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| Keywords (separated by '-') | Bangkok - Commodification - Desire - Markets - Marxism - Political economy - Post-Fordism - Sex tourism |

| Footnote Information | |
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Keywords Bangkok · Commodification · Desire · Markets · Marxism · Political economy · Post-Fordism · Sex tourism

Introduction

[I]t is precisely when production no longer seems to offer an identity that it projects itself onto each and every aspect of experience. (Virno 1992, p. 217)

Capitalist modes of accumulation have always been intertwined with modes of intimacy and pleasure (and always in conjunction with local and broader post-colonial histories, state practices or governmentality).¹ One of the favoured examples of the intertwining of political economy and sex is prostitution. As many able analysts have shown, for example, the increased supply of sexual services in

¹ For one sustained analysis of the effects of capitalism on intimate life, see Zaretsky (1986).

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the global south is a product of national and transnational political-economic forces. This essay also explores the political economy of sexuality through the case of commercial sex, but it shifts the focus of much discussion of this trade by rethinking the relation of markets to desire and by investigating the demand-side of a historically specific category of commercial sex through a focus on sexual entertainment associated with the category ‘sex tourism’ in Southeast Asia.

The relation between markets and desire has remained surprisingly unexamined in discussions of sex work, even in those casting a critical eye on commercial sex. Prevailing economic thinking (e.g. neoclassical and neoliberal thought) characterises the abstraction of markets as benign vehicles. Markets are venues for realising wants, needs, and desires. While anyone invested in actual marketing understands that desires can be fostered and created, orthodox economic logic predicates the market on the priority of desire: desire precedes the market. This presumed relation of market to desire also underpins arguments that the ability to purchase sex restrains men from pursuing non-consensual outlets for their desire (i.e. rape). Perhaps surprisingly, much feminist discussion about sex work accepts this conventional economic understanding of the market, that is, that markets exist to realise preexisting demands. This acceptance is as true for writings from the pro-sex worker rights perspective as it is for feminist critiques of prostitution. The premise of preexisting desires realised on an enabling market explains why so little in the vast commentary about sex work truly investigates the male consumers of heterosexual sex work.2

This essay, therefore, turns to the political economy of desire in commercial sex work. Rather than describe the political economic context for the sex industry in Thailand, I instead ask how political economy generates the erotic desire that becomes the demand for those services. Moreover, rather than use prostitution in Thailand (or Russia, or Cuba) as a racial and gendered symptom of global capitalism’s destructive force, I instead explore what global sexual services reveal about the erotic generativity of capitalism, specifically during the post-1970s era associated with globalisation, and focusing on the West.

Many critical scholars have countered the neoclassical portrait of benign markets, arguing that capitalist markets are hardly mere vehicles for desires and documenting the ways that markets shape the very desires they promise to fulfil (and which are presumed to preexist the markets). Social historians examining the rise of consumer commodities in fashion, social life, or wedding rings, offer notable examples of a counter-narrative about markets and desire (Benson 1986; Ingraham 2008; Peiss 1986). Turning to sexuality, this approach argues that political economic conditions generate subjectivity and desire. Capitalist markets encroaching new spheres or

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2 Bernstein (2007) offers a related discussion of political-economic transformations of sex work in a study that addresses both sex workers and customers. Other studies of male customers of heterosexual services are Garrick (2005) and O’Connell Davidson (1998). Far more research on male consumers of commercial sex can be found in the health-related research spawned by HIV/AIDS, but for the most part these studies assume a drive/outlet model of male sexuality (Vance 1991). Interestingly, in studies of women who act as the consumers in erotic relations involving material exchange, female desire for such services is not naturalised, but investigated and seen as contingent. On female consumption of male erotic services, see, e.g., Ebron (1997). One anthology that covers both male and female clients of heterosexual erotic services is Kempadoo (1999).
intensifying commodification within existing spheres do not simply realise or
liberate existing erotic desires but produce new modes of sexuality.

