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The Rights and Wrongs of Prostitution

JULIA O'CONNELL DAVIDSON

This essay critically explores contemporary Euro-American feminist debate on prostitution. It argues that to develop analyses relevant to the experience of more than just a small minority of "First World" women, those who are concerned with prostitution as a form of work need to look beyond liberal discourse on property and contractual consent for ways of conceptualizing the rights and wrongs of "sex work."

Feminists are deeply divided on the issue of prostitution, and debate between what might loosely be termed the "sex work" and the "abolitionist" lobbies is often both heated and bitter. This can be disconcerting for those like me who find themselves in sympathy with elements of both "sides" of the debate and yet also feel it is the wrong debate to be having about prostitution. My own research on prostitution over the past eight years has involved ethnographic and interview work with prostitutes, third-party organizers of prostitution, and clients in both affluent and poor countries (O'Connell Davidson 1998). In all the countries where I have conducted research, female prostitutes are legally and socially constructed as a separate class of persons, and as such are subjected (to varying degrees) to a range of civil and human rights abuses. I am in complete sympathy with "sex work" feminists' calls for prostitutes to be accorded the same legal and political rights and protections as their fellow citizens. I also agree that the vast majority of those who enter prostitution without being coerced into it by a third party do so for economic reasons, and that prostitution therefore represents a form of work. At the same time, however, none of the data from my research have made me want to celebrate the existence of a market for commoditized sex; rather, the reverse (see O'Connell Davidson 2001; O'Connell Davidson and Sánchez Taylor 1999). In this sense, I am in sympathy with the feminist abolitionist case.

This essay argues that what is wrong with much contemporary Euro-American feminist debate on prostitution is that it disallows the possibility of sup-

porting the rights of those who work in prostitution as workers, but remains critical of the social and political inequalities that underpin market relations in general, and prostitution in particular.

PROSTITUTION AND PROPERTY IN THE PERSON

There is a longstanding tension within liberal political thought regarding the relationship between the body, property, and labor. John Locke is famous for this dictum: "Every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has any right to but himself. The labor of his body, and the work of his hands, we many say, are properly his" (1993, 274). This dictum allows for the commodification of a person's bodily capacity to labor. Yet as Bridget Anderson notes, because he viewed the body as God-given and sacred, Locke also considered that "a man does not stand in the same relation to his body as he does to any other type of property. . . . So a man does not have the right to kill himself, or put himself into slavery, because he is the work of God" (2000, 3).

The liberal concept of property in the person thus leaves open certain questions about what can, and cannot, properly be commodified and contractually exchanged across a market. In this sense, it appears to have set the agenda for much contemporary Euro-American feminist debate on prostitution. For instance, do the body's sexual capacities constitute property in the person or is it impossible to detach sex from personhood without moral harm? Does prostitution law violate the prostitute's natural right to engage in voluntary transfers of her rightful property, or does the prostitution contract itself violate her natural right to dignity? (See, for example, Pateman 1988; Barry 1995; Jeffreys 1997; Chapkis 1997.)

Marxist thinkers view liberal discourse on property, labor, contractual consent, and freedom as a series of fictions that serve to conceal or naturalize huge asymmetries of economic, social, and political power. Their arguments suggest that a person's labor (whether sexual, emotional, mental, or manual) is, in Braverman's words, "like all life processes and bodily functions . . . an inalienable property of the human individual." Because it cannot be separated from the person of the laborer, it is not *labor* that is exchanged, sold or surrendered across a market. What workers sell, and what employers buy "is *not an agreed amount of labor, but the power to labor over an agreed period of time*" (1974, 54). Since property in the person cannot be separated from the person, the wage labor contract actually involves a transfer of powers of command *over* the person. In exchange for *x* amount of money, the employer gets the right to direct the worker to perform particular tasks, or to think about particular problems, or provide particular forms of service to customers.

