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## **New Research Directions: The Cultural Study of Commercial Sex**

Laura María Agustín  
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*Abstract* A paradoxical combination of moral revulsion and resigned tolerance has permitted the sex industry's uncontrolled development in the underground economy and also impeded research on the phenomena involved. The gaze of researchers as well as government and non-governmental actors remains fixed on individual women who sell sex, while a range of other issues is neglected. In this article, ethnographic material from Spain illustrates how commercial sex is tangled up in culture, suggests a number of issues that open up once the field is defined as cultural and argues that efforts to propose new models of governance on 'prostitution' need the benefit of much more information than is now available.

*Keywords* commercial sex, cultural studies, prostitution, sex industry, sex work

Laura María Agustín

## The Cultural Study of Commercial Sex

### Why create this framework

Societies' twin reactions to commercial sex – moral revulsion and resigned tolerance – have paradoxically permitted its uncontrolled development in the underground economy and impeded cultural research on the phenomena involved. Affirmations that the global sex industry is growing and its forms proliferating are conventional in government and non-governmental fora, in the communications' media and in scholarly writing. Commercial sex businesses and trafficking for sexual exploitation are blamed for massive violations of human rights, but the supporting information is unreliable, given the lack of agreement on basic definitions, the difficulty of counting clandestine objects and the fact that much of this stigmatized activity forms part of conventional social life.

Little work exists in a sex-industry framework, but if we agree that it refers to all commercial goods and services of an erotic and sexual kind,

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then a rich field of human activities is involved. And every one of these activities operates in a complex socio-cultural context in which the meaning of buying and selling sex is not always the same. The cultural study of commercial sex would use a cultural-studies, interdisciplinary approach to fill gaps in knowledge about commercial sex and relate the findings to other social and cultural concepts. Recent work has demonstrated how people who sell sex are excluded from studies of migration, of service work and of informal economies, and are instead examined only in terms of 'prostitution', a concept that focuses on transactions between individuals, especially their personal motivations (Sanchez, 2003; Agustín, 2004b, 2005). With the academic, media and 'helping' gaze fixed almost exclusively on women who sell sex, the great majority of phenomena that make up the sex industry are ignored, and this in itself contributes to the intransigent stigmatization of these women. While the sexual cultures of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender people are being slowly integrated into general concepts of culture, commercial sex is usually disqualified and treated only as a moral issue. This means that a wide range of ways of study are excluded. A cultural-studies approach, on the contrary, would look at commercial sex in its widest sense, examining its intersections with art, ethics, consumption, family life, entertainment, sport, economics, urban space, sexuality, tourism and criminality, not omitting issues of race, class, gender, identity and citizenship. An approach that considers commercial sex as culture would look for the everyday practices involved and try to reveal how our societies distinguish between activities considered normatively 'social' and activities denounced as morally wrong. This means examining a range of activities that take in both commerce and sex.

The purpose of this article is to point out the scarcity of research in these areas and reveal the kinds of issue that are up for study. Although public debate and academic theory on commercial sex abound, few participants are familiar with the wide variety of forms and sites involved; most are dealing with stereotypes and interested solely in street prostitution. This is an area where more information and images need to be disseminated, a project for which I make a small beginning here with some descriptive material from Spanish sex venues.

Since this is the beginning of what I hope will become a new field, I do not here offer any solutions to what is too often characterized as a 'social problem'. Rather, I hope to interest others in taking up the call to study not 'prostitution' but the sex industry in new ways and to gather much more information on the object of governance before offering blanket solutions. This does not mean that important moral and ethical issues are not at stake nor that there is not widespread injustice in the industry. On the contrary, my proposal takes these injustices very seriously, laments the

absence of workable solutions up to now and hopes that with better research these may be found.

## How study has proceeded so far

Affirmations that the global sex industry is growing and its forms proliferating at a rapid rate are now conventional in government and non-governmental social fora, in the communications media and in scholarly writing. This growth is routinely taken for granted in work on trafficking in human beings (Bales, 1999; Williams, 1999), globalization and international relations (Enloe, 1989; Appadurai, 1996; Pettman, 1996), feminist theory (Barry, 1995), migration (Carchedi, 2000) and sexuality studies (Altman, 2001). The issue of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is on the agenda of every major international and national governing body as well as many local ones.

