

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EROTIC

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Introduction

This paper is based on a qualitative research project focused on prostitution that takes place in the Historic Center of Mexico City. The studied area, known as “La Merced”, is widely known as the place of the most ‘marginalized’ prostitution, an area where women sell “ratos” (‘whiles’, ‘brief times’) at prices considerably lower than the ones that can be found elsewhere in the city.

The traditional “Barrio de la Merced”, in the Historic Center of Mexico City, constitutes a plural space where diverse human activities and expressions come together in a festive, commercial and cultural environment. A quick glance around the neighborhood inevitably leads to the commercial activities in the area, where almost anything can be found for sale. It takes its name from the one that the mercedarian missionaries gave in 1602 to the church and convent they had built there (“Nuestra Señora de La Merced”, Spanish for “Our Lady of Mercy”), La Merced remains an icon of an age written in clay and *tezontle* (volcanic rock) in the heart of an aquatic city, a place where inhabitants from all over the Mexico basin arrived by canoe in order to sell their products and furnish themselves with the enormous variety of goods offered in this land.

For centuries La Merced has been a neuralgic point of the city’s wholesale and retail commerce. Nowadays those activities resist the efforts to eradicate them initiated by the city government due to the excessive growth and gradual deterioration they have caused to this historic area.

The commercial activity, characteristic of La Merced, gave rise to various social processes and phenomena, such as prostitution. Wholesale and retail marketing and prostitution have been the hallmarks of La Merced, and have conferred sense and meaning to it. For over four centuries sexual commerce has been privileged here.

Josefina Muriel (1974) states that ever since the colonial city was established, prostitution has had clearly defined geographical boundaries that have been tolerated by authorities. Following the European tradition that specified that an area for prostitution should be established in each city, the Spanish authorities in America, in a regulatory attempt, established state-controlled “casas de mancebía” (houses of prostitution) that would safeguard “the decency of this city and of its married and single women”. In 1538, at City Hall’s request, the establishment of the first house of prostitution in the street, then named Calle de las Gayas, was approved. That first “official” house of prostitution was located in one of the main streets of what we now know as La Merced. Throughout the colonial period of this neighborhood we can find reliable historical evidence of women engaged in sexual commerce, a phenomenon that has continued up to this day in the heart of the Historic Center of Mexico City.

The current number of women working as prostitutes in La Merced and its surroundings is estimated in 2,000. Based on the research project reported here, we were able to identify 35 hotels in the neighborhood, and in 34 of them sexual commerce occurrences were confirmed.

As for the economic exchange derived from the sexual commerce that takes place in the area, we can mention as an indicator that, according to the interviewed women, earnings resulting from a “rato” (“a while”) vary from the equivalent of US\$2.10 to US\$2,105. This dispersion is explained by the interviewees as follows: the price established for a 10 to 13-year-old girl’s virginity is the equivalent to US\$2,105 (the amount is usually paid to the “madrota¹” (madame), as the rules of the trade establish for an initiation in the business). For a period of time following the first sexual intercourse, and usually until the girl is 14 or 15 years old, US\$105 to US\$210 are paid for each sexual intercourse. A woman under 20 years charges the equivalent of US\$17.70 to US\$26.30. Interviewees state that women in their thirties (“if in good condition”) charge the equivalent to up to US\$10.50 per “rato” while older women (40 to 50 years old) can charge as little as US\$2.60, or even less. This explains the difficulties reported by female “Sex Workers” in the studied area, since competition for clients and profits is nuanced by the cult of youth and beauty imbedded in clients’ attitudes, causing severe difficultness in intergender relationships.

It is in this context that the interest arises in a research project that encourages careful consideration on the defense of the human rights of one of the most vulnerable groups in Mexico. Several studies have already exposed the marginalization of “Sex Workers”, particularly of those that come from an extremely impoverished and culturally marginalized environment. It is from this line of thought that the authors, in collaboration with the Federal District Human Rights Commission and the Iztapalapa Campus of the Metropolitan Autonomous University, arised in the development of a research project that would gather detailed information concerning the gender and social problems of “Sex Work” through in-depth interviews with the women that work in La Merced and their clients. The information gathered was analyzed under the principles of the Social Representation Theory.

