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The Ethnography of Prostitution: New International Perspectives

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REVIEW ESSAYS

Big Rights, Small Citizens

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In this important book, Margaret Somers sets herself the ambitious task of developing an analytic and empirical approach to citizenship as “the right to have rights” and elaborates an “architectonics of citizenship” (p. 35) in terms of the historical, contemporary, and normative “triadic” institutional assemblage of state, market, and civil society (p. 30). Her main adversary is market fundamentalism in all its varieties. The book offers many profound insights into the genealogies of concept formation relevant to her task, and ranges across a wide array of what she calls “knowledge cultures” (p. 51). As such, it is a most worthy read for all social scientists.

Working through the analytic and normative contours of this triadic relationship, as well as of a robust public sphere mediating among the three, is a challenge. Somers theorizes a proper balance, with countervailing forces needed to maintain the integrity of civil society. Her boldness is unusual for a sociologist, combining normative argument with conceptual and empirical analysis. In the end, however, Somers’ formulation of rights is too capacious and her theory of citizenship too narrow. Indeed, both are prone to their own form of fundamentalism.

Arendt’s right to have rights includes membership in a political community and recognition by others of moral equality, as well as the civil, political, and social rights stressed in Alfred Marshall’s famous 1950 formulation. Somers aims to overcome the precariousness of citizenship rights in many previous theories by grounding them in an “ontology of social inclusion” (p. 29). The ontology here seems to signal an analytical solidity, but the further specifications are what lead to a rights-based fundamentalism. Thus, Somers asserts that the right to have

Genealogies of Citizenship: Markets, Statelessness, and the Right to Have Rights, by **Margaret R. Somers**. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 338pp. \$34.99 paper. ISBN: 9780521793940.

rights to social insurance of *all* forms must come without any litmus test of moral worthiness, no commensurable quid pro quos of any sort, under any circumstances.

Somers is correct to caution against stigmatizing narratives of moral unworthiness that have been utilized against single mothers, the poor, minorities, and immigrants. One can make arguments about the limits of welfare reform in the United States in the 1990s, including the need for better training and childcare support that would enable career growth leading to a solid middle-class income. But it is a far step from this democratic posture to an unconditional set of rights structuring all social welfare and social insurance in a decent, democratic, and inclusive society. The right to have rights to social insurance, such as welfare, does not translate into a right to refuse any “degrading” low-wage job that might “invoke the specter of slavery and indentured servitude . . .” (p. 47).

Nor is it the case that when public policy falls short of providing more ideal forms of support, do the affected citizens and poor communities fall into a theoretical abyss of “statelessness,” “expelled altogether from any level of political or social membership” (p. 92), “robbed of . . . their recognizable humanity” (pp. 113-14), “without moral worthiness” (p. 42), “[un]deserving of membership altogether” (p. 89), compelled to accept “any kind of work, no matter how

degrading or low paid" (p. 90). Indeed, Somers argues that those New Orleans citizens neglected in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina were "already a rightless, stateless, and expendable population deemed unworthy of the mutual recognition due moral equals" (p. 11). If public welfare policy falls short of an unconditional right to have rights, does this mean that all laws of workplace protection, sexual harassment, abusive treatment, and minimum wage have been suspended, along with all forms of civic recognition and decency in the marketplace and public square? Somers' rights fundamentalism leads her to a rhetorical excess that cannot serve as the cultural foundation for a realistic democratic politics of social justice or civic reconstruction.

Unconditional social rights cannot be claimed in a society with a public that is cognizant of relative scarcity, moral hazards, and unintended consequences of policy tools. Somers' ontological frame of the right to have rights relieves her rights-bearing citizens of the test of a democratically deliberating public, a key concept of democratic theory today (e.g. Gutmann and Thompson 2004), not treated seriously as part of her public sphere. Deliberating publics, even inclusionary ones, tend to raise questions of moral hazard, reciprocity, obligation, and quid pro quo regarding expanding social rights, revealed by scholarship and practitioner reports on deliberative public forums over the past twenty years.

