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SEXUAL POLITICS FROM BARNARD TO LAS VEGAS

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The Barnard Conference was as much about the struggle to create a feminist identity as it was about scholarly inquiry. As such, the conflicts that emerged became at once very personal and very political. Living in Las Vegas and doing research on its sex industry over the past twenty years has brought these political struggles home to me in some very personal ways. In this essay I argue that the us vs. them divide that has opened especially around sexual commerce was then and is now tangled in and fueled by political battles far removed from feminism. While not being naïve about how hard this is, we have to start disentangling political battles from scholarship. Those of us interested in good research from both sides must start talking to each other.

If I say where I became a feminist it would have to be in that iconic city of commodified sex, Las Vegas. As such, the conflicts that came out of the Barnard Conference in 1982 have become a core part of my lived feminist academic experience over the past 20 years. To live and do sociology in a place where sex, vice, and women are run up on a flag and waved like the Star Spangled Banner so a few people can make lots of money is disconcerting. Yet there is something oddly daring about this sexual openness: it dares traditional sexual norms as much as bourgeois notions of women's proper place. Women are sexual objects. But here, women are also sexual subjects. These contradictions have forced me to learn from Las Vegas—its late capitalist, globalized tourist economy and post-modern culture play with multiple meanings of gender and sexuality with varying consequences for women. But over the years it has felt nearly impossible to take this stance on sexuality and Las Vegas within feminism. I am always forced into representing this sexual openness as *either* pleasure or

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danger for women. And these stances are not just academic; they are very, very personal.

Las Vegas has been a great place to do feminist research on sexuality. For the last 15 years as a professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, I have been doing research on sexual commerce in and around Las Vegas, particularly the place where I see these contradictions played out so clearly, Nevada's legal brothel prostitution.

It is an understatement to say that Nevada's legal brothels are contradictory places for women. The most vulnerable and the most powerful women both fully choose and only sort of choose to come here to work. They work in an environment on the one hand as exploitative as any Walmart, yet these places pay more than any service worker ever dreamed. Their job, unlike for other prostitutes, is legal, yet they still endure a stigma worse than any welfare mother. Brothels are undeniably safer than working the streets. Brothels also undeniably demand a heavily gender-scripted heterosexual performance (Brents & Hausbeck, 2001, 2005, 2007). Women complain about drunk men who can be rude, but more often talk about sweetheart customers who often just want companionship. The biggest complaint among the women we interviewed was boredom in the slow hours, and not being able to write what they did for work on a job application despite the fact that what they do is legal.

It is an understatement to say Las Vegas is a contradictory place for women. My next door neighbor of many years was a cocktail waitress at a major casino. Every morning we'd wave as we got into our cars, I in my Birkenstocks and backpack, playing down my sexuality to profit in my job as a university professor, she in her high heels, low-cut, tight red top, short skirt, and long permed hair playing up her sexuality to profit in her job. But she owned her house; it was a union job. And her biggest complaint about her job (back in 1990) was not being a sexual object or dealing with inappropriate men; it was the cigarette smoke.

Sure, living here means being surrounded by billboard after billboard of the same old objectified symbol of the sexually available big-breasted woman. The economy of our city is, as many other global resort cities are, built on the sexualized labor of women. Yet I bristled when Bob Herbert wrote in his *New York Times* column on September 4, 2007, that no-where are women treated worse than Las Vegas (Herbert, 2007a). He wrote a three-part series based on a report that Las Vegas' sex industry encourages the violence and degradation of all women in the city. This is just not true. The Institute for Women's Policy Research ranks Nevada as about average in economic progress for women (Hartmann, Sorokina, & Williams, 2006). The rates of violence against women are typical of other large, urban areas. However, Nevada also ranks ninth nationally for women holding elected office and third nationally for women living

above the poverty line (Caiazza, Shaw, & Werschkul, 2004). I am so tired of outsiders making Las Vegas the scapegoat for all our cultural anxieties about women and sex.