This essay investigates the ways that transnational capitalism generates
‘Western’ men’s desire for the sexualised nightlife of Bangkok. (By Western, I
am speaking here of an identity, but also a conjunction of racial associations,
both social and geopolitical location, which cohere in the eyes of Thais
and tourists, and which gain expression in the sex trade in Thailand.) What
produces the desire to watch women use their vaginas in a performance that includes
pulling out razor blades or projecting objects from that cavity? Such shows are
paradoxical. Many customers do not pronounce them ‘sexy’ yet they are a staple of
the most prominent sexual service zone for first-world foreigners in Thailand.

I read the performances of working women in well-known exotic shows
symptomatically, as indications first, of specific meanings adhering in the desires of
their audience, and second, for what these erotic performances say about the
production of those desires. My reading therefore strategically highlights, from a
range of potential motifs, the economic themes within these performances in order
to reconstruct the construction of one mode of racial and gendered post-Fordist
desire.

**Sexual Economics**

Within the burgeoning critical scholarship on sexuality, investigations of the
political-economic dimensions of sexuality remain relatively limited. Analysts of
sexuality have brought less attention to the ways economic domains construct
sexuality than they have to examining the effects of gender and racial discourses,
state practices, or science and medicine. At the same time, the way much Marxist
scholarship has linked capitalism and sexuality has relied on a limited conception of
sexuality that is usually out of step with queer and feminist theories. Much Marxist
discourse relies on an unexamined trope of ‘seductive’ power to critique
commodities, for example: “commodities borrow their aesthetic language from
human courtship; but then the relationship is reversed and people borrow their
aesthetic expression from the world of the commodity” (Haug 1986, p. 19). In
‘Things to Do with Shopping Centres’, cultural critic Meaghan Morris (1988)
criticises the reliance of critiques of capitalism on a model of seduction, which, she
demonstrates, is gendered.

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3 ‘Western’ is predicated on problematic geopolitical constructs that reify region and identity, typically
in Eurocentric ways (e.g. Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Nonetheless, the category of Western is salient both
to the subjects of this essay, and I argue, to its analysis. The well-known Thai word *farang* glosses as
*Western*. The commercial sex trade for foreigners in Thailand is differentiated according to the
nationality or regional identity of the consumer, with the result that there are zones associated with a
Western clientele, others with East Asian visitors, and different venues for Thai men. Analytically, the
term *Western* offers shorthand for significant global patterns, namely in the distribution of capital,
mobility, and privileges to recognised subjects of Europe and its settler societies (which are racialised as
white but can include individuals of colour). This essay explores how this general context, intersecting
with sex/gender systems of heterosexual masculinity, generates particular modes of sexual consumption
in Thailand.
Others have argued against economic reductionism in studying sexuality. In their introduction to a special issue of *GLQ* on globalisation and sexuality, Elizabeth Povinelli and George Chauncey assert that many analyses of the cultural/subjective dimensions of globalisation (including sexuality) focus on charting economic conditions without exploring subjectivity: “as if an accurate map of the space and time of post-Fordist accumulation could provide an accurate map of the subject and her embodiment and desires” (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999, p. 445). If it is difficult to map the relation between material conditions and subjectivity, it also remains challenging to demonstrate the productivity of discourse, despite the wide influence of Michel Foucault’s approach to sexuality. Ann Stoler notes this difficulty even in the pronounced case of the erotics of colonisation: “The production of new sites and strategies of colonial control engendered by the discourse on sexuality is easier to identify than the production of the ‘incessant’ spirals of pleasure and power that Foucault would suggest it allowed” (Stoler 1995, p. 184). That is, it is easier to show how discourse regulates sexuality than how it generates it.

Resources for a study of sexuality in political-economic terms of course do exist. Notable examples of sexuality as an effect of economics—albeit in different ways—include Rubin’s (1975) classic work on ‘the traffic in women’, D’Emilio’s (1993) study of capitalism and gay identity, and the Marxist critiques of queer theory by Hennessey (2000). Looking outside a self-consciously queer genealogy, one finds studies that attempt to explain how sexual practices transformed in step with, and because of, economic shifts. For example, in ‘Coitus Interruptus and Family Respectability in Catholic Europe: A Sicilian Case Study’, Schneider and Schneider (1995) explain the class-based rise of the embodied strategy of coitus interruptus during a specific moment in Italy. Changing conditions “induced a profound change” in sexual practice without “a clear institutional vehicle or ideological program” (p. 177) and before the professionalisation of science (p. 192). Their study, like D’Emilio’s explanation of gay community, does more than induce sexuality from a map of political-economic structures because they describe the processes that generate modes of sexuality.

