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Prostitution, Moral Spatiality, and Urban Territory

The example of Zurich

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes and Gabrielle Schaad
with Valentina Genini

If money cannot buy love, love-making or sex is being traded for centuries. In this context prostitution is generally and traditionally defined as an exchange of sexual services for money or material remuneration¹. However, according to Marxist theory, it is more than that, because of the notion of power over one person's body by another.

«Sex work» exerts individually a right of command over another person's body for a time: domination.² Control over bodies might be the main goal of all societies and is, over women's bodies, fundamental.³ Undoubtedly it is no overstatement to extend this projection to the urban space and the desire of control exerted by authorities over prostitution. Domination, particularly in terms of territory, generates conflict. When street-practiced or de facto visible in reserved districts, prostitution is often attached to a general degradation of life quality and a stigmatization of areas as dirty, dangerous and depraved. The conflict between prostitution and urban space relates to the sexualisation of the city and the production of moral geographies, as well as to subsequent spatial migrations.⁴

To opt for Zurich as a case study allows the recognition of such migrations in the city as a concrete paradigm. However, interferences between common use of public space and prostitution in public space have dramatically changed the manner in which prostitution is perceived within the last decade. Prostitution has not only become subject to increasing regulation. Its visibility also changes with the growing importance of the Internet and new digital applications.⁵ The number of clients is estimated at 125000 country-wide—approximately 5% of the country's male population aged between 20 and 65.⁶ According to a recent study on behalf of the federal government there are 16000 female prostitutes working in about 900 «indoor establishments»⁷ throughout Switzerland. 1452 employments are counted in the Canton of Zurich, while one post is often shared between several women. The number of women working as street prostitutes is estimated at 250 over the entire country. Street prostitution exists in nine cantons; the most frequented areas are in Olten, Basel and Zurich. Still, the lack of restrictions, combined with the country's wealth, has pushed the number of prostitutes per capita in Zurich to one of the highest of industrialized countries. Based on police figures, Zurich has about 11 prostitutes per 1000 people, similar to the rate of Amsterdam, known for its sex trade.⁸ With the assumption that the more explicit

and visible prostitution is, the more it sexualizes the space it occupies and the deepens the conflict it generates, a relation is to be established between mobility and visibility of prostitution.

Prostitution in urban territories: Sexualizing the city

Prostitution signals the presence of sex in the urban space. The city is sexualized and organizes human sexual relations in a Manichean way to perpetuate distinctions between «good» and «bad» sexual identities⁹. Namely, socio-spatial practices encourage people to adopt heterosexual identities without them being conscious of it. Only confronted with deviating and «abnormal» manifestations of sexuality (prostitution, homosexuality, hardcore pornography, etc...) do they come to question their own sexual evidence. Hence prostitutes constitute a key sexual identity about the limits of heterosexuality¹⁰. Prostitutes are symbolic of «sexifying» heterosexuality, and are therefore banned from the clean realms of heterosexual citizenships.

Prostitution occurs in a variety of settings. In street prostitution the prostitute solicits customers while waiting at street corners or walking alongside a street, visible but possibly only at a certain time during the day. Prostitution also takes place in some massage parlours, identified as such. Whilst prostitution is more out in the open, solicitation occurs at bars. Brothels or sex-clubs are establishments specifically dedicated to prostitution, occasionally red-lighted at night. Prostitution can also take place at the prostitute's apartment or in a rented room when solicitation of customers is done from behind windows or through advertising. In escort or out-call prostitution, the customer calls an agency and the act takes place at the customer's place of residence or more commonly at his hotel room, thus reducing direct visibility. Hypothetically, because visible prostitution sexualizes its pertained space; a connection can be recognized between mobility and visibility of prostitution. A recognized, legalized business such as a brothel implies certain spatial inertia,

due to reputation and tolerance. But visibility is delimited here by a building facade. On the other hand, with a much more explicit exposition, with visible prostitutes and clients the much more «sexualized» street-prostitution is constantly stigmatized and extremely mobile. Thus, the question of visibility is central to the spatial aspect as it, by sexualizing the city, directly influences morality and therefore movements of prostitution migrations—a paradigm that could be labelled as a conflict.