As consumer thirst for lifestyle, adventure, and titillation expands, sex as a marketing device spills into everything from shopping centers to restaurants. Sex is everywhere. It drives the growth of consumer culture (Hawkes, 1996; McNair, 1996). Las Vegas is more open about its vice. But I'd say the world is becoming more like Las Vegas, or maybe Las Vegas is becoming more like the world. This consumer market is changing the way we relate to each other and driving us to commodify all sorts of intimacies (Bauman, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 1997; Zelizer, 2005). Service workers increasingly sell emotions, performances, an entire range of more or less sexualized services (Adkins, 2002; Hochschild, 1983). So what is so different about being more open about selling sex?

Sex matters culturally and economically now more than ever. It is supposed to be the most authentic of human expressions, yet it has become a most public phenomena. Sex matters more to us now because the private, personal intimate nature of sex exists in an uneasy union with the public prominence of sex.

So what does that mean for feminism? The Barnard Conference made crystal clear that this debate over sex as a commodity—a commodity written largely through women's bodies—is not just an academic debate, but a very personal one. It is a debate that can't be separated from very deep and personal cultural anxieties about sex.

In the early 1990s, fresh out of graduate school with little lived experience in feminist activism or academia, I naively began my career at UNLV teaching students in my classes a version of feminism that had both a strong critique of patriarchy and its sexual danger for women, and a feminist celebration of sexual pleasure. I frequently taught gender studies classes filled with students who either worked in the sex industry, knew someone who did, or who were interested in writing about it. I recall one woman who didn't believe feminism was anything more than a vicious political correctness. As an erotic dancer, she had been taunted by anti-porn feminists at some rally in New York. Surely, they weren't feminists, I countered. What feminist would attack sisters? But the attack had been very personal to her. Indeed, as I came to discover, the feminist debate over sex was very personal to most sex workers.

On January 12, 1997, sociologist Kate Hausbeck and I found ourselves in the back of an event called Legends of Erotica at Showgirl's video, a local adult video store and nude dancer venue in Las Vegas. The event, somehow connected to the larger adult video conference in town, which

at that time was still part of the huge Consumer Electronics Show, was inducting adult film stars into a hall of fame. Marilyn Chambers, star of *Behind the Green Door*, 1972, the first widely released adult movie, stood at the front of the auditorium, wearing very little (to my middle-class mid-western eyes), accepting her honors as a room full of men cheered and snapped photos. A local attorney pulled us to the back of the room to meet two women excited to talk to the women professors. One had just come off stage, dressed like the other porn stars; the other, seemingly out of place, dressed more like me. This was Nina Hartley and Bobby Lilly.¹ And there, as a room full of porn-watching men objectified their favorite porn stars, who had started to disrobe on stage, we listened as Nina and Bobby, full participants in all this and also excited to meet comrades in the feminist struggle, told us about doing feminism as sex workers.

The stories they told were of activism inspired by living in Berkeley post 1960s, and ignited by the 1986 Meese Commission report and the conservative rights' attack on pornography. But their flame was most strongly fueled by other feminists, especially the New York-based Women Against Pornography who assisted the Meese Commission and celebrated their findings. Hartley spoke of defending the X-rated film industry on talk shows and how she was attacked by radical feminists. Lilly talked of slowly being disenfranchised as she tried to make the local chapter of the National Organization for Women pay attention to these issues before forming her own anti-censorship organization. While the adult industry was relatively young and misogynist men were the majority of those working in the industry, they argued that it was not inherently bad work for women. The men behind the camera were increasingly respectful of women, and women like Candida Royalle were beginning to create feminist pornography. Nina and others in the industry were organizing to advise and protect young women in the adult film business. Sex wasn't the problem, they contended; it was labor issues and a patriarchal attitude of not taking women seriously. Their activism certainly seemed feminist to me. But for them, too, the battle was a personal one, a battle waged as much against other feminists as against the conservative right.

