Ne Nya Sexpuritanerna

I. India Thusi†

The northbound train has just arrived at the Old Town train station in Scandic City. The subway conductor is looking for passengers on the platform before preparing for the train’s departure to the next stop. Jasmine and Rebecca hurry past the sliding doors of the well-maintained red train and feel a sense of relief that they caught it. As the ladies run into the train, the conductor shuts the doors and begins to direct the train toward its next destination, into downtown Scandic City.

Scandic City is the capital city of Oceania, which is reputed to be a truly egalitarian society. Scandic City’s extensive police force includes “security officers” that handle low-level and quality-of-life offenses, as well as more professionalized “police officers.” This security organization is central to the democratic socialist agenda in Scandic City because the preservation of law and order is critical to the radical left agenda of the egalitarian New Radicals.

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1 The title is Swedish for The New Sex Puritans. Sexual Puritanism is an American concept, which reflects how “the pursuit of piety through sexual purity, [has] been at the forefront of American culture.” Eric Luis Uhlmann, et al., Implicit Puritanism in American Moral Cognition, 47 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCH. 312, 312 (2011). Feminists have historically been leaders in furthering the sexual purity agenda in the United States and abroad. See I. INDIA THUSI, POLICING BODIES: LAW, SEX WORK, AND DESIRE IN JOHANNESBURG (2021). This title reflects upon the Sexual Puritanism within feminist ideology, which is now expressed through the desire to punish various forms of deviant sexuality that are alleged to harm all women. See I. India Thusi, Feminist Scripts for Punishment, 134 HARV. L. REV. 2449 (2021). The title also invites a comparison between contemporary carceral feminists with the Puritans of yesteryear. Both were persecuted minorities that sought liberty from oppression. Both resorted to punishment and violence to achieve their righteous ends.

2 This story is based on Sweden, where I conducted a legal ethnography that included interviews with several people selling sexual services there. Many of my observations are included in this story, and where indicated, I have included data shared with me during semi-structured interviews with my research participants. Where statements about Oceania are not directly cited, the intention is to provide a generalized account inspired by Swedish politics and culture. The only observation from this story that is fictionalized is Jasmine and Rebecca’s relationship to each other and their encounter on the subway station. They represent two of my informants, and they have not met each other. All other observations about the Oceanic society reflect my impressions of Swedish society and data that I gathered there.

3 Readers might recognize the name “Oceania” from the book 1984. See GEORGE ORWELL, 1984 (1949). Like the Oceania from George Orwell’s book, the Oceania of this Essay embrace repression to further its vision of progression.

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political party. This egalitarian society reflects the feminist vision of the world. The country has a well-developed statecraft for control, which—for the most stigmatized women and people in Oceania—is experienced as pain.

Before Jasmine and Rebecca entered the train car, two city security guards had been chasing them—Rebecca had passed through the subway turnstile without paying her fare. She had managed to slide through the same turnstile as Jasmine, as Jasmine swiped her unlimited subway monthly pass.

After the train pulled away, Jasmine and Rebecca laughed and celebrated their escape from the security forces. The Scandic security police force took such quality-of-life offenses very seriously. Just last month, several security officers had assaulted Jasmine, kicking and punching her in a group of five. Jasmine stayed in the hospital for a week to recover from her injuries. She no longer engaged in petty offenses like skipping the subway fare because she was still recovering from her injuries from her last encounter with the force. But she would not try to stop her friend from doing what she wanted to do.

Jasmine and Rebecca met at a meeting for the only sex workers’ rights organization in Oceania. They live in a nation with strong social welfare, but they still sell sex for materialistic ends. Jasmine is an engineer and engages in sex work for additional spending money. She frequently travels around Europe and likes the disposable income she gets from selling sex. But her greatest fear is the shame that it would bring her if her family or friends found out. This is not normal behavior. When she was in school, she had learned that women who do this have something wrong with them. She often wonders what is wrong with her. She enjoys sex a lot and views her clients as weak and easy to manipulate. While she likes the income she receives from selling sex, she often wonders why it is so easy for her to do it. She grew up in Scandic City, the capital of Oceania, and is worried that she might meet people she knows as clients.

