

11. Sex as Work & Sex Work

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An army colonel is about to start the morning briefing to his staff. While waiting for the coffee to be prepared, the colonel says he didn't sleep much the night before because his wife had been a bit frisky. He asks everyone: How much of sex is 'work' and how much is 'pleasure'? A Major votes 75-25% in favor of work. A Captain says 50-50%. A lieutenant responds with 25-75% in favor of pleasure, depending on how much he's had to drink. There being no consensus, the colonel turns to the enlisted man in charge of making the coffee. What does he think? With no hesitation, the young soldier replies, 'Sir, it has to be 100% pleasure.' The surprised colonel asks why. 'Well, sir, if there was any work involved, the officers would have me doing it for them.'

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Perhaps because he is the youngest, the soldier considers only the pleasure that sex represents, while the older men know a lot more is going on. They may have a better grasp of the fact that sex is the work that puts in motion the machine of human reproduction. Biology and medical texts present the mechanical facts without any mention of possible ineffable experiences or feelings (pleasure, in other words), as sex is reduced to wiggly sperm fighting their way towards waiting eggs. The divide between the feelings and sensations involved and the cold facts is vast.

The officers probably also have in mind the work involved in keeping a marriage going, apart from questions of lust and satisfaction. They might say that sex between people who are in love is special (maybe even sacred), but they also know sex is part of the partnership of getting through life together and has to be considered pragmatically as well. Even people in love do not have identical physical and emotional needs, with the result that sex takes different forms and means more or less on different occasions.

This little story shows a few of the ways that sex can be considered work. When we say sex work nowadays the focus is immediately on commercial exchanges, but in this article I mean more than that and question our ability to distinguish clearly when sex involves work (as well as other things) and sex work (which involves all sorts of things). Most of the moral uproar surrounding prostitution and other forms of commercial sex asserts that the difference between good or virtuous sex and bad or harmful sex is obvious. Efforts to repress, condemn, punish and rescue women who sell sex rest on the claim that they occupy a place outside the norm and the community, can

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be clearly identified and therefore acted on by people who Know Better how they should live. To show this claim to be false discredits this neocolonialist project.

Loving, With and Without Sex

We live in a time when relationships based on romantic, sexual love occupy the pinnacle of a hierarchy of emotional values, in which it is supposed that romantic love is the best possible experience and that the sex people in love have is the best sex, in more ways than one. Romantic passion is considered meaningful, a way for two people to 'become one', an experience some believe heightened if they conceive a child. Other sexual traditions also strive to transcend ordinariness in sex (the mechanical, the frictional), for example Tantra, which distinguishes three separate purposes for sex: procreation, pleasure and liberation, the last culminating in losing the sense of self in cosmic consciousness. In the western romantic tradition, passion is conceived as involving a strong positive emotion toward a particular person that goes beyond the physical and is contrasted to lust, which is only physical.

It is, however, impossible to say exactly how we know which is which, and the young enlisted man in the opening story might well not understand the difference. Sex driven by surging or excess testosterone and sex as adolescent rebellion against repressive family values cannot be reduced to a mechanical activity bereft of emotion or meaning; rather, those kinds of sex often feel like ways of finding out and expressing who we are. And even when sex is used to show off in front of others, or to affirm one's attractiveness

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and power to pull, ‘meaningless’ would seem to be the last thing it should be called. Here it is true that one person may not only lack passion but totally neglect another’s feelings and desires, but just as often this other person is engaged in the same pursuit. The point is that reductions like lust and love don’t go very far towards telling us what is going on when people have sex together. Moreover, while real passion is meant to be based on knowing someone long and intimately, a parallel story glorifies love at first sight, in which passion is instantly awakened – and this can occur as easily at a rave or pub as at the Taj Mahal.

Part of the mythology of love promises that loving couples will always want and enjoy sex together, unproblematically, freely and loyally. But most people know that couples are multi-faceted partnerships, sex together being only one facet, and that those involved very often tire of sex with each other. Although skeptics say today’s high divorce rate shows the love-myth is a lie, others say the problem is that lovers aren’t able or willing to do the work necessary to stay together and survive personal, economic and professional changes. Some of this work may well be sexual. In some partnerships where the spark has gone, partners grant each other the freedom to have sex with others, or pay others to spice up their own sex lives (as a couple or separately). This can take the form of a polyamorous project, with open contracts; as swinging, where couples play with others together; as polygamy or temporary marriage; as cheating or betrayal; or as paying for sex.