I discovered it was personal in academia as well. A colleague had warned us that feminist audiences would not be automatically receptive as we prepared to present our first papers on the Las Vegas' sex industry. I was confused. Then I saw what she was talking about. In April 1996 at the International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, in Adelaide, Australia I was shocked as I watched an audience member interrupt and verbally attack a presenter who was doing a kind of performance piece on the history of the sacred whore. The audience member accused her of being complicit in a system of patriarchal violence and charged her with the rape of all women.

I was dumbfounded. The speaker was obviously a feminist, speaking of women's power and giving voice to women-centered stories all too often not told. The audience member was right in questioning what could be seen by some as false consciousness in a pervasive patriarchal system. In fact, both brought up valid feminist and theoretical points. But the venom in the audience member's voice took me aback. Why was this attack so personal, I wondered?

In many ways, you can't escape being pulled into the fray. Over the next 10 years, I saw more and more academic feminists struggling, like myself, to move beyond the now oft-told bifurcated debates about the sex industry. Scholars look more and more at changing contexts in which myriad and diverse forms of gender and sexuality intersect in the marketplace. But we keep getting pulled back to one or the other "side." It has become clear to me that pro-sex or anti-sex feminism is a subject position, a unifying narrative defining an "us" vs. "them." The debate is clearly not just academic; it is an identity. It is hard to escape it.

It is not just personal, it is also very political. The pro-sex vs. anti-porn subject positions are exacerbated by politicized battles over abortion, same-sex marriage, and sex trafficking. For years, feminists internationally have struggled with the problems of forced migration and slavery, working to separate consensual from non-consensual sex, tightening laws, and establishing services to protect those who were forced to work. Now however, the Bush Administration has used the outrage against labor trafficking to gain political points on immigration and franchise religious supporters by mobilizing moral outrage around sex. Sex trafficking has become a moral crusade (Chapkis, 2003; Weitzer, 2007; Agustín 2007). Government monies to fight sex trafficking go only to agencies or researchers who declare their opposition to legal, state-sponsored, or decriminalized prostitution. As a result, they have cut funds to many AIDS programs and harm reduction programs that refuse to sign the declaration, including those who hand out condoms, as this is defined as supporting prostitution. A small number of anti-trafficking activist researchers have received grants to study trafficking, yet recently a GAO report questioned the quality of the research produced under these guidelines (Weitzer, 2007, p. 460). This is, of course, making the sex problem even more personal for feminists, and driving a further wedge between "us" and "them."

In September 2007, several colleagues forwarded to me a press release announcing a 300-page study titled "Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada, Making the Connections," written by Melissa Farley (2007), one of the key academic/activist spokespersons for the new anti-prostitution movement. The study captured international media attention, thanks to, among other things, Bob Herbert's three columns in the *New York Times*

(Herbert, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). The study was purported to be conclusive evidence that Nevada's legal prostitution promotes exploitation, abuse, violence, and trafficking.

I have to admit I read the study from an "us vs. them" perspective. But what I read in the book surprised me. Given the extensive press coverage of her conclusions, the report offered no empirical or even verifiable evidence to support the existence of trafficked prostitutes or human rights violations in Nevada brothels. When the 45 brothel prostitutes she interviewed in Nevada failed to reveal being victimized or trafficked she wrote, "I knew they would minimize how bad it was." The women were not honest, she said, because they "ignore bad things or they pretended that unpleasantness will go away, or they call the degrading abuse of prostitution by another name that sounds better" or because managers listened in on interviews (Farley, 2007, p. 22).

So when her own data failed to generate the information she wanted, she relied on rhetoric, took quotes out of context from secondary sources, drew on anecdotal evidence from unnamed "former legal prostitutes, and used quotes from research in other countries and simply said, "the situation is the same in Nevada." After carefully reading her footnotes in the chapter on brothels, I found that she drew from 10 studies based on original research in Nevada. Of these, seven concluded their research with qualified support for legalized brothels in a clear contradiction to how she cited these studies in her report.

