

The Sexual Politics of the “New Abolitionism”

*O*n Sunday, February 18, 2007, 5,800 Protestant churches throughout the United States sang the song “Amazing Grace” during their services, commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of slavery in England. As the congregants sang the lyrics of John Newton, the British ship captain turned abolitionist, they were simultaneously contributing to a growing political movement and to the promotion of a just-released film. The film, *Amazing Grace*, which focuses on the role played by British parliamentarian William Wilberforce’s evangelical Christian faith in his dedication to the nineteenth-century abolitionist cause, was produced in explicit coordination with a campaign to combat “modern day” forms of slavery, of which the organized Sunday sing-along was a part (Virgil). “Slavery still exists,” notes the movie’s *Amazing Change* campaign Web site, which directs Web-browsers to “become modern-day abolitionists” through prayer, donations to sponsored faith-based organizations, and the purchase of *Amazing Change* t-shirts, buttons, and caps. As Gary Haugen, founder of the International Justice Mission (one of the campaign’s four sponsored humanitarian organizations) has sought to

emphasize, “[T]here are approximately twenty-seven million slaves in our world today—not metaphorical slaves, but actual slaves. That’s more slaves in our world today than were extracted from Africa during four hundred years of the transatlantic slave trade” (*Terrify* 21).

What does it mean to say that there are twenty-seven million slaves worldwide, more than in the transatlantic slave trade? The figure of twenty-seven million is frequently invoked by the broad coalition of evangelical Christian and secular feminist activists, nongovernmental organizations, and state agents who, since the late 1990s, have self-identified as “modern-day abolitionists” in their struggle to combat what they see as a diverse yet intertwined array of human rights abuses, one which ranges from trafficking across borders to indentured labor in rock quarries to participation in some (or all) forms of commercial sexual activity. Although the trope of “modern-day slavery” and the numerical estimate of twenty-seven million derive from the work of Free the Slaves founder Kevin Bales, who has defined slavery as “the total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation” (6), what the disparate abolitionist groups (or even Bales himself) mean by the term when they invoke it is by no means transparent.¹ How, for example, is “modern-day” slavery distinct from chattel slavery, wage slavery, or what was once known as White Slavery? Of what, for the various activists and state agents concerned, does the fight against modern-day slavery consist? Who is a slave? And how does the movement for slavery’s (re-)abolition relate to a contemporary evangelical worldview? Or to neoliberal cultural politics more generally?

I come to these queries via a particular ethnographic circuitry, one that, over the course of the last decade, has led me from the sociological study of sex work toward the study of the growing cadre of evangelical Christian and secular feminist humanitarian projects that have emerged to reclassify all or certain forms of sexual labor as “slavery,” to press for laws that punish the individuals who are deemed responsible for this captivity, and to vigorously pursue sex workers’ rescue. Before assuming this current research focus, I spent nearly a decade investigating the highly diverse motives and experiences of women, men, and transgendered people who engage in sexual labor in postindustrial cities. I have also spent many years as a participant-observer of sex workers’ own organizing efforts to address some of the manifold injustices that affect sex workers locally and globally, including violence at the hands of police officers, the absence of labor regulations in illicit as well as legal commercial sex sectors, and

the threat of deportation that looms large over undocumented workers (Bernstein).

While in the early and mid-1990s such struggles were typically pursued under the culturally and politically ascendant banner of “sex workers’ rights,” in more recent years this framework has been undercut by a bevy of federal- and state-level antitrafficking laws that equate all prostitution with the crime of human trafficking and that rhetorically capture both of these activities under the rubric of modern slavery. During his three-and-a-half-year tenure in the U.S. State Department’s Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons, Ambassador John Miller was highly attuned to the political importance of linguistic frames, arguing that the ongoing use of the term “sex worker” by certain NGOs, activists, and feminist academics served “to justify modern-day slavery, [and] to dignify the perpetrators and the industries who enslave.”² The spate of U.S. antitrafficking laws that have emerged to create an enforcement apparatus for Miller’s view create stepped-up criminal penalties for pimps and sexual clients (considered by modern abolitionists to be slaveholders), impose financial sanctions upon nations deemed to be taking insufficient steps to stem prostitution (understood to be self-identical with trafficking and with slavery), and stipulate that internationally based NGOs that do not explicitly denounce prostitution as a violation of women’s human rights are to be disqualified from federal funding.³ Although the U.S. Trafficking Victims’ Protection Act (TVPA) officially defines the crime of human trafficking to include forced labor as well as forced sex (where the latter is understood to be categorically distinct from the former) in terms of current U.S. enforcement priorities, media attention, and NGO practice, the forced prostitution of women and girls constitutes the paradigmatic instance of what “modern-day slavery” is assumed to be.⁴