The creation of spatialized moral order by state and law

As the ordering of urban space plays a crucial role in producing and reproducing sexual identities that accord to notions of being «a good citizen» in Western societies, law is a key element to spatial morality. Law is one of the most powerful means used by society to control behaviour.¹¹ Jurisdiction seeks to regulate and control prostitution expressing a moral condemnation of it as well as supposedly offering some degree of «protection» to those engaged with it. Clearly, on the legal side, cities and governments (and to a certain extent, civil society) have an impact on where and how prostitution should be practiced, if legal or not, if tolerated or not, and how this relates to its migrations.¹² Therefore contemporary vice laws are crucial to geographies of prostitution. Moral control and spatial ordering generate a spatialized moral order.

Regulation of sex work often relies on the strategic containment of prostitution to sites where it can be subjected to regimes of surveillance by state and law as by society in general. Legal codes, norms and understanding vary from locale to locale.¹³ It seems that some forms of prostitution are more tolerated than others, prostitutes working the streets are seen as less acceptable than off-street prostitutes who conduct their affairs in the private realm—presumably on the basis that the presence of prostitutes in the urban space might indicate the state's tacit approval of «sex work». Namely, law regulates activities that offend public order and decency and expose the citizen to what is allegedly offensive and injurious.¹⁴ One must concede that jurisdiction concentrates on the «good» citizen and does not necessarily consider populations involved in prostitution—a classical double-standard position. Another regulation of «sex work» consists of banning prostitution from city centres and can be related to authority's desire to «clean» the urban core. Typically, the phenomenon of «outcasting» and peripheralization addresses questions of «mapping out» specific sites of the body and the city. This means the disposal of a certain form of prostitution composed of lower classes (fragile/visible/troublesome) and keeping the high-range prostitution «needed» as sex outlets for business centres. Current vice laws are difficult to summarise, as they embrace contradictory notions of sexual rights of individuals, gendered space, morality, economy, ... However, moral control and spatial ordering, as well as mobility and human factors make spatial

order a key element to migrations and locations of prostitution in urban space while underlining the pernicious conflict between «visible» sex-trade and the city.

Spatial migrations of prostitution in Zurich

Zurich, as urban centre, has a history of prostitution¹⁵. Spatially, in the 19th century, the business of prostitution was mainly concentrated in the Niederdorf, as nine of the registered tolerated bordellos were located there. The Niederdorf was an area of leisure, packed with drinking houses, bars, informal business and cabarets, enjoying a regional and extra-regional reputation. Women who were to sell themselves moved to the Niederdorf, where the chances were better to find clients. Located a bit offside from the new commercial area Bahnhofstrasse, away from high traffic streets, but close to the city centre and the railway station, accessibility level was high, leading to a general considerable increase of frequentation. In the Kögengasse and the Weingasse, the density of bordellos was relatively high, two of the five houses of the Kögengasse were brothels or such, like the «Hotel Krone».

The Hottingen district was ostensibly more quiet with the «first-class» establishments of Eidmattstrasse and Kreuzbühlstrasse. They profited directly from the neighbourhood of the Variété theatres «Corso» and «Pfauen», just as the theatres could benefit from the bordellos as an extension of their entertainment areas. The Culmannstrasse brothel was situated a bit further away from the city centre. Close to the ETH and University, it was visited by students and professors. The Aussersihl brothel was characterised otherwise. It was located in the Zollstrasse, a nearby street of the railway station, with a poorer population and low-rent area. Most of the clients of this third-class brothel were workers, soldiers and young recruits at duty in the close-by Kaserne. In a word, prostitution businesses at the time were located around multifunctional leisure areas such as Niederdorf, close to obvious business poles like the Kaserne or theatres and near communication nodes such as the railway station.