What else do citizens do in Somers' analytic frame? They organize movements in civil society primarily to claim membership and rights. Of course, this is an indispensable component of any democratic theory. The citizen who is largely missing, however, is the pragmatic problem-solver mobilizing collective intelligence and community assets to co-produce public goods: John Dewey more than Alfred Marshall or Hannah Arendt.

There is a substantial analytic, normative, and empirical literature in this approach to citizenship, civic action, and collaborative governance (e.g. Sirianni 2009; Briggs 2008; Fung 2004; Corburn 2005; Weber 2003; Torfing and Sorenson 2007; Dzur 2008; Fung and Wright 2003; Sirianni and Friedland 2001; Wood 2002; Boyte & Kari 1996; Shirley

1997), as well as many other studies in specific subfields of public policy, community development, public administration, urban planning, environmental protection, community health, public safety, and youth development. In this view, citizens organize to gain formal rights that can then be delivered as programmatic goods by the state. They organize to solve problems, mobilize assets in their own communities, integrate local knowledge with professional expertise, build sustainable triadic partnerships and networks among a broad array of stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit institutions, universities and school systems, businesses, trade, and professional associations. Public problems are seen as too complex to expect the bureaucratic delivery of services or command-and-control regulation will be adequate to the task. This conception of the co-producing citizen is the most relational of the variants, and it is thus ironic that Somers, who seeks to revalorize the relational in the face of rational-choice and market imperialism, neglects it.

One would also expect there to be room for the co-producing citizen in Somers' overall theory, since many of the works cited above proceed from a roughly similar view of aligning state, market, and civil society in a robust democratic fashion. But Somers seems blocked from admitting the co-producing citizen to her framework for several reasons. The first is that she stakes so much of her theory on the right to have unconditional social rights. But one can have a robust theory of rights without expecting them to carry the burden of creating and securing the public good; expecting so much of them leads to neglecting, even fearing the admission of the co-producing and deliberative democratic citizen. The fear appears linked to Somers' critique of the concept of social capital as transforming civil society into a politically manageable, domesticated caricature of itself, little more than backyard barbecues and volunteer labor (p.218). But Chicago residents and local churches use street-side barbecues to help drive drug dealers out of their neighborhoods through civic shaming and claiming public space, and citizens and police hold monthly beat meetings to develop pragmatic and accountable beat plans based

on the core principle of co-producing public safety (Fung 2004). Indeed, a local citizens' movement demanded this design. Volunteers across Puget Sound provide tens of thousands of hours to help restore ecosystems, in partnership with local civic associations and city governments, under the overall strategic direction of the Puget Sound Partnership, a state agency designed according to civic (even triadic) partnership principles and part of EPA's National Estuary Program. The redesign of policy and administration, and for the state to cease simply "seeing like a state," is a precondition for a genuinely democratic and richly "triadic" institutionalism.

Somers builds upon previous critiques of the limits of social capital as a concept, along with her critique of market fundamentalism. But her contention that social scientists who utilize the concept are "recklessly infatuated" and "utility-envy[ing]" (p. 232) dupes who "inadvertently collude with the neoliberal project of appropriating, domesticating, transforming, and evacuating the social from public knowledge" (p. 218) represents another kind of fundamentalism. Following are her two key theoretical points of critique of social capital based on networks and norms.

First, "the irreducibility of relationality at the heart of the social" (p. 232) admits no form of utilitarian calculation, which expects a public return on the investment in civic or social capital—indeed, the notion of investing in "capital" can only be an oxymoron for Somers. The relational citizen or civic partnership convener is thus theoretically and normatively proscribed from thinking of their network Rolodex in a strategic, utility-maximizing fashion, such as how to best catalyze network collaboration for the production of public value (e.g. educational outcomes, energy efficiency, safe streets, restored habitats). They cannot be a part of a multi-stakeholder job-training network that not only aims to enhance social justice, but also strategically seeks to improve the efficiency of labor markets through social capital. Why is it that complex citizens in a complex, networked social world cannot be relationally public-spirited and strategically calculative at the same time, especially if the explicit normative goal of the overall

theory is reciprocal power-balancing and complex democratic alignment of the three spheres of state, market, and civil society?