Likewise, *sex* or *sexual labor* is not exchanged in the prostitution contract. Rather, the client parts with money and/or other material benefits in order to secure powers over the prostitute's person that he (or more rarely she) could

not otherwise exercise. He pays in order that he may direct the prostitute to make body orifices available to him, to smile, dance, or dress up for him, to whip, spank, urinate upon, massage, or masturbate him, to submit to being urinated upon, shackled, or beaten by him, or otherwise act to meet his desires (O'Connell Davidson 1998). It is not that the prostitution contract allows the client to buy the *person* of the prostitute while the employment contract merely allows the employer to buy the worker's fully alienable labor power. Both contracts transfer powers of command from seller to buyer (the extent of those powers and the terms of the transfer being the subject of the contract), and so require the seller to temporarily surrender or suspend aspects of her will.

Liberal theorists generally regard the invasion of an individual's will to be a heinous violation of fundamental human rights, and take a dim view of pre-capitalist and "traditional" social formations within which dominant groups exercised personalistic power to force their subordinates to do their bidding. But because market relations are imagined to involve the exercise of power over commodities rather than persons, and because employers do not usually use personalistic power to force workers to surrender their "property," the wage labor contract can be presented as an equivalent, mutual, and voluntary exchange. Money, the universal medium for the expression of the exchange values of commodities, is exchanged for the "commodity" of labor power. In capitalist liberal democracies, formal rights of equal participation in the process of commodity exchange are interpreted as a form of freedom for capitalist and worker alike, even though it is through this very process of exchange that the political and economic dominance of the capitalist class is maintained and reproduced. The beauty of the concept of property in the person, then, is that it conceals the relations of power and dependence that exist between those who pay others to do their will, and those who get paid to surrender their own will and do someone else's bidding.

For anyone who is remotely swayed by this critique, questions about whether or not sex can be commercialized in the same way as labor are the wrong questions to ask about rights. To paraphrase Anatole France, granting rich and poor, men and women, white and black, "First World" and "Third World," an equal right to engage in prostitution under the bridges of Paris is hardly to strike a blow for human equality or freedom. And yet feminists who discuss prostitutes' rights to freely alienate their sexual labor certainly wish to promote greater equality and freedom. Indeed, they arrive at their position out of a concern to challenge the very serious civil and human rights violations that have historically been and still are routinely faced by women prostitutes all over the world (documented in, for example, Walkowitz 1980; Alexander 1997; Cabezas 1999; Uddin et al. 2001).

"Sex work" feminists note that these violations are linked to the legal and social construction of women prostitutes as sexual deviants, rather than as

workers, and to counter this, they emphasize the continuities between prostitution and other forms of wage labor. From here, it would seem a straightforward matter to move to a critical analysis of the class, gender, race, and global power relations that underpin the contemporary sex industry. But instead, "sex work" feminists often take a rather different turn, and one that is rarely made by those concerned with the rights of workers in other sectors. Having discussed ways in which the market for commodified sex is shaped by global and/or gender inequalities, some analysts move to talk about the selling of sexual labor as though it can represent a form of resistance to those inequalities (see, for example, Bell 1994; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Nagel 1997). This is not a leap that directly follows from the proposition that prostitution is a form of labor. Few would, for example, describe the sweatshop worker as "challenging" poverty by stitching garments, the airline flight attendant as "defying" sexism by smilingly serving drinks, or the black child selling shoeshine service in the Caribbean as "resisting" racism by polishing the shoes of white tourists. What makes prostitution different? The answer, I think, has to do with the vexed relationship between sex and selfhood.

SEX AND SELFHOOD REVISITED

"What is wrong with prostitution?" Carole Pateman asks, and answers that for the client to buy mastery of an objectified female body, the prostitute must sell *herself* in a very different and much more real sense than that which is required by any other occupation (1988, 207). This damages the prostitute. To contract out sexual use of the body requires the woman to sever the integrity of body and self, something that carries grave psychological consequences (see, for example, Jeffreys 1997 and Barry 1995). Critiquing such analyses, many "sex work" feminists point to similarities between prostitution and other personal service occupations, arguing that prostitution is better understood as involving a form of emotional labor. Such labor is not always or necessarily harmful to the worker. Wendy Chapkis (1997), for example, notes that while the flight attendants in Arlie Hochschild's 1983 classic study of emotional labor often believed that performing emotion work had changed them in some way, they "most often described that transformation as a positive one, of gaining greater control." In the same way, Chapkis argues, sex workers can experience "the ability to summon and contain emotion within the commercial transaction . . . as a useful tool in boundary maintenance rather than as a loss of self" (1997, 75). If sex and emotion are "stripped of their presumed unique relationship to nature and the self, it no longer automatically follows that their alienation or commodification is simply and necessarily destructive" (Chapkis 1997, 76).

