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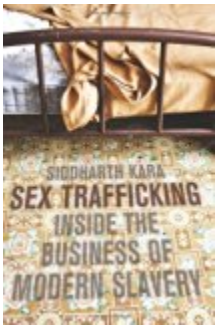
Siddharth Kara. *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. xviii + 298 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13960-1; $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13961-8.



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A Man of Moral Sentiments

Siddharth Kara's *Sex Trafficking* is not a scholarly book. Neither based on methodological research nor reflecting knowledge of literature that could give context to the author's experience, this reads like the diary of a poverty tourist or the *bildungsroman* of an unsophisticated man of moral sentiments demonstrating his pain at unfathomable injustices. This places Kara in the tradition of colonial writers who believed that they were called to testify to the suffering of those not lucky enough to be born into comfortable Western society.

Scholarship is virtually absent from his works cited, whether on migration, trafficking, slavery, feminism, sexualities, criminology, gender, informal-sector labor, or the sex industry and prostitution. Apparently unaware of over ten years of difficult debates, hundreds of scholarly articles, and investigative journalism, Kara is an MBA on a mission, using statistical sleight of hand to solve the problem of slavery. Because the book is touted by campaigners as presenting hard data and incisive analysis, H-Net requested this review.

A travelogue in six chapters is bracketed by arguments both high-minded and businesslike. Kara mentions his moral awakening while volunteering at a refugee camp, his business career, and his sporadic travels since 2000, interviewing 150 "victims" (term unexplained) and a variety of other people located by what he calls "word of mouth." Because many people did not trust him, he could not enter most businesses and found it easier to interview victims in shelters. Chapter headings are regional, but my guess is his stays in most regions were brief (scholars in the field will recognize his contacts as predictable), with India a seeming exception. Kara does not acknowledge these inevitable biases given his lack of method.

On the one hand, his freedom sounds heavenly to those planning fieldwork who have grubbed for funding, written and rewritten interview questions, toadied to gatekeepers, pacified ethics committees, and dealt with supervisors who fail to understand what one is trying to do. On the other hand, Kara reads like a bull in a china shop, bumbling into brothels, stressing and sometimes endangering young women, pressing them to provide him with conversation, annoying goons, and throwing money around. For a scholarly review, the salient point is the absence of academic supervision to control his preconceptions about what he would find, critique his lack of methodology, or control the spin he puts on his experiences. At times, he simply claims that informants did not "appear" to be coerced.

For a man setting out to report on sex as business he is priggish. Bothered by old men who ogle young girls, he admits "I felt ashamed to be male" and opines "I also believe that the preponderance of males do not condone these vulgarities" (pp. 71, 33). After escaping violence he declaims: "For so many years I had stepped into the fire pit and emerged unscathed.... That night, I suf-

fered violent food poisoning from mushrooms and vomited thirty-four times. Justice was swift. I accepted my punishment" (p. 58). Exalted sensibility and anachronistic rhetoric further link Kara to nineteenth-century moral crusaders, like Josephine Butler, famous for saying if she were a prostitute she would be crying all day.

Kara knows little about present-day migration and mobility. Meeting a Lithuanian woman in Italy and a Nigerian woman in Bangkok cause him to suspect they were trafficked, as though obtaining travel documents and tickets were too difficult for women to manage alone. Not finding slaves in the United States, he concludes there must be less demand and therefore less slavery, but also that the United States is "too far away" (from what?), as though airplanes and multiple technologies had not rendered distance almost irrelevant. Even a cursory check of current migration literature would have saved him such gaffes.

But Kara is not interested in migration (whether voluntary, ambivalent, or coerced) or in smuggling. He also rejects "trafficking" as a core concept, preferring slave trading for the movement of people and slavery for the jobs they get. His pitch is that slavery is back in a big way, but his is a cartoon version of master and slave, free of any social complexity and the ambiguities of human interaction. If he can contemplate this industry coolly for the purposes of financial calculations, then he should be able to consider potential human gains also. Finally forced to recognize that slavery could actually sometimes represent "a better life" (p. 199), he is nonetheless blind to the possibility that people in bad situations may be able to exploit them and seems ignorant of slavery studies far evolved from abolitionist reductionism. Slave narratives, slave archaeology, ethnobiology, and historical research all have illuminated social systems in which slaves were not wholly passive nor owners unidimensionally crushing. Coping, resisting, manipulating, strategizing, and creating culture form part of slaves' lives.[1] But Kara, intent on discovering tales of sexual exploitation, has no idea how his informants spend most of their time.