Considerable social conflict is associated with the perception that commercial sex is taking over large sections of the world's major urban spaces and is related to international organized crime and illegal immigration. Residents demonstrate over their neighbourhoods' contamination by public forms of sex (Hubbard, 1999), feminists lobby for abolition of prostitution (Jeffreys, 1997), sex workers claim labour rights (Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998) and illegal migrants are widely employed in unregulated sectors of the informal economy (Sassen, 1998). Policy on commercial sex has been cyclical across Europe, with governments changing regimes as social climates shift; in the present, two different policies are competing for European hegemony, abolitionism and regulation. Abolitionism, the commonest policy in Europe, is epitomized by Sweden, where the law now penalizes those who purchase commercial sex; forms of regulation are currently ascendant in the Netherlands and Germany.

However, these policies concern 'prostitution', while the majority of sex establishments and businesses, which may not be recognized as prostitution *per se*, are mostly unaffected. Moreover, regardless of the system officially in place, 'tolerance' of commercial sex is usually a major component of policy, though this tolerance is often carried out in a haphazard way in the form of local policing – decisions to make arresting prostitutes a low priority, decisions to turn a blind eye to those selling sex while on a tourist visa, and so on – (Outshoorn, 2004). In most European countries, the majority of businesses involved are not recognized in official government accounting, which means that permits, inspections, taxes, workplace health and safety and worker protection measures do not exist. In some cases recognition by governments may be partial, as when, for example, a licensed bar allows sexual services to be sold, having a licence to sell alcohol but not to sell sex (the definition of 'sex' also being local

and disputed, as in the case of pubs that offer lap-dancing in the UK). In the case of Germany and the Netherlands, sexual businesses and entrepreneurs are allowed to become legal, but many have chosen not to (Kilvington et al., 2001; Ananova, 2004; Goodwin, 2004).

Like models for governance, most research has focused on the 'prostitution' form, figured as a two-party exchange of money for specific sex acts; especially studied being individuals who work in the street, the morality of the prostitution relationship and issues of stigma and social exclusion (an extremely partial list of studies includes McLeod, 1982; Høigård and Finstad, 1986; Truong, 1990; McKeganey and Barnard, 1994; Sullivan, 1995; Butcher and Chapple, 1996; Jeffreys, 1997; Bishop and Robinson, 1998; O'Connell Davison, 1998; Hart, 1999; O'Neill, 2001). An epidemiological literature that looks at risk factors and harm reduction is so immense I do not cite examples here, being generally focused on methods for preventing transmission of disease. There are geographical works that consider zoning and community issues (Symanski, 1981; Hubbard, 1999) and a juridical and criminological focus has concentrated on the impact of legal regimes to 'control prostitution'. 'Sex tourism' has been examined in some detail, with much of the literature discussing 'prostitution' (see collections such as Oppermann, 1998 and Clift and Carter, 2000). A very large literature exists, accepting 'prostitution' as the object of study, which describes it in specific places and times, all over the world.

I do not mean to say that individual research projects have not addressed specific commercial-sex issues apart from 'prostitution'. Some have, and sometimes very interestingly (Bryant and Palmer, 1975; Allison, 1994; Manderson, 1995; Flowers, 1998; Lewis, 1998; Lever and Dolnick, 2000; Rich and Guidroz, 2000; Skilbrei, 2001; Bruckert et al., 2003; Mort, 2004; Sanders, 2004; Wilson, 2004). There are several collections of testimonies from sex workers in different sectors (Chapkis, 1997; Nagle, 1997; Johnson, 2003). Stripping and other forms of dancing have inspired work that examines the interactional nature of club environments (Erickson and Tewksbury, 2000; Wood, 2000; Montemurro et al., 2003), and some of this was conducted by researcher-dancers (Rambo Ronai and Ellis, 1989; Frank, 2002). Several works have begun to broaden the scope of the field by considering how sexual issues are bound up with 'globalization' (Altman, 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003), by undertaking methodologically rigorous research on the scale of the industry in Asia (Lim, 1998), by contextualizing sex work discourses in Caribbean social history (Kempadoo, 2001) and by examining social constructions involved in hegemonic AIDS prevention (Law, 2000; Murray, 2001).

Nevertheless, given such a wealth of attention, the absence of theorizing of commercial sex as a whole, in cultural and social terms, is notable.