Chapkis then moves on to observe that in some settings, emotion work is "socially rewarded and personally gratifying," and yet, "the respect given to

emotional labor in the theatre, a psychotherapist's office, or a day care center rarely extends to the brothel" (1997, 79). Picking up on Hochschild's argument that a lack of control over the terms and conditions of employment intensifies the human costs of performing emotional labor, Chapkis concludes that it is not the commodification of emotion *per se* that is problematic in sex work; rather: "mundane concerns like status differences between worker and client, employee/employer relations and negative cultural attitudes toward the work performed, may be at the root of the distress and damage experienced by some workers. This is less grand, less poetic, than the image of a soul in necessary and mortal danger through the commodification of its most intimate aspects. Such a formulation, however, has the advantage of pointing critics in the direction of practical interventions such as workplace organizing and broader political campaigns to increase the status and respect accorded to those performing the labor" (1997, 82).

It strikes me that this formulation also has advantages for anyone who wants to pay for sexual experience but still retain their feminist credentials (it provides a blueprint for how to be a "good" and "responsible" client, prostitution's equivalent of a "green consumer"), and that this is surely significant for Chapkis, who opens the final chapter of her book by saying, "After years of researching the subject of sex for money, I decided to finally have some" (1997, 215).¹ Chapkis's identification with the wish to consume commercial sex helps to explain why, unlike Hochschild, she pays little attention to "the human cost of becoming an 'instrument of labor'" (Hochschild 1983, 3), or to questions about the exploitative and alienating nature of the capitalist labor process, and does not really develop a critique of commercialism in relation to prostitution. Nor does Chapkis's analysis of prostitution refer to broader debates on class or labor movements, despite the mention of employment relations and workplace organizing in the passage quoted above.

So whilst Chapkis's *Live Sex Acts* provides a detailed and well-crafted case for women prostitutes' full civil and political inclusion, it does not question orthodox liberal narratives about property in the person, market relations, and human rights. Meanwhile, the emphasis on increasing "the status and respect" accorded to sex workers, alongside the inclusion of a chapter "sharing" the details of her own "commercial sexual experience," suggests that Chapkis believes that the sexual-emotional labor involved in prostitution, like the emotion work involved in psychotherapy, acting, or the provision of day care, has some intrinsic social value. The implication is that sex work should be respected and socially honored because it expresses (or at least can, under the right circumstances express) a form of care or creativity.

This view is more explicitly elaborated in the work of "sex radical" feminists. Sex radical theory holds that the legal and social binaries of normal/abnormal, healthy/unhealthy, pleasurable/dangerous sex, as well as of gender itself, are

profoundly oppressive. Thus, sex radicals celebrate consensual sexual practices that can be read as subverting such binaries (Vance 1984, Rubin 1999, Califia 1994). Through this lens, both the buying and selling of commercial sex appear as legitimate features of "erotic diversity." Pat Califia, for example, holds that prostitution serves valuable social functions and would not disappear even in a society that had achieved full gender, race, and class equality: "There will always be people who don't have the charm or social skill to woo a partner. In a society where mutual attraction and sexual reciprocity are the normal bases for bonding, what would happen to the unattractive people, those without the ability or interest to give as good as they get? Disabled people, folks with chronic or terminal illnesses, the elderly, and the sexually dysfunctional would continue to benefit (as they do now) from the ministrations of skilled sex workers who do not discriminate against these populations" (1994, 245).