Prostitution and Symbolic Space

Given its ungraspability, Moscovici (1998) declares the repetitive criticism to Social Representations to be a *fata morgana*. These apparitions, known to Arctic sailors, create illusions out of nothing that vanish just as magically as they are brought into existence. They can be perceived when a phenomenon that we consider concrete and limited to social thought has definite objectivations in the real world. Such is the case of the Social Representation of “Sex Work”. However, Social Representation, as a theoretical structure, proposes a binding framework for symbols and ideas that, if materialized in the actual reality of the studied phenomena, show an historical association and a projection for the future, or, as would better fit the problem in question, the lack of future (Schutz, 1969).

Therefore, the focus of this project is the construction and transformation of the Social Representation of “Sex Work”, assuming that it is a theoretical proposition that aims at a psychosocial explanation of eroticism and sexuality associated to a group considered “marginalized”, as the one constituted by “Sex Workers”. Appropriate social performance necessarily entails the creation of collective explanations that enable the day-to-day recognition of the actors. “I am who I am” is a phrase that clearly expresses, in a non abstract way, a symbolic fact that is constructed throughout a lifetime. When someone says “I am who I am” she is recognizing herself in her present by a representational act that cannot be seen in the field of the individual. For a particular person “I am who I am” essentially means the same thing today than tomorrow or ten years from now. However, “I

am who I am” encloses a symbolic content that has been established, changed and resignified by the social group from what it arises. The final concretion of “Sex Work” occurs in the experimentation of the “Sex Worker”. When a woman considers herself a “Sex Worker”, she is making use of a symbolic signification that she thinks applies to herself not only behaviorally but, above all, symbolically.

One of the most important functions of Social Representations is the familiarization of the social group, the collectivity, with the non familiar. In spite of the above, there is a subtle difference between becoming familiar with something that is considered as pertaining to others (in this case, the female other, the “Sex Worker”, and the male other, her client) and becoming familiar with what is foreign to our immediate environment and part of a somewhat “hidden” and distant world which borders what usually only comes near to (in this case, society as a whole, facing a phenomenon that occurs in the public space, i.e. the street, but remains completely hidden to most persons). The Social Representation process is a single process, and thus the prostitution phenomenon, with its multiple actors, objectivates in everyday life the collectively diverse expression of such a process.

From the phenomenal perspective we would have to pose the question of the confluence of multiple representations. The way familiarity with the non familiar is achieved by a “Sex Worker”, that finds herself to be “unlike” other women because of a practice of “the sexual” that becomes ever more complex by the addition of images and thought forms that should recount, for herself and her closest referents first, and for the rest of society later, the intercrossing of corporal, commercial, sexual and erotic aspects, is clearly differentiated from the way the “others” become familiar with the non familiar. By the same token, “the others” who symbolically nourish the collective discussion on “Sex Work” and its underground and clandestine practice can be characterized by their personal, affective, valorative and judgmental distance from the phenomena. This causes the “Sex Worker” to come to a point where she objectivates herself as a person by acknowledging and naming herself as such.

If, as has been frequently repeated, Social Representation can be explained by the social groups’ need for making familiar the non familiar whenever a new, different or unexplainable element breaks into their lives and, particularly, into their theories about life,

we would understand that the function of a Social Representation ends when the element ceases to be non familiar. In fact, transformations of a Social Representation can be explained by the need for the reconnection of symbolic elements already expressed by a collective in a different, more acknowledgeable way in the concrete everyday life. This means that the representation process is an unfinished one, since its expression and re-expression (the contents objectivated and anchored in each period) are manifestations of the inappropriateness of the former expressions. We could then propose that, more than making familiar the non familiar, Social Representation must make less unfamiliar the non familiar. This means that, by the construction of cliches and valorative judgements that confine the strange, diffuse and amorphous to the non familiar but controllable, society may coexist with different ways of thinking, being and acting that it does not completely understand or even that it does not understand at all.

The non familiar is discordant because it is threatening. It is not just an inability to comprehend, but a lack of “shortcuts” that could serve to escape the uneasiness. “To make less unfamiliar the non familiar” allows the creation of objectivation and anchoring strategies in the social groups threatened by “the new presence”, so as to deny its existence in real everyday life. “Prostitutes are bad women” is a useful contrivance that lets “good women” deny the collective existence of a social group, even if its members walk side by side to them in the street. This implies that a contrivance may be effective (as a denial tool) for a while but, precisely because of its deceptive nature, one could assume that its fraudulent essence is bound to be exposed. “Prostitutes and good women are all women” is a fact that transgresses the contrivance and throws the non familiar again to the face of the ones trying to delude it.

