



SEXUAL ECONOMIC TRANSACTIONS: ACTORS, INSTITUTIONS AND TERRITORIES

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Summary

This paper adopts the hypothesis put forward by Tabet (2004; 2001), according to which sexual transactions are always embedded within an economic framework, and seeks to illustrate how this embeddedness is presented today. Sexual Economic Transactions (SET) are approached from an institutionalist and territorial perspective, enabling us to supplement Tabet's structuralist framework and capture the changes that are underway. The aim is to identify the relational, institutional and calculative modalities of SETs, and to propose an ideal-type based on Commons' transaction theory ([1934], 1989). To understand the interconnection between SETs and the rest of society, in the second section we identify a typology of territorialities, using the oppositions between public and private spaces on the one hand, and market and domestic spaces on the other. Taking as our starting point the idea that SETs have historically constituted activities that structure these oppositions, in the third section we examine how digitization today affects their inclusion in society through the case of sex cams.

In conclusion, we propose the hypothesis that SETs have in the past assumed a character that threatens to jeopardize social order, and have always been subject to heavy control, particularly within the public market space. This control is today reinvented by avoidance of the "whore stigma" (Pheterson, 1993), while creating even greater separation between the public and market sphere on the one hand and the market force of female sexuality on the other.

Key-words

Sexual economic transaction

Institutions

Territorial perspective

Public – private space

Domestic – market space

1. Introduction

A wide body of research has highlighted the calculating nature of sexuality and love (Bourdieu, 1972; Deschamps, 2013; Bozon, 2020). It relates to understanding the way in which actors within this field coordinate, and how they enter into and implement agreements. Framed within this perspective, this paper assumes the economic embedding of sexuality and proposes, from an institutionalist and territorial perspective, a characterization of sexual economic transactions (SET) ¹. We seek to identify the modalities (relational, institutional and calculative) by which the agents of sexuality construct agreements relating to joint sexual activities and perform them, all while being socially controlled.

Tabet's (2001; 2004) pioneering structuralist and materialist approach is characterized by the idea that the different forms taken by sexual-economic exchanges (SEE) (marriage, sex work, etc.) lie along a continuum. All these forms involve a male contribution with female sexuality constituting a service due in return. The paper adopts this position while developing a theory to account for the changes underway in society (increase in female participation in the labour market, digitization, feminist movement, etc.). We therefore propose an institutionalist approach based on the transaction theory put forward by John Commons ([1934], 1989), according to whom economic exchange cannot be understood as a simple exchange between free and independent wills that takes place within a social vacuum. Commons thus distinguishes three transactions (bargaining, managerial and rational), each being necessary to achieve the whole in their relational, institutional and calculative dimensions. This framework, which can be described as open structuralist, allows for the integration of institutional and cultural change in SETs.

The approach used in the second section is also territorial (Crevoisier, 2010) in that it postulates that the integration of SETs within society is understood by their spatio-temporal forms and by their deployment in time and space. It aims to grasp the way in which sexuality fits into society by identifying the spaces in which it is integrated as well as the way in which it shapes territories in return. Distinctions, such as public and private spaces or spheres of production and reproduction, are crucial from the point of view of sexual activities. The latter play a central role in the institutionalization of these spaces and in the interconnection of the temporal sequences that characterize SETs, and in particular the link between consent² and sexual activity itself. On another scale, there is also a sequence between the controlling dimension of institutions on the one hand and the reconsideration of norms and values on the other. The proposed conceptual framework is put to the test in the third section in order to understand the changes

¹ In this article, we will mobilise two different but closely related notions: firstly "sexual-economic exchange" in reference to Tabet's research, assimilating all interactions, activities, experiences, etc. to an "exchange". Then we will refine this perspective by mobilising "sexual economic transaction" for our analysis with the institutionalist work of John Commons.

² We use the term "consent" on purpose, although it is currently the subject of considerable debate, especially in the field of law. We use it to account for an explicitly asymmetric dimension in terms of the power relationship between female and male sexuality. We do not mean "female consent" here in the sense of individual will free from coercion. Economic necessities and power relations may play a role, as in other commercial transactions. The female sex is here seen in the sense of "capital" and is therefore based on "*les différences de pouvoir et précisément sur les modalités et les possibilités que chacun[e] a de négocier la gestion des rapports sexuels* [differences in power and, specifically, the modalities and possibilities that each party has with which to negotiate the management of sexual relations.]" (Tabet & Contreras, 2001: 144).

brought about by digitization. Using a case study of sex cams, we will characterize the main changes as well as the permanencies induced by digitization.

Throughout this paper we will use the binary categories of sex and gender (woman – man) to propose a heteronormal SET ideal-type. The aim is to take into account the dominant forms of SETs and how they interconnect with society. Indeed, on sex cam platforms, the majority of supply is offered by people who identify with the female sex and gender, while the majority of consumption is by people who identify as straight cis men. Therefore, we will not systematically use epicene or inclusive forms of language in this text. In addition, it is important to specify that we will use the terms *sex cam* and *live cam* interchangeably; the latter being an emic term used by actors in our field of study, while the first clearly and precisely defines our subject of study.