Two recent exceptions are Pan's work on China (2004)<sup>1</sup> and Sanchez's on Oregon (2003).<sup>2</sup>

## Definitions of the sex industry in general

Social actors involved in the sex industry include not only those who sell sex directly and their customers but also business owners and investors, independent contractors and non-sexual employees (waiters, cashiers, guards, drivers, accountants, lawyers, doctors) and middlemen who facilitate business processes (some travel agents, guides, estate agents, matrimonial agents, newspaper and magazine editors, Internet entrepreneurs). Sites involved include bars, restaurants, cabarets, clubs, brothels, discotheques, saunas, massage parlours, sex shops with private booths, hotels, flats, dungeons for bondage and domination, Internet sites, cinemas and anywhere that sex is offered for sale on an occasional basis, such as stag and hen events, shipboard festivities or 'modelling' parties. Products and services include erotic phonelines, escort and matrimonial services, films and videos, souvenirs, toys, clothes, equipment, and live and 'virtual' spectacles via webcams. Sometimes, art exhibitions and theatrical plays appear to temporarily form part of the industry, and many of the sites and forms mentioned also promote and sell non-sexual products and services. Outside Europe there are other kinds of site, different products and services.

## Local particulars: examples from Spain

The best way to illustrate how commercial sex might be studied culturally is to use descriptive material taken from ethnographic work. The examples given here are intended only to suggest some of the many avenues future researchers might take and the kind of social and cultural issues that are at stake. I have chosen examples from several different geographical areas of Spain, where I live and have studied commercial sex for years, and from different commercial and social settings. But Spain is not a tiny country, many forms of commercial sex are here omitted and no conclusions should be drawn relating any one form with any one region. The following material represents a small sample of the available diversity and benefits from a number of relatively recent research projects in Spain (Hart, 1999; Casal, 2000; de Paula, 2000; Oso, 2000; Agustín, 2001, 2004a; APDHA, 2003; Roldán et al., 2003).

The four industry segments described are: large highway clubs, private flats, small houses associated with agriculture and the international coastal zone. After each description, I highlight the socially interrelated themes that arise from even such a brief glance, in order to point out how a cultural study of commercial sex might proceed.

### Highway clubs

Streams of cars and trucks roar along multi-laned routes that connect Spain with France, Germany and other states east and with Portugal to the west. For long-distance truck drivers, the backbone of European commerce, long stints of solitary driving must be broken up with places offering rest and recreation. The buildings strung along these superhighways, as well as along smaller, provincial roads, are known informally in Spanish society as *puticlubes* (whoring clubs), but to those that work there they are *hoteles de plaza*, a term that refers to the employment system used, in which those offering sex for sale pay a daily rate for a place to live and work for three-week stretches. These businesses may house 50 workers or more, and in some areas, such as between Burgos and the Portuguese border, numerous clubs are located close together, forming a veritable erotic shopping area. With multiple floors, luxurious decoration, videos, live shows, jacuzzis and 'exotic' music – the latest rock from Moscow, for example – these clubs have come to represent luxurious sites of conspicuous consumption. Here customers pay as much as ten times the ordinary price for drinks, and it is the job of the women working there to get them to buy as many as possible, since this is the owner's major source of income. The array of women (and transsexuals, and men) living in the club at any one time is a phenomenon surely unique to sexual milieux: a German or Spanish truck driver or businessman may find himself surrounded by Rumanians, Nigerians, Colombians, Ukrainians, Brazilians and Moroccans. Imagine spaces filled with people speaking many languages, spaces where people from very different cultural backgrounds mix: the result may feel extravagantly cosmopolitan to some customers, who use these lavish venues to entertain and impress their own business clients. Other habitués include young men wanting a night out (and perhaps a sexual initiation) and lovelorn bachelors or widowers seeking company, all of whom may spend hours drinking, talking and watching. There is no requirement to purchase sex at all, and if it is, it occupies no more than twenty minutes (rules of the house, which wants workers back promoting drink as soon as possible). A large number of support personnel is needed to keep these high-overhead businesses going, and because they employ many migrants, good public relations are necessary with local police and immigration inspectors. Workers move on after their three-week stints, assuring that novelty will always be on offer.

To consider this venue as only 'prostitution' requires focusing exclusively on the 15–20 minutes when customers retire to a private room with workers. Much feminist polemic has been written about concepts of exploitation, coercion and the lack of choice suffered by women in these jobs, as well as how they have reached this destination. Ignored are the work and lifestyles of long-distance truck drivers; cultures of entertainment among businessmen; multi-ethnic workplace cultures; the performance of masculinity and femininity and the reproduction of gender roles; homosociality (masculine bonding, competition, deal-making); financial advantages of owning such businesses and the extent to which lack of

regulation makes it possible; relationships with local communities; how sites may be used to accumulate social and cultural capital.