Too many contrivances created to deny the existence of an apparent phenomenon. Moreover, the phenomenon is not only extremely evident (just getting close to La Merced may serve to confirm it) but has had a continued presence over several centuries. How is it possible for a society to continue to create contrivances that deny the existence of a phenomenon which is so widely recognized as “ancient”? Social Representations considered as social thought can be regarded as “communicative spaces”. What cannot be easily argued is that each one has a beginning and an end. We are not talking about

structures that, after a gestation period, acquire a definite final form. Just as up to this day the atom continues to be the paradigm used to explain something called “matter”, Social Representation continues to be, up to this day, the explanatory model for something called social thought.

This implies that Social Representations are more than just “communicative spaces” with two-dimensional “communicative atmospheres”. More than two dimensions? Yes, if we take into account public and private, present and past and the projection of the social group into the future (or the denial of such possibility). Communicative atmospheres that cross and blend due to their unpredictability. How could a Social Representation of female prostitution be considered if, throughout History, a Social Representation of “Womanhood” has not been achieved? It is precisely to this intercrossing characteristic that we refer as the symbolic space of Social Representation.

The communication of the erotic, from the most private spheres of the private environment, does not have any communicative contrivances for its collective expression. Here is where a paradox strikes: although it is private, “the erotic” is highly shareable. There are prescriptions of the erotic experience that successfully link the person to certain “social” or generic labels that define her identity. Transsexuals, for instance, strive to define their identity distinguishing themselves from transvestites, homosexuals, etc. This defense of a label is not casual. It is the acknowledgement of the social prescription applicable within the boundaries of the sexual (Jitrik, 1991).

The above points to the proposition that, in order to approach the phenomenon in question, we must start with the everyday lives of the actors. Nevertheless, assuming that the communicative expression of their motives and reasons is marked by the domain of the appropriate, when their psychosocial explanation is in the domain of the desired, methodological problems arise. The testimonies provided by the interviewees (“Sex Workers” and clients) are conceptually discussed, in an attempt to transcend the normative frame and hypothesize, if nothing else, the dynamic of the prescription of the erotic. It is, hence, a communication concept of a different nature.

Let's point an example: numerous references to the interviewees' concern about their role as mothers and the ideal image of the “good mother”. In fact, “motherhood” is one of the

topics they most frequently resort to when introducing themselves to others. The cult of motherhood and the fact that they never call it into question is as present in this group as, one can venture to say, is in many other groups of women, at least in our culture. They know the normative associated to motherhood and align their discourse with the “good mother” canons. Furthermore, their judgment of their own “mothers” is ruled by the same normative: *“My mother was very hard on me because she was trying to make a good person out of me, but I turned out to be a bad daughter”*. Nevertheless, by observing day to day activities in La Merced area one can discover an everyday life that is family oriented, non peculiar and not very normative.

The social prescriptions present in this social group are of another kind. Physical, psychological and other types of abuse are posed as mere maternal concerns. The abuse carried out by the father, almost always of the sexual kind, is just another element involved in child raising. The construction of the erotic, then is the focal point where not only a double standard but a double discourse intersect: the more communicable normative discourse and the discourse of the desired, socially prescribed by the social group. “The erotic”, then, is inserted in the sphere of the “non appropriate”, the “dark and hidden”. Seen that way, the practice of “Sex Work”, not only enables normative justifications, *“is just another line of work”*, *“for the support of my children”*, but encloses feelings and emotions that can hardly be expressed: *“I was out of this, but I came back because I missed the atmosphere of the trade”*, *“I don’t know why, but I feel better here”*. Crossed communications immersed in a Social Communication frame that rules and prescribes the genesis, establishment and manifestation of the erotic.

Social Representation of Prostitution

A Social Representation just exists as a social thought. Therefore, Representation’s theoreticians and scholars question from time to time the adequacy of studying this or that Social Representation. They wonder: “Is this already a Social Representation?”, “Has it already linked its nuclear images, affections and judgments with the logic characteristic of a social imaginary?” Those are useless questions that conceal a greater social dilemma.

