

BOOK REVIEW

In An Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated The Feminist Movement against Sexual Violence. Kristin Bumiller. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008; xvi+215 pages; ISBN 978-0-8223-4239-7.

Kristin Bumiller's work explores the very important question of what happens when the neoliberal state becomes the protector of women's rights. She looks at various strategies through which the state and its heterogeneous agents exercise control of victims of sexual violence. Bumiller begins with a careful analysis of how anxieties around sexual violence have been authorized and reified through racialized cultural representations of sexual violence. She looks at what characterizing the efforts of early feminists to eradicate these violences as a "gender war" does to the anti-violence project and to the sensibilities of victims, allies and other citizens. She studies various images and icons that have been produced by writers and artists around sexual violence, depicting the victimized jogger's body and the black rapist, in order to argue that these racialized constructions work to legitimise state intervention in "ending" sexual violence in white societies.

Bumiller continues with a critical analysis of the function of rape trials, arguing that these trials function as a way of shoring up the legitimacy of the state as a protector of the violated bodies of rape victims. She offers critical insight into how the state employs various discourses of social services, medicine and psychology to pathologise the victims as sick bodies that can be "cured" with enough state intervention. Focusing on two cases of rape - the New Bedford Trial of 1984 and the Central Park Jogger Trial of 1991 - Bumiller looks at how defendants of colour shore up the legitimacy of the coercive policing function of the state, especially when the victims are white women.

Whereas Bumiller is careful in differentiating between white rape victims and victims of colour, her analysis does not look at other forms of sexual violence women of colour experience, such as the use of rape as a tool of genocide in the case of Native American women, forced sterilization of Native American, Black and other women of colour, or the forcing of women into prostitution through various racially discriminatory employment laws. Moreover, it is important to critique the notion of sexual violence as a human rights issue from the perspective of Native American feminists and other feminists of color within the United States, rather than considering whether or not the American version of human rights is compatible with feminist politics in other countries.

If Bumiller had considered the nuances of what sexual violence means for bodies of colour, her exploration of the coercive role of the state in inflicting racial and colonial forms of

sexual violence would have been more interlocking of race, class and gender. This book is still an excellent read for those looking for critical readings on “feminist” interventions by the state in ending sexual violence.

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