

Call for papers

## **With Compensation**

**Consent and sexual transactions, 18<sup>th</sup> century to present**

**Université Rennes 2 (Rennes, France), 2-3 November 2026**

Conference of the ConSent research project – *Consentement, éthique sexuelle  
et sensibilités érotiques* (ANR-21-CE27-0026-02)

Organizers: Romain Jaouen (ENS Lyon) et Caroline Muller (Rennes 2)

Since 2017, media coverage of the MeToo movement has prompted a resurgence of research on sexual consent in the humanities and social sciences. Whether by tracing the history of consent as a norm (Théry 2022), examining its application in the judicial arena (Pérona 2022; Mornington et al. eds. 2023; Le Meur 2025), or analyzing its place in everyday sexuality (Boucherie 2019; Lévy-Guillain 2024), researchers have tackled the question from multiple angles. However, little attention has been paid to a long-standing subject of debate in feminist theory: sexual transactions. In the 1980s, the question sex workers' consent – specifically, female sex workers – was hotly debated during the North American sex wars (Rubin 1984; Dworkin 1993; Möser 2022). Since then, prostitution has remained a central topic in feminist political theory, particularly in relation to consent (Fraisie 2007; Serra 2024). However, the modalities and specificity of (non)consent in transactional practices, on a micro-analytical scale, remain largely unexplored.

This conference aims to revisit this topic by examining the role of consent in sexual transactions beyond the sole case of prostitution. Shifting the focus away from theoretical debates on this issue, the purpose of this conference is to describe, document, and analyze the way consent and transactions intersect through historically situated sexual practices. Organized by the [ANR ConSent](#) team, it aims to contribute to a study “from below” of the norm of consent from the 18th century to the present day. The call is open to researchers from all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences working in France, Europe, and beyond. Presentations (20 minutes), in French or English, should situate their subject in its specific historical context, regardless of the period and materials used (archives, publications, images, narratives, cinematographic works, testimonies, interviews, observations, etc.). A publication project in the form of a journal issue will be proposed to participants.

## Sexual transactions and consent: an encounter yet to come?

Since the 2000s, “sexual transactions,” understood as sexual practices “giving rise, directly or indirectly, to material, financial, or symbolic compensation” (Broqua et al. 2014), have become an important object of study in the anthropology of sexuality. Inspired by Paola Tabet's concept of “economic-sexual exchange” (Tabet 2012), francophone researchers have explored the many ways in which sexuality can be a place of transaction, in and beyond the context of sex work, and how such transactions articulate various relations of power or domination (Benquet and Trachman 2009). Consent, however, was not a central issue in their investigations.

In the field of history, research on transactional sexuality has long been polarized by the distinction between prostitution and “ordinary” sexuality. Ambivalent figures such as the *demi-mondaine* aside (González Quijano 2016), researchers have focused on socially recognized forms of prostitution (Corbin 1978; Plumauzille 2016). In this historiography, the issue of consent has emerged through the history of human trafficking, particularly in the context of the moral crusades against the “white slavery” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chaumont 2009). While legislative debates in France focused on sanitary concerns and the moral preservation of young girls (Machiels 2008; Quincy-Lefebvre 2011), women's consent to prostitution became an issue in the regulation of prostitution-related migrations (Camiscioli 2019). Practically, historians have noted that women's consent could fluctuate over the course of their lives, from their entry into prostitution to the entrapping mechanisms of subjection or indebtedness to pimps (Blanchard 2022: 343; Millot 2023), or, on a discursive level, depending on whether they were speaking to their families or to the authorities (Camiscioli 2019).

In these studies, the issue of consent in interactions with clients has rarely been explored in depth. For those that consider prostitution to be inherently violent, the consent of sex workers vis-à-vis their clients is not a matter of discussion (Duché and Ruy 2021). However, adopting a sociological perspective, Lilian Mathieu argues that among the multiple forms of violence suffered by sex workers in contemporary times, some are specifically “sexual” (Mathieu 2002). This suggests that not all paid-sex interactions are equally consented to. How, then, can we describe the interactional construction of agreements (or their violation) between sex providers and sex seekers? Looking back in time, what can be said about sexual transactions during past centuries, both within and beyond the socially sanctioned arenas of brothel prostitution and street solicitation?

Conversely, the issue of consent has been central to research on sexual violence, but here, the role of transactions has remained in the shadows. Admittedly, sex crimes or offenses, newly understood as violence against persons in the late modern era (Vigarello 1998), were not defined by the presence of retributions in exchange for sex. However, traces of compensation – offered or received – can be found in many court records relating to sex crimes. How should these be interpreted, and what effect do they have way cases were analyzed by judicial actors in their own time, and how we approach them as researchers today? The issue is even more sensitive in the case of sex offenses that postulate the impossibility of consent, such as sexual relations with children and adolescents, which were gradually codified in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ambroise-Rendu 2009). Although the courts of past centuries did not always pay attention to this<sup>1</sup>, retributions for sex were commonplace in such cases. How transactional mechanisms contributed to the obtention or extortion of consent in these relationships remains to be analyzed. This also applies to other non-

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<sup>1</sup> At ‘best’, the moral standing of victims who had accepted retributions was put in doubt (Bacchiaga, 2024).

coercive relationships which are now sanctioned by law – though only since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – such as those involving partners in a relationship of institutional authority<sup>2</sup>.

