

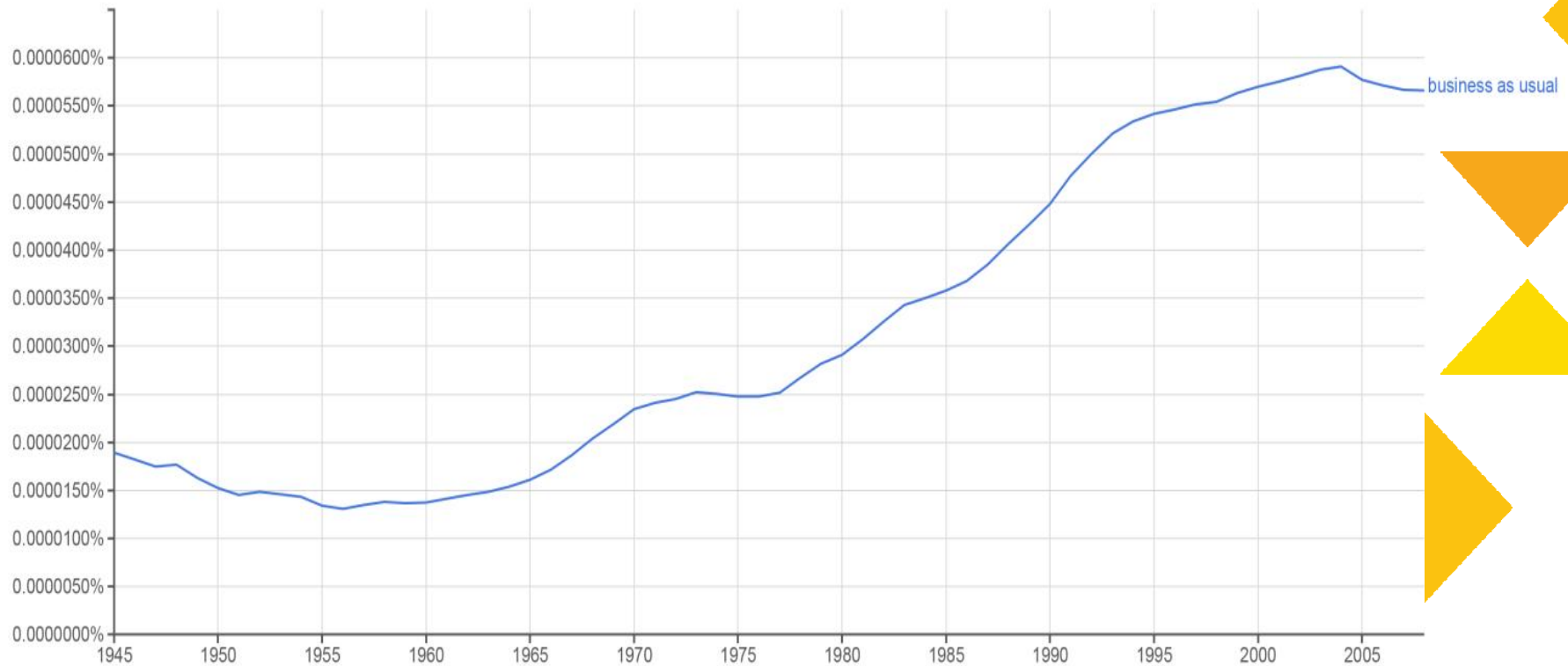
'Business as Usual'
Sex Work and
Limitless
Commercialization

Suvi Ronkainen, University of Vaasa

- “Several European countries have introduced regularization of prostitution in the last decade so, as, among other things, to ensure the rights of women and men in prostitution as workers. This can be seen as a pragmatic approach and as a way to implement harm-reduction, but it is also necessary to view this in light of an explicit ideological stance, where the transaction in prostitution is framed as work. “ (Skilbrei & Holmström 2013, 138)



(1) Business as Usual



- The leading question for my exploration is simple: if selling sex is considered as work – like several feminist oriented researchers and activists are claiming, how seriously it is analyzed and evaluated as a work demanding certain kind of qualifications, real employment opportunity.
- The role of the problematic features of the prostitution?
- Embodiment



Structure of the paper

- Economism: the union of neoliberalism and neo-classical economic theory
- Feminist research on prostitution: focus on prostitution policies, sexuality and stigma, descriptions on sex work
- Sex work as work as usual? Where is economy?
- What can be radical sexual politics in the time of market fundamentalism?