Second, for Somers, social capital norms of community and personal responsibility signal the abandonment of the role of the state to secure the right to have rights and open the door to rampant victim blaming. True, there are some conservative theorists who use social capital in this fashion. But many theorists of social capital and collaborative governance, and most innovative civic practitioners in the United States and across the globe, have articulated clear ways in which a state role can align with community norms, personal and family responsibilities, volunteer labor, faith-based networks, and a commitment to place.

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The Ethnography of Prostitution: New International Perspectives

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The best recent research on prostitution is ethnographic and centered outside the United States. The books under review are multifaceted, rich, novel contributions to the literature, throwing a spotlight on previously hidden worlds. Each presents a microcosm of commercial sex that is linked to macro-level structures. And each focuses on indoor prostitution, a welcome counterbalance to the voluminous literature on street prostitution (Weitzer 2009). Since sex work is highly stigmatized and marginalized, ethnographers face a major hurdle in gaining access to settings where sex work takes place. The authors deserve praise for successfully penetrating the barriers. The best ethnographies allow readers the vicarious experience of "being there," so I evaluate the books on this score as well as other dimensions.

Two of the books examine rarely-studied *legal prostitution* systems, a major contribution in itself. Readers may be unaware that prostitution is legal and regulated in 13 of Mexico's 31 states. Patty Kelly's *Lydia's Open Door* examines one such place: the Zona Galactica located four miles outside Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of the state of Chiapas. The Zone was created in 1991 in an effort to move the sex trade outside Tuxtla and was intended as a model of controlled sexual commerce. The Zone contains 180 rooms owned by different landlords who collect rent but otherwise have little involvement. In addition to the brothel, the Zone hosts a clinic, school, and jail staffed by a few cops. The school offers lectures on health care, English classes, and occasional job-training workshops.

Kelly was a participant-observer in the Zone for one year, teaching English to a small group of sex workers. We are not told whether

Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel, by **Patty Kelly**. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008. 270pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520255364.

Sex Work and the City: The Social Geography of Health and Safety in Tijuana, Mexico, by **Yasmina Katsulis**. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008. 174pp. \$50.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780292718869.

Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, Sexuality, and AIDS in the Dominican Republic, by **Mark Padilla**. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 294pp. \$21.00 paper. ISBN: 9780226644363.

Sugar Girls and Seamen: A Journey into the World of Dockside Prostitution in South Africa, by **Henry Trotter**. Auckland Park, SA: Jacana, 2008. 242pp. \$24.00 paper. ISBN: 9781770095755.

Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China, by **Tiantian Zheng**. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 293pp. \$22.50 paper. ISBN: 9780816659036.

the research included interviews; quotations appear to come from conversations. Overall, the methodology should have been described more fully. The clients come from Tuxtla or neighboring towns; most are working-class men in their 20s and 30s. They are searched by the police at the entry gate to make sure they are free of weapons. Clients like the

Zone because they do not risk being robbed or assaulted, and can avoid being observed by people they know in Tuxtla.

Recent research on clients highlights the *non-sexual* dimensions of their encounters with indoor sex workers, where there is often some therapeutic or emotional connection with a provider (Weitzer 2009). But the Zone's clients seem uninterested in anything but sex. Kelly says that the encounters are "not always free from emotional exchange" (p. 168), which sounds quite exceptional. Unlike three of the other books reviewed below, Kelly's contains little discussion of client-worker relations and focuses on the workers instead.

The question of legalizing prostitution is an ongoing debate. Kelly is critical of state-regulated prostitution, seeing it as a form of control over women who defy cultural norms, and as offering only questionable social and health benefits. The main rationale for legalization was the state's desire to "cleanse" the city and to "discipline sex workers and bring into the formal modern market a sexual-economic activity that had formerly existed outside its control" (p. 19). Of course, given the small scale of the Zone and Tuxtla's population of half a million, the Zone is hardly sufficient to cleanse the metropolis. (This might be a reason to expand the size of the Zone or create additional ones, but Kelly does not advocate this.) Indeed, there is plenty of illegal prostitution in Tuxtla, which Kelly observed as well. Kelly argues for outright decriminalization rather than state regulation, not only in Tuxtla but also generally. "Legalizing some forms of sex work while criminalizing others creates a stratified system of prostitution, a hierarchy of despair in which all workers lose" (p. 85), whereas decriminalization reduces stigmatization and helps to empower workers.