A Social Representation is not a thing in the broad sense of the word. It does not have a corporeal location outside of what we may call “communicative atmosphere”. And despite

its corporeal absence, and because of its finished or unfinished construction of polarities, it establishes boundaries, creates identities and defines and identifies conflicts (Moscovici, 1988).

A Social Representation originates in a constructive process. As a social thought, it is formed by the coming and going of images and affections. Its constructive logic is not rational (understanding the rational as the linguistic parameter of the normative). The contents of a Social Representation cannot hold a logical-deductive analysis. That is why Social Representation is contradictory. Its function, if it can be labeled as such, is the creation of explanations that bind communities. The bond is of an affective kind. Whenever a collectivity exists, it exists only because of the affections that bind it. Evidently, the collectivity narrates its explanations and this narration is of a linguistic nature. Nevertheless words enclose contradictions that for a neophyte in the subject may seem shocking. This is the least important element. Human beings that are recognized in a collectivity may not clearly elucidate their “loyalties” and “antagonisms”, but they know perfectly well the meaning of their affections.

To talk about the Social Representation of Prostitution necessarily implies polar themes. The Man-Woman relationship, for example, is deemed by society, in the context of prostitution, as a mercantile relationship where one agent pays for the service offered by the other. This approach originates in the same society that considers sex as a “good”. Therefore, a “Free Sex” and a “Paid Sex” can be established.

In this approach sexuality, as an expression of human essence is out of the question. The polarity “Free Sex” and “Paid Sex” assumes a symbolic relation between “body” and “money”. Hence, a woman is “good” when she gives her body without any economic exchange, at least without any objective proof of “pay per service provided”. A woman that “charges for her services” is then a “bad” woman. “Good” and “Bad” are opposites in a false polarity. What we are discussing here are the shades of the “Good Woman” concept. In the sphere of “paid sex”, prostitutes differentiate from one another by their degree of “goodness”. The usual justification offered by the interviewed women is in the broader domain of “love” and in the more objective domain of “motherhood”. They classify themselves as “good” or “bad. The “worst” of them all is the one that never had children.

“She does it because she likes it” is the lapidary phrase that drives the prostitute to a state of extreme dishonor. Although it is hard to imagine many years of an everyday life limited to prostitution and selling of the body (with its associated violence and corruption) without any subjective and existential meaning conferred to it, “Sex Workers” who are also mothers continually resort to such argumentation.

But it is not their argumentation. A prostitute’s clients can also make a distinction between “good” and “bad” prostitutes. A “good” one is a woman who has been forced by circumstances to work in order to support her family. Being a “mother” in the sense of the selling of her body is a positive monetary balance in a financial exchange for others.

It does not matter if those others are also subjected to violence and abuse. It does not matter if those others are away from home and alienated from their mother. It does not matter if the mother from time to time vaguely remembers not only that she is mother, but also that she has children. Even the relationship with her “padrote” (pimp) is a submissive and unequal one, justified by a primary value of contemporary society. The “mother-wife” that takes care, pampers and worships the man as if he were her son. The prostitute is “good” when she works for “others”, A prostitute is “good” when she lives in self-renunciation. The similarity to the “other” “good” women is astonishing: women that are only “better” because the offering of their body is not subjected to an evident monetary exchange.

It is not the concept of motherhood the one that makes a social distinction between “good” and “bad” women, but it is its social justification. The distance between them is established as the value associated to a financial retribution. The “free sex” inside wedlock implies a financial retribution, even if it is frequently a false one. The housewife that offers her body to her husband “charge free” gets in exchange the prestige associated to “being good”. The wife’s domestic prestige is regarded as synonymous to domestic financial retribution. If a housewife has to leave home in order to find sustenance, if she is a “good woman” she will excuse herself explaining that she has to do it in order to “help” her husband. In this context financial independence and self-sufficiency are considered antivalues. The man is in possession of the money, since money is masculine. If a woman earns it, it is only to give it to others. If a man earns it, it is “his money” and he can choose to give it to others or not. “Bad women” lack domestic prestige, but they have financial prestige instead. “Bad

women” are considered, from a rather “glamorous” perspective, as women that “work whenever and for as long as they want” and hence “make as much money as they want”. “Sex for money” takes them to a dimension of independence that “good women” cannot share. “Free sex” is to offer oneself receiving nothing in return. “Sex for money” is to use one’s body to require and demand something from the other.