In addition, some of her facts were just plain wrong. Throughout the book she characterized brothels this way, "Surrounded by barbed wire and high fences, Nevada's legal brothels are little prisons in doublewide trailers" (Farley, 2007, p. 9). While most women are restricted to residing at the brothel, most can leave fairly easily to run errands, and women in a number of brothels return home after their shift. I have recently visited five of the largest brothels in the state that have no fencing at all around them, and of the 20 or more I've seen I honestly can't recall seeing any with barbed wire like that. The Chicken Ranch has a four-foot white picket fence, making more like a suburban home than a sexual prison. Moreover, the picture of the fence on the cover of Melissa Farley's book shows the barbed wire leaning out, which seems to protect people from getting in rather than women getting out.

In spite of all this, the conclusions have been taken up wholeheartedly by some in the media without question. As the conclusions from the study were disseminated to the Las Vegas' Metropolitan Police Department's Anti-Trafficking League Against Slavery, a colleague of mine who was on the task force suggested that the group also distribute, via e-mail, a peer-reviewed article Kate Hausbeck and I had recently published on the brothels in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. Our research found legal

prostitution to be far safer than illegal prostitution. Farley's report had cited the article, but only quoted the one incidence of violence we had described. She characterized our research as saying we "described violence in the brothels" (p. 25) and failed to mention that our conclusions were different than hers. The chair of the task force refused to distribute the article. Her e-mail said she was not at liberty to forward the work because she certified that she would not "promote, support or advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution," as part of their \$370,000 Justice Department grant (Goldman, 2007). Our article was dismissed without even being read because its conclusions were on the wrong side of a very politicized issue.

The combination of Bob Herbert's *New York Times* articles and Farley's public relations efforts generated a great deal of media attention in Las Vegas. And, of course, the attention and support we did get was because we are both locals and seen as supporters of the sex industry. The outrage against Farley was because she was an outsider, one of those "feminists." Of course, more complex issues concerning class, race, gender inequality, or context fell on deaf ears. And at the same time the social workers, labor rights advocates, and others I heard from were frustrated that the issue was so politicized that no useful information came of it.

In January of this year I went to the Adult Entertainment Expo, the biggest porn convention in the country. While there, I attended a cocktail party to celebrate the debut of a sex toy store's new vibrator. At this party, within 45 minutes and 6 feet of each other, I engaged in two separate and equally feminist, equally passionate conversations. One was with Nina Hartley and the other with Gail Dines, Professor of Sociology at Wheelock College and organizer of the anti-pornography conference, *Pornography and Pop Culture: Reframing Theory, Re-Thinking Activism* in March of 2007. I listened as each argued passionately, intelligently, both as feminists, about pornography and the women who worked in it. I really did joyously engage in and learn from both conversations. But both were so distrustful and bitter about the "other side," I doubt they would have come near each other had they been aware of each others' presence. I also doubt that either would have taken time to engage me had they heard I had been talking with the other.

So is the legacy of the Barnard Conference an inevitable conflation of feminist identity and intellectual debate when it comes to sex? Why, after 25 years, can we not move beyond such a personalized divide?

I'll tell you why. The feminist movement cannot be independent from other political and social forces. The culture wars that rack the United States today stem from a whole set of cultural anxieties about class, race, and sexuality. The anti-porn feminism that was part of the Barnard Conference was overlaid/intertwined/overshadowed by the Meese

Commission's anti-porn political agenda which was overlaid/intertwined/overshadowed with the Reagan era politics of mobilizing the conservative religious right. The anti-trafficking feminism of today is overlaid/intertwined/overshadowed by immigration politics and by the politics of mobilizing the Christian Right which is based on keeping the culture wars alive.

