



Prostitution, Power and Freedom

Julia O'Connell Davidson

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For 'Desiree'

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Polity Press

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Licence my roving hands, and let them goe
Behind, before, above, between, below . . .
How blest am I in this discovering thee
To enter in these bonds is to be free

John Donne, *Elegie to his Mistris Going to Bed*

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I am an unrepentant romantic, and I choose to read John Donne's elegie as meaning that the license to discover another person's body confers both subjection and freedom: lovers take on bonds which oblige and commit them in certain ways, and yet simultaneously release them from the spectre of separation, loss, isolation and other existential anxieties. This potential is, I believe, also present in non-sexual friendships, for it lies not in the physical intimacy of sexual acts but in the possibility for mutual recognition implicit in all bonds of emotional intimacy. As a person who is much haunted by existential despair I value this kind of recognition above all else, and for this reason I want to thank Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, Della Cavner and Laura Brace, who have not only given me constant intellectual and emotional support but also, in so doing, the closest thing to freedom I can imagine.

Introduction

A Canadian tourist once told me a story about his relationship with a young Cuban woman, 'Lourdes'. He had met her in a bar in a Cuban tourist resort in 1992, and 'Brian', the Canadian, said that Lourdes was a 26-year-old doctor, intelligent, educated, beautiful, kind, from a 'good' family. Brian was a 43-year-old divorcee. He occupied a relatively well-paid but unglamorous middle management position back home in Toronto and, with his paunch, his thinning, gingerish hair and his pasty complexion, he could hardly be described as possessing 'film star good looks'. His conversational skills, at least in the two to three hours I spent in his company, also appeared somewhat limited (perhaps because his interests were confined almost exclusively to himself and the houses, boats and cars he possessed). He did not exude charm or charisma, and I could not help thinking it unlikely that an attractive 26-year-old doctor from an equally well-connected, wealthy family in Canada would have formed an erotic or emotional attachment to him. And yet, according to Brian, Lourdes had fallen just as passionately in love with him as he had with her. 'I know there are a lot of Cuban girls who are just looking for a ticket out of here', Brian told me, 'but this was different. Lourdes was *really* in love with me.' They wrote to each other constantly, and Brian returned to Cuba four times in a year in order to spend time with her. He brought with him gifts of clothing, shoes, make-up and other items which are difficult to obtain in Cuba as a consequence of the US economic blockade. He wined and dined her in the best tourist hotels and restaurants, establishments which accepted only hard

currency – something to which few Cubans at that time had access. Eventually, he decided to investigate the possibility of marrying Lourdes and taking her back to Canada with him. It was this that ended their relationship, for, in Brian's own words:

It brought everything home to me. It would've cost me \$45,000 to get her out of Cuba [the cost of her medical training], plus she would've had to spend another two years in medical school in Canada before she could have practised, plus the Canadian government would make me sign a guarantee that I'd support her financially for ten years. It was just too much. I'm a realist. What if I paid all that, and then she found herself some young guy? . . . I could've paid all that and she could've just run off with another guy.

Brian's story put me in mind of the tale of Mr Peel, recounted by E. G. Wakefield in 1833, and retold by Marx in *Capital* (see Nichols, 1980). Mr Peel was an enthusiastic colonist who set off for Swan River, Australia, taking with him from England not just 'means of subsistence and of production to the amount of £50,000' (Marx, 1954, p. 717) but also three hundred men, women and children of the labouring classes, intending to set them to work in his small empire. Once arrived in Swan River, however, these three hundred 'labourers' disappeared to eke out an independent subsistence on the land, and 'Mr Peel was left without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water from the river' (Wakefield, quoted in Marx, 1954, p. 717). Mr Peel's story, Marx argues, reveals that 'property in money, means of subsistence, machines, and other means of production, does not as yet stamp a man as a capitalist if there be wanting the correlative – the wage worker, the other man who is compelled to sell himself of his own free-will' (1954, p. 717). Capital is not a thing, Marx continues, but a 'social relation between persons', and Mr Peel had not been able to export English *relations* of production to Swan River. To turn his £50,000-worth of 'things' into capital, Mr Peel needed 'a *class* of labourers – a class of non-owners who had no choice but to labour for those who did own and control the means of production' (Nichols, 1980, p. 74). Given access to subsistence land, the labourers Mr Peel had transported chose not to perform wage labour for him.