This subway encounter is an accurate retelling of an incident that occurred between me and Rebecca, who entered the subway after I swiped my subway pass. After we entered the subway train, she informed me that the security guard had previously assaulted her for a petty offense, resulting in her hospitalization, which is fictionalized in the Essay as being Jasmine’s experience. The real “Rebecca” grew up in Sweden, but she has foreign origins and is racialized as “Black” in Sweden. A recent United Nations report notes that racialized groups in Sweden complained of a “fear of an oppressive police presence, racial profiling and arbitrary stops and searches.” Sweden Should Step Up Efforts to Fight Systemic Racism, UN Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice Says After 5-day Visit, OFF. HIGHL COMM’R HUMAN RIGHTS, UNITED NATIONS (Nov. 4, 2022), https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/11/sweden-should-step-efforts-fight-systemic-racism-un-mechanism-advance-racial [https://perma.cc/F28K-332X].

This encounter was actually experienced by the key informant represented by Jasmine.

This focus on materialism was reflected in my ethnographic findings in Sweden. I encountered sex workers with professional degrees, who had access to other resources through their personal finances or through the government, who nevertheless engaged in sex work.

Jasmine is an anonymized version of one of my key informants. The following observations come from my interviews with her, as well as over 100 hours of participant observation I engaged in with her as my key informant.
Rebecca, on the other hand, is a migrant from New Zealand, and her long-time partner is of Oceanian origin. She lives with him in Oceania, and the couple is currently facing a high-profile prosecution. Her partner is accused of being her pimp, although she had engaged in sex work before meeting him and did it independent of her relationship to him. There is a presumption that women are either forced or mentally disturbed if they sell sex for money.

Rebecca and Jasmine want to support each other more as they meet their clients, but if they were to drive each other around or provide protection for each other while they worked, they would run the risk of being prosecuted as pimps.

The New Radicals is the ruling party in the island nation of Oceania, and Scandic City is the capital and largest city in Oceania. It’s been fifty years since the nation embraced a new constitutional order that promoted an egalitarian society. The egalitarianism of Oceania is embedded within the culture. Several generations of Oceanians have been educated to support and embrace the country’s commitment to egalitarianism. In fact, in some ways, Oceanians perceive their commitment to egalitarianism as a mark of their progressiveness, and perhaps superiority, as a society. Oceania is one of the few European countries without a violent colonialist past rooted in racial hierarchy. Oceanians feel “better” than people from other countries; and they certainly feel superior to their neighbors in Germany and Holland. They have embraced their commitments to equality and fairness, and this commitment lends a certain gravity to their public ethos.

Men and women are equally represented in almost all professions in Oceania. Women are well-represented in the professions that deal with medicine, the sciences, business, and mathematics, which had been previously male-dominated. Likewise, more men have entered into professions that previously were dominated by women.

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9 Rebecca is an anonymized version of two sex workers I interviewed; the prosecution is actual and ongoing. While she is not originally from New Zealand, the underlying facts of her husband’s prosecution are accurate.

10 This fear was relayed to me by several sex workers in Sweden.

11 My Swedish informants who supported the Swedish approach to prostitution frequently compared Sweden to Germany and Holland, and would suggest that the approaches in these countries, where sex work is legalized, went “too far” or that the people in these countries were less sexually restrained than Swedes.

12 See generally AKE DAUN, SWEDISH MENTALITY (1989) (examining the perception that Swedes are “shy, unemotional, [and] conflict-avoiding”).