2. Sexual economic transaction

John Commons ([1934], 1989; Chavance, 2012) constructed an economic transaction theory that allows us to break away from the traditional market model, which contrasts and connects supply and demand. Economic activity is conceived as the common anticipation of beneficial transactions structured by rules of action (working rules). The transaction is thus conceived firstly as a social activity, bringing into play calculative dimensions and occurring within a specific period for the direct actors, and secondly as a regulatory activity, due to the control which society exerts over these activities. Within the meaning assigned by Commons, these are complex *trans*-actions (Beaurain & Bertrand, 2009) and not a supply and demand equation, which would be more suited to a commercial exchange of goods. However, supply is a specific proposition, in particular within private markets. As a result, it is demand that can choose one supply or another – or abstain (Hirschman, 1970). It is therefore a specific temporal and spatial sequence, and it is from this angle that we are going to study market SETs, from their tangible to their digital forms, within the market but also within the domestic sphere. (Tabet, 2004). Commons distinguishes three transactions: bargaining, managerial and distribution. Each is based on negotiated and expected equivalences, transactions that we apply to sexuality. The whole is also characterized by a “territorial arena” (Guex & Crevoisier, 2015) combining different times, places and scales (Fig. 1).

First, the actual negotiation (P1) – the *bargaining transaction* – is the point at which the direct protagonists, in this case the potential sexual partners, negotiate the terms of a future joint sexual activity. This encounter may take place during classic social interactions (outings in the town, with friends, etc.) or in dedicated tangible (bars, meeting places) or digital (dating platforms, social networks) locations. It can also occur in the street or in spaces dedicated to sex work. In all cases, it is a matter of negotiating consent for sexual activity which gives rise to the calculation of a first form of equivalence. The specific aim here is to show the dimension of bargaining and its asymmetry, constrained as it is by social control. The calculation may include only the actual short-term sexual activity (e.g. in the case of street sex work) or encompass many other dimensions (as in the case of negotiating marriage or cohabitation). For all cases, this bargaining can therefore be carried out in a dedicated tangible private or public space, including online for digital forms. Dating sites, whose function is to put people in touch with each other, generally leave the question of possible sexual activity completely open. Escort websites or online ads suppose from the outset a public offer, generally made by women, but combining various services that are not directly sexual (dining out, girlfriend experience, etc.); although the terms may have been fixed before the meeting, consent is negotiated, bilaterally, within a digital or tangible space. Finally, on live cam sites, the relationship evolves from a digital public space (a sex cam platform, for example) in principle towards a private overtly sexual activity – even if various services that could be considered *care*

(Scrinzi, 2016) are frequently included. In principle, the relationship remains digital from end to end.

This first form of equivalence is not just a simple meeting of free wills, but of instituted actors – i.e. they have certain freedoms and constraints with regard to institutions. Each protagonist will self-assess according to various market criteria, competition, desires and resources (monetary, physical, cultural, etc.). There is therefore no equality in commercial power between the parties because of the different baggage acquired during socialization, and the different transmitted or acquired capital. For SETs, the object of the bargaining is largely sexed and gendered. It is a question – still within the framework of the SET ideal-type – of obtaining female consent on the basis of compensation in the form of a deposit (monetary, goods, etc.) provided by the male party.

Socially, however, this freedom of negotiation is largely controlled by laws (for example, the behaviours accepted in public spaces, the possibility of same-sex marriage, etc.) or social norms (social endogamy within marriages, family units including children, etc.). More specifically, we note two very significant cultural norms concerning SETs: first, the “whore stigma” (Pheterson, 1993), and second, the attachment of value to masculinity as the ability to provide financially and to position oneself socially (Bessière & Gollac, 2020) through elements with an economic connotation, such as family names, makes of car, cultural capital, etc. These norms and values of social control are developed by public debate (Fig. 1, P3 of the sexual economic transaction), but must be understood as being controlling in the first phase of the transaction (Fig. 1, P1 of the sexual economic transaction).

In spatial terms, it is important to note that sex work is carried out mainly by migrants (Deschamps, 2007; Lévy & Lieber, 2009), who thus operate less directly in the areas frequented by their relatives. Digital technology makes it possible to avoid stigma by not superimposing the digital public spaces on which sex cam providers offer their (directly sexual) services, thanks to the country-specific distribution offered by the platforms. We will come back to this fundamental change later.

As far as there is agreement in P1, it is a question of understanding the way in which the specific performance of the SET takes place in time and space and, in the case of sexual activities, whether they are strictly limited or linked to broader agreements, such as marriage. Commons' *managerial transactions* consist of accomplishing the activities planned in P1, and this materialization requires the implementation of a large number of elements (objects, schedules, places, attitudes, etc.). For Commons, who was inspired by labour law, these managerial transactions are between one dominant and one dominated person. In the case of sexual economic transactions, the actual sexual activity involves the execution of sexual scripts (Monteil, 2016), the main one of which is that of male domination through the purchase of female availability and submission. First, through the sale of availability, and second, in the position of service provider, women are in the position of execution, whether the sexual act takes place within the framework of a professional sex activity or that of “conjugal duty”.