The Sex Contract

Even when love is involved, people may use sex in the hope of getting something in return. They may or may not be fully conscious of such motives as:

- I will have sex with you because I love you even if I am not in the mood myself
- I will have sex with you hoping you will feel well disposed toward me afterwards and give me something I want
- I will have sex with you because if I don't you are liable to be unpleasant to me, our children, or my friends, or withhold something we want

In these situations, sex is felt to be and accepted as part of the relationship, backed up in classic marriage law by the concept of conjugal relations, spouses' rights to them and the consequences of not providing them: abandonment, adultery, annulment, divorce. This can work the opposite way as well, as when a partner doesn't want sex:

- I will not have sex with you, so you will have to do without or get it somewhere else

The partner wanting sex and not getting it at home now has to choose: do without and feel frustrated? call an old friend? ring for an escort? go to a pick-up bar? drive to a hooker stroll? visit a public toilet? buy an inflatable doll? fly to a third-world beach?

People of any gender identity can find themselves in this situation, where money may help resolve the situation, at

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least temporarily, and where more than one option may have to be tried. Tiring of partners is a universal experience, and research on women who pay local guides and beach boys on holidays suggests there is nothing inherently male about exchanging money for sex. That said, our societies are still patriarchal, women still take more responsibility for maintaining homes and children than men and men still have more disposable cash than women, making the overtly commercial options more viable for men than for others.

We don't know how many people do what, but we know that many clients of sex workers say they are married (some happily, some not, the research is all about male clients). In testimonies about their motivations for paying for sex, men often cite a desire for variety or a way to cope with not getting enough sex or the kind of sex they want at home.

- I want to have sex with you but I also want it with someone else

This is the point in the sex contract many have trouble with, the question being Why? Why should someone with sex available at home (even good sex) also want it somewhere else? The assumption is, of course, that we all ought to want only one partner, because we all ought to want the kind of love that is loyal, passionate and monogamous. To say I love my wife and also I would like to have sex with others is to seem perverse, or greedy, and a lot of energy is spent railing against such people. However, there is nothing intrinsically better about monogamy than any other attitude to sex.

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If saving marriages is a value, then more than one sex worker believes her role helps prevent break-ups, or at least allows spouses to blow off steam from difficult relationships. Workers mean not only the overtly sexual side of paid activities but also the emotional labour performed in listening to clients' stories, bolstering their egos, teaching them sexual techniques, providing emotional advice. Rarely do sex workers position clients' spouses as enemies or say they want to steal clients away from them; on the contrary, many see the triangular relationship – wife, husband, sex worker – as mutually sustaining. In this way sex workers believe they help reproduce the marital home and even improve it.

Sex as Reproductive Labour

In support of the idea that sex reproduces social life, one can say that people fortunate enough to experience satisfying sex feel fundamentally affirmed and renewed by it. In that sense, a worker providing sexual services does reproductive work. Paid sex work is a caring service when workers provide friend-like or therapist-like company and when they give a back rub – whether the caring is a performance or not. The person providing the caring services uses brain, emotions and body to make another person feel good:

- Leaning over to comfort a baby
- Leaning over to massage aching shoulders
- Leaning over to kiss a neck or forehead or chest

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- Leaning over to suck a penis or breast

If the recipient perceives the contact as positive, a sense of well-being is produced that the brain registers, and the individual's separateness is momentarily erased. These effects are not different simply because the so-called erogenous zones are involved rather than other parts of the body. In this sense, sex work, whether paid or not, reproduces fundamental social life.

The argument against sex work as reproductive labour is that sexual experiences, while sometimes temporarily rejuvenating, are neither always felt as positive nor essential to the individual's continued functioning. Humans have to eat and keep our bodies and environments clean but we don't have to have sex to survive: the well-being produced by sex is a luxury or extra. Sex feels as essential as food to a lot of people, and they may be very unhappy without it, but they can go on living.