My aim in this essay is to consider how it is that prostitution, something previously of concern only to local law enforcement and to relatively small numbers of committed feminists and sex-worker activists, has come to occupy the center of an ever spiraling array of faith-based and secular activist agendas, human rights initiatives, and legal instruments. Given that the perspectives of abolitionist feminists and their partnership with conservative state agents have begun to be analyzed and critiqued elsewhere,⁵ my focus in this essay will rest upon the less frequently examined (and usually presumed to be self-evident) ideological commitments of evangelical Christians. Evangelical advocacy on human trafficking has

achieved particular prominence since the Bush administration's "charitable choice" initiative declared avowedly faith-based organizations to be eligible for federal funding; since 2001, the year of its implementation, evangelical Christian groups have secured a growing proportion of federal monies for both international and domestic antitrafficking work as well as funds for the prevention of HIV/AIDS (Butler; Mink; Stockman et al.). Drawing upon my ongoing ethnographic research with prominent conservative Christian antitrafficking groups, as well as a review of relevant policy documents and press coverage, in this essay I consider the means by which evangelical activists have successfully formed and perpetuated political alliances around a particular shared premise: that prostitution is a form of gendered social exchange that constitutes the literal antithesis of freedom.⁶

No doubt, the globalization, expansion, and diversification of sexual commerce in recent decades have been relevant factors in fostering this consensus. Indeed, the first few sentences of the 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act explicitly state that the explosion of the sex industry during the last decade was an important impetus for the law. Yet the position of cultural and political prominence that has been granted to prostitution in contemporary Christian narratives of slavery (and to the forced sexual labor of the "third-world prostitute," in particular) remains puzzling given that the issue presumably exists at some remove from the lives of the overwhelmingly white and middle-class activists who embrace it as their cause. The portrayal of most or all prostitution as "slavery" is also curious given the actual working conditions of most sex workers. Although it would be foolish to deny that situations of force and coercion can and do occur in sex work (as they do in other informal and unregulated labor sectors) and are no doubt exacerbated by the compounded inequalities of race, class, gender, and nation that prevail in many instances, reputable accounts by sex-worker activists and by researchers, including those based in the third world, suggest that the scenarios of overt abduction, treachery, and coercion that abolitionists depict are the exception rather than the norm.⁷ Given the distance of forced prostitution from activists' own lives and from the experiences of the majority of the individuals who engage in sexual labor, we will need to summon other explanations if we are to comprehend the significance of the campaign to "free the slaves" that is spreading through church pews, college campuses, and federal and state legislatures at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

*From White Slavery to
Modern Day Slavery*

It is slavery, real slavery that we are fighting. The term “white slave” isn’t a misnomer or a sensational term. [. . .] The words describe what they stand for. The white slave of Chicago is a slave as much as the Negro was before the Civil War, as the African is in the districts of the Congo, as much as any people are slaves who are owned, flesh and bone,

body and soul, by another person, and who can be sold at any time and place and for any price at that person’s will. That is what slavery is, and that is the condition of hundreds, yes, thousands of girls in Chicago at present.

—Clifford Roe, *The Shame of a Great Nation* 1909, qtd. in Rosen 117.

Of course, the sudden and dramatic refashioning of commercialized sex as slavery is not without historical precedent. Various commentators have noted the similarities between the moral panic surrounding “modern-day slavery” in the current moment and that of the White Slavery scare in the last century, which engaged a similar coalition of “new abolitionist” feminists and evangelical Christians (Hobson; Rosen; Smith-Rosenberg). Prior to the Progressive era, the goal of eradicating prostitution had not seemed particularly urgent: as the historian Ruth Rosen has shown, U.S. religious leaders had previously been far more inclined to worry about adultery and fornication than about prostitution. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, narratives of women’s sexual enslavement abounded, drawing upon both the nation’s legacy of race-based, chattel slavery and a resonance with biblical notions of “slavery to sin.” Such narratives conjured scenarios of seemingly irrefutable moral horror: the widespread abduction of innocent women and girls who, en route to earn respectable livelihoods in metropolitan centers, were seduced, deceived, or forced into prostitution, typically by foreign-born men. Historians have generally agreed that, in association with a rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment, the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fight against White Slavery served as a socially acceptable vehicle in which bourgeois women could channel their frustrations with the sexual double standard and an increasingly legitimate commercial sexual sphere. For both evangelical women and for feminists, the fight against White Slavery served as a useful stepping stone and surrogate for a host of additional causes, from social purity and moral reform to temperance and suffrage. Though subsequent empirical investigations would reveal the White Slavery narrative to be largely without factual base (the evidence suggested that large numbers of women were not in fact forced into prostitution, other than by

economic considerations), anti-White Slave crusaders were nevertheless successful in spurring the passage of a series of “red light abatement” acts as well as the federal Mann-Elkins White Slavery Act, which officially brought the nation’s first era of wide-scale, commercialized prostitution to a close.⁸