13 Sweden has not achieved full equality with women’s representation in all professions. However, women are much more represented in male-dominated fields than in the United States, and my observation is that people took great pride in this form of equality. See Global Gender Gap Report 2022, WORLD ECON. F. 26 (Jul. 2022), https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf [https://perma.cc/MV2D-Y9FL] (“[Sweden’s] score reflects a high level of female workforce participation, parity in the participation of women in professional and technical roles, and a level of parity in estimated earned income that is higher than 137 other countries.”). This section is intended to acknowledge that there have been positive societal outcomes as a result of the feminist approach in Oceania.
When walking past construction sites in Scandic City, many women are building, wearing blue hard hats and carrying tools; some women are acting as supervisors for the construction projects. Many men in Oceania are elementary school teachers, nurses, and nannies. Parents and schoolteachers teach boys to embrace equality at home and show them how to cook and clean. The government promotes social media campaigns that encourage men to be primary caretakers during the early months of their children’s lives. When you enter grocery stores in the middle of the day, there are men acting as caretakers, chasing their young toddlers around the store. The infamous “double shift,” which many women in patriarchal societies must endure, does not exist in Oceania because the men “step up” and contribute to the work in the home. Accordingly, domestic labor is shared equally.

Furthermore, there is no gender wage gap, as laws that promote transparency in wages and hold companies accountable for wage inequities have successfully eliminated gender wage inequity. Companies and government entities have adopted strong affirmative action programs that require gender equity across professions. There is a robust social security system which acts as a safety net for people who are unable to support themselves or who are in desperate situations. So, people of Oceania can rely upon the government to provide for their basic needs, and they experience less pressure, born from desperation, to engage in illicit conduct just to have a roof over their heads.

But this society didn’t just naturally evolve into its current version of egalitarianism. While the people in Oceania have been the main participants in this social experiment in equality, many of the architects of Oceanian society were feminists from the United States, who imported their views

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14 Jess Huang et al., For Mothers in the Workplace, a Year (and Counting) Like No Other, MCKINSEY & CO. (May 5, 2021), https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/for-mothers-in-the-workplace-a-year-and-counting-like-no-other [https://perma.cc/ELY7-CNQ] (“Decades of research show that women do significantly more housework and childcare than men—so much so that women who are employed full-time are often said to be working a ‘double shift.’”).


16 This reflects the heteronormativewesness of the Swedish version of egalitarianism. While there is tolerance for homosexuality or nonbinariness, the feminist vision there is decidedly shaped by essentialist understandings of what it means to be a woman and man.


about how women could thrive in a society. These feminists provided the philosophical and ideological support for quotas and affirmative action and argued that women deserved equality in wages. They also believed that many governments were unconcerned with violence against women and argued that stronger criminal enforcement would protect women from harm.

These feminists further believed that sex is the primary site for the expression of patriarchy and that pornography and prostitution are evidence of male domination. Consequently, Oceania formed laws that criminalized the purchase of sex, while leaving the sale of sex decriminalized. This approach—the Oceania Model—protects the innocent women who, according to the dominant narrative in Oceania, are desperate and sell their bodies for money.

Oceania reflects a certain feminist vision for the future. It is a progressive social democracy that provides for the basic needs of those who need it and strives for equality by any means necessary.

And these means often require a strong state apparatus. In addition to the building of an infrastructure that supports quotas and direct action for women’s advancement in the workforce, the state has strongly embraced a statecraft that can monitor and regulate private activities in furtherance of its feminist vision for Oceania.

The Oceanian state relies upon extensive surveillance to further its equality agenda. Oceanian government officials believe egalitarianism can be enforced through the repression of contrary behaviors and beliefs. Accordingly, in addition to a well-funded and centralized state police force, there is an extensive network of semi-private security forces that monitor the

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19 The feminists that helped shape the aspects of Swedish society that I am concerned with in this Essay are radical feminists who advanced a feminism that embraces the use of police powers to advance women’s equality. Some call them carceral feminists because they have embraced the use of punishments to reach feminist ends. See Thusi, supra note 1, at 2449 (“Professor Elizabeth Bernstein coined the term ‘carceral feminism’ to describe the feminist commitment to ‘a law and order agenda.’”). The focus on American feminists is deliberate because they were particularly involved in the development of the Swedish prostitution law that prohibits prostitution for the buyer but decriminalizes it for the seller. The names of prominent American feminists were frequently mentioned by several of the police, sex workers, and advocates informants that I interviewed in Sweden, which was surprising for me. I was informed that these feminists continue to remain involved in the governance of sex work regulation there, and these feminists are my focus.