The deceitfulness of the glamorous is located in the sphere of the erotic. A sexually demanding woman cannot be a good woman. This paradox is also valid for prostitutes. The experimentation of sexual feelings in a relationship with a client is completely denied: “*You don’t feel anything, you are just working*”. “*I only make love with my husband; the rest is just work*”. It cannot be otherwise when their justification is just trying to get them closer to the “good woman” concept.

Reflections on the social thought of prostitution reveal other forms of social thought. Identification of affections and images related to “Bad Women” in the social imaginary is a very hard task when the collectivity does not have an incorporating perspective of “Womanhood”. However, we are not aiming at a social representation of women. What can be appreciated is an alive, changing and unfinished process for the social construction of inequality.

Evidently, if a project on Social Representations is to be carried out, its processes have to be approached. Objectivation and anchoring, as is widely known, are two sides of a coin. Prostitutes are the current objectivation of an inequality built over many centuries. From the moment we name their label we know it is a marginalized group. To label is to objectivate. To be labeled is to be the receiver of the quality of the objectivation. Furthermore, when a labeled individual labels himself/herself and proposes a dynamic social relationship based on his/her label, he/she is anchoring once more a Social Representation.

The act of labeling implies the use of social values. A name, a way of saying shows the collectivity’s evaluation of facts, things, images and affections. The analysis of the objectivation process of Social Representation of Prostitution entails a deconstruction of the discourses. It involves a double task: what was said and the value associated to what was said. The interviewee that praises the first man that made her “feel” and states that he was good and different from the rest, even though in her discourse she has made clear that he

was the one that entered her into the prostitution business, beat and humiliated her, separated her from her children and, after having exploited her for years, abandoned her, is assuming, in the label “good man” her unequal role. Good treatment is always unjustified and, sooner or later, its price will be paid.

By the same token, this personal experience of the assumption of the inequality refers to the anchor in the social imaginary. Anchoring is then located in very deep imaginal aspects. We are referring to the “belief system of the collectivity”. In addition to being the objectifications of a form of social thought, the public manifestations of a good woman (self-sacrificing mother, helping wife) bear on the meaning of “Womanhood”. “To be for others” is the objectification of the set of beliefs that denies the possibility of being for oneself. The negation of “being for oneself” is the anchoring, chained to the belief system that provides the “Womanhood” quality to both “good” and “bad” women.

As a consequence, the development of a comprehensive explanatory framework for values is present in the objectifications made by “Sex Workers and clients when they talk about themselves and others, and closely related to the sense of their everyday lives. This sense emanates from their belief system, where, on one hand, the dark, hidden and even denied axis of the erotic confers a meaning to the experience of the sexual.

In this study, to talk about prostitution is to talk about women. To talk about prostitution is also to talk about transgression: the public turned private, the private disturbing the public. To talk about prostitution, as we already mentioned, is to talk about inequality. But above this, to talk about prostitution is to talk about sex. In our society the sexual is referred to the physical act that involves skin to skin contact. Prostitutes persist in the denial of any subjective experience, in the sexual nature of their activity. Their clients say that “that” is just sex. “It is not the same as it is with the wife” is an argument used by all actors.

In this context, prostitutes are presented as essential for society. “*We do what wives could never do, because if they did they would not be wives any more.*” “*If they come to us, then they will not ask this from them.*”

However, the experience of the sexual is an erotic experience. The erotic involves exultation, emotion, passion, pleasure. The construction of the erotic happens in a private milieu. Although it is absolutely social, the focal point of human eroticism does not exist in

words. The construction of the erotic originates in images and feelings that are rarely confessed to others.

This private nature of the erotic presumes a complex and diverse constructive process. Extremely complex if we consider cases in which the focal point of someone's eroticism emerged (had been constructed) from a relation with things, people and spaces that violate the public. The woman who considers her first sexual experience as shameful because she was raped by her father, has on her side a society that sanctions and strongly disapproves the crime she suffered, but at the same time she has against her a society that would impose her a double sanction if, in addition to excruciating pain, she had experienced pleasure.

The personal experience of pleasure in the domain of "the sexual" entails an erotic experience. In this sense we could accept that the sexual without eroticism is just sex. A mechanical relationship between a man and a woman, a fact that cannot be argued. The erotic implies a meaning for the experience. Its absence, then, implies a lack of meaning. A sexual experience lacking meaning involves submission and violation of privacy. Therefore, the experience does not have an intrinsic meaning, but it has some other kind of meaning, even if it is "meaninglessness" itself.