### *Private flats*

Where clubs specialize in splashiness and publicity, private flats offer discretion. They exist in most towns. Here the client rings up first to make an appointment in the kind of building that suggests tenants are 'respectable' middle-class families. The manager of the flat arranges for clients not to run into each other, and the flat itself displays few or no sexual signs; on the contrary, it may have floral-patterned covers and teddy bears on the beds, crucifixes and images of saints on the walls and the smell of home cooking wafting from the kitchen. A chain and cuffs hanging from a hook on one wall may indicate special services offered. If the customer has not requested a worker he already knows he makes his selection and goes to a bedroom. Again, the mix of nationalities and ethnic groups is notable. These businesses rely on classified advertisements and mobile telephones, the two elements also making possible the boom in independent workers who run their own businesses from their own flats.

Again, most theory has focused on the sexual acts that occur in flats and the extent to which women workers have chosen to perform them. Subjects that need researching include the cultural role of privacy and discretion; the possible meanings of domesticity as a sexual setting, including religious and family icons; communication technology's contribution to the development of businesses.

### *The agricultural world*

In the southern province of Almería, a large proportion of the tomatoes and other vegetables Europeans eat are grown under plastic in vast plantations operated under semi-feudal conditions. Close by, various kinds of sex business coexist, ranging from luxurious bars with private cubicles to rustic, poor housing where tenants open their doors to clients. The luxurious venues are located close to the plantations, even directly across from them, and those who enter and pay the prices are Spanish owners and other 'whites' from the managerial class, many of them men who were once agricultural labourers themselves. Women who work here come from eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The rustic venues are located farther away, sometimes up inconvenient roads with few public services; here the clients are 'non-white', often undocumented, migrants. Here, Nigerian women offer sex and other domestic services in their houses (meals, drinks, washing and ironing, music, a place to stay the night). Occasionally tourists wander up from the beaches, seeking something different from the nightlife of the tourist coast.

While 'prostitution' is present here, this form of commercial sex attests to a traditional link with migrant sectors such as farming, mining and



shipping (Nelson, 1987; White, 1990). Useful research would look at the interrelation of commercial sex with other industries; the intersections of different informal-sector economies and forms of servitude; how the business segments by class, colour and ethnic group. Ethnographic work would consider what kind of relationships are developed among subaltern employees in different expatriate sectors.

### *The cosmopolitan frontier*

This is the area of Spain where Spanishness fades and cosmopolitanism, tourism and hybridity reign. Businesses in Torremolinos, Marbella and smaller towns along the coast highway advertise in a brochure called *Encuentros* (meetings) which categorizes its offerings under the terms Gay Bars, Swapping, Private Establishments and Contacts and Sex Shops. A plethora of clubs, bars, party rooms and flats advertise, mentioning as specialities piano-bars, saunas, jacuzzis, turkish baths, dark rooms, go-go shows, striptease, escort services, bilingual misses, private bars, dance floors, a variety of massages, private booths with 96 video channels, gifts for stag and hen parties, latex wear and aphrodisiacs. Apart from the sexual products and services available, other conditions are announced, such as air conditioning, valet or private parking, swimming pools, credit cards, select clientele, television and accessibility for the handicapped. Many adverts play down the commercial aspect by emphasizing the 'non-professionals' present. Fitting the international environment, businesses are called Milady Palace, Play Boy, Melody d'Amour, Dolly's, New Crazy, Glam Ur Palace Club and Titanic. Many are located in ordinary shopping centres.

Obviously, 'prostitution' occurs in these venues, but further areas for research include the influence of tourism and its correlation with questions of image and class in services; the positioning of gay culture and diverse sexual subcultures with commercial sex; the existence of subcultures *within* commercial sex; the role of entrepreneurship in the proliferation of sites. It would be interesting to know which kind of customer goes to which kind of place, how entrepreneurs decide what to offer in such a compact area chock full of sex businesses and how long businesses last. Are there sexual cultures here that extend into the rest of Spain or that tourists take home with them?

### Elements of culture and researcher positionality

These four sketches only suggest the possibilities for research about the sex industry as a whole. While some characteristics of the environment described here may be unique to Spain, every country has its own variety of sites and all function within cultural contexts. As I said at the beginning, my aim here is not to *provide* extensive ethnographical material or analysis but to suggest ways that research might proceed, in order to open

up limited debates within the 'prostitution' field. The examples given here illustrate the variety of people involved and their myriad connections to the fabric of everyday life. Issues that arise for research and analysis range from economic (links with other industries and role of the informal sector); class and ethnic segmentation; sexual subcultures; gender performance; homosociality; the accumulation of social and cultural capital; the shaping of urban, suburban and rural spaces.