Fetishists would also continue to provide demand for commercial sex, Califia goes on, since "many fetishist scripts are simply elaborate forms of sublimated and displaced masturbation that do not offer anything other than vicarious pleasure to the fetishist's partner" (1994, 245). Prostitution obviates the need for anyone to, in Califia's words, "play the martyr" in a relationship by selflessly indulging a partner's fetish. And in her utopia, sex workers "would be teachers, healers, adventurous souls—tolerant and compassionate. Prostitutes *are* all of these things today, but they perform their acts of kindness and virtue in a milieu of ingratitude" (1994, 247).

In Chapkis's and Califia's writings, then, arguments about prostitution as a form of labor get conflated with claims about the social value of sex work and the client's rights to access the services of prostitutes (see also Perkins and Bennett 1985; Queen 1997). Prostitutes should be socially honored because they facilitate the gratification of erotic needs that would otherwise go unmet, just as health care professionals and teachers should be honored because they meet the population's health and educational needs. And because it meets human needs, prostitution, like medicine and education, would persist in a society that had achieved full gender, race, and class equality.

This takes us a long way from the idea of prostitution as mere service work, for if the comparison were made with, say, jobs in the hotel industry or domestic work, the same arguments would be rather less convincing. (There will always be people who are too busy or important, or who simply cannot be bothered, to open the door for themselves, make their own beds, wash their own clothes, clean the lavatory after they have used it, and come the revolution, these people would continue to benefit, as they do now, from the ministrations of skilled and professional doorpersons, chamber maids, and domestic workers.) Indeed, the fact that these writers compare sex work to healing or psychotherapy and think in terms of some kind of transcendental human *need* for prostitution suggests that they are quite as reluctant as "radical" feminists to strip sex of its

“unique relationship to the self,” albeit for very different reasons. Where “radical feminists” think prostitution is fundamentally wrong because it commodifies something that cannot be detached from the self, the “sex work” feminists considered here think it is fundamentally right because it provides clients with access to something they require to fulfill their human needs and express their true selves. This latter belief is certainly shared by the clients I have interviewed, who invariably explain their own prostitute use through reference to the idea of sexual “need” (O’Connell Davidson 1998). But what does it mean to speak of erotic “needs?”

FROM EROTIC “NEEDS” TO DESPOTIC SUBJECTS

Deprived of sexual gratification, people do not suffer in the same way they do when other basic bodily needs are denied or when medical attention is refused.² There is no biological imperative to orgasm any set number of times a day, week, or year, and though people may find it unpleasant or even uncomfortable to go without sexual release (assuming they are unable or find it undesirable to masturbate), the absence of a sexual partner to bring them to orgasm does not actually threaten their *physical* survival. Human sexual desire is grounded in emotional and cognitive, as much as physiological, processes. If the urge to reach orgasm were a simple biological function, such as the impulse to evacuate the bowels, it would hardly matter whether the person with whom you had sex was old or young, or man or woman. Equally, if a lack of sexual contact posed a threat to health, such that one needed the “ministrations” of a sex worker in the same way one needs those of a doctor or a nurse when suffering from other ailments, then the physical appearance, age, gender, and race of the prostitute would be unimportant. But sex is not a mere bodily function or physical need. Our erotic life is grounded in the ideas we use to categorize, interpret, and give meaning to human experience and sociality, and specific sexual desires do not, therefore, directly express some fundamental, timeless, or general human *need* for sex. To treat them as if they do is hugely problematic.

What follows from the assertion that every individual is *entitled* to satisfy their exact erotic “requirements?” Califia asks us to accept that wanting “to be kicked with white patent-leather pumps with thirteen straps and eight-inch heels” (1994, 245), is an erotic *need*. But what if someone felt s/he could *only* be sexually gratified if it was Princess Anne or Queen Latifa wearing the patent-leather pumps? Would that also be a “need?” And what of, say, a white racist’s specific and narrowly focused desire to anally penetrate black women, or an adult male’s “need” to be fellated by eleven-year-old children? Since non-masturbatory sex by definition involves another person or persons, to grant one the right to control the if, when, with whom, and how of having sex would very often be to deny those same rights to another.