Unlike Mr Peel, Brian foresaw all too clearly what would happen if Lourdes ever found herself in a position to refuse, as well as to consent to, his wishes. He understood the truth of Marx's observation that:

Money's properties are my – the possessor's – properties and essential powers. Thus, what I *am* and *am capable* of is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy for myself the *most beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness* – its deterrent power – is nullified by money. (Marx, 1959, p. 122)

Brian realized that, if Lourdes had no need of hard currency, that is, if she was in a position to support herself independently in the style to which she wished to become accustomed, his money would lose its miraculous powers. Stripped of his massive economic advantage, he would have to meet Lourdes merely as an individual man, and:

Assume *man* to be *man* and his relationship to the world to be a human one; then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc. . . . Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual* life. If you love without evoking love in return – that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a *living expression* of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a *beloved one*, then your love is impotent – a misfortune. (Marx, 1959, pp. 124–5)

Prostitution is an institution that allows clients to secure temporarily certain powers of sexual command over prostitutes. These are not the kind of powers that many people wish to transfer indiscriminately to anonymous others. In fact, people will generally surrender such powers over their person to others only under very particular social, political and economic conditions – conditions which effectively limit their 'choices' to a set of alternatives which are not of their choosing. In other words, prostitution, as much as wage labour, is predicated upon the existence of a very particular set of social relations. In some cases these relations present people with a stark 'choice' between abject poverty or prostitution, or between violence, even death, or prostitution. In other cases the 'alternatives' may stretch to include monotonous, low-paid employment, as well as prostitution. I will labour an obvious point. Wealthy, powerful individuals do not typically elect to prostitute themselves. We hear stories about government ministers, senior executives, bishops, movie stars, directors of public prosecution, university vice-chancellors and so on *using* prostitutes. We do not hear stories about them giving up their careers in order to *become* prostitutes.

Those who wish to defend the institution of prostitution often state that there are individuals who enjoy working as prostitutes. There are, for example, some men who say that prostitution represents for them a happy coincidence between their desire for multiple anonymous sexual encounters with other men and their need to make a living (see, for instance, Marlowe, 1997). There are also some women who state that they find fulfilment in prostitution. The American prostitute-cum-performer-cum-self-publicist Scarlot Harlot (Carol Leigh), for instance, describes the laws which criminalize prostitution as curtailing her 'freedom of sexpression' and her 'freedom to do whatever I want with my body' (Bell, 1994, p. 179). There are also prostitutes who describe themselves as 'high priestesses of sacred sex magic rituals', 'professional sexual deviants' and 'sexpositive feminists', and claim to derive certain pleasures from their work (Nagel, 1997, DePaulo, 1997; see also Califia, 1994).

I do not wish to join with those feminists who insist that people who find prostitution sexually as well as financially rewarding are the victims of false consciousness. I think that we can allow for the possibility that these individuals are providing a faithful account of their own subjective experience without this in any sense undermining the more general argument that prostitution is an institution which founders upon the existence of economic and political conditions that compel people to act in ways in which they would not otherwise choose to act. If one or two of the labourers transported to Swan River had taken a special fancy to Mr Peel and elected to remain as his servants, it would not, after all, invalidate Marx's general analysis of this tale. Likewise, there are very probably some individuals who choose to become soldiers because they are attracted to the idea of killing other people. However, if national armies could *only* recruit this kind of psychotic, they would hardly be the massive and powerful institutions that they are. And there may exist some individuals who find the kind of tasks allocated to workers on factory assembly lines challenging and rewarding, but industrial capitalism would not have advanced very far if its enterprises *only* employed those individuals who can take active pleasure in performing mindless, repetitive tasks.

It is equally the case that, if those with the will and the money to enter into commercial sexual transactions had recourse only to the Scarlot Harlots of this world, prostitution would be a small-scale affair indeed. But the fact is that prostitutes' clients do not find themselves constrained in this way. In virtually any city, port or

tourist resort of the world, their money can buy them sexual access to a selection of adults and children who will derive no physical, sexual or psychological gratification (and often precious little financial reward) from the encounter. These are people whose entry into prostitution is conditioned by and predicated upon a particular set of *social* relations rather than being a specific expression of their individual selves. They become prostitutes because the economic, political and social circumstances in which they live make it either the best or the only means of subsisting, or they are people who are forced into prostitution by a third party.

This book is not concerned with the tiny minority of individuals who are attracted to prostitution by the intrinsic qualities of 'sex work', but deals only with the experience of people for whom prostitution represents either the best of a bad bunch of options or a condition forced upon them by another person or persons. Its aim is to examine the nature, meaning and consequences of the bonds which prostitutes enter into with clients and with other third parties, and to consider the power relations which are associated with and reproduced by these bonds.