Sexuality as a Social Dimension of Prostitution

The Social Representation of prostitution has been alimented by a bipolar conception of masculine eroticism and feminine eroticism (as well as their utopical union). In the prostitution phenomenon the attributes and values assigned to each sex are radicalized. All the "negative" elements that have been socially imputed to the feminine and all the "positive" elements attributed to the masculine. The fragmentation of erotic experience is also radicalized.

In the collective imaginary the prostitute is a public woman, someone to whom society has disenfranchised, denied the right to privacy and attributed a non reproductive sexuality, a "barren sexuality"². She is the whore, she gives herself for money, she does not choose, she does not love, she forgets, she does not demand a commitment from the man nor makes a commitment herself, she abandons and is easily abandoned. She is a temptress, she is all the archetypes at once: "witch", "magician", "sorcerer", "siren". Her body is a powerful weapon that conquers a man's will. The relationship with her is noncontinuous, the erotic

act does not involve co-responsibility, she is just a body, an instrument for pleasure. She does not have a name, she is “a nobody”.

Thus, prostitution is defined as “an essentially feminine activity that happens in the public space, and involves the exchange of money for a personal service” (Coria, 1996: p. 31). “The man that pays for sexual intercourse” is excluded from this definition. In fact, there is no word for him in popular or scientific lexicons. He is known as “the client”, a neutral term that only denotes his role as consumer, without any labeling or branding that could call into question “his good name and honor”. As Coria states, “if the man who buys sexual services from a woman is the one who has the money, then prostitution is a necessary although uncomfortable act that does not disrupt social order nor causes any harm to humanity” *op. cit.* p. 43.

The masculine eroticism expressed in a commercial sexual relationship is consistent with the sexual prototype attributed to the “common and ordinary man”, the man on the street. In sexual commerce the man righteously experiences the erotic ideal that culture has assigned to him. He controls, wants, undresses, he is not responsible for his eroticism, he does not make a commitment³, the erotic encounter is just a gap, a hopeless interlude; he abandons, gets pleasure without ethical or moral considerations, has a desire alienated from love. A man whose sex life has all these attributes, whether derived from a stable relationship or not, is a successful man, and his conduct should be praised. It does not matter whether he has achieved all of the aforementioned characteristics because of his manliness, or not. Money acts as a substitute for virility. Hence, the lack of a name for the man who pays for sex is not surprising, since a commercial sexual relation is something that “any man” can have.

For that reason, prostitution is and has been tolerated for centuries as a “necessary evil”. A “necessary evil” that does not have a specific object, since its necessity is not attributed to the men requesting it, just as its evil is not ascribed to the women that practice it. “Society” as a whole, with its diverse acting bodies and institutions, becomes the recipient (beneficiary). Familiarity with this phrase mitigates the uncertainty and uneasiness caused the public existence of the phenomenon. Prostitution is “bad” but needed; consequently, the need arises for a social permissiveness that goes beyond juridical permissiveness. It is not

by accident that this premise is shared by countless social groups (jurists, legislators, scientists, civil servants, clients, “Sex Workers” and ordinary men and women). Conceiving it as a “necessary evil” justifies gender and social inequalities between men and women and among women themselves.

If “Society” justifies it, then there is nothing to justify. Thus, there is no subject in need of vindication in the prostitution phenomenon. The stigmatization of female “Sex Workers”, the violation of their human rights, the sexual and symbolic violence they are victims of, the humiliations and murders recurrently committed by clients and the abuse of authority, among other, do not call for a social explanation nor for any kind of authoritative action, much less justice and vindication.

According to several interviewed “Sex Workers”, an indeterminate number of women have been murdered in hotel rooms and those guilty of the homicides have never been prosecuted. In regard to these unsolved murders, society as a whole acts as an accomplice in the crime of impunity, since the clamor for justice is saved for another category of women.

The above is familiar, but in the way back, when turning the non familiar into familiar, when we wonder about the phrase “Prostitution is a necessary evil”, why do not we ask for whom is it “evil” and who “needs” it? The existence of a “separate” category of women ensures the production and reproduction of a real and symbolic order where the ideal of masculine eroticism can be established.

