
Selling sex and in-between spaces in historical perspective

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Résumé

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Some human activities, especially when they balance on the limits of what is allowed, in this case prostitution or sex work, have a strong link with urban in-between spaces. They make use of them, evolve around them and, in certain cases, influence their development. In this presentation, I will develop the argument that subaltern urban actors, such as sex workers, were and are often pioneers when it comes to the ‘exploitation’ of existing and new in-between spaces.

In-between spaces refer to both ‘permanent’ spaces and spaces that only become ‘in-between’ in certain contexts, and sometimes only in a metaphorical sense: somewhere between the public/private, legal/illegal, industrious/deserted, popular/bourgeois, moral/immoral, mainstream/underground, night/day, visible/invisible. Over time, a game of cat and mouse developed around these gaps between the (subaltern) actors active within the sector and authorities that wanted to keep the sector manageable, from the perspective of public order and/or public morals, for instance by confining sex work to certain neighbourhoods. In the same time, the agency of sex workers, documented by an against and along the grain reading of police sources, makes it clear that they participated in the (re-)production of urban spaces and were not always passive actors in this process. They too determined what is possible, and where it is possible, with an eye to improving their working and living conditions. Of course, these expressions of agency should be seen within, and nuanced by, their context.

In this presentation the focus is on the city of Antwerp in the period 1845-1910. During this period the city experienced a strong expansion and developed from a regional textile centre into a port of global importance. In order to demonstrate the pioneering role of people in prostitution, but also the sex sector as a whole, when talking about the use of different in-between spaces, I will zoom in on three levels. First, I will look at the spatial tactics of sex workers in ‘public’ in-between spaces, such as the streets. Secondly, I will discuss the use of space, in and around cabarets and cafes where sexual services were sold. Thirdly, I will discuss the macro shifts of prostitution through the urban space of Antwerp. By so doing, I will examine the extent to which the geography of prostitution was related to the creation of new in-between spaces in the developing city.

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*Intervenant

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