Methodology

The book draws heavily on my own research on prostitution, which started in 1993 with an ethnographic study of a successful, entrepreneurial British prostitute (see O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994). This project involved participant observation as a receptionist, in-depth interviews with ten regular clients and four receptionists, a survey of clients' demands and analysis of letters and other documents provided by clients, as well as transcripts of tape-recorded sessions with clients. In 1994 I conducted a small-scale study of the attitudes and motivations of British sex tourists to Thailand (O'Connell Davidson, 1995a) and in March 1995 I undertook a similar piece of research on sex tourism in Cuba (O'Connell Davidson, 1996a). Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, who is bilingual in Spanish and English, accompanied me on this trip and carried out interview work with women, children and men working in informally arranged tourist-related prostitution as well as interviews with Spanish sex tourists. Jacqueline and I were subsequently commissioned by ECPAT (End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism) to undertake a series of research trips to investigate the identities, motivations, practices and attitudes of

individuals who exploit child prostitutes (ECPAT employs the United Nations definition of a child as a person under the age of eighteen). Between July 1995 and June 1996 we visited Costa Rica, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Goa, South Africa and Cuba for a second time. In each research site we used the same basic methods: observation in brothels, bars, clubs and tourist haunts, interviews with sex tourists, prostitutes, pimps, brothel keepers, hoteliers, taxi drivers and others involved in the informal tourist economy, and, where possible, interviews with staff of agencies and NGOs working on issues of child protection, prostitution, child prostitution and tourism. We also used printed questionnaires to gather structured data on sex tourists' background characteristics. In August 1997 we conducted pilot research on male prostitution and female sex tourism in Jamaica.

In all, I undertook fifteen weeks of fieldwork on sex tourism, and, taken together, 230 prostitute users (tourists, expatriates, businessmen, locals and sailors) and 169 people involved in prostitution (adult and child prostitutes, pimps, procurers, brothel and escort agency managers and doormen) were interviewed by Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor and myself in the course of all nine field trips. The sex tourists we interviewed formed a diverse group in terms of age and socio-economic background. The vast majority were white heterosexual men, but our sample does include five African-American and Black British male sex tourists and ten white female and three African-American female sex tourists. We also have survey data from around forty Western female sex tourists.

We did not attempt to measure the scale of the problem of child prostitution, or to produce quantitative data on the numbers of sex tourists, expatriates, businessmen, sailors, locals and others involved in the sexual exploitation of local and migrant women and children. Although the research involved interview work with a fairly large number of individuals involved in prostitution and sex tourism, this was an opportunistic, not a random, sample and any attempt to advance generalizations along the lines of 'x per cent of prostitutes in tourist-related prostitution are under the age of 18' or 'x per cent of their clients are married men' on the basis of such a sample would be entirely inappropriate. Instead, our fieldwork aimed to produce insights into the lived experience of participants in sex tourism by documenting their narratives and lifespan biographies, examining contradictions and tensions in sex tourists' spoken defences of their prostitute use and using observational

methods to build on our understanding of prostitute–client interactions. We were attempting to achieve what Geertz (1973) has termed ‘thick description’ of sex tourism as a social practice, and our confidence in the description we offer on the basis of our field research comes from the fact that we were able not only to triangulate different kinds of research evidence (observation, interviews with sex tourists, interviews with prostitutes, interviews with pimps and brothel keepers, survey evidence, documentary evidence) but also to compare and analyse our own very different experiences in the field.

As well as the research already mentioned, I have, over the past four years, conducted interviews with ten British women who work in street and/or massage parlour prostitution, visited court with a probation officer where I observed magistrates sentencing prostitute women for non-payment of fines for soliciting, and attended the preliminary meeting of a prostitutes’ peer support group as well as various meetings arranged by agencies which provide services for prostitutes. Five men who knew of my research interests approached me to ‘confess’ their prostitute use/sex tourism and subsequently agreed to be interviewed in person or to enter into correspondence about their prostitute use. I have also found the Internet to be a useful means of contacting clients (as well as finding various sites, in themselves, to be a source of data on prostitute users’ attitudes), and have conducted a number of e-mail interviews with prostitute users contacted in this way. Other published and unpublished documents that I have collected, such as contact magazines, small advertisements for ‘massage’, pornographic magazines and videos, prostitutes’ telephone kiosk cards and so on, have also contributed to the analysis of prostitution offered in this book. Again my confidence in the validity of the description of prostitution that I offer in the following pages comes from the fact that I have been able to triangulate data gathered in different ways from a number of different sources. It is important to note, however, that this book presents and analyses data on Western heterosexual prostitute users, most of whom are white and male, and does not necessarily speak to the demand for prostitution which comes from Asian, South-East Asian and African men or from homosexual men and women. Also, my own research has not focused on the social organization of male prostitution, nor have I investigated links between prostitution and organized crime.