The scope and depth of the economic transformations of the past three decades have altered conditions for intimacy, identities, and practices. The shifts I speak of are associated with transformations from first-world economies centred on Fordist principles (mass-production and centralisation, organised capital) to a more integrated global economy characterised by globally dispersed and flexible production, niche marketing, and disorganised capital, which has been called post-Fordism. This period is also characterised by the ascendance of consumer capitalism and by the massive restructuring of national economies promulgated by neoliberal policies. If the post-Fordist period describes a new landscape for social life, as many argue, what is its sexuality? How is a transnational capitalist infrastructure conditioning new modes of sexuality?

The question of how a new economic time creates the sexualities to accompany it has empirical and analytical dimensions. The empirical dimension involves identifying modes of sexuality that have transformed or emerged in the past few years.

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4 A superb exploration of the sex/economic interplay can be found in Bedford and Jakobsen (2009).
For example, the rise of the ‘pink dollar’ of gay tourism has developed a geography of gay-friendly neighbourhoods, cities or even countries, which often advertise themselves to gay markets. An ethnographic laboratory for such changes can be found in the former command economies of China, Vietnam, the USSR and Eastern Europe, and Cuba: after these planned economies were opened to global capitalist markets and privatisation, forms of commodified heterosexuality emerged.\(^5\)

Analysing these new or transformed modes of sexuality requires a conception of relations between markets and (sexual) desires.

As Povinelli and Chauncey (1999) assert, mapping global capitalist conditions does not produce an adequate analysis of emergent sexualities. Marxist philosopher Jason Read proposes that contemporary critical thought is “unable to grasp the transformations of politics, culture, and the economy by new intersections of production and the production of subjectivity” (Read 2003, p. 7). What authors like Povinelli, Chauncey and Read suggest is that new economic realities require reconceptualising the relation between, broadly speaking, economics (material conditions) and culture or subjectivity. Helpful here is a political-economic analysis that views capitalist production as the production of subjectivity. This approach locates subjectivity within the operations of capitalism (and not only as an externality that helps to reproduce capitalism, as women’s domestic labour reproduces the worker). That is, in this current economic moment, subjectivity (knowledge, desire, affect) has become itself productive, not merely co-opted by capitalism (e.g. in marketing urban fashions), but immanent to it (e.g. in immaterial labour) (Read 2003, p. 10). Much of this work, however, neglects discussions of sexuality, gender, or feminist and queer theory (see Quinby 2004).

A prescient example of an approach that does incorporate erotic desire is WF Haug’s book, Critique of Commodity Aesthetics (1986), original published in German in 1971. His work considers “the fate of sensuality” in the expansion of consumer economies. He describes commodity aesthetics as “a complex which springs from the commodity form of the products and which is functionally determined by exchange-value”, and which includes both “material phenomena” and “sensual subject-object relations” (Haug 1986, p. 7). Because Haug’s work on the relation of commodity and desire sees subjectivity “at once as a result and a prerequisite” of capitalist functioning (p. 7), it is useful in examining post-Fordist economies as a condition for sexuality.

Below I offer an illustration of how first-world post-Fordist economies and transnational markets generate sexual desires, by arguing that they generate the demand for sexual services that classical economics presumes to precede the markets that serve them. To map this political economy, I engage Marxist thinking about commodity production, industrial manufacture and post-industrial culture. However, unevenly, I attempt in this essay to consider the interplay of commodity exchange and erotic desire in the late twentieth century moment of sexualities.

\(^5\) Discussions of post-socialist sexuality include media and scholarly attention to women trafficked from the former USSR and Eastern European countries as well as discussion of the re-emergence of sexual services in China or Cuba. I know of no systemic analysis of transnational, post-socialist sexual cultures but case studies of specific contexts are emerging. For one analytical discussion of transformations from socialist conceptions of sexuality to post-socialist modes in China, see e.g., Zhang (2007).
deindustrialisation in the West, a period that only intensified processes Haug identified as underway in 1971.