(1) Economism, market fundamentalism

- Economism as a concept is used in the ethics of international development
- Somers (2008): Market fundamentalism
- Somers (2008) distinguishes three different ways how the economism operates: as a descriptive narrative, as a well-funded social movement supporting and promoting that narrative, and as a set of techniques that proposes specific policy solutions for specific problems.



(1) Having a market economy vs. being a market society

- A market society is a way of life in which market value seep into every aspect of human endeavor. It's a place where social relations are made over in the image of market. The economy is not anymore part of the society: it is the society. (Sandels 2008).



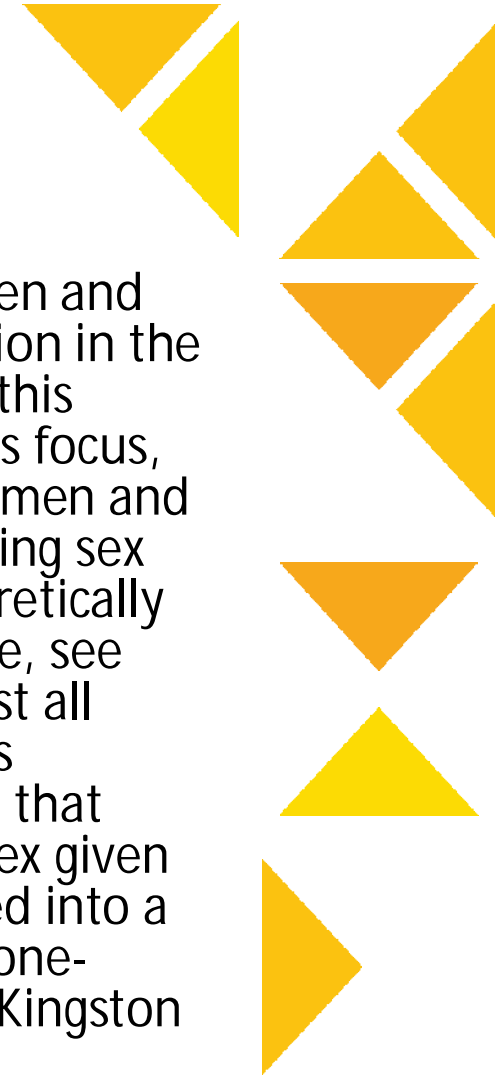
(2) Feminist debates

- “The question how to conceptualise, and accordingly how to regulate prostitution has long been a focus of attention. Diverse agendas about gender equality, the regulation of sexuality, personal self-determination, state protectionism, public nuisance and socio-economic disparity have come together in debates on prostitution policy – often fusing and/or clashing with one another in complex, unpredictable and controversial ways. “
(Munro & Giusta 2008, 1)