This activity is normally carried out within the private space, whether within a household, a synchronous digital space or a hotel room. Society then discreetly looks away, despite having previously enacted the principles of equivalence between the parties through institutions (e.g. through the laws enacted concerning the marriage commitment, pricing, the structuring of dedicated places, etc.). This part of the transaction is emblematic of the private space (Fig. 1, P2 of the sexual economic transaction). Regarding equivalences, and drawing inspiration from Hirschman (1970), the result of this activity can be satisfaction, loyalty, defection, or speaking out, either in private or publicly. Thus it is possible to consume a sex cam service and to leave a comment about the performance on the profile of the person providing the service, or to refuse the price of a service in a dedicated street.

Finally, we must understand the way in which society – understood here as a set of actors participating in debates on sexuality, including the media, parliaments, governments, associations, etc. – structures and frames SETs. Institutions within a field – in our case, the field of sexuality – allow costs and benefits to be distributed on the basis of equity. These are the *rationing transactions*.

These transactions take the form of debates within the public space aimed at the production of forms of justice. They can give rise to formal rules, such as laws, but also disseminate “spontaneous” standards and values, such as language, or in the case of the sexual economic field, the “whore stigma” (Pheterson, 1993) and the attachment of value to masculinity. This institutional arena can at the societal level lead to forms of protest. These ‘protests’ may take the form of debates and controversies (certain feminist movements play an important role), formal institutional amendment procedures (e.g. amendment of marriage legislation) or the development of new technologies which, in turn, produce new practices (such as sex cams). It is therefore at the institutional level that control occurs over the managerial and bargaining transactions discussed above.

Viewing sexual economic transactions as the deployment in time and space of a continuous chain of three distinct forms of equivalence between partners, with all that goes with them and under the control of society, makes it possible to go beyond the traditional political economy exchange model and anchor the whole spatially.

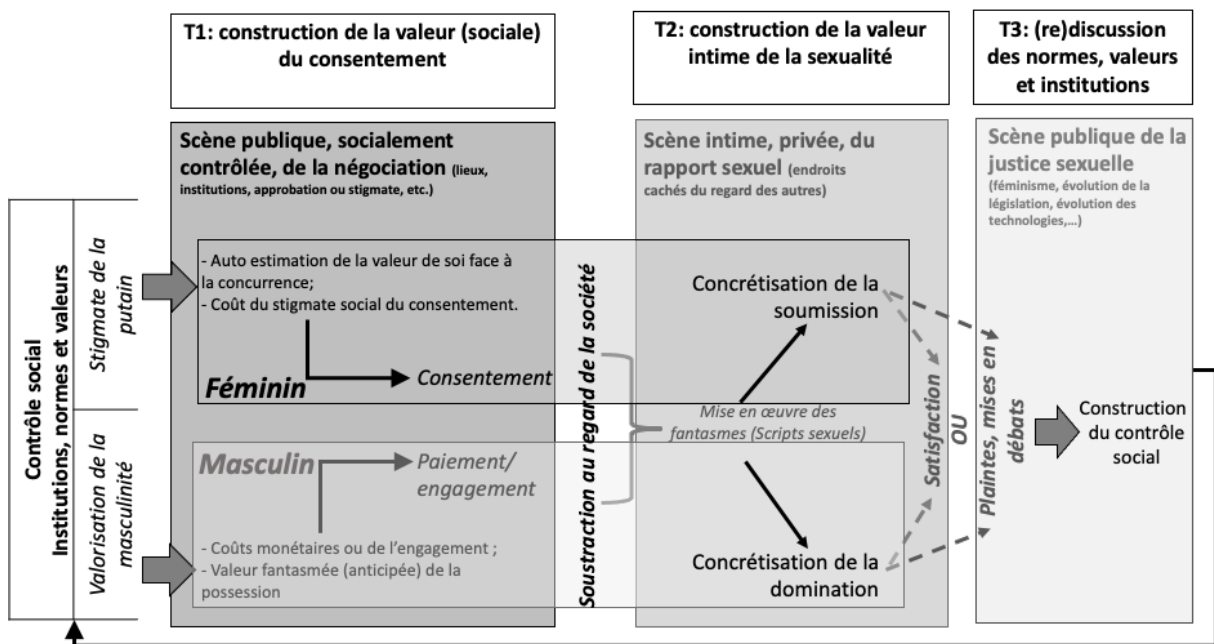


Figure 1 : The three phases and arenas of sexual economic transactions
Source: Own elaboration

3. The traditional sexual economic transaction: the sexual economic continuum and stigmatization

Here, it is a question of showing the traditional manner of controlling female sexuality by embedding it within two specific spatio-temporal forms: firstly, domestic reproduction spaces, where female sexuality is understood within complex transactions, including various domestic tasks and in response to a male request; secondly, by stigmatizing it within public spaces, especially if this sexuality is offered in a directly market way. This

territorial embedding is constitutive of the sexual economic continuum (Tabet, 2004). It is therefore as much the occasional or perennial nature of these economic-sexual transactions which characterizes them as their embeddedness within a particular space and time.

Finally, it is possible to demonstrate that this territorial construction revolves around the neutralization of the economic power of female sexuality within the market sphere and the development of masculinity viewed as a capacity for social positioning.

3.1. Market economic space and the private and public spaces of sexuality

By definition, an SET is a combination of economic and sexual dimensions. The institutions regulating economic transactions bring into opposition the domestic world and the market world. The first operates on the basis of reciprocity between the members accessing it: the various services that are the object of transactions represent complex exchanges, spread out over time, which are based on commitment and therefore on the accountability of the parties to each other (Mauss, [1923], 2007; Polanyi, [1944], 1983). In this domestic world, sexuality, and more precisely female sexual availability, has a value that forms part of the calculation of global equivalence, and is therefore the subject of male expectations. The market space, however, is based on bilateral and balanced exchanges, generally of a service for money. The service is well identified and, in the field of sexuality, it can go as far as precise pricing of each sub-service. Commitment ends as soon as the service is performed.

An essential distinction in Western societies puts into opposition public and private spaces. Historically, this distinction has taken the form of a reciprocity of perspective, the narrower definition of one reinforcing the specificity of the other. Sexuality was certainly one of the determining areas of this construction, sexual behaviour being strictly banned from the public space and confined to the most exclusive and hidden private spaces (Cervulle, 2014; Rodriguez, 2017; Pryn, 2002). “*La ‘sphère publique’, par opposition au privé, désigne l’ensemble, juridique ou coutumier, des droits et des devoirs qui dessinent une citoyenneté ; mais aussi les liens qui tissent et qui font l’opinion publique, la ‘publicité’ au sens de Jürgen Habermas, qui a montré l’importance de sa constitution au XVIIIe siècle.* [“The ‘public sphere’, as opposed to the private, designates the set of legal or customary rights and duties which shape citizenship; but also the links that are woven into and shape public opinion, ‘publicity’ as defined by Jürgen Habermas, who demonstrated the importance of its constitution in the 18th century.”] (Perrot, 2020: 5). The concomitance of all of these elements thus makes it possible to understand the very definition of the “whore stigma”, since “*[l]a place des femmes dans l’espace public a toujours été problématique, du moins dans le monde occidental qui, depuis la Grèce antique, pense et construit la politique comme le cœur de la décision et du pouvoir. ‘Une femme en public est toujours déplacée,’ dit Pythagore.*” [“[t]he place of women in public space has always been problematic, at least in the western world which, since ancient Greece, has placed thought and politics at the heart of decision-making and power. ‘A woman in public is always inappropriate,’ says Pythagoras.”] (*Ibid.*: 6). Not only are women problematic within the public space but if the way that they operate within that space is to offer sexual services in exchange for cash, they turn themselves into the paroxysmal figure of stigma. “*Dépravée, débauchée, lubrique, vénale, la femme [...] publique est une ‘créature’, femme commune qui appartient à tous. [Alors que l’]homme public, éminent sujet de la cité, doit en incarner l’honneur et la vertu. La femme publique en constitue la honte, la part cachée, dissimulée, nocturne, un vil objet, territoire de parcours, approprié, sans individualité propre. Il est l’honneur ; elle est l’horreur.*” [“Depraved, debauched, lewd, venal, the [...] public woman is a ‘creature’, a common woman who belongs to all. [While] the public man, eminent subject of the city, embodies its honour and virtue. The public woman represents shame, the hidden, the invisible, the

nocturnal, a vile object, a territory through which to journey, appropriated and without her own individuality. He is honour, she is horror.”] (*Ibid.*: 5).

3.2. The spheres of production and reproduction

In the literature, the “spheres” of production and reproduction are spatial metaphors; their territoriality is identifiable by the interconnection, first, of the public and private dimensions, and second, the market and non- market dimensions. In addition, the interconnection of the private–public and market –domestic spaces axes makes it possible to identify four specific territories in which SETs are located, and which the latter have helped to shape over the course of history (Fig. 2).

The sphere of production is found at the interconnection of the market and the public space. It is a free access space, in which work is sold in exchange for a salary, i.e. where neither the product of the work, nor its means of production, are owned by the workers (Salais, 1991). The sphere of production also includes the market in its public dimension, i.e. where the range of goods produced are shown with their price, and where each good or service on offer can therefore be purchased. All of this takes place under the supervision of the state, which has the power to control every transaction. From the perspective of sexuality, the transactions taking place in the sphere of production are strongly framed by specific rules and confined to spaces which have an exceptional status, such as streets dedicated to sex work or the establishment of sex *boxes*.

The sphere of reproduction is characterized by a right of access which is restricted to members of a household. This exclusivity fixes the circle of people involved in the exchange according to the rules of reciprocity, where the work, its means and its fruits are the subject of multilateral contributions and distributions. In terms of sexuality, the sphere of reproduction is spatially characterized by the bedroom, a space reserved even more exclusively for the sole protagonists of the transaction. Sexuality is institutionally assigned to the private domestic space, of which it is emblematic (Koch & Miles, 2020; Crewe & Martin, 2017; Deschamps, 2011).

The distinction between these spheres is intrinsically linked to binary social sex and gender relations: the sphere of production (public and market) is mainly dominated by men, the sphere of reproduction (private and domestic) by women. “*La femme est faite pour la famille et le domestique. [...] Ces représentations [...] traversent l'épaisseur du temps et s'enracinent dans une pensée symbolique dont l'anthropologue Françoise Héritier a montré la force structurante. Mais elles prennent des formes variables selon les époques, comme aussi les manières de les gérer. (...) Aux hommes, le public et le politique [...]. Aux femmes, le privé [...], la maison. [...] Mais cette apparente simplicité se brouille par le chevauchement des frontières.*” [Woman is made for family and domesticity. [...]. These representations [...] cross the depths of time and are rooted in a symbolic thought, the structuring force of which has been shown by the anthropologist Françoise Héritier. But they vary in form, and in how they are managed, according to the times. (...). To men, the public sphere and politics [...]. To women, the private sphere [...], the home. [...] But this apparent simplicity is blurred by the overlapping of borders.”] (Perrot, 2020: 6-7). In her book, Perrot first refers to handwritten letters, in the last century, allowing women to enter the public space, but then also cites the “power of the Internet”. The case of sex cams is the best example of the overlap and blurring brought to the borders of these spheres, although “[i]n fact, working at home may not actually improve the quality of women's working life, but rather reinforce gender roles (Kirkwood and Tootel, 2008; Wellington, 2006).” (Rodriguez-Modroño, 2021: 4).

The spheres of production and reproduction are therefore not isolated from each other. On the contrary, throughout history they have been constructed in a strongly interdependent manner. Thus what is offered by the market has partly taken the place of

domestic work, and vice versa. From the point of view of sexuality, this interconnection has been theorized by the economic-sexual continuum (Tabet, 2004).

3.3. Spatializing the sexual economic continuum

Paola Tabet's research is reflexively based on Malinowski's territories in the Trobriand Islands, where the ongoing sexual services that women offer to men are performed in exchange for gifts/services in kind. She therefore conceives sexual exchange from an economic viewpoint along a continuous spectrum, making it possible to link a series of sexual services. Within this series, the author differentiates between the types of services provided (from the sexual dimension and its variations to domestic relationships and their forms of negotiation and compensation). Female sexuality is therefore defined as a service and “[...] n’apparaît [donc] pas comme un échange réciproque entre hommes et femmes, un échange du même avec du même, mais comme un échange asymétrique : il n’y a pas de sexualité échangée contre de la sexualité, mais une compensation masculine pour une prestation féminine, un paiement qui pourra revêtir des formes variées (don, compensation en argent, emploi, promotion, prestige ou statut social, et jusqu’au nom, pour n’en citer que quelques-unes) en échange d’une sexualité largement transformée en service.” “[...] does not [therefore] appear as a reciprocal exchange between men and women, a like-for-like exchange, but as an asymmetrical exchange: there is no exchange of sexuality for sexuality, but male compensation for a female service, a payment which may take various forms (gift, monetary compensation, employment, promotion, prestige or social status, even including family name, to mention but a few) in exchange for a sexuality which has been largely transformed into a service.”] (Tabet & Contreras, 2001: 133). These elements then make it possible to present male domination and the stigmatization of female sexuality within these transactions. What Tabet defines as the central issue is not only the expression of sexual desire – attributed to men – but also the fact of being a “subject of sexuality”, with women being relegated in this process. To this, the author adds “l’inégalité d’accès aux ressources [qui] font que les femmes dépendant de leur travail sexuel et que le sexe est défini comme leur capital [...] tant dans les relations de mariage et de reproduction que dans des relations non-matrimoniales.” “[the inequality of access to resources [which] make women dependent on sex work and mean sex is defined as their capital [...] both in marital and reproductive relationships and in non-marital relationships.”] (*Ibid.*: 137). This takes shape as “un rapport global qui lie oppression sexuelle [à cause de la non-prise en compte du désir des femmes], limitation de la connaissance [à cause de l’invisibilisation du plaisir sexuel féminin] et exploitation économique [par la sexualité échangée]” [“a global relationship that links sexual oppression [because of the failure to take into account women’s desire], limited opportunity for knowledge [because of the invisibilization of female sexual pleasure] and economic exploitation [through exchanged sexuality]”] (*Ibid.*: 149). This is what Tabet calls “la grande arnaque” [“the big scam”].

The above suggests that “le paiement n’est en effet pas ce qui définit une relation sexuelle par rapport à une autre” [“payment is in fact not what defines one sexual relationship in relation to another”] (*Ibid.*: 134). Tabet posits that it is “le caractère occasionnel ou intermittent de la relation, et non pas le type d’objets échangés [pouvant être de la monnaie], qui distingue [le travail du sexe] des autres relations” [“the occasional or intermittent character of the relationship, and not the type of objects exchanged [which may be money], which distinguishes [sex work] from other relationships”] (*Idem.*). However, how do we analyse the case of marriages where there are no longer any sexual relations and the case of sex work with continuous and long-term relations on this continuum? From our perspective, it seems relevant not only to think of sexual activities in temporal terms, but above all to differentiate them spatially.

3.4. Territorial construction of the “whore stigma”

First of all, the territorial approach allows us to better understand what the “whore stigma” is. We can distinguish between a female or male offer, depending on who puts forward a concrete proposal. When women make an offer, it's up to the men to decide whether to take up that offer. In this situation, the woman is stigmatized and, in the canonical model, the offer relates purely to sex in exchange for money. It is a transaction that does not involve any future income, assets or power (except for potential parenthood). The transaction will then typically be concluded in a private place or online, which again only engages the resources of sexuality, in a private space (immediate outcome, balance between services).

When the transactions offered are a combination of activities and resources, it is generally the men who offer (marriage, cohabiting) and thus put the women in a position of making themselves available. Within this, female sexuality is then included in these more complex transactions as a way of balancing the transaction. Clearly, female acceptance endorses an arrangement in which assets or income (or, historically, an alliance between families) are exchanged for sex, thus confirming the economic value of female sexuality, since it is traded off against the other contributions to the transaction (Gollac & Bessière, 2020).

Sex work can thus be defined as an offer of directly sexual services in the market public space (Fig. 2). It is stigmatized, whereas, for example, a mistress maintained in a private market space is not viewed so critically. In the non-market public space, the case of women with free and assumed sexuality is the subject of stigmatization, but it is not subject to repression by the state. These examples make it possible to think about the public spaces within which the stigma is most significant, but also to see that private spaces are not exempt from it, and that digital technology brings new possible configurations. We will see that when they go digital, market public spaces are not subject to strong stigmatization either. It is therefore the conjunction of public, market and tangible spaces that pose a problem. As mentioned previously, the vast majority of sex workers offering their services in the public space are migrants (Deschamps, 2007; Lévy & Lieber, 2009). This aspect is particularly important from a spatial perspective in the sense that it allows them to maintain a separation between, on the one hand, a domestic private life in a specific, tangible place (generally their country of origin) and, on the other, a stigmatized activity in a distant public space.

3.5. Neutralization of the commercial power of female sexuality

The main effect of the “whore stigma” is to prevent women from using their sexual capital in public commercial activities in the sphere of production. This materializes in two ways. First, in the case of an offer of commercial sex work (CSW) with monetary compensation, the “professional” operates an activity clearly distinguished from any other public activity. Thus the CSW is assigned to dedicated locations subject to regulation, dedicated police and even total prohibition. Second, when women use their sexual assets to gain advantage in the world of employment for a recompense that is not directly monetary but still commercial, they are intensely stigmatized. All this shows that society strives to extract female sexuality from the market public space, or, as this turns out to be at least partly impossible, to confine it to well-partitioned spaces. Is it therefore a question of keeping the market public space free from the playing out of female sexuality and so-called “deviant” sexualities, or at the very least of neutralizing its commercial power? It is as if market public space might cease to function if female sexuality were integrated into it. What does this tell us about the functioning of society, the origins of the market and the public space – these being closely linked historically? In the past, this exclusion

of female sexuality from the sphere of production made it possible to settle commercial rivalries without the participation of women and, therefore, to include the latter as part of the agreement. This historic form now seems to be taking new directions. While income and status inequalities persist, the principle of gender equality is beginning to take hold in the spheres of production and politics. As a result, a whole field of social control has opened up (harassment, *#metoo* movement, etc.), which pursues one and the same goal: extracting female commercial power from the sphere of production. Changes can also be seen in the sphere of reproduction (paternity/maternity leave, stay-at-home husbands, equivalent salary contribution to the household, etc.), all while maintaining certain persistent structural bases, such as the unequal distribution of domestic tasks.³

If access to the sphere of production is now visibly accessible to women, as long as the commercial power of their sexuality is not activated, then the question arises of what men can offer as a trade-off in the other spaces. Indeed, in the field of sexuality, if men no longer have economic advantages to assert over women in general, and the one(s) they covet in particular, on which institutions and according to what sexual scripts (Monteil, 2016) can an SET then be founded? Let us return to the general pattern of sexual transactions (Fig. 1). How can the sexual script of domination (*purchase of availability*)/submission (*sale of availability*) still work if the male party is no longer in a position in which he must honour a financial commitment and if female sexuality no longer constitutes a service due in return? And if this script can no longer work, which one will replace it? Is sexuality now disembedded from economics, and therefore from social sex and gender relations, as well as from power? Freed from economic constraints, sexuality seems to be more freely chosen, although – as Tabet comments – what is always at stake lies in “*la différence entre la possibilité ou la non-possibilité d’exprimer son propre désir, entre avoir sa propre sexualité ou fournir un service à quelqu’un d’autre [...]*” [“the difference between being able and being unable to express one’s desires, between having one’s own sexuality and providing a service to someone else [...]”] (Tabet & Contreras, 2001: 142).

The proposed model makes it possible to capture traditional forms of SETs (marriage, prostitution, etc.), but is it able to capture the changes brought about by feminist emancipation movements and by digitization? To answer this question, we refer to a recent survey on sex cams (Donzallaz & Crevoisier, 2020) to understand what is changing and what remains stable.

