

Miria Bowers
C LIT 162
Prof. Amar
6 November 2021
Second Short Paper

Sexual Freedom and the Case for Police Abolition

Last year's George Floyd uprisings have not just impacted the United States, but have drawn attention to and inspired calls for police abolition across the world. But why do so many global progressive activists have it out for institutions of law enforcement? And, apart from racial profiling, how do the police negatively impact queer and sex worker communities? In this paper, I argue that police and policing exist on the most conservative end of liberal and neoliberal society, and that social conservatism is bred, in fact, by law enforcement itself. Historically, these institutions seek to police sexual expression through exaggerated claims of the danger of sex work, legal control through sexual and racial profiling, and eventually dominating the lucrative sex trade.

Firstly, however, we need to establish that social conservatism limits sexual knowledge and expression in general. Indeed, sex work would be far less risky if the powers that be actually educated young adults about what sexual responsibility looks like. One young, self-described 'cosmopolitan' Chinese woman describes it as: "Women do not get the education they need. . . . In college, one of my classmates thought you could get pregnant from just holding hands! So you see the problem" (Rofel, p. 122). Even though this interviewee comes from China - largely considered a Global South country - her words ring true for rising generations across countries otherwise considered developed. Whether police states or states with police, there is a strong ethos in conservative belief that to squash out knowledge of sex is to prevent it.

Similarly, conservative societal views argue that sex work is inherently exploitative, but in reality sex work is not any more exploitative than other capitalist wage labor, even in industries where one can 'be their own boss.' Direct selling schemes are popular among poor working women in Bangkok who would otherwise have gone into sex work, for example (Wilson, p. 168). This fact is interesting because of the way that many of those who work for direct selling companies such as Avon and Mistine (popular in Asia) are instructed to hawk their wares to their family and friends, if not told outright that they should recruit them for the company: "The power of direct selling lies in its ability to tap into individuals' social worlds and so enter extremely local markets" (Wilson, p. 171). This also creates a sort of artificial scarcity when local relationship units no longer need the products. One Thai ex-seller "abandoned selling [because of] the difficulty of collecting the payments from her intimates, especially her mother" (Wilson, p. 171). And yet, this blatantly exploitative network that feeds on the relationships of the seller until there is no more money to be found, is often still engaged in over consensual sex work in Bangkok communities due to its legality (Wilson, p. 175). Here we can see that what is considered "legal," what will not get one in trouble with law enforcement, is prized over than vocations where an individual can retain autonomy.

Policing and the "threat" of sex work or promiscuity to a community also works to control non-normative sexualities, especially along lines of race and queerness. The police are rarely questioned in the first place, but especially on charges of sexual crime using obvious racial profiling. A specific example would be in the 1920s United States when, "neither the prosecution

nor the defense attorneys compelled the police officers to explain their interest [in crimes of sodomy], justify their search without a warrant, or disclose their source of information” (Shah, p. 709). The preceding quote is an observation from Shah on a statutory sodomy case wherein a police officer on a hunch had taken it upon himself to look through a keyhole at two men he had been tailing having sexual intercourse - notably, an asian migrant man and a white young adult. This strange “interest” in the private sexual proclivities - usually homosexual or otherwise queer - of brown and black men has been well-documented since the emergence of specific American sodomy laws in the late 19th century. While those laws were taken off the books in 1976, at least in California, (Shah, p. 795), the stereotype of the depraved, queer brown man seeking young prostitutes still remains as a tool of police control.

In a more general sense, the reason for these sexual stereotypes gets at a deeper truth of policing in neoliberal societies - the security of the middle and upper classes at the expense of the queer, the non-white, and the working class, among others. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the reactions of those civilians attempting to assimilate into middle-class whiteness when that assimilation is threatened. In an article about the blurry lines that make up standards of Arab-American femininity, Naber writes, “[My interviewee’s] interpretation of her community’s prohibition is mediated by historically based U.S. nationalist anxiety about interracial marriage . . . his nightmare over his daughter’s potential interracial marriage emerges as a threat to securing white middle-class norms” (p. 97). The sexual connotations of a relationship between a white-passing Arab-American woman and a Black man are not merely frowned upon here, but are seen as a threat to the legality and safety of the middle-class American life that this interviewee’s family has worked to build. Across multiple religious backgrounds yet this same class status, we can see queerness treated the same way: “parents uphold the normative demands of middle-class American whiteness . . . a heterosexual imperative becomes a more significant symbol of the Arab virgin/American whore boundary than the ‘virginity’ ideal” (Naber, p. 101). Whether in marrying and having intercourse across racial lines or within the same sex, this same ideal of white, capitalist, middle-class life is uniquely threatened by the idea of black, brown, and queer “whores.”