In everyday heterosexuality (flirting, dating, and sexual relations within or outside marriage), recent research shows that indebtedness mechanisms can weigh on sexual consent (Carbajal *et al.* 2019). However, the idea that specific sexual acts might be consented to in exchange for specific retributions remains largely unexplored. One instance of this is premarital sex during the later modern period, where the promise of marriage served as the term of exchange (Sohn 1996a: 580; Mortas 2017: 356; Philip 2022). Overall, the link between transactions and consent has been best analyzed in the context of minority sexualities. This is the case with intergenerational sexuality between men, which queer historians commonly refer to as “modern pederasty” (Amin 2017). Relationships between boys – children, adolescents, or young men – and older adults are often accepted in exchange of financial or material rewards (money, movie tickets, cigarettes, invitations to restaurants, lodging, etc. – Maynard 1997; Revenin 2015). Historians have debated the degree of freedom enjoyed by the youths who participate in these transactions and their capacity to consent (Périsso 2008; Brickell 2012, Cleves 2020, Trichard 2024).

This line of questioning has also been explored in the history of sexual transactions in times of conflict or radical oppression. In studies on sexual relations in the Nazi concentration and extermination system, some authors argue that sexual “barter” existed, allowing for agency on the part of the actors, despite the imperatives of survival and the exacerbated hierarchies of camp life (Hájková 2021; Bos 2024). Others point to the existence of quasi-sexual slavery, which undermined any free will (Sommer 2014; Jones 2024). Similar questions have been addressed in the study of sexual relations in the context of slavery (Owens, 2023).

## **Describing, contextualizing, interpreting: analyzing transactional (non-) consent**

While sexuality can rightly be considered a place of exchange in all circumstances, we are interested in situations in which sex is obtained or granted in exchange for explicit compensation, whether that compensation is material or not, verbalized or not, before or after sex, and regardless of the gender of the partners. As for consent, we understand it not only as a relationship to oneself, but also as the result of an interaction – the establishment of an agreement between two partners with room for maneuver – and as a relational disposition – the propensity to take into account the consent of others. Distinct among other forms of sexuality, sexual transactions raise many questions in terms of consent, which we outline below. We invite participants to reflect on the methodological possibilities and challenges when tackling these questions.

### **Axis 1 – Describing and understanding signs of consent in the context of transactional sex**

In the context of transactions involving a sexual act, both providers and seekers must signal their intention or their availability. Solicitations may emanate from the provider of sex, or from the person who seeks it, and can take various forms. The signs used to signal availability vary as well: a verbal signal based on shared vocabulary, the manipulation of an object, or a gesture signifying

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<sup>2</sup> In France, relations between minors over 15 years of age (i.e., past the age of consent) and a person in a position of institutional authority (teachers, educators, etc.), even if consensual, were prohibited in 1980.

agreement. This first axis invites participants to study how the signs of assent expressed, as well as how they vary according to the location, the era, and context of the transaction. Transactional sexuality takes place in a multitude of spaces: from cafés, restaurants, theaters, ballrooms, and *café-concerts* in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris (González-Quijano 2015) to contemporary beaches in Peru (Roguet 2025). It can also be found, at times, in the more ordinary realms of everyday sexuality, such as the bedroom, or in shared spaces appropriated for sexual purposes (the workplace, the crop field, the woods, the urinal, a public park). It would be interesting to question the expression of consent depending on whether the transaction is private, public, or exposed to outsiders' view (Iacub 2008).

When assent is given, the terms of the transaction themselves may cover several parameters of the relationship: its duration (an hourly rate, for example, for camming – Jones 2020), the price and type of remuneration provided (money, or various resources), the exact nature of sexual acts and practices, and how certain acts are to be performed (the level of intensity allowed in practices such as whipping or choking). Can discussions or negotiations over these elements guarantee a degree of consent on both sides of the transaction? How do the timing, channels, and interfaces of the discussion affect the production of consent? And when those who offer sexual acts display a “specialization”, as expressed, for example, in classified ads in the Belle Époque press (Mortas 2020; Gaillard 2024), is the production of consent reconfigured?

The specificity of places explicitly dedicated to sexual transactions, such as brothels, needs to be interrogated. What happens there to the signs of consent, and how do clients perceive them? Do they assume collective consent? To what extent do these spaces allow for individualized negotiation of consent, in a context where the constraints on sex workers can be very heavy? This raises the question of the weight of intermediaries involved in the transaction on the formulation of consent. Local coalitions of actors – for example, sex workers agreeing on the price of services – can also influence the terms of exchange.