³ Taken from [Online], URL <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/catalogues-banques-donnees/graphiques.assetdetail.17124591.html> (accessed 22 May 2020)

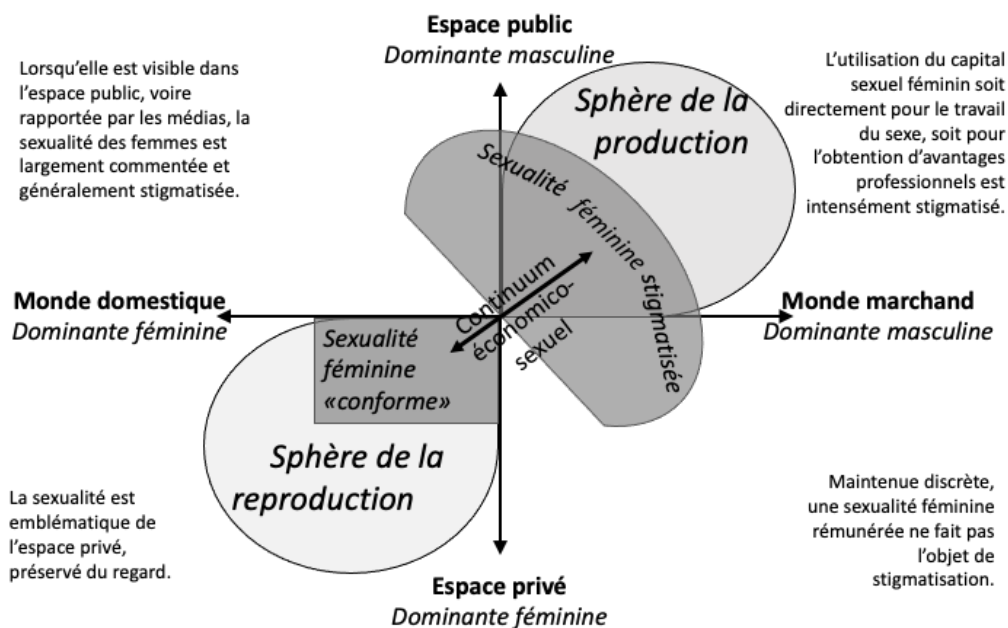


Figure 2 : Spaces of the economic-sexual continuum and construction of stigmatization
Source: Own elaboration

4. Digitization: overcoming stigma and compartmentalization outside the market public space

The new possibilities offered by technologies such as sex cams call into question the practices and representations around sexual activities as well as the territorial logics in place. Indeed, some public spaces subject to stigma and repression have been able to convert to digital format, allowing actors to avoid certain moral judgements and circumvent the laws of certain countries. Despite this partial avoidance, these spaces are still affected by the (re)discussion and definitions of norms and values. More fundamentally, they thus pose a question about the very definition of public space: what type of digital space is public? And what type remains private? The debates around the issue, particularly in terms of data management, identities, etc., are indicative of the state of transition that we are currently experiencing (Rouet, 2018; Kessous & Rey, 2009), since although the economy is currently one of the main engines of global growth, it raises many questions, particularly in terms of centralization and control of accumulated data (Srnicek, 2018). Therefore, sex cams are a particularly relevant case study: they make it possible to simultaneously construct digital public spaces which are subject to stigma, while allowing not only service providers, but also customers, to avoid the stigma that they would experience within tangible public spaces. Anyone can access live cam content online from a private space via a personal computer by logging in and viewing it. It is therefore not located within either the sphere of production or that of reproduction, but at the confluence of the two through digital technology. This limits the risk of being morally judged for the consumption of paid sexual services, for example in a dedicated street. Even if female sexuality is still stigmatized, sex cams make it possible to escape the direct stigma of tangible spaces. Moreover, they blur the borders, because tangible private spaces house part of the monetarized market world. Indeed, sex cam performers provide their services within a tangible private space – within a dedicated private studio or at home – thus bringing the market world into the private space, while producing a domestic service relating to sexuality. These new practices, associated with the advent

of digital technology, reshuffle the deck at the level both of institutions and of the spaces which are representative of or dedicated to SETs.

It is therefore necessary to classify and create a dialogue between the new spaces created by digital technology. Sex cams show that the binary categories that were used in the past – production/reproduction, private/public, domestic/market – need to be reassessed.

In Figure 3, level L^{-1} represents the tangible space within which we encounter the places where the sex cam models (M) and their customers (C) are located, each in a private place. They can only connect with each other through the public space. Through connection to a platform, Ms and Cs can interact within a digital public space, a form of “marketplace”. This space corresponds to the consumer's screen, on which the models appear alongside each other. Finally, after negotiating, M and C meet at level L^{+1} in a private and exclusive digital space for the show.

