

Towards a Queer Political Economy of Sex Work

Written by Katy Pilcher, Nicola Smith and Mary Laing

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/08/18/towards-a-queer-political-economy-of-sex-work/>

KATY PILCHER, NICOLA SMITH AND MARY LAING, AUG 18 2015

Commercial sex has long represented a highly contested and politicised site, and accordingly, there is now a vast and diverse academic literature surrounding it (see inter alia O'Connell Davidson 1998; Jeffreys 2009; Weitzer 2010; Ditmore, Levy, and Willman 2010; Sanders 2013). Although policy and media discourses often depict the sale and purchase of sex in terms of the immorality and/or criminality of individuals, there is a wealth of academic scholarship that interrogates commercial sex as matter of political economy (Agathangelou 2005; Agustin 2007; Penttinen 2008; Jeffreys 2008; Chin 2013). This literature insists that sex markets cannot be removed from, but instead are deeply implicated in, the structures and hierarchies of global capitalism. Scholars also emphasise that the global sex industry is neither static nor monolithic but is constantly changing and diversifying (Bernstein 2007). However, within this literature, there is considerable disagreement as to whether the sex industry is *always* and *only* oppressive or whether sex work can itself involve agentic moments and even political resistance. While some argue that the global expansion of sexual commerce inherently represents the industrialisation of patriarchal power relations (Bertone 1999; Raymond, Hughes, and Gomez 2001; Jeffreys 2008), others attempt to expose and resist dichotomies between oppression and liberation, violence and pleasure, and victimhood and agency by emphasising the complexity of the practices and processes involved (Bell 1994; Chapkis 1997; Cabezas 2009; Kotiswaran 2011).

This scholarship is enormously valuable in developing new theories and empirical analyses of gender, sexuality, intimacy and embodiment in the context of debates about neoliberalism, capitalism and globalisation. Yet this otherwise rich and diverse body of literature focuses almost exclusively on the sale of sex by women to men, be it on the street, in a brothel, via an agency, over the internet, or by other means. This is problematic, for knowledge production surrounding sex work should explicitly draw from – and not systematically overlook – the hugely important experiences of those who do not fit in to this rigid binary conceptualisation. Nor should it exclude the bodies of queer and trans* scholarship that emphasise the need to challenge, not reproduce, heterosexist and cisnormative imaginaries (see for instance Hall and Jagose 2012; Styker and Aizura 2013). This erasure of non-normative identities, performances and embodiments in debates about the sex industry not only restricts the potentialities for political agency of queer and trans* sex workers but also often reinforces the very gender dualisms regarding 'natural' gender roles that many feminist, queer and trans* scholars would wish to challenge (Smith 2012). A queer focus, going beyond the hetero-centric gender norm, is important for developing fresh insights into how gender, sex, power, crime, work, migration, space/place, health and intimacy are conceptualised and theorised in the context of commercial sexual encounters (Smith and Laing 2012).

In our book, *Queer Sex Work*, we argue that we need to think differently – that is, to think queerly – about the practices and politics of commercial sex (Laing, Pilcher, and Smith 2015). We deploy the term 'queer' in several different ways. First, we aim to shine a spotlight on queer sex work (using the term 'queer' as an adjective) by exploring diverse forms, practices and embodiments of non-hetero/ homo-normative sex working. Although there is undoubtedly an extant literature on men who sell sex to men (see inter alia Aggleton 1999; Altman 2002; Morrison and Whitehead 2007; Whowell 2010; Logan 2010; Mai 2012; Minichiello and Scott, 2014), our book explores diverse embodiments and performances of sex work that have been little explored. The contributions in our collection cover aspects of sex work(ing) that push at the boundaries of heteronormativity in complex ways – including experiences within erotic dance venues; online sex working; BDSM; pornography; grey sexual economies; issues around sexual assault; sex worker activism and campaigns; identities and sex work; sex worker advertising; tourism and wider global dimensions of sex work.

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Second, we seek to *queer* sex work (using the term here as a verb) by exploring the ways in which commercial sex is 'queered' by both workers and customers/consumers in commercial sexual interactions. We consider how differing spatial and temporal constraints – together with the requests and experiences of customers, the ways in which sex is regulated in law and in practice, and the identities and work roles constructed by sex workers – may affect the ways in which participants in commercial sex can be, do and imagine a 'queer' sex work. Further, we argue that *queering* sex work not only creates room to examine the potential fluidity and contestability of gender and sexual power relations in the interactions between sex workers and their customers, but also provides scope for considering the implications of people's engagement with (and challenging of) heteronormative discourses more widely.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we aim to advance a queer *politics* of sex work – that is, we want to open up rather than close off space for different voices, both as an outcome of politics and as a means of its expression. Contributions to the book come from self-identifying queer sex workers, activists and practitioners as well as from scholars from a variety of social and political disciplines such as history, geography, sociology, criminology, and political science. The book necessarily involves debates, challenges and disagreements yet, ultimately, our aim it is to disrupt rather than to reproduce the oppositions, dichotomies and polarities that so frequently frame debates about sex work, and to challenge rather than to reinforce the politics of silencing through which engagement with different perspectives and approaches is foreclosed. We hope that this book goes some way – even if there is undoubtedly still a long way to go – in advancing a queer politics of sex work and that this politics might, in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993, xi), represent something that '*feels* queer, and good'.

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