

The ideology of trafficking

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Introduction

There is increasing recognition among anti-trafficking activists that the consequences of anti-trafficking measures have not been, as hoped, to decrease human rights abuses and offer redress to the wronged, but that anti-trafficking has instead become a rallying cry for governments and activists who seeks to slam the door on migrants, reduce women's autonomy and promote abstinence, rather than sex worker empowerment, as HIV prevention. As trafficking is increasingly being used by governments and even by NGOs as an excuse for repressive policies, NGOs are left wondering 'where did we go wrong'?

That is what I intend to address in this paper. In particular, I want to explore whether looking at 'trafficking' as ideology can help us account for the way anti-trafficking efforts have served to further repressive political agendas. Is 'ideology' a useful term when we are examining the effect of anti-trafficking activism? Before we can answer this question, we need first of all to know what we mean by 'ideology'.

What do we mean by ideology?

As Marxism lost credibility within academia as the theoretical grounding for (social) scientific analysis and within international politics as a viable alternative to capitalism, so 'ideology' as an analytical concept has come to be discredited.

Ideology has shared Marxism's fate – and has largely been supplanted by the notion of 'discourse'.

Yet the term 'ideology' is still very common. I would argue that it is not academic sloppiness or simply the desire to speak in 'common sense' terms that makes the word 'ideology' seem both right and relevant when applied to 'trafficking'. I believe that the term can be valuable when looking at trafficking, that we use it because it 'gets at' something which is not captured by talk of trafficking as discourse. What is that something? What are the connotations that are carried by 'ideology'? I will venture a couple of answers, which are both inextricably linked with ideology's Marxist genealogy. Before this, however, I want to make clear that I am not arguing for a 'reclaiming' of ideology as a general analytical category, in a Marxist or any other sense. It is the very specific use of 'ideology' in relation to trafficking that I am interested in: in what we may mean, and in what 'ideology' allows us to see, when we discuss 'trafficking. What I have in mind is not so much a reclaiming of ideology as a reframing of trafficking.

Firstly, ideology brings to the forefront the question of truth, of examining the basis of truth-claims, of epistemology. It hints at the possibility of falsehood, of deliberate manipulation. It rests on the idea that ideology is the enemy of truth, perverting it, using it. This is of course related to Marx's notion of 'false consciousness' (see Eagleton 1996). Second, 'ideology' captures better the idea of political struggle, of winners and losers, of strategies and compromise, of power given and taken: it foregrounds conflict in a way that the rather bloodless 'discourse' does not. Marx's imprint is visible here as well, in his conception of ideology as an inextricable part of class conflict.

1. Ideology and truth

The first meaning that comes associated with ideology, then, is that of the distortion of truth for political ends. I became interested in looking at ideology in

the course of my research comparing the campaigns against 'white slavery' at the end of the 19th century with present-day anti-trafficking campaigns. I was struck by the similarity between the campaigns (Doezema 2000, 2001). Then as now, the paradigmatic image is that of a young and naive innocent girl, lured or deceived by evil traffickers into a life of sordid horror from which escape is nearly impossible. Historians that have studied the period have almost all come to the conclusion that there were actually very few cases of white slavery that matched the kind of stories above. There was, however, was a huge wave of migration from Europe to the United States and Latin America. Many of those who migrated were prostitutes, who carried on working in their new lands. While these women certainly enjoyed no 'rights' as we would term them, neither is there evidence that they were the sex slaves of popular imagination. This has led historians to pose the question: why the stories of sex slaves take such hold of the popular imagination? In answering this question, historians have used the concept of myth, of white slavery as a political myth (see – add historians).

The term 'myth', like ideology, brings to mind the idea of falsehood, of distortion. And indeed historians of white slavery rely on this interpretation when they contrast their archival findings about the extent of white slavery with the numbers claimed by politicians and activists of the time. Mark Connelly traces how statistics and findings of the highly influential 1911 Chicago Vice Commission investigation into 'white slavery' were used by all subsequently published white-slavery narratives in America in a way that was 'provocative, lurid, emotionally overwrought, and misleading' (Connelly 1980: 119). He gives the example of how the Commission's estimate of a total of 5,000 prostitutes 'at any one time' in the city of Chicago was transformed by one such narrative into "'Each year Chicago alone exacts the ghastly toll of five thousand (see Report of Chicago Vice Commission) of these girls to fill the decaying gaps of our great army of twenty-five thousand lost women.'" (Zimmerman 1912: 17 quoted in Connelly 1980: 120).

When we look at the way trafficking is being employed politically today, there would seem to be examples enough of the distortion of 'the facts' of trafficking. Many researchers point out that hazy estimates of trafficking are presented as hard fact (e.g. Wijers and Lap-Chew 1997). This is particularly true with statistics regarding trafficking for prostitution, when numbers relating to all categories of trafficking victims or to voluntary migration are turned into cases of 'sex trafficking'.

Yet I believe that to focus too much on the distortion of the facts about trafficking is to misunderstand the way that ideology operates. To return to theory for a moment, one of the key reasons for the demise of ideology as an analytical category has been the post-structuralist assault on the notion of an objective 'truth' and of a corresponding idea of the possibility of distortion. As the post-Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau explains: 'The crisis of the notion of "ideology" was linked to two interconnected processes: the decline of social objectivism and the denial of the possibility of a metalinguistic vantage point which allows the unmasking of ideological distortion (1997: 320)' Or, put more simply, 'Categories such as "distortion" and "false representation" [only] made sense as long as something "true" or "undistorted" was considered to be within human reach" (1997:298).