It is true that some of the Zone's regulations are obtrusive, such as the mandatory health card that includes the worker's name, photo, and health status and must be renewed every 3 months (they are tested for syphilis and HIV). Yet, much of the book can be read as vindicating the Zone's form of legal prostitution: its workers have a "great deal of freedom and exercise control over their work" (p. 79). They alone decide when to work and for how long, who they will serve, and their rates; they come and

go as they please; and they take extended leaves to visit family members. Almost all of the 140 women are independent, with only a dozen having a pimp. On a good day they can earn ten times the daily minimum wage in Chiapas. The women are able to buy consumer goods that they otherwise could not afford, such as nice clothing, cell phones, jewelry, and items for their children. This, according to Kelly, bolsters their self-esteem.

One of the more interesting findings in the book is the number of women who turn to sex work to escape domestic problems. Many gravitated to the Zone to support their children after a rupture with their husbands; these women had suffered unhappy, abusive, or violent relationships. Consider Gabriela: "Free of her husband, she was transformed from a quiet, deeply depressed person to a sometimes outspoken, confident, and much happier woman" (p. 134). This kind of empowerment is not a mirage, as the Zone is an arena in which "women can live and work without the dependence on male spouses or family that Mexican culture prescribes" (p. 202). At the same time, the work revolves around satisfying male demands for sex. The net effect is that this work straddles the exploitation-empowerment boundary, where "they simultaneously defy and enact sexual and gender norms" (p. 206).

Legal prostitution also exists in Tijuana, Mexico. For *Sex Work and the City*, Yasmina Katsulis conducted in-depth interviews, a quantitative survey, and participant observation over 18-months in Tijuana. The discussion largely revolves around the 198 respondents to a survey and 53 in-depth interviews with sex workers who visited the city clinic. Participant observation was secondary, and little is said about her role and her observations. The clients, who include both American tourists and Mexican men, are not examined. The study is unique in two ways. First, it compares the legal and illegal sectors, something missing from almost all of the literature. Second, the subjects include female, male, and transgender workers – one of the few comparisons of all three groups.

Katsulis raises the intriguing question of why more poor women and men do *not* turn to sex work, given its economic benefits

relative to low-paying domestic and factory work. A sex worker can earn five times what the average professional worker makes in Tijuana, and ten times what most city residents make. In fact, "Most of the sex workers who participated in my study made more than enough money to make ends meet" (p. 56), and this was especially true for those working in massage parlors and nightclub-brothels. None of the sex workers had been trafficked against their will and very few had pimps. They made conscious decisions to enter the trade, and many had responded to eye-catching newspaper ads or were introduced to the work by a friend or family member. Although Tijuana is known as one of the largest drug smuggling routes into the United States, few of Katsulis' subjects had entered sex work to support a drug habit or currently used drugs.

Some major differences were found between female, male, and transgender workers. Males were the most economically disadvantaged, socially isolated, and involved in criminal activities. Transgenders had the highest rates of all types of violent victimization; women were at lowest risk. The males and transgenders entertained clients at home, but almost none of the women did. This increased the chances that the former might form friendships with or romantic feelings toward their clients, something avoided by the women, whose sex work was purely utilitarian. For the men and especially transgenders, the lines between clients and friends and lovers were more blurred (consistent with Kulick 1998).

About 1,000 prostitutes are working legally in Tijuana at any given time, along with an unknown number of illegals. Katsulis compares workers who had registered with the authorities and held a legal work card (recording their health status) and those who had not registered. Almost all of the legal workers are women, with a few transgenders. Officials make no attempt to register male workers, apparently because they see this as condoning homosexuality.