Anti-trafficking feminist activists Phyllis Chesler and Donna Hughes recognize their role in larger political debates very clearly in a piece they wrote for *The Washington Post*,

The sexual revolution benefited women in some ways, but it also fueled sexual liberation, which has resulted in the increasing normalization of prostitution. Feminists have been hampered in their response to this threat because there are divisions within feminism about the nature of prostitution . . . Feminists are right to support reproductive rights and sexual autonomy for women, but they should stop demonizing the conservative and faith-based groups that could be better allies on some issues than the liberal left has been . . . Saving lives and defending freedom are more important than loyalty to an outdated and too-limited feminist sisterhood. . . . Twenty-first century feminists need to become a force for literate, civil democracies. They must oppose dictatorships and totalitarian movements that would crush the liberty and rights of people, especially women and girls. They would be wise to abandon multicultural relativism and instead uphold a universal standard of human rights. (Chesler & Hughes, 2004)

They acknowledge that the "outdated and too-limited feminist sisterhood" fails to acknowledge their part in larger political debates. This article firmly reaches out a hand not only to the religious right, but to the foreign policy approaches of the Bush Administration. In fact, the article starts out equating feminism with an attack on Islamic Fundamentalism saying,

Many feminists are out of touch with the realities of the war that has been declared against the secular, Judeo-Christian, modern West. They are still romanticizing and cheering for Third World anti-colonialist movements, without a realistic view of what will happen to the global status of women if the islamists win. (Chesler & Hughes, 2004)

But the other "side" is not immune from politics either. Pro sex feminism today is overlaid/intertwined/overshadowed by the meteoric rise of an economically powerful, increasingly concentrated, quintessentially

capitalist sex industry, and by the class, race, and gender politics of politically mobilizing an urbane, aspiring middle and upper class and their free-market morality where personal choice in consumption is elevated to a moral right. The strange bedfellows problem cuts both ways.

The Barnard Conference made clear that sex is political. Feminist academics had not then and still haven't resolved, as Gail Hawkes calls it, the specialness of sex. Still feared, yet still celebrated, perhaps it is impossible to study it "objectively." Perhaps wading through 500 years of ideological muck on good sex/bad sex to see what sex is today, is it asking too much of us?

The Barnard Conference laid bare that feminism is politics. Feminism lives and dies off of passionately held beliefs and the construction of bitter enemies. There has always been an uneasy alliance between feminism as politics and feminism as intellectual pursuit. Feminism thus will always be personal. But it has become so personal of late because of political battles far outside of feminism.

Las Vegas has shown me that we cannot be naïve about how tangled this feminist debate is with larger social, political, and economic battles. The sex wars are political. Politics needs rhetoric uncluttered with academic complexity. Politics is not gentle. Political battles require compromises. Politics is about power. Politics needs bitter enemies as well as strange bedfellows. In this world, at a very practical level, some of us will be activists, some researchers, and some will try and be both. Let's recognize that it will be personal.

But Las Vegas has taught me that understanding gender, sex, and markets is complex. We need good empirical research to unpack the specialness of sex. The feminist movement must generate both activism and research. Let us not lose sight of research. Wading through the ideological muck requires dialogue. Barnard should teach us, as it is increasingly convincing me, that those of us interested in good research, and not just politics, should cross the lines and talk to each other. We need peer review, not just from sympathetic researchers, but from those interested in good research from all "sides." That is the only way past the blinders politics inevitably places on us.

NOTE

1. Bobby Lilly was a founding member of San Franciscans Against Censorship Together (SF-ACT), which later became Californians Against Censorship Together (CAL-ACT), and a member of the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force. Nina Hartley has been an adult film star since 1982 appearing in more than 400 films, including the 1997 film *Boogie Nights*. She has been an outspoken advocate of sex-positive feminism. Hartley and Lilly were lovers at the time.

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