Masculine Eroticism and Prostitution (Masculinity-Sexuality-Fatherhood), Archetype: the Client

Female prostitutes are the basic sign, symbol and image in the imaginary and in masculine intersubjectivity. They are present in the rites and in the transmission of myths that are constantly being recreated by males. In this imaginary, prostitutes are the category of women that, among other things, facilitate young males’ sexual initiation rites, preventing such an initiation from harming or impairing in any way the “chastity and decency” required from women “destined” to marriage and motherhood. The male’s initiation rite is a festive occasion, a sexual celebration in which “the young man must provide evidence for his resistance and virility”⁴. This initiation gives birth to the “single man”, who has social

authorization to live an active and varied sexual and erotic life. This sex life initiated in adolescence also “ends” with a rite of passage. In bachelor parties all pleasures barred from married life are called together, and it is customary to have public women as the first persons invited to the party. From then on, they will also be the ones making sexual fantasies incompatible with married life come true, since honeymoon is as ephemeral as a man’s sexual desire once he has taken the woman that will bear his children.

Hence, in the case of the male, marriage is not a permit authorizing him to live his sexuality freely, but a commitment to reproduction. The married man is bound, engaged by a collective ceremony to the generation of offspring. A “married man” is a “dead man”, since his freedom will be cut down, subjected to the fluctuations of a domestic and prescriptively monogamic life. In Mexico City’s wedding ceremonies the rite of passage finishes with the man being carried as a coffin by pallbearers, to the rhythm of a funeral march.

But the dead man is resurrected and alternative spaces are built in order to rescue him from domestic monotony and bring him back to the ideally ludic and erotic space that encircles a man’s life regardless of his social status. “To whore around”, “to go partying”, “to have a fling” are all fundamentally masculine spaces where women are transformed into a signifier recreated in language and incarnated only in public women. Secrecy and complicity are two dimensions of the masculine circle where alternatives to domestic and monogamous life are created, and where eroticism and “forbidden” sexuality take place.

Public women are the ones that make the sexual fantasies “most celebrated” by a man’s circle of friends come true: unconventional positions and sensations, oral and anal sex, and all the sexual possibilities that men do not dare to have (or at least to connote) with the mother of their children. A price must be paid for these sexual fantasies since inside of wedlock they are regarded as sinful. Paradoxically, the most frequent sex act performed with “Sex Workers” is the plain vanilla missionary position and does not take longer than a few minutes. The difference is in the consequences of the intercourse: it does not demand responsibility nor asks for reciprocation in terms of the partner’s desire and sexual fantasies, since feminine sexuality and eroticism require from the man desire, uninhibited behavior, imagination and effort if the act is to be mutually enjoyed.

Feminine Eroticism and Prostitution (Femininity-Sexuality-Motherhood), Archetype: the Whore

Women's sexuality and eroticism is the primary space for the objectivation of gender discrimination and inequality. Hence, the collective ideal and standard of feminine eroticism is the non existence of eroticism. According to social discourse, feminine sexuality is mysterious, inscrutable and must be limited and controlled. However, a woman's sexual potential goes far beyond the limits imposed to it. It has been proved, for instance, that a woman can have multiple orgasms and that female genitalia completely unrelated to reproduction, such as the vulva and clitoris, are essential in the erotic experience. It is not casual that cultures practicing mutilation of the female body (such as excision of the clitoris or an even more severe practice called "infibulation", consisting of complete removal of the clitoris and suturing of labia majora) have survived thus far. This ritual practice, carried out in several Muslim countries up today, is directed against girls, it is a sexual inhibition ritual.

In spite of being multicultural and thus a country where the expression of sexuality takes diverse forms, Mexico is still dominated by a Judeo-Christian approach to the sexual education of boys and girls. Although we do not perform extreme rites such as the ones of Islamism, other cultural forms are dictated through an education aimed at the inhibition and repression of sexual desire.

While the boy touches his penis since he is an infant, thus assimilating it into his everyday experience, the girl is repressed each time she touches her genitals. She grows up alienated from a body that she knows nothing of, and it is precisely that lack of knowledge the basis of its attraction.