Although the registration and mandatory health checks may seem invasive, Katsulis documents positive outcomes. One of the interesting findings is that legal status, in itself, has a multiplier effect—providing "a form of social capital and a set of

protections" (p. 64) and a sense of professionalism and empowerment that go beyond the health benefits inscribed in the registration system. Registration provides a "barrier against police harassment"; is associated with improved working conditions, job satisfaction, and self-esteem; decreases victimization risk; and fosters a "sense of legitimacy and community" (p. 77). Illegal workers are vulnerable to police harassment and violence, fines, and incarceration; they have less stable support networks; and they are about twice as likely to have been assaulted, robbed, or kidnapped than the legal workers. Katsulis' assessment of legal prostitution is much more positive than Kelly's. The one unanswered question is *why* many Tijuana workers opt out of the legal system. Katsulis hints that it is connected to the fear of being formally labeled a prostitute and the associated risk of being discovered by family members—but this question deserved more attention.

Studies of sex tourism are limited to heterosexual transactions between locals and foreign tourists. Mark Padilla's *Caribbean Pleasure Industry* breaks new ground by focusing on male prostitutes who sell sex to foreign men visiting the Dominican Republic. His three-year study utilized focus groups, participant observation, a survey administered to 200 male prostitutes, and in-depth interviews with 98 workers. Padilla initially conducted joint research with an HIV-prevention agency, providing access to the workers. Participant observation took the form of socializing with workers and clients at bars, discos, parks, and private settings in Santo Domingo and Boca Chica. His multidimensional data collection (thoroughly described in the book) is a great model of how to conduct qualitative research, allowing for cross-verification of findings to an extent not possible in the other four books. The only criticism is that Padilla's role and actions are fairly invisible in the book, and the presentation does not engage the reader in the vicarious "being there" sense.

Studies of male sex work are fairly scarce, but the existing literature shows that many male workers identify as gay. Padilla found, by contrast, that only 3 percent of his subjects did so, and most were in relationships with wives or girlfriends (and had children)

while selling sex on the side (what Padilla calls “situational bisexuality”). They justify their sex work by pointing to the way it enables them to support their female partners and children, but they keep their work secret by inventing cover stories. Many prefer to have sex with women, and some sell sex to both men and women, but female sex tourists are a relatively small population and not a consistent source of income – hence the involvement with gay male tourists. Most limited their sexual behavior to the “dominant” insertive role, refusing to allow clients to penetrate them, which they associate with homosexuality. They meet clients on the beaches, at gay bars, and while working as tour guides or entertainers at hotels.

After tracing the rise of the tourist industry in the Dominican Republic and its parallel sex tourism industry, Padilla examines how men enter sex work, how they manage the tension between their stigmatized work and their (heterosexual) domestic life, and their complicated relationships with foreign tourists. While some of the men want only short-term encounters, to avoid potential emotional complications, others are looking for more lasting associations. Long-term relationships with foreign men are the most lucrative, including remittances sent after the tourist returns home. Only about a third of Padilla’s respondents believed that they could fall in love with a foreign client (again, associating this with homosexuality) yet many did so, especially with clients who offered the greatest material support. Many clients are looking not just for sex but also for an authentic emotional relationship with a local man. The motives of foreign clients vary, but Padilla argues that many of them hold eroticized fantasies about “exotic” Caribbean men and expressly seek out the most masculine partners in order to fulfill their fantasies. Furthermore, most of the tourists seek encounters with men whom they regard as non-gay, which they find especially erotic. The racial and sexual stereotypes of the Other mirror the way heterosexual male tourists view female sex workers in the Caribbean, Thailand, and other “exotic” locations (Brennan 2004; Kempadoo 1999).

Padilla’s discussion of macro-micro linkages is compelling, centered largely on the

growth of the Caribbean tourist industry and how this has changed patterns of sexuality for local men and women. The economic inequality between affluent foreign tourists and disadvantaged local men is exploited to the former’s advantage. Foreign privilege and local vulnerability is reflected in patterns of social control, where local men are frequently arrested, incarcerated, and forced to pay bribes to the police, while their foreign clients are immune to such sanctions. Subordination is also evident in the lack of social services and HIV-prevention programs for male sex workers.

