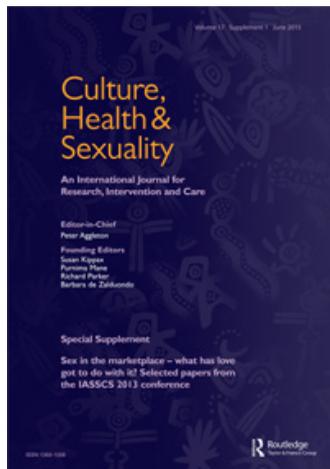


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Sex in the marketplace - what has love got to do with it?

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Sex in the marketplace – what has love got to do with it?

This Special Issue of the journal *Culture, Health & Sexuality* brings together six papers originally given at the 2013 conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS), held in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Building on the foundation of nine previous conferences organised over a period of 15 years,¹ the 2013 IASSCS conference sought to stimulate research and analysis on one of the key aspects of sexuality research that seems to have lagged behind while the field as a whole has grown in recent years: namely, the economic dimensions of sexuality and the ways in which political-economic considerations shape many of the most important aspects of sexual experience, sexual cultures and sexual politics.

The relationship between sexuality and the economy is perhaps one of the most poorly understood and under investigated areas in the field of sexuality research. It is clear that sexuality is shaped by economic factors (and in some cases may influence economic patterns as well) in many ways. Yet more detailed and nuanced analyses of the economic dimensions of sexuality and sexual life are few and far between. There has been a gradually growing concern with what has sometimes been described as ‘a political economy of the body’ as one important attempt to map out and analyse this complex relationship. But economic issues have all too typically been ignored in recent work, and it is clear that a more robust understanding of the interface between sexuality and the economy (or economies) would be important.

This understanding of the sexual field cannot be achieved without confronting a range of different issues, including the ways in which sexuality is inscribed in (yet supposedly absent from) mainstream economic policy research, and how market forces and sexual orders intersect in critical domains such as labour, migration and the commodification of bodies, images and practices (which in many cases leads towards the banalisation of sex). Attention to and analysis of these issues, and of the relations between economy, development and sexual politics, has lagged behind interest in other topics, but is no less central to understanding current trends in the politics of sexuality and to advocacy for sexual freedoms in the contemporary world.

These were among the many concerns that led the organisers of the 2013 IASSCS conference to prioritise economic issues and analyses as the focus of the meeting. Organised around the overarching theme, ‘Sex in the marketplace – what has love got to do with it?’, the 2013 conference was hosted and co-organised by the Study Group on Sexualities of the Gino Germani Institute in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires. Presentations developed for the conference focused, among other things, on the increasing commodification of sexual relationships, in both their sexual/erotic and emotional dimensions. Within the context of expanding global market economies and of national/local responses to this process, the conference also examined issues relevant to the political economy of the body, the market value of bodies and the activities in which those bodies are involved, as well as the multiple markets and marketplaces in which different genders and sexualities, together with health and human rights, are produced and reproduced.

Various conference sub-themes were evident in the sessions that took place: (1) Selling the body: sexed economic relations, commodified sexual relations; (2) The production of sexual knowledge, theories and research on sexualities; (3) Sexuality and gender: two movements for the price of one?; (4) The commodity in the sexual market: heterosexualities versus heteronormativities; (5) 'If you have any questions, ask your doctor': sexuality as a health issue; (6) Sex, communication and the acceleration of time; (7) A best seller: stories of romance and the power of utopian ideals of love – love as a political discourse; (8) The institutional (ex)change market: the law, policies, education and religion; and (9) Artistic production lines: transgression or abjection.

These various sub-themes provided the point of departure for a rich conference programme that offered one of the most wide-ranging (topically as well as geographically) explorations of the economic dimensions of sexuality yet realised in any academic conference that we are aware of. The papers presented examined a remarkably wide range of issues, from the relationship between sexuality and capitalism, to the commodification of desire and the libidinalisation of commodities, to the intersection of sex work and gender hierarchies. Within the field of academia, the commodification of certain kinds of sexuality research was also discussed, together with the economic values attributed to certain kinds of 'evidence' in sexuality research and policy debates. Other topics addressed included the economics of social movements and activism in relation to sexuality and gender, and related commodification and professionalisation; the commodification of heteronormative and non-normative sexualities, and the pharmaceuticalisation of sexuality; the economics of gender transformation; the explosion of internet-based pornography and diverse cybermarkets regarding sexuality; notions of erotic and economic justice; and black markets in systems where certain practices are illegal (e.g. abortion or sex work). This list could be further extended in accounting for the hundreds of papers that were ultimately accepted for presentation at the meeting in Buenos Aires.

While it is impossible to do justice to the rich diversity that characterised the discussion and debate that took place at the conference, in this Special Issue we have tried to offer readers some sense of the exciting intellectual energy generated by bringing together a collection of some of the finest work presented there. The six articles included here all address different dimensions of the Buenos Aires conference theme, sex in the marketplace – what has love got to do with it? They include four of the plenary presentations given at the conference (i.e., contributions by Gary W. Dowsett, Jennifer S. Hirsch, Mara Viveros and Jane Bennett), along with the paper that was selected for the *Culture, Health & Sexuality* prize, awarded at every IASSCS conference (i.e., the text by Samuel Muchoki), and, finally, the recipient of the IASSCS prize, also awarded at every IASSCS conference (the piece by Marisa N. Fassi). Following the conference, all of the papers were revised by their authors and submitted for blind peer review through *Culture, Health & Sexuality*'s regular peer review process, and we are very proud to be able to publish them here in this Special Issue.