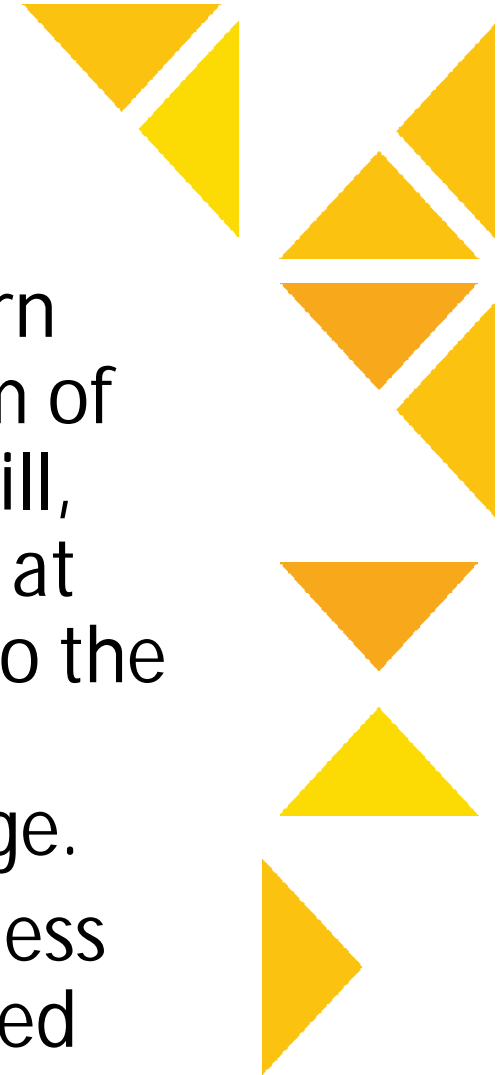
(2) Radical/liberal, Dominance/queer

- “Although we acknowledge there are those men, women and children who do not exercise choice in their participation in the sex industry, due to trafficking, exploitation or abuse, this collection focuses exclusively on ‘sex as work’. Given this focus, the use of the term ‘sex work’ pays appreciation to the men and women who identify themselves as ‘sex workers’. Viewing sex as a form of work has led to heated debates, both theoretically and politically. Put crudely, radical feminists for example, see prostitution, in all its forms, as a form of violence against all women as it reduces women to sexual objects for men’s pleasure. Liberal feminists on the other hand recognize that some men and women make a rational choice to sell sex given their circumstances and that rather than being socialized into a subordinate position; they recognize that power is not one-dimensional and that not all sex workers are women.” (Kingston & Sanders 2010, 3)



3) As a work: economy

- Economists Lena Edlund & Evelyn Korn (2002) describe prostitution as a form of employment very briefly: it is low-skill, labor intensive, female and well paid at least when the income is compared to the full-time earnings in professions with comparable skill requirements and age.
- As a business it is a multibillion business that is more common in less developed countries. (Edlund & Korn 2002)



Short career, high life-time career costs

- “The price initially increases with age, then starts to decrease above a certain age, 20,1 years to be precise.” (Moffatt & Peters 2004, 682).
- “The analysis shows that earnings from prostitution hardly constitute invested funds for the future, particularly when one considers the associated costs of such expenditures on illicit drugs, allocations to third parties and the significant lifetime productivity losses of formal labor market earnings. ” (DeRiviere 2006, 397)



(3) informal work without employment contracts

- Informal, unrecognized work
- Self-employment or 'independent contractors', new labour ?
- Entrepreneurship – glorification of the 'independent worker'
- No employment contracts, neither long-time career opportunities and security.



(3) But who needs it since...

- “Sex workers appreciate the autonomy, the chance to meet and interact with new and interesting people, the opportunity to explore their sexuality, and the sense of accomplishment related doing a job well. Finally, as it does for other job sites, the work can (for street-based workers or those who labour in and establishment) provide social contacts, camaraderie, and friendship.” (Bruckert & Parent 2013, 63)



(3) Working conditions or the work itself?

- Danger of violence
- Drug and abuse problems
- Under-aged recruitment
- Trafficking and recruitment from the vulnerable group
- Low level of education, formal skills and trade union activity
- Exit? Life after the sex work
- Client's images of the 'service provider'



- “Imagine prostitution successfully stripped of its stigma. Except perhaps in the case of the most privileged dominatrixes, what actually remains is menial, repetitive, boring, ‘caring’ work, often hazardous, often involving intimate contact with dirty and/or foul-breathed customers, and almost invariably calling for intensive and depleting emotional labour. Who, faced with equally well-paid alternatives would choose this.” (O’Connel 1998, 199)