It is from the elements of this negotiation that disagreements, misunderstandings, or conflicts can arise, potentially tipping the relationship into sexual violence. Considering the steps leading to sexual interaction, can we hypothesize that (non-)consent is specific in a transactional context? Does the presence of explicit (rather than implicit) negotiations, or even contractualization, constitute a condition or materialization of consent? And how do the authorities who regulate or monitor these relationships assess the terms of the agreement when confronted with sexual transactions?

## **Axis 2 – Transactional consent as an observational standpoint to analyze power relations**

Each of these questions must be considered within the sociocultural and legal environment in which sexual transactions take place. Sexual transactions are part of a web of power relations that involve class, gender, race, and age, as well as hierarchies of law and status, especially in societies structured by caste, estates, or slavery. In the Middle Ages, prostitutes were mainly poor, immigrant, or isolated young women (Lett 2024); this was also the case for most prostitutes imprisoned at the Salpêtrière during the French Revolution (Plumauzille 2013). In transactional intergenerational sex, relationships of class and age are often closely intertwined.

However, sexual transactions imply a biased approach to power dynamics. Instead of a unilateral imposition of will, they seemingly postulate the capacity of both parties to take an active part in determining the conditions of the interaction. To write the history of the consent to

transactional sexuality, we must ask how power relations impact the subjects' room for maneuvering in negotiations, sometimes referred to as agency (Garrau 2021). From one context to another, does the production of consent to sexual transactions allow for the expression of agency? Do transactions reactivate or disrupt the power dynamics of a given social context? The question is worth asking both for those who “specialize” in transactional sex as for those who only practice it occasionally.

This room for maneuvering must be positioned against large-scale historical processes. In colonial contexts for instance, and in contexts of racialization more broadly (Taraud 2003; Séquin 2024), the definition of consent depends on the perception of a specific sexual availability of racialized bodies (Dorlin 2009). The production of consent can also be affected by historical events, particularly wars, which transform the geography and markets of transactional sexuality. When access to women's bodies is presented as a reward for military service, the consent of prostitutes – and other women (Anonymous 2007 [1954]) – is taken for granted: see, for example, the case of the GIS in 1945 (Roberts 2013). More generally, if we consider sexual transactions as part of a market, consent to these transactions is caught up in the state of supply and demand specific to each historical situation: a dense supply, such as in the ports of Bristol and Nantes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Pluskota 2016), limits the possibility of negotiating the exact terms of the transaction.

### **Axis 3 - Transactions, consent and sexual culture: a learning experience?**

Less commonly considered, the role of transactions in the learning of consent is a question worth asking. Transactions require the explicit expression of expectations that are usually implicit in “ordinary” or legally codified forms of sexuality—in France, for example, marriage as defined in the Civil Code of 1804. The negotiation of a transaction is premised on the fact that sex is not taken for granted, which allows for the person who provides sex to set their conditions. This experience may develop specific skills in both partners, whether verbal or behavioral, as well as a particular disposition towards sexuality. This can lead to a learning process on both sides, which consists either of knowing how and to whom to ask for a transaction, or of accepting the request and negotiating consent.

This conference will provide an opportunity to examine this learning process from the perspective of those who provide sexual services. Can transactional sexuality be learning experience regarding how to negotiate consent, as suggested by recent reflections on the experience of prostitution as a place of explicit negotiation with a client (Despentes 2006)? This question can also be asked from the perspective of clients and other seekers, when considering their point of view in the transactions (Rubio 2020). Can paying for sex be a way for them to learn that sexuality is not a given, and that it is therefore necessary to obtain the agreement of someone else to have sex? Beyond the transactional framework, are there transfers and knock-on effects of these lessons in more “ordinary” and legitimate forms of sexuality, as individuals acquire experience in the negotiation of access to sexuality?

This question can be considered at an individual level, by asking how specific people develop new relationships to sex through the medium of sexual transactions. But it also needs to be asked as well as on a macroscopic level, which is to say collective experiences. For instance, did the widespread use of prostitution by men until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century constitute a socializing experience in terms of consent? Are sexual negotiations a place through which a broader “sexual culture” is developed, traces of which might be found elsewhere, reformulated and appropriated throughout

the romanticization of couples and emotional aspirations in marriage? In other words, have the diverse and varied forms of transactional sexuality contributed to the emergence of a culture of consent since the 18<sup>th</sup> century?

## Application procedure

**Proposals** (500 words max.) should be sent by email by **May 15, 2026**, to the following addresses: [romain.jaouen@sciencespo.fr](mailto:romain.jaouen@sciencespo.fr) and [caroline.muller@univ-rennes2.fr](mailto:caroline.muller@univ-rennes2.fr). Authors should indicate their research framework, subject, and methodology. They are invited to specify their approach to the concepts of “transaction” and “consent,” whichever they adopt. An indicative bibliography is requested (max. 10 references). In addition to the proposal, a **brief presentation** of the authors is expected, limited to 100 words.

Decisions on acceptance will be made before **June 15, 2026**.

Partial funding for accommodation and transportation will be provided for participants.

## Scientific committee

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