The first of these papers, Gary W. Dowsett's 'The price of pulchritude, the cost of concupiscence: how to have sex in late-modernity', examines the rapid expansion of sexuality research over the last 60 years and the reasons why this has taken place. He distinguishes between (1) sexology, (2) sex research and (3) critical sexuality studies as three competing paradigms within this field of work. He then focuses primarily on the third paradigm and the ways in which it seeks to address key challenges in relation to how we explore the body, understandings of sexuality and the commodification of bodies and pleasures in late-modernity.

‘Desire across borders: markets, migration and marital HIV risk in rural Mexico’, by Jennifer S. Hirsch, analyses the processes through which political and economic factors shape sexuality. Hirsch draws on findings from her ethnographic research in rural Mexico and among Mexican migrants in Atlanta and New York in the USA. She examines the ways in which what she calls sexual opportunity structures, sexual geographies, the multisectoral production of risk, sexual projects and the idea of externalities can be used as conceptual tools in order to explore the ways in which political economy shapes sexuality and sexual practice. In a particularly provocative turn of phrase, she shows how these various factors impact on changing beliefs related to love, marriage, fidelity and intimacy between partners in ways that produce ‘vaginal marital barebacking’.

In ‘The sexual erotic market as an analytical framework for understanding erotic-affective exchanges in interracial sexually intimate and affective relationships’, Mara Viveros explores erotic-affective exchanges in interracial relationships in Latin America. She analyses the ways in which racial, gender and class hierarchies shape the marketplace in which erotic, affective and economic values are produced within a distinctive political economy of race and sex. This allows her to focus on both the repressive and the productive effects of power, and to examine the economy of erotic pleasures in which resources (including capital) are exchanged in ways that structure social and sexual relationships and alliances in countries such as Colombia.

In “‘Solemnis(ing) beginnings’”: theories of same-sex marriage in the USA and South Africa’, Jane Bennett analyses arguments for and against same-sex marriage in the USA and in South Africa. She focuses on key tensions in same-sex marriage activism in the USA, and on the problematic process of exporting US conceptions and legal ideals to other countries. Using South Africa as a key case study, her analysis emphasises the importance of a better understanding of cultural and historical context – and, in particular, of the need to critically examine shifting notions of marriage in these countries themselves.

The article by Samuel Muchoki, ‘Using “intimate citizenship” to make sense of the experiences of men with refugee backgrounds in Australia’, explores the experiences of refugees from the Horn of Africa – including Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia – who have migrated to and settled in Australia. Muchoki draws on Ken Plummer’s concept of ‘intimate citizenship’ as a theoretical tool for understanding these men’s experiences. He points out that many of these men migrated from societies in which traditional norms dictate that intimacies should be restricted to narrow social spaces as dictated by collective cultures. Fleeing their homelands due to civil wars and seeking asylum in Australia, a society that provides greater space for individuals to exercise choice in their personal lives, they had to adjust to new ways of pursuing intimate relationships. Muchoki argues the some men found this process of adaptation overwhelmingly difficult, while others saw it as an opportunity, and were able to reorganise their intimate lives (though not without frequent tension and ambivalence) around a new range of options that became available to them in Australia.

The final article, ‘Legal is not always right: sex work and the claim for grassroots legislation’, by Marisa N. Fassi, examines the role that the law can play in the everyday lives of sex workers. It distinguishes between a number of different legal approaches to sex work and sex workers. Fassi argues that approaches such as abolition and prohibition relegate sex work in ways that lead to great secrecy, and that therefore reinforce sex workers’ vulnerabilities. Models that focus on regulating sex work as a legally acceptable form of labour, on the other hand, make it possible to address a range of important issues (including health, registration, intimacy, publicity, contracts, police behaviour, sex slavery and trafficking, solicitation areas, and access to alternative work), but do not necessarily

lead to greater protection for sex workers. Fassi draws on the experience of sex workers in Córdoba, Argentina, and examines their struggle to design and promote sex work legislation as an alternative, contextualised legal approach that can prevent violence, vulnerability and exploitation. She argues that laws acknowledging the grassroots claims of sex workers have the potential to prevent violence, vulnerability and exploitation.

Taken together, the six papers that comprise this Special Issue of *Culture, Health & Sexuality* provide a vivid picture of the ways in which research on the political economy of sexuality in the early-twenty-first century can help move forward certain neglected dimensions of sexuality research. They also offer a sense of how important the role of IASSCS has been in fostering topical, theoretical and methodological innovation in sexuality research, as well as in stimulating greater diversity and a truly global geographic focus in contemporary research and scholarship.

Note

1. For a fuller account of the history of IASSCS, see di Mauro, D., Cáceres, C., Iguñiz, R., and Aggleton, P. 2013. "Editorial Introduction." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 15 (Suppl. 2): S128–S136.

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