There is a long-standing philosophical debate within the social

sciences about the relative importance of structure and agency in theory and method which I will not enter into here, but merely note that I subscribe to what might be termed the 'realist' compromise within such debates:

Realism . . . argues that the knowledge people have of their social world affects their behaviour . . . However, people's knowledge may be partial or incomplete. The task of social research is not simply to collect observations on the social world, but to explain these within theoretical frameworks which examine the underlying mechanisms which structure people's actions and prevent their choices from reaching fruition. (*May, 1993, p. 7*)

I have therefore borrowed from theoretical analyses of wage labour and slavery and of various forms of erotic domination as well as from theories of consent, contract and community in order to both structure and explain my empirical observations. My aim has been to examine not simply the intersubjectively agreed rules and meanings which guide interaction and the discourses which surround it, but also the structural mechanisms which underpin the everyday experience of participants in prostitution (see Layder, 1993). Even if I were in a position to do so, it would be impossible in a book of this length to provide a detailed exposition of the ways in which every single macro-phenomenon that impacts on the lived experience of prostitutes and clients structures and constrains action (I can, for example, envisage an entire book on the ways in which prostitution is 'racialized' and how this relates to broader structural and ideological factors, and another entire book on age and prostitution). It merely provides selected examples of how legal and institutional structures, patterns of tourist investment, labour market conditions, systems of debt bondage, ideological representations of 'race', sexuality and gender, and so on, shape the experience of prostitution and give meaning to the interactions between adult and child prostitutes and their clients, and I hope that other contributions to a body of realist evidence on prostitution will compensate for its shortfalls.

Definitions and book structure

'Prostitution' is typically defined by both academics and lay persons as the exchange of sexual services for cash and/or other material benefits (see Phoenix, 1995, for a discussion of the

limitations of such definitions), for it is widely assumed that, as Overall (1992, p. 716) puts it, 'sex work is by definition the commoditization of sex.' However, both the idea that it is *sex* or *sexual services* which are commodified in prostitution and the notion that prostitution necessarily involves transactions modelled upon narrowly contractual commodity exchanges can be contested.

The assertion that clients buy sex or sexual services from prostitutes raises the same kind of problems that are advanced by the idea that employers buy labour from their workers. As Marxists have pointed out, while it is possible for one person to design a project and then pay another person to it carry out, 'Labor, like all life processes and bodily functions, is an inalienable property of the human individual' (Braverman, 1974, p. 54). Because it cannot be separated from the person of the labourer, it is not *labour* that is exchanged, sold or surrendered (we cannot, for example, purchase ten kilowatts of plumber's labour at a DIY superstore and then take it home to fix our own leaking sink). What workers sell, and what employers buy, 'is *not an agreed amount of labor, but the power to labor over an agreed period of time*' (Braverman, 1974, p. 54, original emphasis) (thus we can pay for an hour of a plumber's time and *direct* that plumber to execute the labour necessary to fix our leaking sink). This distinction between labour and the power to labour is hugely significant. It draws our attention to the fact that labour power is, as Pateman (1988) puts it, a political fiction. She continues:

The capitalist does not and cannot contract to use the proletarian's services or labour power. The employment contract gives the employer right of command over the use of the worker's labour, that is to say, over the self, person and body of the worker during the period set down in the employment contract. Similarly, the services of the prostitute cannot be provided unless she is present; property in the person, unlike material property, cannot be separated from its owner. (Pateman, 1988, pp. 202-3)

For this reason, I would argue that, although prostitution is popularly defined as the exchange of *sex* or *sexual services* for money and/or other material benefits, it is better conceptualized as an institution which allows certain powers of command over one person's body to be exercised by another. The client parts with money and/or other material benefits in order to secure powers over the prostitute's person which he (or more rarely she) could not otherwise exercise. He pays in order that he may command the

prostitute to make body orifices available to him, to smile, dance or dress up for him, to whip, spank, massage or masturbate him, to submit to being urinated upon, shackled or beaten by him, or otherwise submit to his wishes and desires.