21 It is women because accounting for men, transgender people, and others complicates the feminist narrative on the issue.

22 The assumption that a woman would only sell sexual services out of desperation was prevalent based on my observations. This was apparent from media coverage, and many of the people I met in Sweden recounted this perspective. However, my observations told a different story of women who were not so desperate but nevertheless engaged in sex work.


24 This approach openly embraces punishment to further feminist goals. However, it does not consider that not all people or women experience the state from similar positions, and some women are harmed by additional punitive, state interventions. But see Thusi, supra note 1, at 2484 (arguing for a “new feminism [that] requires an openness to prioritizing intersectionality, rather than shallow mentions of a commitment to antiracism in response to accusations of racism”).
behaviors of Oceanian people. The state-trained security forces can be found all around public spaces in the capital of Oceania—including restaurants, nightclubs, bars, and subways.\(^{25}\)

The security officers monitor people’s behaviors and approach and remove people who deviate from the state’s expectations. While many Oceanians have had negative interactions with the security, they have learned to tolerate and ignore the excesses of security in order to cope. Life is a lot more challenging when you look appalled by, or try to resist, the actions of the security officers when security is everywhere.

Because they don’t know better, foreigners and tourists often pay too much attention to the security officers. If they have with darker skin or hair colors, they can quickly find themselves the objects of security officers’ attacks. Perhaps they were staring and, therefore, appeared “suspicious” or “drunk.”\(^{26}\) Even people who are generally racialized as white do not benefit from their whiteness if they do not reflect the blond, blue-eyed, and very fair-skinned ideal in Oceania.\(^{27}\) After a few such encounters, these darker-skinned foreigners quickly learn that in order to exist safely in public spaces, they have to ignore security officers and support whatever they do, regardless of the violence they inflict on others.

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\(^{26}\) This thread about interactions with the Swedish security polices mirrors my own and those of many others I encountered in Sweden:

I am venting here but I am on the cusp of quitting nights out as I’ve been kicked out of clubs multiple times after only having a few drinks WTF?

At Slakthuset for instance, there’s this big overgrown polar bear looking dude with the biggest bitch face imaginable that is just looking to kick people out for no reason and throw them out to the cold. I was making my way to the second dance floor and he just grabs my arm and throws me out for no reason.

At O’Leary’s this self-righteous ‘Secret Service’ wannabe went up to tables when they started laughing “too loud” and told them to keep it down in a very condescending tone.

At Under Bron I went for my third drink and I could seriously tell the blue guy nearby started circling around me like a vulture on a carcass.

And to top it off I went to some club last night (I forget the name) but I got kicked out for no reason at all and I wasn’t even drinking or being rowdy!

Like seriously WTF is up with these blue guards? Is having fun illegal in Stockholm or what LOL.

\(^{27}\) This section reflects on the racialized nature of policing I observed in Sweden. I often observed that people with olive complexions or darker skin, including foreigners from Italy or Spain, complained about the security officers or called them “racist.” They appeared to immediately recognize that they were being singled out because they were not white enough despite the Swedish officials often declaring that racism was not tolerated in Sweden. It is remarkable because in a relatively short amount of time, I observed a substantial number of incidents of police violence. This demonstrates the harms that come from demanding a robust police state to address community harm. I also observed the discrepancies in how the prototypical Swedish-looking people (blond and blue eyes) were treated as compared to others, including other white people.
The security officers enforce the Oceanian value of “jantelagen,” which reflects the belief that “you’re not to think you are anything special.” Jantelagen reflects a commitment to communitarianism and to working as a collective that supports everyone in the community. It also reflects a commitment to a particular definition of normality: we are all the same. While this value is reflected in the deep commitment to equality in Oceania, it is also reflected in the intolerance for difference and deviance. Oceanians dress similarly; they mind their own business and do not speak with strangers; they prefer to be quiet rather than boisterous. And if people act differently or dare to be unique, Oceanians question why that person is not behaving “normally.” Because Oceania is an egalitarian society, there is an explicit rejection of racism. However, people who emigrate there are expected to quickly learn the Oceanic language and assimilate into Oceanian society, in order to be normal.