Sex as a Job

The variability of sexual experience makes it difficult to pin down which sex should properly be thought of as sex work. My own policy is to accept what individuals say. If someone tells me they experience selling sex as a job, I take their word for it. If, on the contrary, they say that it doesn't feel like a job but something else, then I accept that.

What does it mean to say it feels like a job? There are several possibilities:

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- I organise myself to offer particular services for money that I define
- I take a job in someone else's business where I control some aspects of what I do but not others
- I place myself in situations where others tell me what they are looking for and I adapt, negotiate, manipulate and perform – but it's a job because I get money

There are other permutations, too, of course. All service jobs involve customer relations, which are eternally unpredictable. Some clients are able to specify exactly what services they want and make sure they are satisfied, but some cannot and may end up getting what the worker wants to provide. To imagine that the worker is always powerless because the client pays for time makes no sense, since all workers jockey for control in their jobs – of what happens when and how long it takes. This is a simple definition of human agency. And it's important to remember that a very large proportion of sex work is spent on selling: the seduction and flirtation necessary to turn atmosphere, potentiality and possibility into an exchange of money for sex.

Furthermore, although we like to think about the two roles, salesperson and customer, as separate, in the sexual relation roles can be blurred. Theorists want to think about the worker doing something for the client or the client commanding the worker to act. But carrying out a command does not exclude doing it one's own way, nor, for that matter, enjoyment, feelings of connectivity and the reproduction of self.

Non-Partner Sex in the Home

Many would like to believe that non-commercial (or ‘real’) sex takes place in homes, while commercial sex lurks in seedy other places. However, sex outside the partnership easily takes place while one of the partners is not there. This can be sex that is ordered in and paid for or adulterous, promiscuous, play or non-monogamous sex. Sometimes the non-partner is considered ‘almost one of the family’ – a live-in maid or nanny. Other times the non-partner is someone who’s come to perform some other paid job – the proverbial milkman or plumber. There’s also sex in the home online, via webcam, or over the telephone, as well as images or objects that enhance a sexual experience in which no partner is necessary at all. The sex industry penetrates family residences in many ways and cannot be, by definition, the family’s Other.

Most commentary on how the sex industry is changing focuses on the Internet, where apart from more conventional business sites, sexual communities form and reform continuously. Social networking sites like facebook provide spaces where the commercial, the aesthetic and the activist intersect and overlap, also complicating the traditional divide between selling and buying. Chat and instant messaging provide opportunities for people to experiment with sexual identities including commercial ones. Much of all this is unmeasurable, taking place on sites where all participants are mixed together, not sorted into categories of buyers and sellers. Statistics on the value of pornography sold on the Internet focus on sites with catalogues of products for sale, but the sphere of webcams,

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like peep shows of old, blurs the wobbly line between porn and prostitution.

Although some (like my colleague Elizabeth Bernstein 2007) claim that sex workers offering girlfriend-like experiences are a manifestation of post-industrial life, I am not convinced. Sex worker testimonies from many periods reveal the complexity always waiting to happen when brief encounters are repeated, when clients seek again someone with whom they felt a bond as well as a sexual attraction. Nor am I convinced that the experiences of upper-class clients patronising courtesans, geishas or mistresses are inherently different from the socialising of working-class men and women in 'treating' cultures. Instead, it is clear that the lines between commercial and non-commercial sex have always been blurry, and that middle-class marriage is itself an example.

Scholars of sexual cultures won't get far if they follow dogma that considers marriage to be separate and outside the realm of investigations of commercial sex. In societies where matchmaking and different sorts of arranged marriages and dowries are conventional, the link between payment and sex has been overt and normalised, while campaigners against both sex tourism and foreign-bride agencies are offended precisely because they see a money-exchange entering into what they believe should be 'pure' relationships. We have too much information now about non-family forms of love and commitment, non-committed forms of sex and non-sexual forms of love to hold on to these arbitrary, mythic divisions, which further oppressive ideas about sexually good and bad women. We know now that monogamy is not necessarily better, that paid sex can be affectionate, that loving couples can do without sex,

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that married love involves money and that sex involves work.