The social, technical and conceptual organization of this transfer of powers varies. Sometimes it is organized by a third party, who has either enslaved the prostitute or provided her/him with direct or indirect employment. In other cases it is organized by independent, self-employed prostitutes. Within this, the prostitute-client transaction may be formally arranged along the lines of a closely specified, speedily executed commodity exchange (that is, x sexual service for x amount of money), but it can also be organized as an exchange that is more like a contract of employment or indenture (that is, x amount of time being served by the prostitute for x amount of money). Where the prostitute-client exchange takes this latter form, there can be enormous variability in terms of how and where the boundaries of the contract are drawn. The limits to the transaction and the client's powers of command within it may be tightly drawn, but in other cases the exchange is diffuse and loosely specified. The client may even get to command the performance of non-sexual labour as well as sexual services in exchange for a sum of money and/or other benefits which are not explicitly negotiated in advance. The duration of such transactions can also vary widely, sometimes taking place over a number of days, weeks or even months. Taking the 'employment' status of prostitutes and the contractual form of the prostitute-client relation as two major axes of difference in terms of how prostitution is socially organized, it is possible to distinguish at least six different forms of prostitution (see figure 1), each of which represents a different way of organizing the transfer of powers over the person which prostitution entails.

Figure 1: Dimensions of diversity

	Prostitution contract = informal, diffuse	Prostitution contract = formal, commoditized
'Enslaved'		
Directly/indirectly employed		
Self-employed		

Part I of this book is concerned with the variability of prostitution in terms of its social organization, the power relations it involves and the degree of unfreedom it implies for individual prostitutes. It looks at the hierarchies that exist within prostitution and the economic, social, political, ideological and legal factors that structure them. Chapters 1 and 2 explore these issues in relation to the forms of prostitution which occur in the upper four boxes of figure 1 (that is, informal and formal contracts that are organized or controlled by third parties). Chapter 3 examines independent, self-employed street prostitution which involves narrowly contractual, highly commoditized exchanges, while Chapter 4 is concerned with independent but informally arranged prostitution. Chapter 5 considers the experience of self-employed prostitution at the apex of the prostitution hierarchy.

My purpose in examining the diversity of prostitution is not to show that there is no 'fixity' to this institution or to argue that there are multiples of incommensurate prostitutions. Rather my aim is to locate variability within theoretical frameworks that allow us to identify underlying structural mechanisms which shape differences in prostitutes' experience, and to identify what is common to that experience. In particular, I am concerned with links between systemic features of oppression (see Young, 1990) and the organization of prostitution.

Part II of the book turns to questions about the social meanings that attach to prostitution and about clients' motivations for prostitute use. Chapter 6 is largely theoretical and examines what notions of community, contract and consent can tell us about the construction of the prostitute as a debased and degraded sexual 'Other'. Drawing on my own interview work with clients, Chapter 7 then goes on to analyse the dynamics of sexual desire for such an Other, and to develop a typology of clients through reference to the ways in which they eroticize their own prostitute use. Chapter 8 is concerned primarily to explore the highly 'racialized' and racist narratives Western tourists use to justify their acts of sexual exploitation while travelling in poor countries, and develops an analysis of sex tourism as the pursuit of gender honour. The political implications of parts I and II of this book are briefly considered in the concluding chapter.

Finally, I should make some remarks about the term 'child prostitution'. Childhood is, as many authors have pointed out, a socially constructed condition rather than one which can be clearly defined through reference to biological fact or chronological age.

Its perimeters vary cross-culturally and historically, and even within any one nation state its boundaries are often indistinct (see Pilcher, 1995). For the international community to concern itself with the condition and experience of children around the globe, however, it must necessarily employ some universal definition of childhood, and the United Nations and many other international bodies define a child as a person under the age of eighteen. I follow this definition – even though I am aware of the case made by those who hold such a definition to be Eurocentric (Ennew, 1986) – since, for the purposes of my general arguments about child prostitution, it makes no difference whether we draw the boundary of childhood at eighteen, fourteen or even ten, for the vast majority of child prostitutes of whatever age are actually integrated into the mainstream sex industry which serves *all* prostitute users, rather than working in some isolated ‘market niche’ that caters solely to the desires of ‘paedophiles’ or child molesters. It follows from this that any group which represents a source of demand for commercial sex can be assumed to supply a significant number of child sex exploiters, many of whom sexually abuse children because they are prostitute users (and/or strip and sex show customers, and/or consumers of pornography) in a world which, on the one hand, places sexual value on youth and, on the other, forces large numbers of children (either through direct coercion or economic necessity) into working in the sex industry. For this reason I do not separate child prostitution analytically from the more general phenomenon of prostitution, but rather treat age as one of several stratifying factors which impact on the degree of unfreedom experienced by individual prostitutes.

PART I

DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY

