Sverre Molland

_The Perfect Business? Anti-trafficking and the Sex Trade along the Mekong._
Price: USD 26.00 (paperback).

Trafficking, we often hear, is big business, and so, too is anti-trafficking. This book explores trafficking, anti-trafficking, and the sex trade in the Mekong border region between Thailand and Laos, with a focus on two trafficking ‘hot spots’: Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and Nong Khai in Thailand, connected to Vientiane via the Friendship Bridge. The author is an anthropologist who had previously worked for the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (UNIAP) and he deploys both his insider status as an ‘anti-trafficker’ and his anthropological training to give us fascinating insights into the lives of women and men who work in the beer bars and brothels in various capacities. Most studies focus on victims of trafficking, and Molland is unusual in his holistic approach which includes traffickers and anti-traffickers. He shows how these are by no means necessarily the contrasting and cartoonish characters often depicted in the literature. Indeed, a person can be at the same time a trafficker and an anti-trafficker, a victim and a trafficker. He is particularly concerned to explore the collision of ‘ideal types’ of victims (innocent, duped, impoverished) and perpetrators (evil, cunning, profit-driven, criminal) with the realities of daily life and socialities in the sex trade. He argues that the space between the simplistic depiction of trafficking and the far messier and more complicated experiences on the ground permits an unreflexive engagement in (anti) trafficking by all parties that enables life to continue as usual in the face of frenetic anti-trafficking activity and projects.

The book is structured in three parts. The first, ‘Global Perfections: the idealised discourse of trafficking’, examines the rise of trafficking policy and research, its elasticity, and consequently the way trafficking can be used to serve a multitude of sometimes competing agendas. Molland is particularly exercised by the ‘metaphor of the market’ and the emphasis on demand, and he unpacks some of the assumptions underpinning this that he later draws on to analyse his fieldwork.

The second section, ‘Local Imperfections: on-the-ground realities and ambiguities’, describes and analyses his fieldwork in Thailand and Laos. There are some very well drawn ethnographies of life and exchange in bars—the reader can almost see the evening falling from the Friendship Bar’s verandah, elevated over the rice fields: ‘Rice paddies stretch out into the dark horizon that is occasionally lit up by distant lightning. There is a slight cool breeze as a thun-
derstorm is approaching’ (p. 75). We feel as if we come to know some of his main informants, young women like Nort, who debuted as a sex worker when she was seventeen by selling her virginity to a Thai businessman, and who plans to open a shop in her village and buy some land for her stepmother even though she doesn’t treat her very well. Or businesswomen like Souksavan, who works at the Mekong Lounge as a mamasan, (an older woman, often a former sex worker, who works as a manager) who is fed up with traveling from her village and wants to set up a restaurant. The reader learns in practice how young women introduce their friends into bars, and how they may be both ‘trafficked’ and ‘trafficker’. The anti-trafficking model proves particularly difficult to apply when the recruiters are under 18. Furthermore, many start by being ‘socialized’ into bars, not selling sex but, over the course of weeks, realising how little they are earning in comparison to other workers. Is this an ‘abuse of vulnerability’, as anti-traffickers would have it? Or do these girls rather ‘choose to be exploited’? One cannot help but wonder how helpful this framing in terms of ‘choice’ really is (though Molland does not explore this in detail). Notably we meet far fewer men and are introduced to no clients. This is perhaps because the author is so averse to ideas of demand and the market as applied to trafficking. He debunks ideas that demand for workers of a particularly ethnicity or niche services can account for the recruitment and mobility of workers within the sector. He does allow that the selling of virginity does follow some market principles (‘Virginity: selling it, or losing it to a boyfriend?’ p. 161), though he describes how the numbers of those wanting to sell in practice outstrips demand.

The third section, ‘Betwixt and Between: the anti-traffickers’, also draws on fieldwork, this time exploring his experiences with those concerned to combat trafficking. He situates their work within the aid and development world of UN Agencies, with training programmes to identify victims of trafficking seemingly a world away from the realities of the previous chapters. Concern that states are going for easy wins and targeting the small fish, he argues, implies that the big fish exist. The anti-trafficking world is driven by an internally discursive logic: ‘To put it crudely, the goal of trafficking programs is not to find answers to the challenges of trafficking, but the reverse: they seek problems that fit their solutions, in the form of their own development programs’ (pp. 222–3) and he reflects on his own complicity in some of these processes.

One of sole criticisms I have of this book is the index. This may not have been within the author’s control, but not a single word that I looked up for the purposes of this review was in the index, and it has some frankly pointless entries including ‘trafficking’, which is what the entire book is about, as well as including the names of some authors selected apparently completely arbitrarily. Indexing by computer is very unhelpful for the reader.
This book shows how ethnography can profoundly complicate policy categories, and models relying on ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’. It offers some important insights into how it is that anti-trafficking has proved so resilient a policy tool despite so much critique, both academic and from within NGOs and international organisations.

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