I see no postmodern crisis here. Some believe that the developed West was moving in a good direction after the Second World War, towards happier families and juster societies, and that neoliberalism is destroying that. But historical research shows that before the bourgeoisie's advancement to the centre of European societies, with the concomitant focus on nuclear families and a particular version of moral respectability, loose, flexible arrangements vis-à-vis sex, family and sexuality were common in both upper- and working-class cultures (Agustín 2004) . In the long run it may turn out that 200 years of bourgeois 'family values' were a blip on the screen in human history.

Sex, Equality & Money

Understanding professional sex work has not been made easier by making 'equality' the standard for gender relations. We can only really know whether sexual experiences are equal if everyone looks and acts the same, which is not only impossible but repressive of diversity. In sexual relations, equality projects run into the problem of dissimilar bodies, different ways of exhibiting arousal and experiencing satisfaction, not to mention differences in cultural background and social status. Those who complain about other people's perversity and deviance are accused in return of being boring adherents of repressive sex.

In terms of the work of sex, we run into a further difficulty vis-à-vis equality, the cliché that sees participants taking either an active or a passive role and identity. But

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many people, not just professional sex workers, know that the work of sex can mean allowing the other to take an active role and assuming a passive one as well as taking the active role or switching back and forth. Sometimes people do what they already know they like, and sometimes they experiment. Sometimes people don't know what they want, or want to be surprised, or to lose control.

For some critics, the possession of money by clients gives them absolute power over workers and therefore means that equality is impossible. This attitude toward money is odd, given that we live in times when it is acceptable to pay for child and elderly care, for rape, alcohol and suicide counselling and for many other forms of consolation and caring. Those services are considered compatible with money but when it is exchanged for sex money is treated as a totally negative, contaminating force - this commodification uniquely terrible. Money is a fetish here despite the obvious fact that no body part is actually sold off in the commercial sex exchange.

Sex Work & Migrancy

In many places, migrant women and young men do most of the paid sex work, because:

there are enormous structural inequalities in the world, because there are people everywhere willing to take the risk of travelling to work in other countries and because social networks, high technology and transportation make it widely feasible (Agustín 2002). Migrants take

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jobs that are available, accept lower pay and tolerate having fewer rights than first-class citizens because those are less important than simply getting ahead. Even those with qualifications for other jobs, whether as hairdressers or university professors, are glad to get jobs considered unprestigious by non-migrants. While many view migrants in low-prestige jobs as absolute victims too constrained by forces around them to have real agency, social gain or enjoyment, there are other ways to understand them (Agustín 2003).

Critics hold that migrants who work in private homes reproduce the social life of their all-powerful employers but accomplish little on their own behalf. This is strange, because low-prestige workers who are not migrants are acknowledged to gain a connection to society, knowledge of being a useful economic actor and more options because of having money.

We look at migration as neither a degradation nor improvement . . . in womens' position, but as a restructuring of gender relations. This restructuring need not necessarily be expressed through a satisfactory professional life. It may take place through the assertion of autonomy in social life, through relations with family of origin, or through participating in networks and formal associations. The differential between earnings in the country of origin and the country of immigration may in itself create such an autonomy, even if the job in the receiving country is one of a live-in maid or prostitute. (Hefti 1997)

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One of the great contradictions of capitalism is that even unfair, unwritten, ambiguous contracts can produce active subjects.

Ways Forward

I have proposed the cultural study of commercial sex (Agustín 2005), in which scholars are free of the constraints of the traditional study of prostitution, where ideology and moralising about power, gender and money have long held primacy. Cultural study does not assume that we already know what any given sex-money exchange means but that meaning changes according to specific cultural context. This means we cannot assume there is a fundamental difference between commercial and non-commercial sex. Anthropologists studying non-western societies consistently reveal that money and sex exchanges exist on a continuum where feelings are also present, and historians reveal the same about the past (for example, Tabet 1987 and Peiss 1986).

Sex and work cannot be completely disentangled, as the officers knew and the enlisted man would some day find out.

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