At the end of the 19th century, the golden age of prostitution was over. Brothel owners tended to give away the business quickly, pressured by authorities. Competition increased, and brothels started using advertising methods, girls standing scantily clad at windows and doors of the houses and typical red lights were installed. Since most of the establishments were in the vicinity of residential houses, they were causing considerable grievance among the population, a criticism that was to be uttered repeatedly towards the end of the 19th century. Complaints concerned the behaviour of the girls, loud music, dancing and the general activity buzz. Brothels became objects of popular resentment. Unexpected crackdowns and police investigations were increasing, which upset clients. Harsh controls and consequent busts and prison sentences deteriorated the commerce. Civil society grievance got considerable, as well as the pressure from morality groups. Finally, in 1897, many bordellos of the city were

closed down by authorities and prostitution was officially forbidden. Almost immediately, illegal establishments came up. Drinking-halls, cabarets, bars and pubs soon took over and offered alcohol and sex at all price levels. Between 1893 and 1900, 300 different businesses with parallel functions to bordellos were listed. These were located again in the Niederdorf and in the Aussersihl around Langstrasse. Those areas seemed predestined for prostitution business, being densely packed with beer-halls and small hotels. The back-rooms of cigar-shops and postcard-shops functioned as a cover for prostitution. In 1913, 34 «cigar-shops» were registered, and often prostitutes owned the shops themselves. In December 1913 this under-cover business was closed by decree. In general, the massive prostitute population in the streets and places, in cafés, restaurants, Music-halls, Variétés and theatres, from elegant ladies («demimondaines») at the «Corso», winking young girls on Bürkliplatz and poorly-dressed street-prostitutes on Limmatquai, in the streets and bars of Niederdorf or installed in the Aussersihl confirmed a spatially extended and mobile activity of prostitution in the late 19th and 20th century.

Prostitution activities declined and leapt into clandestineness as the moral pressure of both war time periods and post-war were not favourable to legalisation. However, typically, Langstrasse, Niederdorf and its extension Seefeld¹⁶ were stigmatized as prostitution areas throughout the 50's and 60's. As the 1973 oil crisis escalated, the working immigrant population was sent home as the inland work market deteriorated. Consequently, a void in the housing area formerly rented by this population was produced, namely in the 4th district—Langstrasse. The prices of rents were plummeting and the milieu took over, as the authorities' control was low. At the end of the 80's, lax drug policy created the so-called tolerated «open scenes», draining drug-addicted prostitution activity around the railway-station, Letten and Limmatplatz. After having given up on hopes that a policy of tolerance would lead to self-regulation and containment, those areas were police-cleared in 1995.¹⁷ The dealing and prostitution activities were transferred to Langstrasse.

Switzerland legalised prostitution in 1992, and in 1998 the first legal brothel, called «Petite Fleur» («Small Flower») re-opened in Zurich. Street prostitution remained illegal for the moment outside the tolerated areas. In 1991 the city authorities issued a «Strichplan»¹⁸ that identifies 14 street portions dedicated to streetwalkers where they were allowed to propose sexual services from 7 PM to 5 AM. Contraventions were penalised with a fine of up to CHF 500.¹⁹ Apparently, police forces were outnumbered and could not guarantee the respect of this Strichplan²⁰. Langstrasse and Niederdorf, even though both recognized as prostitution areas, did not appear on the map.

The urban and moral spatiality of gay prostitution on the other hand has its own history in Zurich, functioning very differently; not least because of the prevailing criminalization of homosexuality by Swiss

law until 1942. Even after the legalisation of sexual intercourse between men, the age of consent was twenty, against 16 years in the case of women. Male prostitution stayed illegal until 1992. The performative corporeality and visibility of street prostitution were never an option due to the threat of denunciation. A slight increase in visibility around 1960 was met by police and local authorities with harsh controls, leading to house searches and forced coming outs—often with disastrous consequences for the privacy, the social relationships and the housing situation of queer lives.²¹ The police justified the reinforcement of control by means of surveillance files rhetorically with two murders committed by young male prostitutes in 1957 and 1958. Also, the rise of syphilis infections in the early 1960s served as an argument for the city government to enact a dance ban on men,²² with economic consequences for—if covered, well institutionalised—meeting points and platforms for gay men.²³ Nowadays the main pick up spots for the so-called «escorts» beyond established contact bars in the Niederdorf area are on Internet platforms and smartphone applications like Gayromeo or Grinder.²⁴

