

Review of Lydia's open door: Inside Mexico's most modern brothel by Patty Kelly, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

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Anthropologist Patty Kelly examines state-regulated sex work in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of Chiapas, in her ethnography *Lydia's open door: Inside Mexico's most modern brothel*. This book is part of a growing trend toward situating the workings of prostitution within the politics and economics of the locale under study. While it may be the “world's oldest profession,” prostitution itself is constantly changing. In this case, Kelly situates the Zona Galactica (Galactic Zone), Tuxtla's regulated prostitution district created in 1991, within the broader context of neoliberal economic reforms in Mexico. Her analysis is framed by Foucault's *scientia sexualis*—a discourse which attempts to control, cleanse, and simultaneously liberate bodies under the pretense of objective science, individualism, “free will”, and free markets.

Kelly weaves thick, empathetic description with insightful critiques of neoliberal economics and global politics. In the first chapters, she explores the IMF and World Bank's sordid history of economic reform in third-world countries and the implications of these policies for gender and sexual ideologies in Chiapas. While she steers clear of the much overdone anthropological assessment of Mexico's agricultural feuds and indigenous plights, she presents solid background information on Mexico's various political reforms, including discussions on the Zapatistas and the people of the Ejido Francisco I. Madero. In the last chapters, she discusses the lives of the workers in the zone.

Kelly does not ignore the negative impacts of Tuxtla's state-run brothels, and describes oppressive regulations imposed upon sex workers, including regular mandatory (and grotesque) medical

examinations. These regulations in the zone are coupled with raids on illegal, “clandestine” prostitutes outside the zone. These efforts to legitimize the zone reflect a “moral double standard that punishes poor women...” (62). Kelly draws heavily on Foucault to emphasize that regulated prostitution is more complicated than dichotomous feminist arguments of oppression/liberation. She explains that the Galactica “is another space, free from dominant norms regarding gender and sexuality, where men and women both learn and experience alternative sexualities, [but] it is also a place where cultural codes are reinforced” (159).

Sex work is transgressive as a commodified public activity, yet reflects the intersections of class with gender and sexual binaries, hierarchies, and norms. In an excellent instance of this, Kelly brilliantly parallels Mexico’s land disputes with moral and social hygiene arguments surrounding prostitution in Chiapas. Kelly states that “...discourses [on land and sex work]...are not just about public prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases, or only about class and oppression, but also speak to and reinforce deeply held beliefs about gender and sexuality...[that] reflect the current priorities of the state: order and modernity” (120). Ultimately, the zone is “located at the intersection of elite fears about working-class sexuality, urban growth, and desires for modernity, order, and hygiene...” (160).

While Kelly supports sex workers’ rights, she challenges readers to critically analyze state-run brothels at the micro level and neoliberal economics at the macro level. She leads readers to believe that perhaps a more egalitarian society would support public sex and, more importantly, women’s rights to choose when, where, at what price, and with whom they engage in sex. Though Kelly is somewhat repetitive in the concluding chapters, she reiterates that social stigma, as opposed to the work itself, oppresses women because it marginalizes workers who may have little options for employment in an economic system that increasingly feminizes the service sector while simultaneously

creating greater divisions between the rich and poor. Furthermore, she argues that social stigma echoes neoliberal economics by confining prostitution to socially acceptable spaces—spaces on the outskirts of society, away from the prying eyes of more “acceptable” society—while valorizing the consumptive behaviors that sex work provides. “Only the way a worker spends her earnings makes the work morally defensible” (199) and further pits workers against one another by dividing them into sex workers who work *por necesidad* (because of need) and sex workers who work *por gusto* (for pleasure), the latter being greatly stigmatized by workers and lay people alike (162). Kelly shows, though, that this mentality is rooted in gender ideologies that glorify women as mothers and therefore perceive sex work as a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Kelly’s work has important implications for understanding neoliberalism’s contradictory relationship with sexuality. Increasing regulation of the body was a Fordist project of the modern state, and the kind of zoning and medicalization that the Galactic Zone represents has been carried out in the U.S. and Mexico since the turn of the century, long before neoliberalism’s political ascendance. Importantly, she argues, like Harvey, that neoliberalism does not represent deregulation as much as reregulation, a shift of regulation from protection of people to the protection of markets (19). Allowing sex to become a marketable commodity worthy of state protection is neoliberal at its core. Yet the consolidation of tolerance zones, medicalization and regulation of the body seem at odds with the neoliberal project. While the book itself doesn’t discuss the implications of this contradiction, it does make clear that the neoliberal project is uneven and contradictory, and may not manifest itself out in the same ways in all spaces.

Kelly’s work is an important contribution to feminist discussions of sex work, particularly because she shows that “agency” is tied to larger social and economic structures. Her work brilliantly makes

complicated macro social problems accessible to readers of various backgrounds. One will most likely complete Lydia's Open Door with the same sense of compassion Kelly expresses for her informants and also recognize that the issue of sex work—like all service jobs in late capitalism—must be approached from broader perspectives that mix analyses of global society with thick ethnographic descriptions. In honor of the woman for whom the book is named, one should walk away with a newfound appreciation for the vast experiences of women and a sense of social responsibility to rearticulate gender ideologies, reform oppressive and sexist laws, and rethink the way one consumes.

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