Henry Trotter’s *Sugar Girls and Seamen* explores an unexamined type of sex work—dockside prostitution. Trotter spent 15 months doing participant-observation in four dockside nightclubs in South Africa – bars that cater exclusively to foreign seamen—which amounted to 150 evenings at three nightclubs in Cape Town and one in Durban. Almost all of the prostitutes (called “sugar girls”) are black or mixed-race and the sailors are mostly East Asian. Trotter interviewed 90 bar prostitutes (out of 140) and 50 sailors, club owners, bouncers, bartenders, and waitresses. These actors regarded Trotter as a curiosity (since he frequented the bars, was not a sailor, and didn’t buy sex), but he gained their confidence over time. Trotter’s role and actions are quite visible in the book.

Many seamen buy sex when docked at ports around the world, and this is encouraged by their co-workers. But the South African nightclubs offer much more than sex; they are also sites of binge partying—playing pool, singing karaoke songs, watching TV, and dancing. For others, the pleasure of club flirtation (which requires that the men buy the women drinks) is enough to satisfy their need for female companionship. For those who are interested in sex, it is not *just* sex that attracts them to the bars. Having been denied contact with women for so long at sea, the men seek their companionship through prolonged conversations and mutual sharing. The women use the conversations to make the men *care* about them.

The bars are unique geo-cultural intersections: “Through their continual interactions with foreign seamen, [the bargirls] become major traffickers in culture, ideas, languages,

styles, goods, currencies, genes, and diseases" (p.16). What is unique about these sites is the extent to which the women adopt multiple cultural toolkits and foreign languages, which they acquire through numerous conversations with the men. They are adept at using their (international) cultural repertoire to market themselves. The women also develop "a mental database of stereotypes to deal with each nationality" in order to tailor their behavior to different clients (p. 43). They rank each group in terms of their generosity and manageability—with Japanese seamen ranking at the top and Vietnamese at the bottom.

The bar girls spend hours each night dancing provocatively, flirting with the men, and hoping for an eventual solicitation. Owners depend on them to attract customers to the bar, but they also exercise control over them. Owners use temporary or permanent bans to punish those who fight, steal, fall asleep, disrespect the staff, leave the bar early, visit other clubs, or fail to get the men to buy numerous drinks. Despite the rules and sanctions, the women do not see themselves as victims but instead as enterprising agents who exploit the opportunities offered by the bars: "They can earn decent money, enjoy a flexible work schedule, control the price and location of the sexual rendezvous, and move around with relative autonomy" (p. 27). The nightclub provides ample opportunity to screen clients, diminishing the chances of anything going awry after they leave with a client. Very few have ever been abused by a client, nor did they have pimps.

Relations among the sugar girls are both supportive and competitive. Verbal and physical conflict are regular occurrences, as one would expect in an environment in which alcohol is consumed in large quantities and where the men sometimes play women off against each other. The most serious offense is intruding on another's transaction: "Everyone agrees that if a club girl gets caught poaching, she deserves a beating because it amounts to theft" (p. 133). The women hope to forge a permanent relationship with a man and relocate to his country. For those few who do so, things usually do not work out well. They confront boredom, a foreign

culture, suspicious or racist in-laws, and lack friends—all in stark contrast to the independence they had at home and the carnival atmosphere of the clubs. A few, however, do manage to adapt and thrive in their new life abroad.

The most ambitious and eye-opening study is Tiantian Zheng's *Red Lights*. Zheng conducted field research at ten karaoke clubs in Dalian—a large, northern Chinese city. Three of these bars were studied intensively—one upscale, one mid-range, and one low-tier. Zheng does not report the number of bar visits, but she appears to have spent substantial time in them. She interacted with a total of 200 hostesses, and interviewed government officials, businessmen, and police officers who frequent the bars. She accompanied some of the men on their visits to other bars. And she travelled with some of the women when they visited their families in rural villages, documenting the women's growing estrangement from traditional values and norms.