Beautification and migration tendencies

When the project «Langstrasse PLUS»²⁵ was launched in 2001, it was in response to the organized outcry of local residents and shop owners concerned about the growth of street sex trade in the Langstrasse area. After ten years the city government argued that the goal of Langstrasse PLUS had been reached and the project was phased out. Its goal had been to achieve a better life quality and a safer environment for its inhabitants. The instruments employed concerned legislation as well as real estate management, with a constant promotion through advertising campaigns. To cut down the sex-trade establishments, the city bought pieces of real estate and restructured them with offices, trendy bars and standard flats. This has upgraded the area, chasing out some of the sex-trade related businesses, although there are still some 250 brothels in the district.²⁶ Street prostitution is not tolerated in the area. The legalisation of contact bars was seen as yet another measure to keep prostitution off the street. A recent initiative to include Langstrasse in the newly drafted Strichplan was rejected the city council in 2016.²⁷ In practice, this program intensified the repression of outdoor sex markets, thus redirecting part of the consumers to the indoor sector, a move facilitated by online technologies. In fact, many of the women who had been working in the streets got mobile phones and headed for sex clubs.

This can partly explain the phenomenon of the migration of prostitution toward the periphery of Zurich. Those sex clubs are now established in the suburban areas of the city²⁸. Dispersed in the outskirts villages, housed in quiet residential neighbourhoods, these types of services are strongly internet based, and display on their website to potential clients the location of the club, how to reach it, types of proposed

services and pictures of the girls. Graphic codes used on those web pages are very colourful and catchy, attempting to draw attention.

Basically, the Internet advertises those clubs on a private platform that replaces the public platform with which they cannot physically advertise. In fact, spatially, those suburban brothels sport a quiet, common, innocent appearance of family houses and office buildings. They only become identifiable at night when their character is red-neon-proclaimed. This semi-anonymity might be partly due to the increase of communication and mobility that leads to separate places of contact and places of transaction, thus reducing the need of visible display. It might also be the wish to be mapped out from moral geography in order to avoid stigmatisation and reaction of the local authorities. The loophole in the cantonal regulations those clubs are exploiting might be filled as soon as civil society once again files a complaint. If the Internet can bring advantages to the self-organization among prostitutes, for example chances to inform each other about abusive clients,²⁹ it also fosters the neo-liberalisation and isolation of prostitution in general.³⁰ Also, this migration into virtual spaces and the invisibility of prostitutes in the streets makes it more difficult for NGOs to contact alleged victims of women trafficking or to track down exploitative structures now out of view, yet still existing.

Out of the city into the box: Prostitution spatial ordering

After the number of street prostitutes at Sihlquai had reached a new peak in 2011, complaints by inhabitants and media pressure to shut down the area grew stronger. The fact that a growing number of prostitutes came from Hungary, Slovakia and other countries that were recently granted freedom of movement within the extended Schengen space—deemed as unwelcome work-migrants—fuelled arguments of right-wing political circles. Whereas, from a left perspective the increasing number of reported cases of women trafficking, and sexual assault called for a re-evaluation of the legal framework. A taskforce consisting of several members of the police department and city planning mapped out a new Strichplan in correspondence with the new prostitution commerce regulation, the «Prostitutionsgewerbeverordnung» (PGVO), concerning the use of public and private space for prostitution. First of all, this meant a radical ten kilometer reduction of legal zones for street prostitution in total, as well as changed legislations for salons that needed a building permit of late, in addition to the usual prostitution permit.