Various contemporary critics have observed the extent to which the tropes that animated the moral panic around White Slavery in the last century have been recycled in campaigns against “modern-day slavery” in the current one, including those of violated femininity, shattered innocence, and the victimization of “womenandchildren.”⁹ Penelope Saunders thus notes that it is precisely such shared ideological constructions that have served to unite the diverse constituencies that comprise today’s modern-day abolitionist cause. As Saunders argues, for both conservative Christians and for many feminists, “archaic and violated visions of femininity and sexuality [. . .] tap into widely held beliefs about the harms women face due to their sexual vulnerability” (“Traffic Violations” 355). Jacqueline Berman has similarly postulated that “shared views of sexuality [. . .] and universalist constructions of woman” have served to facilitate the strong alliance between conservative Christians and abolitionist feminists that, as in the two groups’ prior alliance against pornography during the Reagan years,¹⁰ undergirds the current antitrafficking policies of the U.S. state (272). Berman posits that, for conservative Christians, stopping sexual slavery stands as a politically uncontroversial surrogate for an array of more familiar, right-wing concerns: advocacy around family values, the promotion of abstinence, and “the rescue of women from risky, post-1960s norms like work outside the home” (276). Gretchen Soderlund has also observed the dovetailing of right-wing efforts to curb prostitution and to curtail women’s reproductive rights, arguing that current U.S. antitrafficking policy is “deeply intertwined with attempts by the Bush administration and its faith-based constituency to police nonprocreative sex on a global scale” (79).

The roster of prominent nongovernmental organizations that have catapulted the fight against sexual slavery to the top of their agendas indeed suggests that a sexual politics premised upon the reinstatement of traditional sex and gender roles underlies the attention that many conservative Christians have granted to the issue. Alongside established and expected feminist constituencies such as the Coalition against Trafficking in Women, NOW, and the Feminist Majority stand such well-known Christian-right groups as Focus on the Family, the Family Research

Council, and Concerned Women for America, an extraordinary left-right alliance that political scientist Alan Hertzke has gone so far as to describe as “the most significant human rights movement of our time” (6).¹¹ Some of my own initial field research with conservative Christian antitrafficking activists would also seem to bolster the conclusion that there is a traditionalist sexual and gender agenda at stake in fighting “modern-day slavery” that extends well beyond the issues of trafficking and prostitution. For example, at a Concerned Women for America “antitrafficking” panel that I attended at the U.N. Beijing Plus Ten meetings in 2005, which occurred immediately after the group received a grant from the U.S. State Department to combat trafficking on the U.S.-Mexico border, the presentation focused exclusively upon the perils posed to women by abortion and premarital sex, with prostitution only mentioned once—and briefly—during the two-hour session. The chairwoman Janice Crouse responded to an audience question about the phenomenon of human trafficking not by discussing trafficking per se, but by talking about the risks of promiscuity (and implicitly prostitution) faced by teenage girls at the mall. Observers of conservative Christian engagement in the abortion debates of the 1980s will also note the direct migration of language and slogans from earlier campaigns to curtail women’s access to abortion, which similarly relied upon the metaphors of slavery, rescue, and abolition to generate passion and commitment for their cause (Balmer; Beisel and Krimmell).

The dovetailing of the antitrafficking movement and of a traditionalist sexual and gender politics is further manifest in publications such as *Focus on the Family* and *Today’s Christian Woman*, which, along with several other evangelical Christian popular magazines published during a single three-month period last winter, featured lead articles on the “record numbers” of women being trafficked into commercial sexual slavery.¹² According to one such article, coerced abortions, family and sexual violence, biotechnology, human trafficking, and prostitution form the cluster of socially intertwined phenomena that place women’s lives at greatest risk. Affirming the conclusions of scholars such as Marie Griffith, Linda Kintz, and Christian Smith who have described how evangelical women find “power in submission” to traditional gender roles and male “headship,” here it is modern sexual culture and technology that constitute the fundament of slavery, and traditional sex and gender roles that best encapsulate what it means for women to be “free.” As Berman has suggested,

In a globalizing world where women make decisions about illicit sexuality, capital, and movement in relation to prostitution, work, sex work, migrant sex work, and migration, these [. . .] groups have come to agree that it is the availability of these options that pose[s] a danger to women, to “our” culture, to “our” communities. (287)

