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Lilian Mathieu

Framing abolitionism as an anti-neoliberal struggle: the case of France

Zagreb COST meeting – Sex work & neoliberalism – Tuesday 20th September, 2016

My aim in this presentation is not to discuss the impact of neoliberalism on prostitution or to take neoliberalism as a concept to analyse prostitution. It is rather to discuss how and why the denunciation of neoliberalism has become such a powerful and suitable frame in the discourse of contemporary French abolitionist movements. I borrow the frame concept from sociologists David Snow and Robert Benford who say that social movements do framing work when they “assign meaning to, and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists”. Accordingly, I will try to show that abolitionists assign meaning to prostitution and try to interpret it when they say that its development is a consequence of neoliberal policies or ideology, and that by using this frame they have been able to establish new coalitions with other movements, especially coalitions with the feminist and antiglobalisation movements.

Today, most French abolitionist and feminist organisations use this neoliberal frame when they define prostitution as a commodification of women’s bodies that is encouraged by the globalisation process, while many antiglobalisation groups analyse the development of prostitution as a consequence of neoliberal policies, especially in third world countries. This is no secondary issue as this neoliberal frame has been very helpful in the campaign for the adoption of the new law that criminalises prostitution clients. Of course, France is not the only country that has adopted the so-called “Swedish model” but what is maybe specific is that its adoption has been mainly promoted by parties and movements from the left and the extreme-left, that stand as the main adversaries of neoliberal ideologies and policies. This is a striking difference with countries such as the United States where the abolitionists have established alliances with the conservative and religious right.

I will explain first what has made possible the coalition between abolitionist, feminist and antiglobalisation movements; second I will give examples of how the neoliberal frame is expressed in abolitionist discourses; and third in conclusion I will stress some of the paradoxes of this framing.

The first thing is that the coalition between the abolitionists, the feminists and the antiglobalisation groups was rather unexpected. Most French abolitionist organisations have a catholic origin and for long they have privileged a psychological rather than an economic framing of prostitution. According to them, women in prostitution come from all social classes but most of them suffer from psychological trauma as they have been victims of incest or sexual abuse in their youth. As a consequence, adopting the neoliberal frame was not easy as it pushed them to move from a focus on the individual prostitute to a focus on the economic context that forces her to enter the sex market.

Another difficulty is related to the fact that some French abolitionist organisations, such as the Scelles Foundation, are rather conservative and have close connexions with politicians and parties from the right. But the main abolitionist group, the Mouvement du Nid, comes from the more progressive parts of the Catholic Church where the solidarity for third world countries is also an important dimension. The Mouvement du Nid for example is affiliated to the international Catholic solidarity organisation Caritas that participates to the antiglobalisation movement. As such, solidarity for third world countries that suffer from neoliberal policies is a first thing that facilitated the connexion between progressive Catholics and antiglobalisation activists.

But progressive Catholics only belong to a sub-sector of the antiglobalisation movement. As many French antiglobalisation activists come from leftist groups and share a Marxist background, they were not very interested in abolitionism. In fact, most (male) antiglobalisation leaders or intellectuals were not very interested in gender issues until some female members of the movement with a feminist background started to take interest in the prostitution issue as they started to stress that women are the first victims of neoliberal policies. A sub-group on women's issues was founded within the main French antiglobalisation organisation, Attac, and started to work on issues such as inequalities between the sexes concerning housework, wages, childcare, etc. Feminists from Attac identified prostitution as a danger for poor women in countries where there is no welfare, but also as a source of profit for criminal networks.

These feminist antiglobalisation activists had never worked on prostitution before and they looked for information—and they found it in the European representative of the Coalition against trafficking in women, a woman named Malka Marcovich. Marcovich was pivotal in the building of the coalition between the feminist, abolitionist and antiglobalisation movements as she was able to frame prostitution in a way that was suitable and compatible with each movement's world view.

Marcovich was among the first in France to define prostitution as violence against women and to promote the Swedish model. By doing this, she was able to boost feminists' conviction that prostitution is a patriarchal institution that denies women's humanity by treating their bodies as objects. Defining prostitution as violence was also suitable for abolitionists who have always claimed that prostitutes join the sex market because they suffer from trauma. And by stressing that the sex market produces enormous profits and that most prostitutes come from third world countries, she was able to convince antiglobalisation activists that the abolition of prostitution is a central dimension of the fight against neoliberalism and that criminalising prostitution clients is the best way to achieve its abolition.

There is a very interesting document on the website of the Mouvement du Nid. It is an interview of Claudine Blasco, who is a member of the group on women's issues in Attac. She explains that before joining the antiglobalisation movement, she was a member of Terre des hommes, a solidarity organisation with a progressive catholic background, and that before joining Attac she knew nothing about prostitution. But she says that hopefully she met Marcovich who explained to her that prostitutes suffer from psychological trauma that explains that they always deny the violence they experience in prostitution. What is ironic is that Marcovich was able to adapt her argumentation to her antiglobalisation interlocutors, but she is not herself an opponent to neoliberalism. She published a text where she clearly despises the antiglobalisation movement and where she celebrates the American international policy which was at the time the policy led by George Bush.