In summer 2013 the «Strichplatz» in the outskirts quarter of Zurich, Altstetten, opened its doors. The new «Strichzonenplan» was enacted in 2013 after urgent measures like the reduction of the legal timeframes for street prostitution had been taken in 2012 already. It replaced an earlier version of 1991, updated in 2000. If street prostitution and brothels can today

be located in areas with less than 50% residential ratio only, for the site in Altstetten it was even less—20%. Further requirements included the absence of educational institutions and youth centres in the neighbourhood that should ideally neither be adjacent to public parks, nor to churches. An infrastructure consisting of access road as the garage-like boxes, a café and the advice centre «Flora Dora» was to be installed with «neighbourhood security»³¹.

This provoked political and civic opposition cumulating in a popular referendum initiated by the conservative right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP). The Zurich electorate, however, accepted a credit for sex boxes with 52,6 percent. The sex boxes are open daily from 7pm to 5am. The site is accessible by car exclusively, that is no entry for pedestrians. Sexual intercourse has to take place in one of the nine car boxes, the two «Stehboxen» or the four caravan-areas. The site is run by services within the social department of the city of Zurich. Its staff is periodically present to observe «district compatibility», controlling licences and enforcing the borders of the site by fining transgressions and spatial migration.³² Beside these boxes, the new Strichplatz picked the historic prostitution area within Niederdorf and the Allmend Brunau as the sole remaining zones for legal street prostitution.³³

Conclusion

Through time, the migration of prostitution in Zurich has been shown by different tendencies. Certainly, poles of business, such as theatres or barracks were crucial at times, whereas communication nodes and axes became more and more attractive for prostitution business as mobility was expanding. Nevertheless, the inertia of persistent entertainment areas is high, as one can see with the case of the Niederdorf, having been identified with the sex-trade for more than hundred years.

However, two opposite tendencies could be observed in the phenomenon of migration of prostitution: on the one hand, the increase of communication and of client mobility, together with beautification programs led by the authorities partially caused a peripheralization of prostitution, especially towards the north-western areas of the city, the airport area and the Glatbrugg neighbourhood, out of range of municipal jurisdiction. Certainly, officials are concerned that this migration from city to periphery may head even further towards remote locations that are dangerously isolated for women involved in prostitution. But the fact that part of the sex trade is out of cities and out of citizen's view is without a doubt satisfying for the Zurich municipality. On the other hand, authorities still seem to favour centralized, clearly defined and tolerated «sacrificed» red-light districts such as Niederdorf and Langstrasse in order to operate control as well as to maintain a certain offer of sex outlets in the city. Therefore, credits allocated to programs are limited on purpose, or so it seems.³⁴ Beautification, or gentrification strategies might as well function as demagogic

tools to calm down public opinion.³⁵ Officials' contradictory and ambivalent positions typically demonstrate the complexity of the topography of prostitution. Scarcity of geographically reliable information in addition to the factors' intricacy makes it indeed difficult to draw ultimate conclusions about this changing matter. Nevertheless, one can stress that migrations of this activity in urban space are interdependent of laws and moral control, tolerance issues, accessibility factors and spatial ordering. As all of these elements are subject to vary, prostitution adjusts through migration—migrations that illustrate the conflicted relation between sex and the urban space.

Nota Bene: This research was initiated in 2008 within the context of the seminar «Urban Mutations on the Edge» with Prof. Marc Angéil, and Deane Simpson at ETH Zurich (Federal Institute of Technology) and updated as well as extended for this issue of *trans* magazine. Earlier versions of the text have been published in *MAS Context*, and *Camenzind*.

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- 5 The effects of Internet and digital technology on street prostitution in Switzerland are still understudied, and reliable information concerning this context therefore sparse.
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- 8 Allen M., «Police crack down on East European prostitutes», June 14 2007. www.swissinfo.ch/eng/specials/euro2008/euro2008_rss_detail/Police_crack_down_on_east_European_prostitutes.html?siteSecr=22204&sid=7926641&cKey=1181888567000&ty=st. Retrieved: 12.04.2011.
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- 19 See: «Vorschriften über die Strassenprostitution», *Stadtratsbeschluss vom 17. Juli 1991 (2204)1 mit Änderungen bis 14. Mai 2003 gestützt auf § 74 des Gemeindegesetzes*.
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Annex: Zürich Strichplan 1991/2000