Zheng highlights contradictions between state policies and practices. While hostessing itself is legal, it is associated with illegal erotic services—rendering the hostesses vulnerable to exploitation by local officials. The state simultaneously encourages the proliferation of sexually-oriented establishments—seen as essential arenas where businessmen and government officials make deals, including foreign investment—and periodically represses them in the name of cultural purification and socialist morality. Frequent crack-downs were launched by the Bureau of Culture and the Public Security Bureau, yet the erotic industry contributes more than its fair share to Dalian's economy; karaoke bars pay seven times the tax levied on other businesses.

Hostesses can earn in a couple of hours a tip equivalent to what other urban workers make in two weeks, and this does not include what they can earn if they have sex with a customer. All of the hostesses have sex with customers at least occasionally, whether on the premises or at a hotel, and this distinguishes these clubs from the hostess bars in Japan, where the women act *as if* they are romantically interested in the men but typically do not engage in sex (Allison 1994).

A less tangible benefit than income is access to influential and affluent men. For rural migrants who turn to hostessing, being desired by cosmopolitan, urban men inflates their self-esteem and gives them a sense of vicarious upward mobility. Many hold out hope of marrying one of these men, and such marriages did occur. In order to increase their attractiveness, the hostesses refashioned themselves not only by buying expensive clothes and jewelry but also by undergoing eyelid operations, applying skin-whitening creams, and breast enlargement surgery (customers preferred busty women, compared the breast sizes of the different hostesses, and constantly fondled them). When they are on the street they are readily recognized as hostesses, and they prided themselves on standing out in this way, rather than feeling stigmatized.

Unlike the other four authors, Zheng's field experiences were sometimes harrowing. At the beginning, government officials imagined that she was a spy sent by the United States to expose China's dark secrets and stain its image abroad. Hostesses were suspicious at first, and they ridiculed her inability to understand their world and participate in their sexual banter. Gradually she broke down these barriers by virtue of her total immersion in the bars, which included rooming with the hostesses. She also had no choice but to assume the hostess role, because customers regarded all women in the bar as such and specifically requested her company. Rejecting them would have disrupted the setting. She did her best to remain inconspicuous and dressed in (relatively) conservative attire to be less appealing to the men. When she was chosen, she would try to engage them in non-sexual pursuits, such as singing songs, dancing, drinking games, and inviting another hostess to join in order to run interference.

These strategies were not always sufficient to tame the men: she became embroiled in several conflicts with patrons, and bouncers and owners had to intervene to protect her. After one such altercation, a customer, on leaving the bar, yelled, "Just you wait, I'll be back for you!" (p. 32). She experienced police raids along with her subjects, fleeing upstairs and hiding under beds until the officers left. And, at the low-tier bar, Zheng

and the hostesses were vulnerable to attacks by gang members and thugs hired by competing bars. On one occasion, "gangsters walked into the bar, grabbed me by the arm and started dragging me up the stairs toward a private room intended for hostesses' sexual encounters with clients" (p. 32). She escaped this fate only because the bouncer and manager insisted that she was a friend, not a hostess—meaning that a real hostess would not be so lucky.

Gangsters often visited the low-tier bar (misnamed *Romantic Dream*) and posed a constant threat: "When they saw a pretty hostess, they dragged them upstairs and raped them. When they saw less pretty hostesses, they slapped them and beat them up" (p. 90). All of the hostesses at this bar had been raped by a gangster at least once. To protect themselves, hostesses formed alliances with one or more gangsters, though this did not guarantee their safety. The bars were stressful workplaces. In addition to gang attacks, fights between drunken clients and between clients and hostesses were a daily occurrence – even at the upscale bar, *Colorful Century*. The bar staff could be abusive as well. Madams and owners practiced favoritism, rewarding their pet hostesses with the most lucrative clients, and madams in the upscale bar led their own factions. Zheng witnessed madams' routine verbal abuse of hostesses as well as slapping and beating them. This contrasts sharply with Thai nightclubs (Steinfatt 2002), Japanese hostess bars (Allison 1994), and Japanese male host bars (Takeyama 2005)—where the action is tame in comparison. (The medium-tier bar, *Prince Branch*, was less oppressive than the other two.) At the upscale and low-tier bar, hostesses were forced to consume huge amounts of alcohol with customers in order to get the latter to spend money, adversely affecting their health and safety.