Gayle Rubin has argued: "In Western culture, sex is taken all too seriously. A person is not considered immoral, is not sent to prison, and is not expelled from her or his family for enjoying spicy cuisine. But an individual may go through all this and more for enjoying shoe leather. Ultimately, of what possible social significance is it if a person likes to masturbate over a shoe? . . . If sex is taken too seriously, sexual persecution is not taken seriously enough. There is systematic mistreatment of individuals and communities on the basis of erotic taste or behavior" (1999, 171). But it seems to me that sex radicals also take certain aspects of sexual life far too seriously. Certainly it is ridiculous that a person's shoe fetish can provoke community revulsion and expulsion. But it is equally ridiculous to elevate that person's ability to indulge this fetish to the status of human right. If we are to say "so what?" about the fact someone likes to masturbate over a shoe, surely we can equally say "so what?" about the fact that s/he might have to make do with fantasizing about a shoe while masturbating, rather than thinking it imperative to set in place a social institution that will guarantee her/him access to a shoe whenever the urge to masturbate over one should arise.

At the same time, sex radical theory does not pay sufficient attention to the fact that "talk about sex is about a great deal else than organs, bodies and pleasures" (Laqueur 1995, 155). In using the example of a masturbatory fetish, Rubin evades the difficult issues that arise from the fact that non-masturbatory sex is, by definition, relational. To be sure, it is an intolerant and illiberal society that condemns a person for masturbating over a shoe. But since Rubin stresses that sex must be consensual, her own tolerance probably would not extend to an unknown man who happened to feel the "need" to masturbate over *her* shoe as they sat together in Starbucks, for example. Like Califia, she reserves for everyone both the right to gratify themselves as they wish, and the right not to "play the martyr" by indulging other people when it will bring them no personal gratification. Everyone, that is, except prostitutes, who are instead awarded the right to give up their right to personal pleasure from sex in exchange for payment.

The essence of the prostitution contract is that the prostitute agrees, in exchange for money or another benefit, *not to use* her personal desire or erotic interests as the determining criteria for her sexual interaction.³ What this means is that the prostitute must, at least during working hours, assume her or himself as the Other, fix her or himself as an object, in order that everyone else may always be able satisfy their erotic "needs" on demand. In other words, the existence of a market for commodified sex leaves room for every non-prostitute to become, in Simone de Beauvoir's (1953) terms, a "despotic subject" should she or he so choose.

For feminist abolitionists, this subject/object distinction in prostitution necessarily corresponds to a patriarchal order within which men achieve self-

sovereignty through the political subordination of women. This is to essentialize gender, and also implies an over-optimistic view of women, who are perfectly capable of pursuing “masculine” self-sovereignty through the objectification of racialized and/or classed Others, as demonstrated by the research of Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor (2001) on female sex tourism and that of Bridget Anderson (2000) on employers of migrant domestic workers. Feminist abolitionists further imagine that in requiring a woman to temporarily fix herself as an object, prostitution permanently, completely and literally extinguishes her as a subject. This glosses over the important (and sometimes hugely painful) fact that people do not either literally become, or come to see themselves as, objects even when they are treated as such. It also ignores the immense political dangers that go along with refusing any group of people full subjectivity, even when one’s aim is to help or “save” that group. But the sex radical position on prostitution, which embraces despotic subjecthood as a delightful and ideal condition, is surely every bit as politically dangerous.

THE POLITICS OF RIGHTS AND RESPECT

Noting that the early feminist movement called for the labor involved in mothering and caring for the old, the sick, or the disabled to be recognized as work, Mary McIntosh argues that the term “sex worker” both means that prostitutes “are women who are paid for what they do” and that “as with other women, what they do should be respected as a skilled and effortful activity and not considered simply as a natural capacity of every woman” (1994, 13). But feminist calls for the labor involved in social reproduction to be recognized and rewarded have generally been advanced on the basis that this labor has intrinsic social worth, not simply because it is skilled and effortful. Indeed, this is partly why domestic and caring labor remains a difficult issue for feminists, for as Anderson’s work shows, socially reproductive labor does not simply fulfill physical needs but “is bound up with the reproduction of life-style and, crucially, of status” (2000, 14). So, for example, the tasks performed by paid domestic workers often serve to demonstrate or raise their employer’s status rather than having an inherent social value. There are even employers who demand that their domestic worker wash the anus of the family pet after it has defecated (Anderson 2000, 26), something which requires skill and effort, but is hardly necessary either to any individual or to our collective survival.