Pussy Shows

I am sure a girl who thinks about herself so much…could never accept the fact that many Western Men just don’t want a BOSSY, MASCULINE WHITE GIRL who says the sex is free, after you have taken her to dinner 10 times, and obeyed her every command. (Mango Sauce 2004)

The cardinal example of the intersection between global markets and sexuality is the commercial sex that has proliferated in the third world and former second world during the last three decades of global restructuring through ‘sex tourism’ and trafficking in women, which is often called sex trafficking. As I noted above, commercial sex is often assumed by participants and critics alike to be a venue for preformed desires, even where commentators recognise the historical construction of the workforce and infrastructure for prostitution. I examine the production of demand for transnational sexual services in relation to political-economic and cultural transformations, highlighting changing labour and consumer markets in the transition from first-world Fordism to post-Fordism. Commodification, the term we most associate with women in global sex work, is a key motif in these shows, in ways that suggest an anxious reworking of Western masculinity under late twentieth century reformulations of productive and consumer economies.

Go-go bars and exotic sex shows are a well-known part of tourist economies in Thailand. They are cited in guidebooks, blogs and popular fiction about Thailand (e.g. Burnett 2003, pp. 38–39), all of which convey the institutionalisation of these sex shows in Bangkok.

Along with the sex, a variety of, well, vaginal gymnastics, are displayed. Shooting ping pong balls across the room, smoking cigarettes, tricks with fruit and live fish, writing letters and drawing, and stunts with razor blades all top the list of popular sex shows. (Shugart 2002)

Such vaginal performance was also (problematically) popularised through a caricature of a Filipina in the Australian movie, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994).

Go-go bars developed to cater to American GIs during the 1960s–1970s US military involvement in Indochina, and have remained a form of commercial sex particularly oriented to Western male consumption (Wilson 2004). The structure of the go-go bars, like that of massage parlours, is designed for the visitors’ visual and visceral consumption of an ample selection of staff demarcated by numbered tags.

In the go-go bars, women dance at a pole on a stage in rotation: each woman will dance a set of three songs at a pole, moving to the next pole at each musical change.

Thus there is a constant rotation of dancers on the stage while the other women mingle about the bar and, along with the wait staff, encourage customers to order drinks. This arrangement offers entertainment and consumer choice, and also
suggests the commensurability of the workers, who are mostly under 25 and mostly from the northeast of Thailand, the poorest region of the country.

Thailand’s sex industry for foreigners, and the particular form of the sex shows, developed over the 1980s—a time when many Asian economies, including Thailand’s, were undergoing rapid industrialisation accompanied by dramatic rates of economic growth. The shows that developed during this time became a staple of the tourist industry, and are advertised outside the bars by ‘touts’ carrying signs announcing the line-up: ‘pussy pingpongball’, ‘pussysmokecigarettes’, ‘lesbian show’ or ‘sex 69 show’. In the ‘pussy’ shows, workers use their vaginas to perform a variety of improbable actions, like emitting a string of razor blades or shooting a dart. In the sex shows, the pair moves through a variety of positions, in some cases on a motorcycle that is lowered onto the stage with the workers on it. The shows have been described as a kind of a circus (Manderson 1992, p. 17; Van Beek 1988, p. 190); their spectacular quality is the draw.

I have often heard that these shows are not ‘sexy’: watching a woman open a bottle with her vagina does not necessarily strike all foreign viewers as arousing. The rote quality of the sex shows is apparent. Yet their popularity and role in this trade suggests that they carry significant meanings for customers. The desires these shows elicit may differ from the promise of immediate heterosexual gratification. Nonetheless, the shows offer evidence about the desires and subjectivity of their audience, in ways confirmed by customers’ discourses as well.