Finally, to read contemporary Christian campaigns against “modern-day slavery” as a reaction as much against “the modern” as against slavery is also consistent with an established body of sociological and journalistic work that argues that in late-capitalist America, individuals’ experience of economic disempowerment has often been compensated for with a staunch commitment to traditional configurations of gender and sexuality in the domestic sphere. Works such as Kristin Luker’s *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (1984), Arlene Stein’s *The Stranger Next Door* (2001), and Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas* (2004) posit diverse ways in which the moral and sexual politics of conservative Christians can be read as class-based reactions to the hegemonic sexual cultures of elites. In her classic study of prolife and prochoice activists in the abortion debates, Kristin Luker observed that the secular idea that personhood is social as opposed to God given implies to conservative Christians that some individuals have a less compelling claim on scarce resources than others. This worldview is seen as particularly threatening by persons “who have reason to fear that they may be denied such access” (*Abortion* 7). In her study of conservative Christian opposition to gay rights legislation, Arlene Stein found similarly that the debate over homosexuality could be decoded in class terms. “Attitudes towards homosexuality appeared to correlate with divisions between a declining working class that felt itself displaced and ignored, and a rising professional class [that] tended to support abortion and gay rights” (6). And Thomas Frank has famously argued that “moral values” issues such as abortion and gay marriage in fact serve as an intricately managed spectacle to convince disenfranchised, working-class Americans to vote against their true economic interests. Correlating activists’ ideological commitments with their material circumstances, these authors attribute evangelicals’ conservative stances on matters of sexual politics to the spiritualized discontent of those whom the global economy has left behind.

But the relevance of this analysis seems to fade in relation to the sexual politics of modern-day abolitionism, particularly as some of the most prominent antitrafficking activists in question do not identify

with the Christian right at all, but rather describe themselves as Christian “moderates,” and in some cases, even as Christian progressives.¹⁵ Similarly, our interpretations of this movement must change when it is realized that the most strident activism around sexual slavery has not been fomented by individuals who are especially disenfranchised, but rather by the emergent evangelical professional middle classes.¹⁴ The fieldwork that I have been engaged in not only suggests a need for a more variegated empirical rendering of evangelicals’ sexual politics and class interests but also complicates the connection between moral politics and material circumstances that Luker, Stein, Frank, and others have posited.¹⁵

A new group of highly educated and relatively affluent evangelicals have pursued some of the most active and passionate campaigning around sexual slavery and human trafficking. These evangelicals not only embrace the languages of women’s rights and social justice but have also taken deliberate steps to distinguish their work from the sexual politics of other conservative Christians. Richard Cizik, vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals and a self-described evangelical “moderate,” has gone on record describing the efforts of his organization to reorient conservative Christians away from issues such as homosexuality and abortion and toward more “common denominator” concerns such as global warming, prison reform, human trafficking, and HIV/AIDS.¹⁶ David Batstone, an executive editor at the liberal *Sojourners* magazine and the author of *Not for Sale* (the official book of the *Amazing Grace* new-abolitionist campaign) is also spearheading his own *Not for Sale* social movement, which aims to unite churches, universities, businesses, and individuals who take a pledge to fight slavery. And the officially nonpartisan International Justice Mission (IJM), the largest and most established Christian antitrafficking organization in the U.S., with upward of eighty full-time paid staff members and operations in fourteen countries, boasts the endorsements not only of Chuck Colson from the far-right Wilberforce Forum but also of noted “left” evangelicals such as Tony Campolo and Jim Wallis.¹⁷ According to one staff member that I spoke with, members of the organization—who are required to endorse a Christian statement of faith as a condition for their employment, and who spend the initial hours of each workday engaged in collective prayer—have even debated abandoning the term “evangelical” entirely because of its troubling associations with the right wing.

The fact that contemporary campaigns against modern-day slavery have been vigorously embraced by Christian moderates and liberals does not, however, mean that they are linked to a sexual agenda that most

sex-workers' rights activists (or others with a critical feminist perspective) would likely find progressive. In the remainder of this essay, I shall take a brief detour into two moments from my fieldwork in order to explore in more detail the sexual politics that a growing body of self-described "moderate" and "liberal" evangelicals bring to contemporary antitrafficking campaigns. Following the analyses of Lisa Duggan and Aihwa Ong, I situate these new-abolitionist politics in terms of a neoliberal (rather than a traditionalist) sexual agenda, one that locates social problems in deviant individuals rather than mainstream institutions, that seeks social remedies through criminal justice interventions rather than through a redistributive welfare state, and that advocates for the beneficence of the privileged rather than the empowerment of the oppressed. As such, this approach leaves intact the social structures that drive low-income women (and many men) into patterns of risky migration and exploitative informal sector employment, including those relatively rare but very real situations that would rightly qualify as "trafficking" or "slavery." Finally, by examining more closely the dovetailing of contemporary evangelical and secular feminist antitrafficking efforts (which might respectively be described as militarized humanitarianism and carceral feminism) and both groups' pursuit of avowedly probusiness social remedies, I hope to reveal some of the neoliberal underpinnings (and political limitations) of secular as well as faith-based variants of the modern abolitionist cause.

