

*2004 Annual Meeting . . . Public Sociologies*

## The Transformation of Sexual Commerce and Urban Space in San Francisco

*The third in a series of articles highlighting the sociological context of ASA's next Annual Meeting location . . . San Francisco, California*

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Despite the frequent equation of "prostitution" with "the oldest profession," what many of us typically think of as prostitution has not existed for very long at all: large-scale, commercialized prostitution in the West is a recent phenomenon, emerging out of the dislocations of modern industrial capitalism in the mid 19th century.

For social scientists, legal scholars, and feminists (not to mention state actors) who have been attentive to the issue of prostitution, a key question has concerned what societies should *do* about it. Underlying this dilemma are a number of important ethical and political concerns: Is there anything inherently wrong with the exchange of sex for money? Should prostitution be considered a crime? In the mid-1990s, while serving as a participant-observer on the San Francisco Task Force on Prostitution, I got the chance to directly witness the ways in which policymakers and local activists responded to these questions. The Task Force had been created by the city's Board of Supervisors to suggest amendments to existing prostitution laws. In tandem with this work, I also began what would become a seven-year ethnographic project of my own to map the transformations in the city's commercial sex trade, as well as attempts to regulate it in San Francisco and other cities.

### Street-level Observations

I began my research in three separate streetwalking strolls of the Tenderloin District, each just blocks from the posh shops and hotels of San Francisco's Union Square (the principal tourist district of the city, where most conference goers will be housed at this year's ASA meetings). At the time, street-walkers could be easily distinguished because they were practically the only women who ventured at night into the sparsely populated, poorly lit streets. I befriended women like Olivia, a 27-year old, African-American mother of two, who took the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit train) to work each night from Oakland. When she arrived at the local \$20-per-hour, single-room occupancy hotel, she would change into what she called her "uniform," then she hit the streets. Most of her nights were spent dodging pimps and police officers, and waiting for customers to approach, either by car or on foot. Olivia and the other women on her stroll were a visually unmistakable presence among the jumble of neglected apartment buildings, liquor stores, seedy bars, and cheap hotels. Toward the late 1990s, they spent an increasing number of their working

nights—from two to three nights to as many as four nights a week—in jail.

### **Technology and the “Oldest Profession”**

In those peak years of the dot-com and high-tech investment in the city, when San Francisco would become the repository of more than a third of the nation’s venture capital and the global headquarters of the Internet economy, the nine-square-block area of the San Francisco Tenderloin that had housed the city’s primary street prostitution strolls for more than 75 years was on its way to being incorporated into Union Square. As glossy, tourist-oriented restaurants and high-priced apartment complexes widened their spread, police cracked down to make the area more “respectable.” At the same time, advertisements for prostitution in the newspapers and through the new on-line services exploded, as did prostitution in 11 of the city’s 17 legal strip clubs. Many of the same women who had been working on the streets now began to get cell phones and to take out ads, or to look for work in indoor venues. These venues were not concentrated in the center of town, but were dispersed throughout the city, housed in Victorians in quiet residential neighborhoods, or relocated to the city’s suburban periphery. This explosion of commercial sexual services drew relatively little attention from the police, despite their intense focus upon visible streetwalking. I observed the number of female prostitutes on the streets of San Francisco dwindling from several hundred to as few as 10 or 20 at night, while the overall size of the sex industry expanded and diversified.

When the Task Force on Prostitution was first convened in 1995, it was largely in response to the organized outcry of local residents and merchants who were concerned about the growth in the street-level sex trade. In contrast to anti-prostitution reform movements of eras past, complaints by the neighborhood groups were explicitly aimed at visible street prostitution in the Tenderloin and not at the sex trade as a whole. The task force’s *Final Report* was notable in advocating both further crackdowns on street prostitution *and* the decriminalization of the indoor sex trade. Although never officially adopted, these recommendations became *de facto* municipal policy. The city also instituted a ground-breaking “First Offenders” program, which was to involve stepped up arrests of male clients, and an all-day reeducation program (akin to traffic school) for johns. Yet in practice, this program, too, served primarily to curtail outdoor sex markets, redirecting male consumers to the burgeoning indoor sector, which was facilitated by online and other technologies.

The transformation that was underway in San Francisco did not merely concern the fate of a few hundred street prostitutes and their customers, but was about a wide-sweeping reallocation of urban space, in which the inner city was reclaimed by the white middle classes, while those at the social margins were pushed to the city’s literal periphery. The young, white professionals who flooded the city during the 1990s to work in high-tech, multi-media, and other industries were at the forefront of a new economy in sexual services, both by creating a demand for them, and in facilitating new conditions of production. The sex trade was not eliminated, but instead changed its form: the subterranean world of street prostitution had begun to recede, while a diversifying array of spatially dispersed sexual services had emerged to take its place.

### **Return to the Streets**

Much has changed in San Francisco and in the world since 2001, when I

officially completed this research. A new administration in Washington, DC, global and local economic recessions (the Bay Area has lost some 200,000 jobs since the “dot-bomb” of 2001), two wars, and a massive exodus of high-tech workers have all had an impact on the region. The shape of sexual commerce has changed with it—it is not in fact a “recession-proof industry,” as one trade magazine for sex industry workers claimed. Recent conversations with local sex workers have revealed a slowing of demand for their services, and some in-door sex-workers have left the area. Meanwhile, street prostitution is slowly reemerging, though not at the scale it occupied in former years.

### **It’s the Economy...**

While most public and scholarly debate has focused on the normative questions that surround prostitution, such concerns are deeply embedded in the dynamics of the political economy and the allocation of urban space. The proliferation of sexual commerce in off-street venues highlights how prostitution emerges as an issue in relation to poverty and “urban blight,” as much as in relation to sexual ethics *per se*.