Go-go bars and the sex shows abound with economic motifs. Often said to ‘commodify women’, these venues actually thematise commodified mass production and service work. Mechanisation, manufacturing, and money are motifs that pervade the world of the go-go bar and the heterosexual relations it occasions (including courtship and romantic relationships) (Wilson 2004). The theatrics of these commercial sites illustrate the meanings of commodities, by highlighting exchange value, the meaning something has on the market, over use value, its worth in actual practice.7

Post-Fordist Desire

‘Pussy shows’ may advertise the effectiveness of women’s bodies, and presumably their sexual availability and skill, and thereby suggest or promise use value. The promise of use value, Haug suggests, is key to the commodity’s exchange value and is not equivalent to the literal presentation of use value. (Razor blade is not immediately equivalent to coitus.) It is the “aesthetic promise of use-value” that motivates a person to buy a commodity (Haug 1986, p. 144). The commodity aesthetic of these performances also offers a performance of commodification.

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6 “The stories you’ve heard about the sex shows are all true and have to be seen to be believed”, a guidebook tells us: “It is not a place for the squeamish or those with feminist leanings” (Van Beek 1988, p. 192).

7 My discussion of exchange value obviously draws on Karl Marx’ famous pages on this subject in Volume I of Capital (Marx 1990). Other economists in a classical tradition discussed the difference between use and exchange value, including Thomas Malthus. See, e.g. Gallagher (2005).
'Pussy shows' parody the manual labour and machinery that comprise an industrialised commodity economy. The women’s vaginal performances present precise manual skill of no clear productive use. Such displays mimic deskill manual labour, like the repetitive pulling of a lever that uses bodily actions and machinery that cannot be applied to other efforts. The 'pussy shows' present women as both machine and operator, with vaginas that both produce and manipulate objects.

Another component of these performances is their props: darts, bottles, ping-pong balls, pens, cigarettes—or in the case of sex shows, the setting: a motorcycle, a phone booth. All of these items are mass-produced commodities. They are not prostheses, at least in the sense of a replacement of a body part. While organic items are sometimes involved—a snake, an egg—in the context of a commercial show surrounded by coloured lights and pop music, even these natural objects can take on a commodity form. The pussy shows present the woman’s mechanised vagina manipulating or producing commodities, and the woman as machine and labourer.

Thus, Bangkok’s sex shows symbolise commodified labour in service and manufacturing. They dramatise, parody, and perhaps even celebrate the value services, goods, or human bodies achieve in the market through the mechanisation of the Asian female body, with images of a sharp and dexterous vagina. Tellingly, these shows proliferated as industrial manufacturing was exported from the industrialised first world to sites like Thailand, in a broad shift that replaced first-world working class male labour with that of third-world women. As Virno argues, "it is precisely when production no longer seems to offer an identity that it projects itself onto each and every aspect of experience" (1996, p. 271).

The bar’s symbolic micro-economy of machines in operation, goods for sale, and exchange relations foregrounds Asian women’s bodies, while obscuring the role of the male customers in commercial sexual exchange. Yet, through a symptomatic reading of these spectacles, we can trace the home cultures and economies of the customers backwards from this third-world feminine embodiment. The commodity spectacles of the bars dramatise the transformations of masculine embodiment in the hyper-commodified, deindustrialising, consumer economies of the West, particularly with respect to the changing economic and political positions of first-world working- and middle-class men that accompanied global restructuring. Sex workers’ bodies symbolise and eroticise these transformations and allow men control over commodity exchange; at the same time, customers’ practices and discourses about this industry betray their anxieties about heterosexual masculine identities in relation to economic restructuring. I am not speaking here about the specific working identities of the male customers of these bars. (From self-depictions in letters to women, business cards in workers’ possession that I saw, and other research, it is clear that the customers range from military of different ranks to skilled labourers in the Middle-East to white-collar workers to government and NGO staff.) Rather, I am speaking about shifts in definitions of masculine subjectivity in relation to production, particularly industrial production.

