

INTRODUCTION

"Les Putes Sont En Grève..."

This new edition of *Sex Work* comes more than a decade after the book's original publication—and just in time to celebrate the discovery in Salonika of what is believed to be the oldest known brothel. The two-thousand-year-old structure is believed to have been frequented by male clients who came to enjoy services from both male and female sex workers. The brothel, steam rooms, marble baths, and swimming pools are thought to be part of a large complex dedicated to the pursuit of physical pleasure, and were found replete with comedy and tragedy masks—Aristophanes' plays were set in brothels—clay dildos, offerings to Aphrodite, and all manner of erotic paraphernalia.

That this discovery reminds us of a time when sexuality (albeit male sexuality) was seen as important enough to make its setting public, comfortable, a place of community, a place where conversations could take place, where the arts could be enjoyed alongside more private pleasures, should at least provide a fertile context in which to read this extraordinary collection.

In 1987, *Sex Work* sought to create a space where "prostitution" was not automatically understood as a metaphor for self-exploitation; in fact, after publication of *Sex Work*, "sex work" became the preferred term—among progressive feminists, academics, and the workers themselves. The book appeared at a time when the feminist movement was embroiled in a profound split, dividing those women who wanted to explore the complexities of sexual desire and those who condemned such exploration as a treasonous and antifeminist assimilation of men's objectification of women.

Sex Work was sometimes denounced but often reviewed, and was probably the first (and only?) book from a feminist press to be reviewed favorably in the same month in both *The Women's Review of Books* and *Hustler* magazine.

The landscape of women's sexual representation has greatly changed since then, thanks to the writings of Dorothy Allison, Joan

Nestle, Carol Vance, Pat Califia, Susie Bright, Kate Bornstein, Wendy Chapkis, Carol Queen, Annie Sprinkle, and many others. Publications like *On Our Backs* (at its most transgressive throughout the '80s and early '90s), *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography and Censorship*, edited by the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (1992), and *Red Light: Inside the Sex Industry* by Sylvia Plachy and James Ridgeway (1996) heralded more realistic images. *Sex Work* is now read on university campuses all over the world—translated in German and Japanese—creating an intellectual communal space where sex and culture are talked about. A far cry from Salonika, and the plays of Aristophanes, but progress nevertheless.

My own introduction to the social complexities of sex work was far less auspicious than the recent archaeological find, but it was a revelation for me. It was in 1975, on the eight p.m. news, that I first heard prostitutes speak for themselves. A few brief sentences, from the St. Nivier church in Lyon, soon interrupted by the newsmen: "And now, back to you in Paris." His smile was understood by millions. "Les putes sont en grève..." ("The hookers are on strike.") That was a good one. Chuckles at the dinner table, pass me some bread please, pour me some wine.

I had seen the *putes* many times before. As a child, with my father on our Sunday morning strolls in the streets of Paris, rue Blanche, rue Pigalle, La Madeleine.... Years later, on my moped, my freedom, I discovered rue St. Denis: women in miniskirts walking nonchalantly, groups of three rapping over cigarettes; one had tall black leather boots and a whip at her side. After I passed her on my *mobylette*, I wanted to turn back, but was afraid to be rude. I went back several times but never saw her again.

And then once, while waiting for my turntable to get fixed, I had an espresso in a small cafe, and I saw them, gathered around two small tables, slowly sipping their coffee, rubbing their hands—for it was a cold winter that year—talking like they knew each other well. I was sitting at the bar. *La patronne* was washing glasses and I could see her, them, me in the large mirror behind the counter. It was my first experience of a "women only" space.

Thirty years later, I've turned the bar stool around, and we are face to face.

In editing this second edition of *Sex Work*, Priscilla Alexander and I have chosen to retain the original stories of the women whose trust can be felt on every page of this book. In the mid-eighties, that trust was most often met with either complete silence or an analysis that labeled all sex workers as victims. (A woman who worked

in the movement to abolish prostitution in France told me, "You will never get the real stories. The articles you receive will be written by cops and pimps." Many people could not believe that sex workers could actually speak for themselves.) Part I, "In the Life," features the stories of street prostitutes, exotic dancers, nude models, escorts, porn actresses, and workers in massage parlors—speaking for themselves.

Part II, "Feminism and the Whore Stigma," considers the whore stigma in the context of racism, classism, anti-Semitism and the culture of chastity, and the relationship of sex work to feminism, lesbianism and other progressive politics. In "Prostitution: Still a Difficult Issue for Feminists" Priscilla Alexander writes of the legal, health, occupational, and political complexities of sex work at the end of the millennium. This essay stands as an update of the first edition, which appeared early in the AIDS pandemic.

Part III, "United We Stand, Divided We Die: Sex Workers Organized," retains the original documents of organizations like COYOTE, The Red Thread, U.S. PROStitutes, and others. Priscilla Alexander's introduction, "The International Sex Workers' Rights Movement" updates the history of these and other sex workers' rights organizations.

New for this edition is a resource section, which includes information on a number of activist organizations and publications, many of them just a web click away. The bibliography has also been completely revised to reflect a decade's worth of writing and publishing on sex work.

This book is about sex, and how shameful and perverted sex has become in our collective psyche—how we have lost respect for pleasure and respect for those who know about it, all in the name of "morality." This book is also about money and workers' rights, and it's about women. Women who have voices and a great deal to say about our culture, women whose words cut through the discourse and tell the truth about their lives, and ours.

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