Why has this research been so little done? A taboo on showing interest in commercial sex as a human phenomenon has undoubtedly discouraged some. The policies of funding bodies have an important impact; in this field (remember, conceived of as 'prostitution') funding bodies tend to expect proposals on social exclusion, crime prevention and epidemiology (Agustín, 2002). It is also said that ethical standards committees might not accept participant observation in sex venues. These reasons, however, both *derive from* moralistic attitudes and *lead back* to them, since as long as moralism informs research policy, the research that might enlighten it cannot be done. This is not to say that moral issues should be ignored, only that they should not determine whether research is carried out or not or overly limit research parameters.

I am told that much of the proposed research would be dangerous. This notion assumes, again, that the object of study is 'prostitution' (and more specifically 'prostitutes', particularly those most stigmatized, street workers). However, while some researchers ascribe the difficulty in 'gaining access to' street workers to something inherent in these workers themselves, other researchers have managed this situation, which suggests that particular researcher profiles and methods play a part, as well as local conditions (see for example, Bernstein, 2005). The idea of danger has been brought up to me, personally, because I have done work with migrants who sell sex, and in the context of a 'trafficking' scare, people imagine *milieux* to be filled with gangsters and slaves. The researcher proposing to do cultural work in sex venues will, of course, need to be well informed on where he or she is going, choosing research sites carefully – a standard requirement of ethnographic work. A researcher will also need to avoid being seen as threatening to either authority figures or those who sell sex. There are excellent ethnographies of war-zones as well as of criminal and sexual environments that can serve as models (Limón, 1994; Bourgois, 1995). But more important, the places where real danger and real gangsters can be found will probably not be visible to or approachable by social researchers, and, if they do get as far as the door, they are unlikely to get any further.

This kind of research is unlikely to take the form of an approach to participants by academics asking direct questions like 'Why do you do this?' (buy sex, sell sex). Direct question-asking has to be rethought as a

method when subjects are marginalized, stigmatized and criminalized, not only because it may be interpreted as rude but because the responses are liable to be compromised (Agustín, 2004c). Tape-recording and even notebook-jotting will probably be left behind during participant observation. Ethnographers and other cultural researchers will, of course, need to have the ability to look and act plausible and be passably comfortable in the presence of up-front sex at times. At the same time, since sex is felt to form a crucial part of western identities, it will be natural for some people to feel uncomfortable with sexual research in general and commercial-sex research in particular. In that case, researchers need to be prepared to confront their own preconceived ideas, their own 'outsider' status and the structures of power they inevitably participate in. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher will be an essential element of the work, a continual questioning of where moral reactions come from and a humble attempt to leave them aside.

Those without moralistic views may find no argument against doing such research. For them, understanding more about the cultural meanings of sex makes an obviously positive contribution to knowledge. But even for those who believe sex should *never* be commercialized, research into its meanings should be important, for how will society stop, 'control' or otherwise govern such widespread activity without understanding how and why it goes on? Getting out of a centuries-old rut about 'prostitution' regimes and looking at what actually exists is the essential first step. Particularly in terms of the future, comprehending why and when young people begin to buy sex will be essential to any effort to change the culture in which they do, for if anything characterizes the sex industry, it is persistence, the ways people find to offer sex for sale and to buy it. A wide field of study beckons.

### Notes

1. Today in China, although the sex industry is still illegal, this has not precluded it from forming its own system and operating mechanism. Producing and marketing blue (porn) materials is its advertising department. Escort services provide its show case and sales department. The medical treatment of STDs is its after-sales department. Those who directly 'buy sex with money' or 'exchange money for sex' are its core 'production' department. Besides those immediately concerned, there are many affiliated industries, such as the hotel industry, the entertainments industry and so on. If the added output value of those affiliated industries deriving from prostitution and escort services is included, the economic scale of the Chinese sex industry may be expanded many times over. (Pan, 2004: 24)
2. [This essay] draws upon field research in licit and illicit commercial sex markets in Portland [Oregon] and regional data on labor and consumption. The essay argues that the emergence of a flourishing economy of commercial sex in Portland should be understood in relation to cultural images and practices that are circulated in the

national and global economy within the context of late-modern global capitalism.  
(Sanchez, 2003: 240)

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### Biographical Note

Laura María Agustín received a Doctorate in Cultural Studies and Sociology in February, 2004 from the Open University, with Tony Bennett as supervisor and Jeffrey Weeks as external examiner. She is an active advocate and consultant in sex-industry and migration issues at European and Latin American level, and is a recipient of funding awards from the Global Fund for Women and the Mama Cash Foundation for work on human rights, migration and sex work. She is the author of several publications in both English and Spanish and has made frequent conference presentations. [email: [laura@nodo50.org](mailto:laura@nodo50.org)]