

Chapter 34

Commercial Sexualities: Section Introduction

Maarten Loopmans

Since the pioneering work of geographers like Symanski (1974; 1981), Shumsky and Springer (1981) and Ashworth et al. (1988), sex work has been one of the topical interests in the subdiscipline of geographies of sexualities. Symanski (1981) and Ashworth et al. (1988), inspired by then fashionable social ecology studies and Robert Park's concept of the 'moral region' (places in the city where divergent moral codes prevailed), sought to understand and explain the location of sex work through economic and sociopolitical determinants. Whilst debates in this field continue up to today – for example, in McKewon's (2003), Ryder's (2004, 2010) and Cameron's (2004) writings on the political and economic determinants of the location of sex work venues or in Aalbers and Sabat's (2012) and Weitzer's (2014) discussion of the red-light district as a 'moral region' – geographical research on sex work has now expanded and diverged in various new directions (Hubbard and Whowell, 2008). Contemporary geographical studies on sex work include critical accounts of the relations between, and politics of, urban regeneration, heteronormativity, transnational migration and the policing of sex work as much as approaches giving voice to sex workers and their lived experiences, their spatial tactics of resistance and performances of self. We now also have a wide variety of case studies of cities and sex workers from the Global North to the Global South.

This introductory chapter will discuss the past decade's coming of age of the geographies of sex work, identifying five main fields of research. In the following section we will explore the burgeoning literature exploring the relation between sex work and the politics of urban space. The next section focuses on the global scale, discussing the policing of transnational sex work. The fourth section opens up new avenues of theoretical exploration in discussing the regulation of sex work as a biopolitical endeavour to construct heteronormality. The final two sections are dedicated to micro-level research on the everyday spatial practices of individual sex workers, on the one hand, and the role of places and spatial performances in the construction of identities and subjectivities of sex workers, on the other. In the conclusion, we introduce the four chapters of Section VI by situating them in the five fields described.

Sex Work and the Politics of Urban Space

Since the early discussions on the political and economic determinants of sex work locations (see Ashworth et al., 1988), urban studies on sex work have evolved into a debate on the spatial transformation of urban red-light districts as part of, and related to, wider urban transformation processes, in particular gentrification, touristification and urban regeneration (Papayanis, 2000; Ryder, 2004; Cameron, 2004; McKewon, 2003; Hubbard, 1997, 1999, 2004a, 2004b; Hubbard et al., 2008; Hubbard and Whowell, 2008; Aalbers and Deinema, 2012; Loopmans and Van den Broeck, 2011; Neuts et al., 2014). Ryder (2004) and Hubbard (2004a) describe how the recent redevelopment of inner cities for gentrification and tourism is pushing up land rent in inner cities, driving profit-maximizing sex entrepreneurs to seek out cheaper sites, or, if possible, upgrade their businesses and integrate them into the wider entertainment and tourism industry (Van Straaten, 2004; Hubbard et al., 2008). Recent policy pressure on the visible presence of the sex industry in inner cities is explained by a reinvigorated conservative sexual morality, intolerant towards public visibility of the sex industry. Consequently, policy-makers aiming to redevelop urban areas have attempted to hide sex work from public view (Papayanis, 2000; Sanchez, 2004; Hubbard, 2004a, 2004b; Löw and Ruhne, 2009; Aalbers and Deinema, 2012). Moreover, as the social geography of cities is changing, red-light districts formerly located in ‘working-class’ neighbourhoods are now confronted with new populations that generally show less tolerance to non-normative sexual activities (Mathieu, 2011). For instance, immigrant populations that settle in these neighbourhoods sometimes reveal themselves as virulent opponents of overt sex work (Hubbard, 1997). Middle-class gentrifiers might insist on a ‘revanchist’ kind of cleansing of public space from all sorts of ‘nuisance-producing’ activities (Papayanis, 2000; Hubbard, 2004a, 2004b). Attempts to close sex businesses or displace street prostitutes are widespread, and, in urban regeneration discourse, quality of life for residents is the antithesis of a visible sex industry. However, the governance of sex work is not only influenced by processes and actors who operate within cities. Increasingly, attention is being paid to global processes affecting the regulation of sex work.

Globalization and the Policing of Transnational Sex Work

In addition to a long-standing interest in the local (mainly urban) politics of sex work, geographers have now also started to pay more attention to the connection between sex work and globalization. Historical geographers have considered the relation between imperialism and the policing of prostitution (Kumar, 2005; Howell, 2004, 2009; Legg, 2012). The apparent globalization of sex work today has gained increasing attention (see Kempadoo and Doezena, 1998; Sassen, 2002; Agathangelou, 2004), some authors having begun to disentangle its geographies (Sanchez, 2004; Hubbard and Whowell, 2008; Hubbard, 2012). Two mutually related ‘global’ processes are emphasized in geographical studies: first, a growing international mobility of sex workers and clients; second, the way in which the globalization of sex work has affected the national and local regulation of sex work.