The theatrical performance of parodied mass production represents the demotion of manufacturing which characterised post-Fordist shifts in the industrial world. In the go-go bar, who controls the machines? Who manages the workers? Whatever his
economic location at home, the male customer secures this command. Go-go bars’ visual and operational structure places customers in managerial positions in control of the economy. Seated around the periphery of the bar, they enjoy management’s panoptic gaze on the workers. They have the ability to choose a woman and to request (although not to force) the terms of the engagement—they can take the woman for a short-term encounter or away for the evening or longer. The satires of industrial production through Asian women’s bodies devalue the conventional working-class man’s factory work and satirise the factory labour of women in the global factory while elevating the position of men’s consumption and management in the global marketplace. The bars allow customers to enjoy the spectacle of exchange value, or to transform exchange value into use value. As guidebooks and customer discourses attest, male clients are quite aware that it is their financial advantage in the global marketplace that gives them this local power: “Money is the only thing that makes such beauty available to the ordinary guy,” writes one customer advocate (Todd 1986, p. 13). In this way, the symbolism of the go-go bar eroticises market exchange, and celebrates first-world men’s (relative) power in the international marketplace.

Commodity Erotics

The pussy shows represent the aesthetisation and eroticisation of commodified labour and the mechanisation of the body. Haug’s work on commodity aesthetics argues that erotics is not merely metaphorical, but is central to commodity exchange itself. Sexuality creates value for modern capitalism “in the form of aesthetic abstraction”: “Here it is not the sexual object which takes on the commodity form, but the tendency of all objects of use in commodity-form to assume a sexual form to some extent” (Haug 1986, p. 55). In this vision, it is not that the sex shows commodify women per se, but that they in fact illustrate capitalist processes more broadly, in which “exchange-value transforms itself into sexuality” (Haug 1986, p. 56). Desire is an integral part of capitalism, because items produced for the market—for their exchange value—are designed to stimulate desire (Haug 1986, p. 55). Rather than accept the desire for sexual services in Thailand as preexisting, this approach suggests examining how conditions for this desire and the subjectivity associated with it developed, while also seeing subjectivity “at once as a result and a prerequisite” of capitalist functioning (Haug 1986, p. 7). This means tracing “the moulding of sensuality” with commodity production and the expansion of exchange value (Haug 1986, p. 7).

The shift from Fordism to post-Fordism (terms which best describe transformations in the industrialised world) is characterised by the extension of capitalist modes of value in two ways: first, their global extension across space, and second, their incorporation of social realms that had been somewhat external to capitalism, such as the general realms of subjectivity, knowledge, desire (Read 2003, p. 149). These tendencies are related, as the incorporation of affect, relations and desires also underwrites capitalism’s geographic expansion. It is not that capitalism did not previously involve ‘external’ social realms, as socialist feminist explorations of
patriarchal and capitalist relations have shown. But now, analysts like Hardt and Negri (2004) argue, subjectivity is subsumed within capitalist production itself: “the production of subjectivity ceases to be a supplement to capitalist production, both necessary and exterior; it migrates into the centre of production itself” (Read 2003, p. 149).

The commodified labour of sex shows not only extends exchange value into social relations, but also eroticises commodity production and exchange value in themselves. It is a mode of commodity aesthetics, dramatising the way commodities elicit desire through the symbolic promise of use value. Literal and aesthetic commodification are bound together in this trade. Customers use wages (the commodification of labour) to actualise desires; in the case of the sex shows, their own commodified labour produces the desire to witness the eroticisation of mechanised mass-manufacture.

Jason Read suggests that capitalism’s incorporation of extra-economic social realms produce subjectivities and desires that conscript people into compliance. In particular, wage labour creates “the interiorised ideal of independence and flexibility” (Read 2003, p. 156). In this view, white males’ historically commodified labour and its transformation within post-Fordist conditions of flexible labour enlists their compliance with capitalist regimes. The freedom their wages bring, and the erotic pleasures it allows them via market relations, subordinates the terms of their own commodification. In the Western consumption of sex performances, and in the geographic and social extension of capital in the post-Fordist era, these economic processes are indivisible from gendered, raced and national processes as well.