Seek Justice™

Seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.
—Isaiah 1.17, from the Web page of the
International Justice Mission

Trafficking is not a poverty issue.
It's a law enforcement issue.
—Gary Haugen, Director and CEO of IJM
(qtd. in Landesman)

We're seeking a business takeover—a
freedom business takeover of the sex
business.
—Kerry Hilton, Freeset Corporation
(qtd. in Jewell)

From my field notes, April 2006:

At the International Justice Mission's fourth annual Global Prayer Gathering, held in an affluent white suburb of Washington, DC, I am greeted upon arrival by a row of well-scrubbed young women in fashionable haircuts and neat suits, the majority of whom appear to be in their mid-twenties. Behind the row

of greeters, a lively group of women and men mingle, carrying sleek tote bags emblazoned with the IJM logo, SEEK JUSTICE™. On the display table to the left of them are copies of prayer books by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged for his role in the Nazi resistance. Along with a historical array of Christian antiprostitution and antilynching activists, he will serve as our moral exemplar for the weekend.

Later in the evening, with the nearly eight hundred other Prayer Gathering attendees, I migrate to the hotel banquet room for a surprisingly rousing and joyous plenary session, in which we pay tribute to the contemporary struggle against slavery through uplifting praise music and prayer. Compared to some other conservative Christian antitrafficking groups, the definition of “slavery” that IJM imparts to us is relatively expansive: we hear not only about women trapped in brothels but also about debt bondage in rice mills, cigarette factories, and brick kilns. The injustice of the latter is viscerally conveyed to us through a “live action” presentation, in which we pass heavily weighted buckets from hand to hand to symbolize the onerous burdens of the slaves. Seated next to me, a man hailing from a nondenominational Bible church in Madison, Wisconsin, offers the following perspective: “People in those countries just don’t know how to treat women!” The next day, a PhD student in theology that I am lunching with expresses a variant of the same view: “It’s time that white Western feminists took an interest in the rest of the world!”

In addition to organized “prayer outings” to the Lincoln Memorial and other Washington, DC, monuments, we spend the weekend circulating through prayer rooms for IJM operations in different regions. In the Uganda room, we learn about a young girl named Sara and how difficult it is for people in her country to gain access to justice. In the Thailand room, we visit four separate “prayer stations” and hear four different women’s tragic stories, studying their photos and case documents and praying separately for each. In the Cambodia room, we learn that not everyone who is rescued is initially grateful. According to the team leader, victims sometimes prefer the hell they know to that with which they are unfamiliar.

In a room called “Project Lantern,” the object of our prayers is less clear. We’re told that the project takes its name

from the Underground Railroad and is also a symbol of God's shining light. The room exists to honor an as yet uninitiated project: the creation of a law enforcement model to combat trafficking that will be replicable across countries and cultures. "What we thought that we might do here is paint lanterns with watercolors," explains the leader, "since creativity is the best way that we have to communicate with God." As she speaks her instructions, young women migrate solemnly to the table display of white paper lanterns, painting and praying for a project that has yet to be implemented, in a country that is still unknown, and for rescued victims of slavery that do not yet exist.

Having risen to prominence through its spectacular rescues of women and children from South Asian brothels (often conducted in partnership with press outlets such as Dateline, CNN, and FOX News) the International Justice Mission has been at the forefront of the media-friendly militarized humanitarianism that has characterized the faith-based response to human trafficking since the late 1990s. In the "rescue and restore" model of activism that the organization has patented, male employees of the organization go undercover as potential clients to investigate brothels, partnering with local law enforcement to rescue underage and allegedly unwilling brothel occupants and deliver them to state-sponsored or faith-based rehabilitation facilities. Although the organization's operations have attracted some controversy (as in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where the rescued women escaped through the windows with bedsheets in order to run back to the brothels from which they had been "liberated" [Soderlund]), the undercover and mass-mediated model of activism that IJM propounds has become the emulated standard for evangelical Christian and secular feminist organizations alike.¹⁸ As with some of its cultural predecessors, such as the Promise Keepers and other "tender warriors,"¹⁹ through IJM's rescue missions men are coaxed into participating in women's and other humanitarian issues by being granted the role of heroic rescuers and saviors. Unlike other Christian men's groups, however, here it is not headship in the domestic enclave of the nuclear family that draws men in, but rather the assumption of a moral leadership role in and against the global brothel system.