In 1981 Symanski was already contending that the ‘demand for diversity has been a significant reason for the [interurban and international] mobility of prostitutes’ (Symanski, 1981, p. 184). Since then, international migration and tourism has expanded in both scale and scope. This increase in migration and tourism includes growing numbers of sex tourists and migrating sex workers (Agustin, 2007; Laidler et al., 2007; Chang and Chen, 2013), giving a new boost to the sex industry and to the development of new local and national policy approaches to sex work. Constituting new spaces of action and erotic/exotic pleasures for sex buyers, these transnational sex markets greatly stimulate demand (Wonders and Michalowski, 2001; Marttila, 2008) and have given rise to the development of ‘world cities of sex work’ (Hubbard, 2012; Deinema and Aalbers, 2015). Places like Amsterdam and Cuba have been promoting themselves as sex-tolerant locales (Pope, 2005; Deinema and Aalbers, 2015; Neuts et al., 2014) as part of a struggle for geopolitical prominence and capital flows, thereby actively contributing to the construction of ‘real and imagined’ global geographies of sexualities.

The increasingly transnational character of sex work has also stimulated other policy initiatives. Comparing recent reforms in EU countries, Hubbard et al. (2008) and Crowhurst et al. (2012) explain how recent policy reforms relating to prostitution within individual nation-states cannot be disentangled from the discursive equation of sex workers with trafficked women and the moral panic in society over rising migration, as ‘legislative reform is deemed necessary to maintain the

integrity of nation-state' (Hubbard et al., 2008, p. 148). Indeed, O'Neill et al. (2008) emphasize how residents' reactions to street sex work are increasingly informed by media discourses about their ethnic and racial 'Otherness', whereas FitzGerald (2013) explores the geographic identity politics of Western feminists in organizing their discourse on the female trafficked migrant, increasingly eclipsing earlier political struggles for both sex workers' and migrants' rights (Chapkis, 2003; Agustin, 2007). Crowhurst et al. (2012) also point to the role of supranational government bodies such as the EU or the UN in universalizing discourses on trafficking and potential policy answers. How this moral panic affects national and local policy-making is debated among geographers. Hubbard et al. (2008) see strong similarities in otherwise very different policy models of legalization, abolitionism and prohibitionism, as all tend to expel prostitutes out of sight from 'respectable' places, and from legal protection. Loopmans and Van den Broeck (2011), on the other hand, emphasize how a globalizing discourse on trafficking translates into different local policy reactions because it is mediated by specific local cultures, institutions and actors (see also Di Ronco, 2014).

Heteronormative Sexual Politics

A powerful critique of the policing of sex work builds on the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben to reveal the connections between the regulation of sex work as 'deviant' and the construction of heterosexuality. In these studies, sex work and heterosexuality are presented as an effect of knowledge and discourse production, as a normative and regulatory fiction embedded in wider biopolitical urges. The sex worker is described as a *homo sacer*, excluded and segregated from 'the normal' (Sanchez, 2004; Hubbard et al., 2008) to serve as a rightless antipodal 'Other' necessary for the construction of heteronormality (and, increasingly, homonormality – see Ross and Sullivan, 2012). In such discourse, a moral geography is constructed 'in which sex work is deemed incompatible with family occupation' (Hubbard and Prior, 2013, p. 145). The policing and control of sex work and sex-work spaces is exposed as functional to the biopolitical regulation of the wider population (Howell, 2004; M. Brown and Knopp, 2010; Evered and Evered, 2013). However, empirical studies reveal how this control is produced through geographically unevenly distributed governmental networks and diverse mundane practices of politicians, planners, policemen and licensing officers. Consequently, such biopolitical regulation of

sex-work spaces remains incomplete, contradictory and open at the level of its effects on the ground (Loopmans and Van den Broeck, 2011; Laing, 2012; Legg, 2012; Prior et al., 2013).

Everyday Spatial Practices of Sex Workers

In the past decades geographers have also turned to an understanding of the lived experiences of sex workers, centring the voice and highlighting the agency of sex workers, rather than the structural and spatial constraints they face. This introduced a whole set of alternative theories and methods to the geographic literature on sex work.