If the idea of ideology as a distortion of the truth is discredited, what are we left with? Can it still be useful? Or should we indeed, abandon the term for that of 'discourse'? Perhaps surprisingly, leaving behind evaluations of truth and falsehood can allow us to see more clearly how 'ideology' works. The focus then becomes, not what ideology says, but what it does in society. Ideology can be seen as a 'performative', as an expression which works not by distorting truth but by masquerading as truth. Terry Eagleton explains this conception of ideology as follows: 'Ideology appears to be a descriptive statement of reality-while being secretly 'emotive' (expressive of the lived reality of human subject) or 'conative' (directed toward the achievement of certain effects). If this is so, then it would

seem that there is a kind of slipperiness or duplicity built into ideological language... It is thus, in the terms of the philosopher J.L. Austin, 'performative' rather than 'constative' language: it belongs to the class of speech acts which get something done...rather than to the discourse of description' (Eagleton, 1991: 18) Or, as Michael Sprinker interprets Marxist theorist Louis Althusser: 'Ideology is a performative; as such, it is not regulated according to a regime of truth and falsehood, but by its sheer power to move' (Sprinker in Eagleton 1991 : 36).

The notion of ideology as a 'performative' has been criticised (see Eagleton 1991), but I believe that it is useful for looking at 'trafficking'. The ideology of 'trafficking', and the political myths that are associated with it, are powerful not because they make lies seem believable, but because they express something of our social reality, because they are able to embody both our fears and our hopes.

How can all this help answer the question of what we can do to stop the tide of repression being carried out in the name of stopping trafficking? It can help in at least two ways. Firstly, we see that the strategy of seeking to lay bare the 'facts' about trafficking will have limited effectiveness, because it fails to strike at the heart of the power of the political myth of trafficking. As Žižek says in his critique of ideology, 'The statement "Let the facts speak for themselves" is perhaps the arch-statement of ideology – the point being, precisely, that facts *never* speak for themselves but are always *made to speak*' (Žižek 1994 :11, emphasis added). An effective ideological critique of trafficking will need to expose the ways that the 'facts' about trafficking are 'made to speak' in repressive voices. We can expose the way in which governments seize on the issue of trafficking to impose harsh immigration policies that will willingly step on migrants and sex workers rights in the name of protecting borders, even when the data that they use to support these policies may or may not be objectively 'true'. Strategies that expose government actions and seek to hold them accountable are prime examples of

this kind of action. This concept of ideology allows us to see the ways in which those who are against the sex worker rights agenda, such as the right wing in the US and certain feminist anti-trafficking groups, use the stories and statistics of trafficked women in their efforts to fight the movement for sex workers rights.

Secondly, and more importantly, the most valuable consequence of the view of ideology as performative is that we need to let go of the idea that 'we' have truth and 'they' have ideology. It means that we recognise that our critique is also necessarily ideological, but that this does not have to be negative. It means that we must turn the same interrogative lens on our own narratives of trafficking. The question is, what voice do we give to the 'facts' about trafficking? In what register, repressive or liberatory, will they speak?

Speaking our ideology

This is where a true critique of the ideology of trafficking begins. I believe that the way that trafficking is politicised by many anti-trafficking groups is wrought with contradictions, and so actually serves to reinforce, rather than challenge, the dominant meanings of trafficking. My own advocacy for sex worker rights has led me to be highly critical of the anti-trafficking framework, even when used by organisations that are not anti-migrant or against sex workers' rights. I have argued that ideology which distinguishes between 'forced' prostitution (as in 'trafficking') and 'voluntary' prostitution keeps intact the division between 'innocent' women deserving of protection, and 'guilty' women – prostitutes- who deserve what they get (Doezema 1998).

This problem is not solved by seeking to remove any mention of 'prostitution' from definitions of trafficking, nor by broadening the focus to include other types of labour (which have been strategies of many anti-trafficking groups). For the problems of dividing migrants into 'guilty' and 'innocent' remains – it is simply displaced onto a larger group of people. Governments are not challenged about

their treatment of so-called 'voluntary' sex workers, 'economic migrants', or refugees.

Conclusion

For these reasons, I and a number of sex worker rights activists believe that the trafficking framework must be abandoned. However, this leaves us with a dilemma, and this brings me finally to the second of the illuminating aspects of ideology in relation to trafficking that I referred to at the beginning of the paper: that of political conflict. The present situation regarding the politicisation of trafficking is fraught with ironies. One of these is that the more repressive trafficking policies become, the less tenable the strategy of refusing to work within the trafficking framework becomes. At the moment, it is the anti-trafficking organisations who recognise sex work as labour and those who seek to broaden the approach of trafficking to include all forms of labour, who are at the forefront of efforts to stop repressive anti-trafficking policies. Organisations who never set out as sex worker rights groups, find themselves under attack for being 'pro-prostitution'. It is important that we, as a sex worker rights movement, continue to support these organisations, while at the same time working to change the overall ideology of trafficking that leads to repression against sex workers and migrants.

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