Innocence (which means ignorance and lack of knowledge) and a pure body are the attributes required from girls before matrimony. Therefore, the start of menstruation in puberty (the perfect erotic state) is lived with shame since it is a sign indicating that the body is now ready for reproduction. This is the state that makes the young woman a virgin. A virgin may relinquish the pleasures of the flesh and remain pure, offering her innocence and fertility to God and society. Dressed in white, facing the altar, she relinquishes her eroticism once again, for sexual union should not imply anything but reproduction.

Thus, there is no sexual initiation rite for women, just a “surrender”. When she surrenders she gives herself to the other and offers him what she has been told is her most precious possession: her virginity. If she “gives herself” out of the sanctioned boundaries, she loses: she suffers the loss of her immaculate purity, her virgin condition, her sanctity and innocence, and is transformed into a potential public woman.

Hence, the public woman, the whore, is the woman who dares to live her eroticism, with or without money involved. In the imaginary, a frequent and accepted social justification for a woman entering into the prostitution business is her need to support her children and take care of them. A woman entering the trade without any moving cause is more of a whore than the ones that have one, because it is then assumed that she “likes” the life in the trade. Delight, joy, desire and pleasure are not permitted in a prostitute’s life. Delight, joy, desire and pleasure are not permitted in any woman’s life.

The social and symbolic order that endorses the construction of a fragmented sexuality has established a *Weltanschauung*, a comprehensive view of human life from which the gender binomial and inequality are endlessly repeated in a *continuum* from one generation of women and men to the next. And in this incessant repetition, they both lose: the woman is separated from pleasure and joy as life dimensions; the man is severed from his ability to join his feelings of love with his eroticism.

Towards a New Conception of Prostitution?

Countless research projects have focused on the motives and causes (usually of personal nature) that drive a woman to engage in prostitution. Only recently attempts have been made to center the discussion on the social construction of sexuality as a universe that signifies and guides the sexual conduct of men and women, and inside of which the phenomenon of prostitution is just another arena.

This vision reflects the influence of a feminist discourse that has stamped the social sciences steering them to consider sexual differences not as a fact of nature, but as a cultural product of primary significance that has meaning in terms of people lives, and that explains and facilitates a reflection on the inequalities derived from this difference.

The analysis of gender inequality derived from such differentiation has driven us to consider the rationalizations and contents included in the Social Representation of

prostitution as cultural events that may be questioned. However, we think we are still far from a new Social Representation of Prostitution. The concept of “Sex Work”, the axis of our research, is a novel label, which in itself speaks of the transformation of the thought of a given period, but restricted for now to experts (theorists, public officials, etc.) and activists (groups of “Sex Workers”, feminists, etc.).

Deep cultural changes are needed in the domain of sexuality and, particularly, in the construction of prostitution as a public subject (through mass media and mass opinion making institutions) so that “Sex Work” may be reconsidered in a dialogic society. Only when the term “Sex Work”, its possible meanings and the way it can be imagined (the creation of an icon so that a change in the figurative nucleus may be initiated) are discussed by society could we talk about a new Social Representation. However, this would entail the modification of other Social Representations as well (such as the ones corresponding to “Womanhood” and “Manhood”). For all the reasons presented above, we think that further research on the social dimension of sexuality, carried out with an engaged, reflective and critical attitude, is needed in order to consider gender inequality and its influence on daily objectifications of the Social Representation of Prostitution.

On this paper we have attempted to characterize sexuality as the arena where inequalities derived from the differentiation and bipolarity of the erotic experience are radicalized, and to show how prostitution is a consequence of such inequality. The fact that society constructs a different sexual and erotic code for each gender not only results in a double standard (non indulgent with women and permissive with men), but also fragments human erotic experience in the plane of the social imaginary. The fragmentation of the erotic experience leads to a cultural clash between genders that is overcome only through the magic of real and symbolic encounters between persons of any gender, where eroticism is free of charge.

¹ The “madrota” (madame) is an adult woman that has prostitution experience and who, usually in a coercive and violent manner, controls an indeterminate number of women. They are also called “leonas”.

² Concept developed by Marcela Lagarde (1990), who states that prostitution is a social, cultural and political space for the forbidden, explicit and fundamentally erotic sexuality, the barren sexuality, the sexuality that does not bring forth any future.

³ Commitment is a promise for the future, a promise of love that requires the will and desire to stay.

⁴ Moscovici, S. (1980). “Llegar a ser hombre” in *Sociedad contra Natura*. México: Editorial Siglo XXI.

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