In discussing the micro-geographical tactics sex workers deploy to avoid harassment and marginalization by police, punters and protesters, Hubbard and Sanders (2003) reveal how sex workers tactically negotiate societal constraints by navigating and reshaping ‘pre-inscribed’ spaces and policies of marginalization. The struggles against societal constraints and social and spatial marginalization in cities has since been discussed in various ways. Central to these interventions is the degree of agency sex workers reveal in co-producing the spatial ways in which sex work is regulated and organized. At the micro-spatial level of the sex work venue, Whowell (2009) and Atkins and Laing (2012), studying male sex work in Manchester’s Gay Village, explain how places for sex work are as much produced by the spatial and bodily performances of sex workers and clients, as by the regulatory strategies of government bodies. Similarly, Laing (2012) emphasizes the way in which exotic dancers in Canada expand the spaces available to them in clubs, in order to make additional income. Subverting the stereotypical conception of male dominance in a sex-work relationship, Aalbers (2005), in an exploration of the ‘unwritten rules’ of the Amsterdam red-light district, describes how sex workers control and manipulate the behaviour of clients. However, in a study on ‘bar girls’ in Ethiopia, Van Blerk (2011) emphasizes how such ‘autonomous performative tactics’ take place within the boundaries set by bar owners and customers, and the agency of bar girls remains fragile and bound up in micro-power relations beyond their control.

At the wider level of the city, Becki Ross (2010) describes the strategies of resistance against displacement deployed by sex workers during the gentrification of Vancouver’s West End. Similarly, Williams (2014) describes how the development of the historic centre of Salvador de Bahia into a tourist place has inscribed itself in the city’s rigid and hierarchical racial and class structure, with black

and poor citizens considered as ‘out of place’ in the historic centre. Resisting being exiled from such ‘whitened’ spaces, black sex workers carve out particular places in the inner city as ‘sex work spots’. Whereas Williams (2014) marks this as a clear example of reclaiming agency by marginalized subjects, she asserts that the presence of black sex workers in the historic centre simultaneously reinforces the geographical and racial discourses stimulating sex tourism and the domination of black people in the city. Emphasizing the social construction of sex workers’ identities, her work ties in with studies deploying feminist theories of performativity to explore the construction of identities in place.

Identity and Performance

Everyday geographies of sex work have also turned to the construction of identities and subjectivities in relation to places and performances of sex work. Much of this work demonstrates how heteronormativity is at the same time challenged and reproduced through the repeated construction and performance of subjectivities (following Butler, 1990, 1993; Gregson and Rose, 2000). Such an approach has proven useful in problematizing and transcending the binaries of passive/active, victimization/empowerment, sex worker/prostitute often mobilized in public debate (Frank, 2003; Yea, 2012).

Collins (2012) discusses the practices of ‘hosts’ to gay tourists in a transnational gentrifying district in Malate, the Philippines. Malate’s development into a popular gay urban enclave relies on host work to facilitate the movement of tourists among Malate’s gay venues., Hosts simultaneously develop and perform their knowledge of the place, but performing hospitality involves much more, including enacting desire or the specific sexual roles visitors imagine them to play. At the same time, hospitality is also desirable to hosts, as it involves not only economic rewards, but also cultural capital and access to desired gentrified gay spaces. As Collins (2012, p. 515) writes, ‘hosts explore their own capacity for self-transformation through desire’. Ding and Ho’s (2013) study of rural-to-urban migrant female sex workers in the Pearl River Delta equally stresses the potential for self-transformation, describing how sex work offers female migrants a way out of the stigma of poverty and rurality. Allowing them to perform a sophisticated urbanity, sex work offers an escape from traditional gender and sexual roles, and provides them with emotional satisfaction and a more liberated sexuality. Ding and Ho (2012) emphasize how such identities are not crafted by individuals in

isolation, but result from the interactional relations with particular spaces, clients, mamasans,¹ husbands, boyfriends and themselves. This point is taken up by Faier (2014) in her analysis of the mobilization of ‘the prostitute stigma’ by Filipina migrant women in a rural Japanese village against fellow migrant women. She describes how this occurs not so much to categorize a sexual–economic relationship, but to distinguish themselves in a strategy to strengthen their own position as respectable mothers and partners. She shows how Filipina migrant women in Japan are always at risk of being stigmatized, as they are often considered poor and hence sexually available to Japanese men, whereas, in the Philippines, they are believed to be immoral and willing to do anything for money. As Silvey (2010) in a case study of Indonesian women explains, the discursive interpretation of migration is heavily gendered, and, whereas migration might be a way of evading moral scrutiny (Van Blerk, 2011; Ding and Ho, 2013), female mobility itself is often at risk of being linked to immorality and the stigma of prostitution (see Sörensson, 2012 on the sexualization of female tourist guides in Indonesia).