But more than this is at stake in the theological ideals and social activism that IJM has mobilized among conservative Christians, particularly since the majority of the organization's grassroots activists (as in antitrafficking campaigns more generally) are middle-class young

women. In contrast to Concerned Women for America’s avowed embrace of sexual and gender traditionalism for Western women, IJM’s members deploy the stock colonialist tropes of the backward traditionalism of third world women that they readily counterpose with the perceived freedom and autonomy of women in the contemporary West. The embrace of the third-world trafficking victim as a modern cause offers these young evangelical women a means to engage directly in a sex-saturated culture without becoming “contaminated” by it; it provides an opportunity to commune with “bad girls” while remaining “good girls,” to enter the world of the postmodern brothel while enduring no significant threat to one’s own moral status or social position. To listen to the repeated stories of bad men, big guns, and bolted chains that are deemed responsible for prostitutes’ captivity is to participate in an experience that is viscerally stirring and that seems utterly life threatening and consequential while never veering far from a seat of safety. Indeed, IJM’s website, like that of the *Amazing Change* and *Not for Sale* campaigns with which it is affiliated, suggests that one can “become an abolitionist” simply by clicking an online button and by donating money. To IJM’s members, this is not a contradiction: at the IJM 2006 prayer gathering as well as at a subsequent IJM event that I attended, staff members insisted that “We can deploy our privilege for the sake of effecting positive changes in the world.” Evangelical antitrafficking efforts thus extend activist trends that are also increasingly prevalent elsewhere, advocating a form of political engagement that is consumer- and media-friendly, saturated in the tropes and imagery of the very sexual culture that it aims to oppose.

Yet significantly, by defining “slavery” in a way that actually extends beyond prostitution, this “new internationalist” (Kristof, “When”) class of evangelical antitrafficking activists reveals a set of political commitments that both encompasses and transcends prior depictions of conservative Christians’ sexual worldviews. In the succinct words of one IJM staff member who described IJM’s successful transformation of Cambodia’s Svay Pak (a district formerly known for child prostitution) into “a nice tourist town”: “Our real goal is to bring people out of slavery into the free market.” This view was also manifest in a recent *Christianity Today* magazine cover story on “The Business of Rescue,” which profiled Christian humanitarian organizations that orient former prostitutes toward entry-level jobs in the service economy, teaching women to bake muffins for Starbucks and to prepare Western-style drinks and food.²⁰ Other evangelical groups (including those affiliated with the *Amazing Grace* and

Not for Sale campaigns) as well as a growing number of liberal, secular groups have also hopped on board with the approach, no longer framing the problem of human trafficking in terms of the broader dynamics of globalization, gendered labor, and migration, but rather as a humanitarian issue that global capitalists can help combat.²¹ Whereas antiglobalization activists during the 1990s had argued that the daily practices of capitalism created sweat-shop conditions of labor that were unacceptable, “modern-day abolitionists” such as the *New York Times* Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nicholas Kristof identify such practices with the very definition of “freedom.”²²

***The Domestic Agenda:
Militarized Humanitarianism
Meets Carceral Feminism***

From my field notes, October 2006:

At the Department of Health and Human Services’ Conference on Survivors of Sex Trafficking, John Miller is thundering against the evils of modern-day slavery and, with his fist raised in the air, admonishes those of us in the audience to “spread the word.” Miller’s testimony is followed by that of two former prostitutes from San Francisco and New York, both prominent feminist antitrafficking activists who have recently declared themselves to be survivors of slavery. Although the conference is officially dedicated to survivors of sex trafficking, in their presentation they are accompanied by a soft-spoken teen from Zambia who, coached by his adoptive Christian mother, recounts his experience of being trafficked into a choir. The fourth trafficking survivor to speak is a board member of a prominent Christian antitrafficking NGO and refers only obliquely to her recently recovered memory of having been trafficked as a child.

Although there are no trafficking survivors from sweatshops, agricultural work, or even domestic work present, there are a number of other individuals in attendance who claim to care passionately about slavery. During a coffee break, I meet a man who says that he has been called by the Lord to work with victims of human trafficking. Though he had no relevant expertise or professional experience, he now runs two

“abolitionist projects” in New York, one devoted to men who have suffered from pornography addiction, the other a hotline for women who have been sexually abused. Meanwhile, many of the middle-aged women that I speak to in the audience say that although they know relatively little about human trafficking, they are moved by the stories that they have heard in the mass media and want to find some way to help.

The conference serves, like recent trends in federal- and state-level policy, to connect slavery as a historical and a global phenomenon with the issue of “slavery in our own backyard.” The final panel of the day will make this link most directly, with members of the Washington, DC, vice squad arguing for longer prison sentences for pimps and for stepped-up arrests of street prostitutes as the best means of eliminating the “domestic side” of trafficking. To judge from the nodding heads and rapt attention of the mostly white middle-class audience members, the sad irony of throwing poor black people in jail as a means of “fighting slavery” appears to be lost.