Commodity Value

My symptomatic reading of pussy shows argues for a more complex understanding of the place of commodification in the transnational sex trade and also attempts to understand capitalism in relation to the social processes of gender and post-coloniality. First-world male customers’ attitudes towards commodified exchange are not always those of celebratory consumption. Consider this comparison of Patpong, the best-known lane of bars, with Soi Cowboy, from an underground guidebook:

If Patpong is a wringer, a mechanical contraption that lures you in so that it can extract to the last penny every bit it can, the Soi Cowboy is by contrast a relaxed atmosphere where...you can still...get to know people who will really act glad to see you again if you come back. Drinks are cheaper, girls ask less, and one is treated like a person rather than a commodity. (Todd 1986, p. 29)

Some years later during my fieldwork, I heard a customer repeat this sentiment to his buddy: Here in Soi Cowboy, he said, “you don’t feel like a commodity”. It would be easy enough to dismiss customers’ complaints of being commodified as self-serving inversions of the actual material conditions of the bars, but there is other evidence that customers’ anxieties about commodification are manifest in the sex trade and its surroundings.
While women’s commodified labour is the cornerstone of Thailand’s sex entertainments for foreigners, some men use bars to find interactions that seem less commodified and more human than what they feel able to achieve at home. Thai bar workers provide a kind of attentive service that implies authenticity and humanity, in contrast to commercial sex and according to many customers, to the routine gender relations found in the industrialised world. A mainstream guidebook writes of Thai sex workers: “these are not the hardened pros of the Reeperbahn or 42nd street” (Van Beek 1988, p. 190). Through their poverty, attentive service and racial and cultural difference, Thai sex workers offer the possibility of other, non-market narratives, ranging from pre-capitalist rescue fantasies to contemporary images of dating movie stars.

At times, customers form longer relations with a worker, ranging from a few nights to on-going romantic courtship. When the men leave the country, they often seek an epistolary relationship. These relationships enable the men to construct identities acceptable to themselves and to avoid seeing themselves as johns, tricks, or ‘punters’ (Garrick 2005; O’Connell Davidson 1998). But typically, when relations shift from commercial contract to romance, money and exchange become problematic. One English man wrote to his girlfriend, whom he had met in a bar:

I don’t know if you love me. Many times I think you only want me for my money. I remember you say to me 100 times ‘Buy me television.’ Even when you came with me to the airport you said to me many times ‘give me money.’

(Walker and Ehrlich 1992, p. 45)

Among these men’s expressions, however, inchoate, are criticisms of excessive market capitalism, of rising greed and materialism, as market relations increasingly supplant other social interactions; of the commensurability between people and commodities; and of the intensified competition they experience not just with first-world white men, but also with white women and people of colour, and with workers in other regions of the world. Anxieties about contractual relations and mass production take gendered, racial and corporeal forms. In customer discourse, western (particularly white) women embody the problems of capitalist market society, from their material demands to their large bodies and irritating verbosity. In the quotation above (the tone of which is typical), Kevin explains Western men’s lack of desire for “bossy, masculine white girls”. Claw, the pseudonym of a poster on a British resident of Thailand’s blog, notes that Western gender relations transformed after the 1950s: “Face it, Western Women have lost any semblance of femininity [sic]. They had it together, about 50 years ago” (Mango Sauce 2004). His chronology corroborates my emphasis on economic transformations.

It would be easy to quote at length from texts by Western men describing their preference for Thai women: bald misogyny, proud sexism and white supremacy are routine in these discourses. The adjective most often used to describe white women is ‘fat’.⁸ (To be fair, posters are often as vitriolic with each other—often through

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⁸ It is possible to read the emphasis on fatness in these critiques of white women through an economic lens as well. Fatness, particularly in women, indexes poverty or lower class status. Susan Bordo, for example, analyzes the emergence of the fit, hard body in the 1980s in relation to shifts in career patterns.
homophobic insults—as they are about white women). Putting aside the blatant misogyny and racial/national discourse of these websites, I am interested in considering the place of economics in their subjectivities and desires.

When it comes to snaring a man, Thai girls leave their western sisters at the starting gate. It’s not just their cheeky charm and good looks. The killer punch is how they make a man feel valued…. In other words, they show him that they value him warts and all (even if they don’t). They may only be after his money but, if a guy is happy, he probably doesn’t care. (Mango Sauce 2003)

One economic theme in this discourse is value. Threading through male consumers of Thailand’s erotic services is rage at white women’s perceived unfair advantage: that is, rage at what is seen as an unjust market advantage in sex, romance and intimacy. Some quite explicitly taunt white women, asserting that white women in Thailand do not garner the attentions they receive in the West, and describing Thailand effectively as a market in which white men are more competitive than white women.