One of the main achievements of this coalition is this little book that was published in 2008; its title in English is "Globalisation of prostitution, a global harm to human dignity". The book was written by members of the commission on women's issue in Attac who in the first pages thank various people from the abolitionist, feminist and leftist movements who helped them to write the book. Among these people, for example, I can quote Richard Poulin who is a Canadian sociologist but also a member of the Trotskyist movement. Claudine Legardinier who is the main spokesperson of the Mouvement du Nid. Malka Marcovich of course. Judith Trinquart who is a close friend of Marcovich and a doctor who relies on Melissa Farley's work to explain that prostitutes suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and that they deny the violence of prostitution. And also Janice Raymond, who is a member of the Coalition against trafficking in women.

If we take a look at the content of the book, we can find the main elements of the neoliberal frame. The book opens by saying the

“prostitution system” is a sector where the neoliberal dynamic can generate enormous profits as trafficking people from Asia, Africa or Europe makes important benefits with little investment. It also says that there is a connexion between criminal activities and the free-circulation of capital, that makes prostitution one the most profitable markets. The main argument is that neoliberalism promotes a commodification of the whole world, including human bodies, that culminates in the prostitution market. According to this view, the development of prostitution is a consequence and a symptom of the submission of all aspects of human life to the market. The authors say that prostitution existed before capitalism but that neoliberalism and the oppression of women support each other.

The book gives many numbers and statistics that give it a serious, academic-like tone: there are numbers of people who are victims of trafficking; numbers of underage prostitutes; numbers about the benefits criminal organisations earn from the exploitation of prostitutes’ bodies; numbers about the importance of the sex industry in the GDP (gross domestic product) of countries who are supposed to attract many sex tourists like Thailand, Philippines and the Netherlands. But, contrary to academic conventions, the book gives very few sources or references and the reader never knows where the numbers come from and how they were produced.

The book also denounces the apathy or the complacency of international institutions like the International labour organisation that is suspected to promote prostitution as work, and stigmatises states like the Netherlands and Germany that, according to the authors, have adopted policies that encourage trafficking. The book also stigmatises sex workers’ claims by suspecting them of being manipulated by criminal networks. The authors explain that considering prostitution as work would be detrimental to all women, and not only prostitutes, and that it would not improve prostitutes’ working conditions and would not end the whore stigma, but on the contrary it would legitimate and encourage violence against women. They also say that prostitution can never be a choice, as the majority of prostitutes have been victims of incest, rape or any other form of sexual trauma, and that most of them would quit if they had the opportunity to do so. And the book concludes that prostitution being violence against women, the authors of this violence, meaning the clients, should be prosecuted—like in Sweden.

I have focused on this book because its production and its content offer the best synthesis of the coalition between abolitionists, feminists and antiglobalisation activists, and because the neoliberal frame appears as the main instrument of this coalition. I could have quoted other articles and texts that offer the same arguments as the neoliberal frame is

nowadays omnipresent in the movement for the abolition of prostitution. What is funny is that even groups that stay aside from the coalition, like the more conservative Scelles Foundation, denounce liberalism but they don't know exactly what it is and make a confusion between liberalism as an economic ideology and what was called sexual liberation during the 1970s.

There is also some irony in the fact that some political parties denounce neoliberalism as it encourages prostitution while they promote neoliberal policies regarding migration, urban gentrification, welfare, or work markets. This was striking last April when the French government promoted the new law on prostitution by stressing that it would end the commodification of women's bodies, and by stigmatising its opponents as neoliberal, while at the same time the same government promoted a new law that deregulates work markets and weakens unions, that nicely fits with neoliberal doctrine. For some political parties, but also for the abolitionist groups, neoliberalism is condemnable when it concerns prostitution, but not on other issues.

There are also some paradoxes in the way these movements stigmatise neoliberalism. In fact, the way they analyse sex markets mostly refers to neoclassic economics, where the demand is what determines the offer. It can also be noted that those people who denounce neoliberal capitalism share a very utilitarian worldview; according to them, it seems that traffickers or pimps only run for economic benefit and look for the economic sectors where they expect to make the best profit... This is quite strange to see people adopt such a utilitarian and liberal view of economics to denounce neoliberalism as the source of all evils.

The last paradox on which I will end is that they also rely on a neoliberal policy to end what they denounce as a consequence of neoliberal policies. Claiming that the demand for sexual services is what needs to be prosecuted in order to abolish prostitutes' offer is a very neoliberal way to frame a social and economic problem like prostitution. Claiming that the client should be at the core of the new prostitution policy, and that this policy must be a penal one, is to take the prostitution issue at the very individual level and to neglect its macro-structural context. It is to reduce human conduct as a search for rewards and a reduction of costs, and it relies mostly on what remains of the state after its neoliberal breaking up, meaning its repressive apparatus. In other words, French feminists and abolitionists have to make another effort if they wish to become anti-neoliberal.