Unbeknownst to all but the most avid observers of recent trends within U.S. antitrafficking policy, the 2005 reauthorization of the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* contained within it a remarkable provision that established the crime of “domestic trafficking” on a moral and legal par with previous cross-border understandings of the crime. In the TVPRA 2005, “domestic trafficking” is taken to be synonymous with the crime of “sex trafficking,” and the provision makes no mention of trafficking for other forms of labor. With the aim of shifting enforcement priorities toward the policing of street prostitution in urban areas, the TVPRA established \$5,000,000 in federal grants to local law enforcement agencies to “investigate and prosecute acts of severe forms of trafficking in persons [. . .] within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.”²⁵ This shift in definitions has proven to be highly consequential not only for the various vice squads that have benefited from federal antitrafficking monies and been able to elevate the status of their weekly prostitution patrols by linking them to the specter of “organized, sophisticated, criminal syndicates” (U.S. Congress, *Victims of Trafficking 2000*), but also for the individuals who engage in the most visible and policed tiers of street-based sexual commerce. As I learned at the Survivors of Trafficking conference, as well as two police training sessions on TVPRA enforcement that I attended (one in Las Vegas and the

other in New York), pimps can now be charged with the federal crime of sex trafficking and given upward of ninety-nine-year prison sentences; prostitutes can be apprehended by law enforcement as a means of securing their testimony in their “traffickers” prosecutions; and clients (whose “demand” for the services of prostitutes is declared by the TVPRA to be the underlying cause of trafficking) can be arrested and their cars apprehended as a means of financing “antitrafficking” activities.²⁴

These new provisions became federal law through the intimate collaborations of devoted evangelical and feminist antitrafficking activists and neoconservative Washington think tanks and reflect a convergence of evangelicals’ militarized humanitarianism with what might be termed “carceral feminism”: the commitment of abolitionist feminist activists to a law and order agenda and, as Marie Gottschalk has similarly described within the context of the U.S. antirape and battered women’s movements, a drift from the welfare state to the carceral state as the enforcement apparatus for feminist goals. The ideological convergence between contemporary evangelicals and many feminists on this point stands in stark and ironic contrast to the work of feminist activists within a rather different social justice arena where the tropes of “modern day slavery” and “abolitionism” also prevail: activism against the contemporary prison-industrial complex. Pointing to the direct historical connections between the U.S. institutions of race-based, chattel slavery, convict loan programs, and the forced labor that occurs in contemporary prisons, feminists who are engaged in the prison-abolition movement (predominantly feminists of color who link their work explicitly to an anticapitalist and anti-imperialist agenda) argue that it is the prison system, not prostitution, that is paramount to slavery.²⁵ Yet the efforts of contemporary antitrafficking activists have relied upon strategies of incarceration as their chief tool of “justice,” ensuring that increasing numbers of men and women of color who participate in the street-based sexual economy will find themselves there, precisely under the guise of being delivered out of slavery into freedom.

As with campaigns against White Slavery in the prior century, the diverse evangelical and feminist groups that have embraced this issue bring to it a disparate mix of symbols and interests (Donovan). For some Christian right antitrafficking activists, such as those pertaining to Concerned Women for America, “freedom” does indeed reside in a particular, prefeminist, traditionalist sexual agenda, such that utilizing

the theme “not for sale” carries echoes of a critique of modern sexual and gender cultures, including women’s participation in paid labor. For self-described “liberal,” “moderate,” and “feminist” evangelicals, on the other hand, an abolitionist stance implies something far short of this: an embrace of women’s participation in the workforce, so long as the domestic sphere remains a site for symbolic (if not actual) male headship. Yet what binds together all of these constituencies—liberal as well as conservative evangelicals, Democrats as well as Republicans, and many mainstream feminists—is a historically significant consensus around corporate capitalist ideals of freedom and carceral paradigms of justice. Could it be that the truly “strange bedfellows” alliance here is not the one between feminists and Christians that has continued to astonish newspaper reporters,²⁶ but rather between people of all religious varieties who have historically held very different ideas about institutions such as the family, the market, and the role of the state?

For modern-day abolitionists, the dichotomy between slavery and freedom poses a way of addressing the ravages of neoliberalism that effectively locates all social harm *outside of* the institutions of corporate capitalism and the state apparatus. In this way, the masculinist institutions of big business, the state, and the police are reconfigured as allies and saviors, rather than enemies, of unskilled migrant workers, and the responsibility for slavery is shifted from structural factors and dominant institutions onto individual, deviant men: foreign brown men (as in the White Slave trade of centuries past) or even more remarkably, African American men living in the inner city. What is perhaps most ironic and surprising about the sexual politics of the “new abolitionism” is that it has emerged not only from the simultaneous rightward migration of feminists and other secular liberals toward the politics of incarceration but also from a *leftward* sweep of some evangelical Christians away from the isolationist issues of abortion and gay marriage and toward a “new internationalist,” social justice-oriented theology.