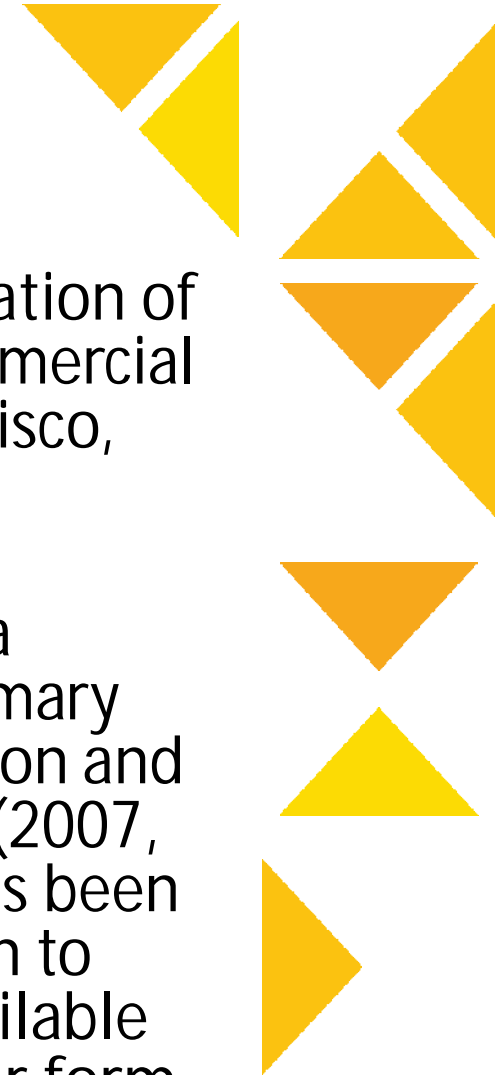
(3) Demanding work

- Survival demands several qualifications
- How to get these qualifications? Who invests in the building of them?
- The ability to numb or freeze the connections between mind, body and self, to make a distinction between the service producing 'me' and between the me in the body is psychologically extremely demanding, and especially demanding in such a way that it does not affect to emotional structure of the person (Tyler 2012)



Two pictures Bernstein (2007) & Dewey (2008)

- Elizabeth Bernstein (2007): growing participation of middle-class, white professionals in the commercial sex sector in post-industrial cities (San Francisco, Amsterdam, Stockholm).
- the 'new postindustrial paradigm of sexual commerce'. Bernstein points to the rise of a recreational sexual ethic that 'derives its primary meanings from the depth of physical sensation and from emotionally bounded erotic exchange (2007, 6). When traditionally relational sexuality has been positioned explicitly in ideological opposition to market activity, recreational sexuality is available for sale and purchase as readily as any other form of commercially packaged leisure activity (2007, 7)



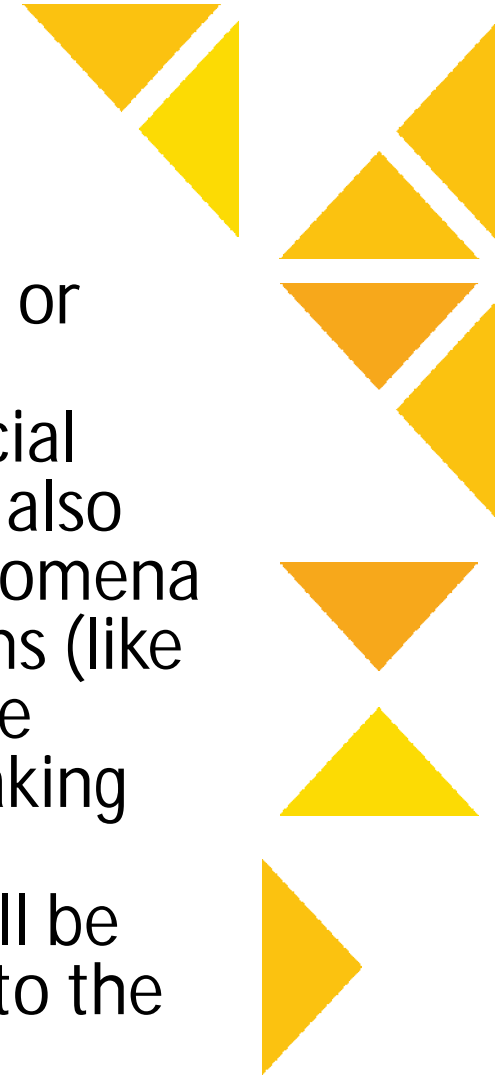
Dewey (2008)

- Topless and nude dancing venues are theoretically the perfect hyper capitalist model, featuring nonexistent labor costs, cash income (much of it untaxed), no unions, and a constant supply of workers preconditioned to follow the rules without complaint. ... Income is unreliable, social stigma pervasive, clients sometimes dangerous or threatening, and dancing offers absolutely no illusions of long-term support. (Dewey 2008)



Conclusion

- In this global context, where economism or market fundamentalism has gotten the dominant position in the political and social discussion, and it is used more and more also either to explain the non-economic phenomena or to give a solution to the social problems (like who should take care of the old folk), the radical ideas of 'sex as work' like the breaking the stigma of prostitutes and the deconstruction of the heterosexuality, will be interpreted only as one more argument to the limitless commodification.



- “When the state no longer carries out its role of constraining capitalism, people are left fully exposed to the unmediated market. With no meaningful participation and only the thinnest of connections to civil and legal rights, they are, in effect, left stateless and rightless. The state, however, has not shrunk away; it has been transformed into an instrument of market-driven governance.” (Somers, 2008, 133)