The security officers ensure that in public spaces everyone’s behavior fits into the prescribed norms. To be normal in Oceania is to embrace the equality of the sexes; it is to live your life in accordance with this equality; it is to accept the omnipresence of state police and to refuse to interfere, even when such officers rely upon repression to effectuate equality.

To be normal is to accept that sex and sexuality must be normal; that normal sex is usually monogamous; that normal sex must be precious even if it happens with many partners; that normal sex is not commercial; that abnormal sex is oppressive to women even when the women enjoy it. When women engage in abnormal sex, they suffer from Stockholm Syndrome and are co-conspirators to their own oppression. These women are both enemies to the state and victims who need to be saved by it.

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29 There is a stereotype that Swedish people are sexually liberal. See Matthias Kamann, Swedish Liberal Attitude Towards Sex–Feminism, Stereotypes & Nudity, HEJ SWEDEN (last updated Mar. 6, 2020), https://hejsweden.com/en/swedish-liberal-attitude-towards-sex [https://perma.cc/99D8-749Q] (discussing the reasons Swedes are associated with a liberal sexual attitude). My observation was that while people were open to having a large number of sexual partners, overt displays of sexuality in public places were not common. People rarely engaged in public displays of affection, and sex appeared to be something reserved for private spaces, with affirmative consent, and with women often acting as the sexual initiators.

30 See Jay Levy & Pye Jakobsson, Sweden’s Abolitionist Discourse and Law: Effects on the Dynamics of Swedish Sex Work and on the Lives of Sweden’s Sex Workers, 14 CRIMINOLOGY & CRIM. JUSTICE 593, 597 (2014) (noting that a “primary ambition” of criminalizing the purchase of sex was to “decrease levels of sex work”).

It is in this society of equality, of great social resources, with a developed social welfare state—this socialist country—that we find a shadow society of marginal, abnormal people.

Despite the cultural norms in Oceania, some women, nonbinary people, queer people, and even men, still sell sex for money. The law decriminalizes their activities. Yet the surveillance of the state never seems to leave them. Police design tactical operations, during which they arrest everyone who enters the home of people believed to be selling sex. People who experience racialized policing because they are Arab, Black, or have darker skin tones also might not want this feminist vision that embraces police. People who complicate the feminist narrative that only desperate women enter sex work, such as LGBTQ+ sex workers or nonbinary sex workers, might want their lived experiences more fully incorporated into this feminist vision.

Researchers have tried to assess the impact of the Oceanian approach on sex work. They have asked: is this really better for sex workers and for women? But several Oceanian researchers who have chosen to conduct independent research to study these laws have been prevented from doing so by western feminists from abroad. Some of the feminists who promoted the Oceania Model are so invested in it that they have contacted government officials to eliminate funding for research on the topic.

Rebecca and Jessica complicate the feminist vision for equality. They enjoy deviant sex. They don’t like the police. They are reminders that the ideology of equality may facilitate repression when it’s reduced to dogma.

This grand egalitarian state, this truly equal society, has achieved the goal that so many feminists long for. This society reflects their ideology. It is a truly equal society, so long as people act normal. And those few deviants, especially sexual deviants, who do not reflect their ideal vision are merely collateral damage.

32 Feminists in Oceania are only concerned with women in sex work.
33 See Thusi, supra note 1, at 2484.