Yea (2012) demands attention to the way in which trajectories of migration or trafficking affect subject positions of sex workers, their tactics and performances (see also Mai, 2009). Yea explains how performances as sex workers or trafficking victims in one place and time cannot be understood in isolation from experiences and performances in other places and times along this trajectory. On a somewhat smaller scale, Spanger (2013a) also detects ‘infections’ between spaces and performances, between performances and between different spaces. She emphasizes the negotiation of various social positions with each other and with the places in which they are performed. In her work with Thai sex workers in Denmark, she understands how gender performances play a part in sex work and how sex work relates to their gendered subject positions in spaces away from sex work, like home.

Conclusion and Section Overview

New directions in geographies of sex work have given rise to improved and more nuanced understandings of the spatialities of sex work and have introduced a number of theoretical and methodological innovations. Geographers of sex work have been influenced by critical urban political

¹ Mamasan is a term sometimes used in East Asia to refer to a woman in a position of authority in a geisha house, bar, nightclub, massage parlour or brothel.

economists in understanding the role of capitalist urbanization (and most notably gentrification) in unsettling the urban geographies of sex work, and by Foucault and Agamben in understanding the biopolitical urge behind many national and local prostitution policies. Queer and postcolonial theorists have had their influence on debates on the lived experiences of sex workers. They have stimulated geographers to reject unproductive binary interpretations of sex work. Moreover, in a number of instances, fruitful theoretical cross-overs between various theories have been established (see Collins, 2012; Hubbard, 2013; Williams, 2014). These theoretical innovations have been accompanied by the introduction and expansion of novel methodologies such as discourse analysis, visual anthropology (see Atkins and Laing, 2012), time–spatial life-course analysis (Yea, 2012) or multi-sited ethnographies (Yea, 2012; Spanger, 2013a). This methodological expansion has allowed for increased attention and access to less publicly visible forms of sex work, so that we now have a rather good understanding of private bars, massage parlours, closed brothels and their relations with other lived spaces in the lives of sex workers.

Notwithstanding great progress in the recent past, gaps in the geographies of sex work remain, particularly when compared to the literature on sex work in other disciplines. While now clearly centring on the voices of sex workers, the experiences of other individual actors with whom they relate and interact (police officers, brothel owners, traffickers, planners, partners, punters and so on), though important in the making of sex work, still remain relatively understudied in geography. And although a turn has been made to pay attention to the lived experiences of sex work, a fleshy, embodied understanding of sex work remains underdeveloped. Similarly, the focus is mainly on female sex workers catering to male clients in urban space, while LGBTQI sex workers and rural or cyberspace – and the methodological opportunities and challenges these have to offer – are still given too little attention (but see the special issue of *Sexualities* coordinated by Smith and Laing (2012)).

The chapters in this section have been selected to offer insights into the variety of approaches in contemporary geographies of sex work. In the first chapter Phil Hubbard addresses the intricate web of governmental strategies which shapes the urban geographies of sex work in the Global North. He discusses the way in which the practices of licensing, zoning, policing and surveillance can be linked to revanchist gentrification, sexual normativity and the gendering of urban spaces.

Next, Magaly Rodríguez García opens up our perspective on sex work and its discursive construction by providing a global history of commercial sexualities. She shows how throughout space and time, moral, cultural and legal definitions overlap and reinforce each other. Rodríguez García explains how such definitions have always served to simultaneously condemn and commodify sexual practices in an attempt to tame the socially disruptive character of desire. Conscious of the power of discourse, she warns against binary interpretations of commercial sexualities, emphasizing its ineffectiveness in encompassing the complexities of commercial sexualities.

In a third chapter, Joseli Maria Silva and Marcio Jose Ornat contribute to the literature on the intricate identity performances of migrant sex workers to disrupt the binary conception of domination and resistance. Introducing the concept of ‘tropicalization’, the authors discuss the corporeal and sexual production of Brazilian sex workers in Spain as resulting from a complex interplay between a hegemonic European gaze and the subversive reactions of Brazilian women engaged in commercial sex. In a highly relational account, they explain how Spanish men and women construct and legitimize their own sexuality in relation to geographical imaginations of ‘Brazilianess’, whereas Brazilian women appeal to and reproduce these imaginations to claim sexual power as sex workers in Spanish society.

Finally, Marlene Spanger mobilizes Butler’s theory of performativity in exploring the connections between places and subject positions in her story of a Thai migrant sex worker in Denmark. She discusses how her performances of the gendered subject positions of sex worker, wife and migrant intersect in different ways, in relation to and navigating the heteronormative discourses which set the boundaries of performances in particular places.

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