This obsession with sexual control that police and legal systems across the globe have clearly shown in the last few centuries coalesces when one realizes that police and military routinely take on sting operations to harass and dominate queer, female, and non-white sex workers under the guise of ‘stopping sex trafficking.’ Brazil in the 00s is a quintessential example of these power grabs from sex work economies. Militarized Police operations such as Operation Carnival in Copacabana proved fruitless, arresting only one individual, but more than this garnered criticism for “hav[ing] no real effect, since the pimps and sex traffickers worked under police protection or in rackets run by the Militarized Police themselves” (Amar, p. 187). The goal of these operations, over the years, became clearer and clearer: to funnel Rio de Janeiro’s most lucrative sex work practices under police control, along with sexual slavery proper. As Amar puts it, were the goals of these supposedly anti-trafficking operations “making serious progress against trafficking networks, or was it breaking up independent, safe businesses, which were often run by women, and thus forcing those women onto the street where they must submit to police protection rackets[?]” (p. 189). In Brazil and across the world, police enjoy such a keen interest in both sex work and sexual exploitation because they seek to control it.

To tie it all together, one of the major reasons as to why these operations enjoyed such funding and governmental support in the otherwise progressive city of Rio de Janeiro was due to incitements of moral panic. The media hype of global sports events has, in the past, provided a

perfect cover for this: “the Brazilian government misconstrued data about sex trafficking in an effort to crack down on red-light districts, clean up those spaces, and make room for the stadiums, hotels, and facilities required for the World Cup and Olympics” (Mitchell, p. 332). If a link to something as horrifying on its face as sex trafficking - particularly of young girls - can be made to the popularity of global sports events such as these, half of the work is already done. As the rest of this paper has covered, there are multiple techniques at the disposal of the authorities with which to accomplish this. Mitchell’s article also brings up interesting points by focusing on *travestis*, a variation of trans woman sex worker common in Brazil, and who were specifically targetted as in need of ‘rescue’ just a few years before Brazil hosted the 2014 World Cup (Mitchell, pp. 325-326). Once again we see queerness linked here with a moral panic about sexual exploitation, regardless of any evidence that says otherwise. The end result for these specific travestis referenced in Mitchell’s article was the government shipping them “back to the conservative northeast against their will to families from which they had fled. Thus did the Brazilian government use brutal force to insist on the valorization of the ‘traditional family’ unit” (Mitchell, p. 328). Thus we come full circle, with the actions of police further fueling tenets of social conservatism. Moral panic as generated by societal conservatism only works to serve the police that are an integral part of the very horrors they claim to be fighting.

Police and policing exist on the most conservative possible end of liberal and neoliberal society, as made obvious through their treatment of and desire to control sex work and any potentially deviant sexual expression they perceive is connected to it. We have seen this through the ways that conservative social norms feed into threats from policing, such as a lack of comprehensive sexual education; the delusion many have that stepping into legal capitalist jobs will protect them from exploitation and instability; racial profiling and labeling queerness as perversion in order to secure the heteronormative white middle class; and in harassing sex workers out of their safe networks and into trafficking rings formed by the police themselves. It is no wonder why calls for police abolition have picked up in recent years by activists who hold the marginalized identities described in this piece. For those of us who will never be friends of the law, through no fault of our own, it is all we can do to hold on, fight for abolition, and build a sexually liberated future.

Works Cited

- Amar, Paul. "Chapter 5: Operation Princess in Rio De Janeiro: Rescuing Sex Slaves, Challenging the Labor-Evangelical Alliance, and Defining the Sexuality Politics of an Emergencing Human-Security Superpower." *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism*, by Paul Amar. Duke University Press, July 2013, pp. 173-199.
- Mitchell, Gregory. "Evangelical Ecstasy meets Feminist Fury: Sex Trafficking, Moral Panics, and Homonationalism during Global Sporting Events." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2016, pp. 325-356.
- Naber, Nadine. "Arab American Femininities: Beyond Arab Virgin/American(ized) Whore." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 32 no. 1, Spring 2006, pp. 87-111.
- Rofel, Lisa. "Chapter 4: From Sacrifice to Desire: Cosmopolitanism with Chinese Characteristics." *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, by Lisa Rofel. Duke University Press, May 2007, pp. 111-134.
- Shah, Nayan. "Between 'Oriental Depravity' and 'Natural Degenerates'; Spatial Borderlands and the Making of Ordinary Americans." *American Quarterly*, vol. 57 no. 3, Sep. 2005, pp. 703-725.
- Wilson, Ara. *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City*. University of California Press, July 2004.