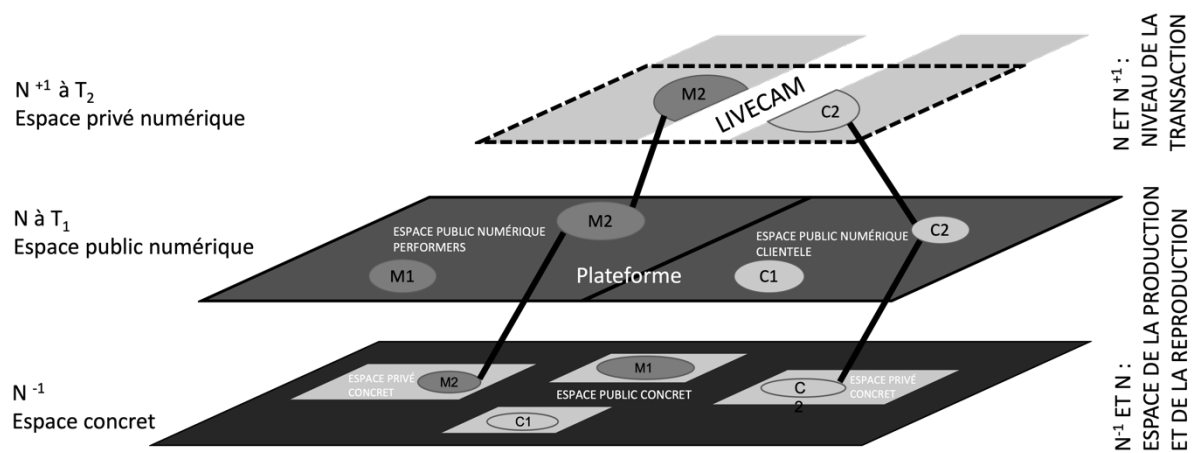


Figure 3 : *Live cam digital and tangible spaces*
Source: Own elaboration

5. Conclusion

Historically, in middle-class society, the market public space was the place where male rivalries are exercised, whether political, economic or cultural (Raibaud, 2008). The exclusion of women strongly suggests that this was, above all, a question of establishing male hierarchies in order to proceed, subsequently, to SETs such as marriage, cohabitation, sex work, etc. In these transactions, male capital formed in the sphere of production, which constitutes masculinity, is brought to the fore in the sphere of reproduction, in the sense that it is transformed into a value for men with regard to women.

This mechanism also makes it possible to understand why it is necessary to exclude female sexuality from this space, or at the very least to keep it under strict control, since the gender dimension of male rivalries and their allocative purposes could otherwise not be realized. However, this exclusion has always been imperfect, and prohibitions of all kinds, as repressive as they may have been, have never been able to put an end to commercial and monetarized SETs. Rather, it seems necessary to ask why these forms of SETs represent such a danger to the social order that they are so heavily controlled. The territorial approach suggests that this pattern comprises two phases (constitution of social capital and negotiation of consent) and two places (market and domestic space), which characterize traditional SETs.

Economic activities create the hierarchies and capitals constitutive of sex and gender, particularly in their economic dimensions. (Bessi re & Gollac, 2020). In our opinion, digital technology is provoking fundamental change in that it makes it possible to bring together domestic spaces for practising sexuality with a digital public space isolated from the rest of the sphere of production. Indeed, these SETs are both market and domestic *at the same time*, in the sense that the customers are tangibly located in their apartments, and the performers are in studios whose sets mimic domestic spaces, or, in the case of *freemium* services, in their own domestic spaces. Finally, the transaction takes place in public digital places – the platforms where the performers exhibit themselves – and then in private digital places – the show itself (Donzallaz & Crevoisier, 2020).

This gives rise to the development of market SETs that are no longer subject to repression on either a moral – due to the weakening “whore stigma” – or legal level. It is indeed a new interconnection between tangible and digital places and spaces that makes this social control obsolete. Thus isolated, the live cam sphere in no way disturbs the functioning of the traditional market sphere, in which, by contrast, sexual economic arrangements are now increasingly condemned and repressed.

In short, the advent of digital technology has made the exclusion of the power of female sexuality – whether monetarized or not – from the tangible sphere of production even more effective. In this, it reinforces the traditional institution of the sexual economic continuum. However, this is happening in a historic context of widespread access by women to this sphere. The commercial rivalries game is now open to both women and men, with increasingly similar rules. If men can no longer make use of their capital in this regard to obtain sexual favours, this also supposes a renunciation on the part of women to exercise their powers, in particular that of seduction.

Tabet’s thesis on the economic embedding of sexual exchanges is amended. Indeed, we must now distinguish a digital sphere in which SEEs are commercial services like any other, while being carefully isolated from other commercial transactions and from the tangible public space. This separation is consistent with Tabet’s analysis, but is different in that there is less stigmatisation and the transaction is more balanced. Elsewhere in society, it seems that we are moving towards a sphere of production from which SETs have been expunged, and which is therefore a space where non-sexualized and non-gendered rivalries are expressed, where male rivalries are stigmatized as much as the exercise of commercial female seduction. Taken to the extreme, this reasoning goes beyond Tabet’s theory to envision a disembedding of sexuality from economics. These are only hypotheses, deductions made possible through use of the proposed conceptual framework. Today, this movement is only just beginning.

In the sphere of reproduction too, sexual transactions could evolve into forms that are disembedded from economics, where imbalances are no longer linked to sex and gender, since there is no longer any prior male input. These renewed sex and gender relationships will perhaps raise the question of the asymmetries between male and female sexual pleasures and desires, the former being described as more pressing by nature than by social construction. More generally, what will remain of the distinction between the sphere of production and that of reproduction? In a world where female sexuality no longer represents an economic value, these spheres are no longer structurally interdependent and gendered. However, we have seen that SETs tend to be increasingly restricted to digital spaces, where they are no longer stigmatized. More generally, are we moving towards an increased partitioning of the spaces of sexuality and those of the market public sphere? Live cams, remote marital relations, “*OnlyFans*” subscriptions for erotic and pornographic content, asexual relationships, online dating and virtual reality headsets and sensors have led to an opening up of the forms of sexual transactions made possible by technology, and is it not the economic disembedding of SETs that has made this socially acceptable?

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