He claims that "sex slaves" are the best earners for masters because they are sold "literally thousands of times before they are replaced" (p. 24), conflating an owner's sale of a slave to another owner with a slave's sale of sexual services to customers. Would he do this if another service were involved, like hairdressing? If a salon owner buys a slave to be a hairdresser who then sees many customers and produces money for her owner, would Kara say the hairdresser is sold thousands of times? Or would he see that her labor is sold, albeit unfairly? Questions to be asked about both cases would include: Is money earned credited toward the payment of a debt? Is the worker able to leave the workplace? Does the worker accept the character of the work but want more autonomy, different working conditions, or a (bigger) percentage of money earned? In the case of sex businesses, workplaces may actually be more comfortable and cleaner than they are in other available jobs, workers may feel safer locked in than on the streets, and they may like wearing pretty clothes and being admired. By reducing the entire world of his informants to the minutes of sex, Kara misses the big picture, whether we call it political economy, culture, or simply everyday life.

Kara proposes abolition through making slave trading and slave owning too costly. The most simplistic version of this thinking is seen in the current End Demand campaign in which complex social interactions and market theories are reduced to a truism: remove demand for commercial sex and supply must disappear. This panacea could apply only if all demand of every kind were eradicated permanently and simultaneously, as demand moves and metamorphoses to find supply. Since the sex industry is large and variegated, and since the supply side (people who sell sex as well as managers and owners of businesses) constantly adapts to new market forces, resists laws, and innovates, the fantasy that supply is 100 percent determined by demand is foolish.

We do not need to read the whole book to know that something fishy is afoot. In the first chapter, extrapolating from only four conversations with customers in one Indian brothel, Kara contends that "demand for sexual services" is highly elastic (p. 35). No responsible economist, academic or not, would dare to make claims on the basis of so little data, easily ascribed to interviewer misunderstanding, informant misinformation, both, and/or random events. But it does not stop there; Kara goes on to suggest that demand must have increased because of the "increased use of slaves" (p. 37).

At the end of the book he presents tables purporting to show "slavery economics" (apparently unaware that others have reckoned slavery values before).[2] Within a typology of sex businesses that fails even to benefit from a sober International Labour Organization study of the sex sector, each table posits general assumptions that must be accepted to believe what is inferred from them.[3] For example, Massage Parlor Economics, Kathmandu, assumes four slaves per parlor, averages ten sex acts per day, one of ten customers buys a condom, one

slave is re-trafficked every six months, and 50 percent "tip" per thirty sex acts, going on to give an average price per sale of sex (table B.3). We have no idea where these figures came from, but scholars in the field will doubt Kara has much to base them on–especially since he produces thirteen other such tables, all requiring data that can only be obtained through long, repetitive, methodological research, whether in Queens or Chiang Mai (to mention two of many locations he claims to know). Kara did not do such research.

That Kara uses terms like "exploitation value" and "return on investment" should not distract us from data at best anecdotal and at worst garbage. As a rescue industry story, his is emblematic. Struggling to accept that not every woman who sells sex is a slave, he tries to convince a woman in Los Angeles to let him help her but finally sees that "it was not up to me to decide that Sunee's life was more important than her father's" (p. 182). The reader heaves a sigh of relief that Sunee was spared. The real message is moral: "The world had indeed degraded into a plague of lust, greed, deceit and violence. Untamed desire ran amok, governing the descent of man" (p. 82). Perhaps Kara reveals his underlying dream when he says "I felt like I was watching myself on a movie screen" (p. 63). Graham Greene would have known how to write about him.

Notes

[1]. John Fair, "The Georgia Slave Narratives: A Historical Conundrum," *Journal of The Historical Society* 10, no. 3 (2010): 235-281; Julius Sensat, "Exploitation," *Noûs* 18, no. 1 (1984): 21-38; Theresa Singleton, "The Archaeology of Slavery in North America," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 119-140; and Jessica Bowes, "Provisioned, Produced, Procured: Slave Subsistence Strategies and Social Relations at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest," *Journal of Ethnobiology* 31, no. 1 (2011): 89-109.

[2]. Jim Marketti, "Black Equity in the Slave Industry," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 2, no. 2 (1972): 43-66; and Robert Browne, "The Economic Basis for Reparations to Black America," *The Review of Black Political Economy*21 (1993): 99-110.

[3]. Lin Lean Lim, ed., *The Sex Sector: The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1998).

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