In this discourse, qualities of commodity capitalism are conveyed through women’s racialised bodies. Excesses of western capitalism (greed, materialism) are symbolised by white women. At the same time that she symbolises market relations, the Thai sex worker also represents a kind of human authenticity lost through industrial and post-industrial relations in the first world but obtainable through a global market.

The racialised femininity and commercial intimacies of the bars dramatise the contradictory status of commodity exchange for customers from the downsizing first world. Western customers are drawn to Thailand for the abundance and even spectacle of commoditised sexuality, which constitutes their power in terms of class, race and gender. But when the extremes of commercial sex have customers complaining of feeling like commodities, we can see their ambivalence about the commodification of their desires and identities. Paradoxically, Western customers resist the downsizing dehumanisation of the global economy through a Western-friendly, commercialised heterosexuality that has been exported around the world. My reading of the exotic dancing suggests that troubling aspects of the restructuring global economy are thematised erotically, through erotic markets.

**Sex on Economics**

The post-Fordist period, from the 1970s onward, generated desire for eroticised mechanisation in the bodies of Asian women. Yet the sex industry for foreigners in Thailand has not been static, but has transformed with changing international and
domestic conditions. Domestically, for example, the trade reflected the impact of numerous phenomena: the HIV/AIDS epidemic and sexual health programs; legal changes (particularly bans on nudity and stipulated closing hours); the surge of internet-based pornography and amateur porn (in which male travelers to Bangkok videotape and distribute their sexual encounters); and the 1997 Asian economic crisis. Since the 1980s, more foreign women have come to Thailand, changing what was a dramatically skewed gender demographic of visitors of the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, with the rise of ‘medical tourism’ since 2000, Thai government and business have recruited medical consumers, and the number of foreign women visiting Thailand has increased (Wilson forthcoming). These changes have converged with transnational trends, such as the US-led response to 9/11 through the ‘war on terror’.

With the consolidation of the tourist industry since the 1980s, Bangkok’s sex shows have become institutionalised as a tourist attraction, an element of the city’s ‘nightlife’. In this process, sex shows are described as a feature of Thailand. They are depicted as a kind of national attraction—part of the scenery—and for some, as an example of national comparative advantage. (Western male discourse is rife with nationally-based comparisons of sexual services as well as a general East–West contrast.) These performances are inscribed as a feature of Thailand’s urban culture that visitors then partake of rather than as a product of foreigners’ desires.

This projected attribution resonates with the too frequent focus on sex workers in discussions of prostitution that leave the male demand for sexual services unexamined, and hence, naturalised. To counter this tendency, I insist on reading the sex shows in relation to the desires of customers and to understand those desires as produced. These odd performances suggest an erotic subjectivity of consumers that are an effect of the cultural/economic shifts of post-Fordism. Theories of capitalist subjectivity help us see this desire not only as an effect, reducible to capitalism, but to consider it as integrated within processes of production. Feminist and queer theories help situate a more specific gendered/sexual subjectivity within capitalist accumulation, remedying the limitations of asexual and gender-neutral political-economic theories of ‘desire’ in global capitalist markets.

In a period of displacement of white male labour by third-world female labour, the eroticisation of mass production is a symptom of the formation of heterosexual masculine subjectivity within globalising capital. The sex-show performance subsumes (parodied) mass production, wage relations and mechanisation to male erotic pleasure. Through a transnational market, racial sex/gender embodiment may resist, or at least mock, the subsumption of (first-world, male) humanity within capitalism.

My reading of these performances considers not only the erotic content of these sex markets—their evident racial and gendered iconography—but also the economic content: how the form and logic of markets generate the erotic life of global capitalism. Pussy shows point to the ways that the changing form and operations of labour markets in the post-industrial world produce the desires and subjectivities that customers imagine they are freely realising through global markets.
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