This leftward sweep has involved the spread of evangelical Christian identity into professional populations that were not previously engaged in conservative Christian sexual politics. Their embrace of the issue of “modern-day slavery,” like global warming, has served to differentiate these new evangelicals from their Christian right predecessors, a consensus-building tool that can be forefronted even while many “new” evangelicals’ opposition to legal abortion and same-sex marriage remains in the background. The politics of antitrafficking and “not for

sale” campaigns are not simply a protest against the materialism of late capitalist consumer culture, one designed to restore women’s dignity by harkening back to an earlier time. While activism against “modern-day” slavery is indeed a critique of the contemporary world (as the designation of the issue suggests), evangelical new-abolitionists are late capitalist culture’s victors, who can deploy their advantages to achieve their vision of justice.

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Notes

- 1 For cogent critiques of some of the spurious numerical estimates that have circulated in contemporary antitrafficking discourse, see Chapkis; Feingold.
- 2 Miller, an orthodox Jew who was previously employed by the neoconservative Discovery Institute (a policy think tank that promotes theories of intelligent design) served from the spring of 2003 through December of 2006 (Hertzke 332–35; Shapiro).
- 3 See Blumenfeld; Saunders, “Prohibiting”; u.s. Congress, *Trafficking Victims 2003*; u.s. Congress, *Trafficking Victims 2005*.
- 4 For a discussion of how current u.s. antitrafficking legislation could conceivably be deployed to combat labor violations committed by companies such as Verizon, Walmart, and Tyson Foods, see Chacón.
- 5 See, for example, Chapkis; Ditmore; and Doezema, “Loose Women,” “Now You See Her,” and “Ouch!”
- 6 This research has consisted of attendance at conferences, prayer gatherings, and other church-based antitrafficking events (such as lectures and study groups) as well as interviews with organizational staff.
- 7 See, for example, Agustín; Brennan; and Kempadoo and Doezema. In fact, many sex worker activists regard the legal framework of trafficking as of more harm than benefit to sex workers. See, for example, Agustín; Doezema, “Forced”; and Saunders, “Prohibiting.”
- 8 The 1910 Mann Act (Ch. 395, Stat. 825–27) prohibited the interstate traffic in women for “immoral purposes.”

- 9 See, for example, Agustín; Berman; Saunders, “Traffic”; and Soderlund.
- 10 See, for example, Duggan and Hunter; and Vance.
- 11 The Coalition against Trafficking in Women is the oldest feminist group working on this issue, whose definition of “sexual slavery” has its origin in Kathleen Barry’s early feminist elaboration of the concept (see Barry).
- 12 See, for example, Batstone, “Cry Freedom”; Cara Davis; Earll; Janney; Jewell.
- 13 Richard Cizik has described evangelical “moderates” and “progressives” as comprising approximately fifty-five percent of the U.S. evangelical population, with the other forty-five constituted by evangelical “traditionalists.”
- 14 For discussions of the spread of evangelism among the affluent and educated professional middle classes, see Balmer and Winner; Smith; Wuthnow.
- 15 See Luker’s *When Sex Goes to School*. See also Butler; Lamont.
- 16 The recent embrace of traditional “liberal” issues by conservative Christians—as distinct from the political agenda that has been advocated by groups such as the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family—has received increasing attention from the press. See, for example, Luo; Stoddard; Totten.
- 17 Both figures have strongly criticized the political agenda of the Christian right in recent volumes. See, for example, Campolo; Wallis.
- 18 The feminist organization Equality Now recently employed a male lawyer to go undercover to find traffickers and to work with local law enforcement to bring them to trial (Aita).
- 19 See, for example, Bartkowski; Kintz.
- 20 As such, these organizations update an older evangelical tradition of channeling former prostitutes into domestic work, or teaching them to sew. See, for example, Agustín; Hobson; Smith-Rosenberg.
- 21 See, for example, Baue; and Vital Voices.
- 22 Kristof has been a particularly vocal champion of the modern day abolitionist cause and the leadership role that “new internationalist” evangelicals have played within it. See, for example, “Inviting” and “When the Right.”
- 23 The 2000 Trafficking Victims’ Protection Act defines “sex trafficking” as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.” “Severe forms of trafficking in persons” are those that include an element of force, fraud, or coercion, or those in which those who perform sexual labor are younger than eighteen years of age.
- 24 See also Jeralyn; “Man Convicted”; McShan; Meltzer.
- 25 See, for example, Angela Davis; Gilmore; and Sudbury.
- 26 See, for example, Block and Meltzer.

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