Customers mistreat the women in myriad ways. They toy with them, verbally abuse them, and reject those who don't please them. Such abuse helps to advance a man's career: If one cannot dominate the hostesses, "who are beautiful but poisonous snakes" (p. 139), one cannot be viewed as a good business partner. Bizarrely, abuse of hostesses seems to be a job qualification: "The most powerful men were identified as those

who could emotionally and physically control the hostesses, exploit them freely, and then abandon them. . . . The weakest men were those who became emotionally involved with the hostesses," since it spelled loss of self-control (p. 10). This particular kind of "entrepreneurial masculinity" has not previously been documented in the sex work literature.

Zheng is at her best when she stays close to the data. Chronological descriptions of face-to-face interactions are consistently fascinating, and meet the test of taking the reader inside the action. She describes scenes in the bars as wild occasions of singing, dancing, drinking, game-playing, flirting, fondling—much like Trotter's bars. Hostesses' standard operating procedure is described as follows: "To lure clients, hostesses presented a hypersexual and lustful image by winking, wearing revealing clothes, and assuming seductive postures. They purred, laughed, screamed, or moaned when clients preyed on their bodies, and they sang songs to seduce clients" (p. 215). Hostesses would kiss the men, sit on their laps, massage them, and occasionally touch their genitals. But they also engage in a lot of emotional labor, struggling to make clients believe that they care about them, trust them, love them, and are devoted to them. Such erotic and emotional labor is fraught with problems including stressful negotiations, boundary violations, and rejection. The payoff occurs when a hostess is able to "fleece gullible clients through well-executed character performances," which gives them an acute sense of empowerment and "comfort for the abuse they endure" from the men (p. 236).

Zheng is least convincing when she tries to link structural arrangements to her micro study settings. She argues, for instance, that Chinese men embraced the sexually oriented karaoke bars, in order to "recover from [Japanese] colonialists' emasculation" (p. 77): "Men resurrected their lost masculinity by emulating the economically successful Japanese and Taiwanese businessmen in the consumption of women. Their subjugation of women represented the recovery of their manhood in post-Mao China" (p. 10). "The grand historical trends in masculinity are the primary

driving forces behind the emergence and proliferation of karaoke bars" (p. 12). These assertions are not linked to data and not convincingly argued.

Unfortunately, the three types of bars discussed early in the book vanish for the remainder, where the discussion is wholly decontextualized. The reader is left to wonder whether her observations and interview data pertain to one type of bar or are applicable across the board. Why create a typology when it plays such a minor role in the analysis? Unlike the other books, *Red Lights* is not well-grounded in the sex work literature. Had Zheng consulted this literature, she would have been in a better position to see what was exceptional in Dalian's karaoke bar prostitution versus staples of sexual transactions elsewhere. Still, the book is a great ethnographic window into this under-researched domain and highlights some quite remarkable features.

The books vary in their success in linking their micro-level findings to larger structural arrangements—admittedly, no easy task. In some cases, the macro explanation seems tacked on. Still, both within each case study and across them we see important variations in how prostitution is experienced, differences that can be traced to their social, legal, and geographical contexts. As such, each of the books challenges monolithic images of sex work, which are all-too-common in the literature (Weitzer 2009).

The books reviewed here make a major contribution to our understanding of indoor prostitution and, in two Mexican cases, legal prostitution. Although studies portray indoor work as preferable to street-level work (Weitzer 2009), researchers have based these conclusions on circumstances in advanced societies, not considering how indoor work manifests itself in the developing world. These books serve as a reminder that indoor work varies as well, ranging from highly oppressive (Zheng) to more routine or partly empowering (the other four books). All five books situate sex work within the context of domestic and global inequalities, and each suggests that sex work can be a quite rational occupational choice given the other options available to unskilled, disadvantaged individuals.

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