Given the enormity of the stigma that attaches to female prostitution and its consequences for women’s lives, it is easy to understand sex workers’ rights activists’ impulse to try to reconstruct prostitution as an intrinsically honorable profession that serves socially valuable ends. But without insisting that human beings have sexual “needs,” rather than socially constructed desires, this position is difficult to sustain. It is fairly easy to make the case that we should attach

social honor to the task of changing a baby's diaper, but hard to see how one would argue that social honor should be attached to *the task* of cleaning the anus of a perfectly healthy dog, or to *the tasks* performed by prostitutes in order to satisfy their clients' sexual whims.

To attempt to destigmatize prostitution by insisting on its social value also carries risks as a political strategy. There is a danger of simply creating new hierarchies and fresh divisions. If prostitutes are to be respected because they undertake socially valuable work, surely those who specialize in working with severely disabled clients will be deemed somehow more respectable than those who give blow jobs to able-bodied men out on their stag night, for example? This division already exists in the Netherlands where "sex surrogates" who work with disabled people are legally and socially constructed as different from prostitutes who work with able-bodied clients. And does this argument not construct the prostitute who meets a client's erotic *needs* as somehow more worthy of respect than the domestic worker who acquiesces to an employer's *demands*?

In an unequal world, opportunities to devote one's life to socially honored goals are classed, gendered and raced. The fact that an individual engages in a form of labor not considered socially valuable thus says nothing about her personal integrity or honor, and vice versa. Becoming a heart surgeon is not proof of the nobility of spirit of a white middle-class man, and becoming a university professor does not demonstrate the personal integrity of a white middle-class woman. A person's human, civil, and labor rights, and their right to respect and social value as a human being, cannot be contingent upon whether or not they perform labor that is socially valued. The university teacher, the heart surgeon, the prostitute, and the domestic worker are all equally entitled to rights and protection as economic actors. Those who work in prostitution have rights and deserve respect not because or despite the fact they work as prostitutes, but because they are human beings. Likewise, our claim to legal recognition, rights, dignity, and respect lies in the fact that we are human beings, not that we are able-bodied or disabled, black or white, straight or gay, shoe fetishist or vanilla sex fetishist.

BEHIND AND BEYOND THE MARKET

It is tempting to conclude that what is wrong with contemporary Euro-American feminist debate on prostitution is simply, as Delia Aguilar suggests, its lack of reference to "the basic concepts of class and social relations of production" (2000, 2). Certainly, the questions about prostitution that preoccupy many Euro-American feminists can seem irrelevant to a world in which vast numbers of people live in poverty, and the gulf between rich and poor continues to widen. Consider, for example, the fact that in India, a country with a per capita GDP of U.S.\$383, some 2.3 million females are estimated to be in pros-

titution, a quarter of whom are minors; or that Burma, a country with a per capita GDP of just U.S.\$69, exports an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 women and girls to work in prostitution in Thailand, while several thousand more cross the border into China to sell sex (Lim 1998, AMC 2000). Though some of these women and children have been forced into prostitution by a third party, it is dull economic compulsion that drives many of them into sex work, just as in America (a country with a per capita GDP of U.S.\$21,558), many women and girls “elect” to prostitute themselves rather than join the 35 percent of the female workforce earning poverty-level wages (Castells 1998). To describe such individuals as exercising rights of self-sovereignty seems as spurious as stating that their prostitution represents a violation of their right to dignity. There is no dignity in poverty, which denies the person full powers of agency. Yet the right to sell one’s labor (sexual or otherwise) does not guarantee the restitution of dignity or moral agency.

But can simple appeal to basic concepts of class and social relations of production move forward the feminist debates on prostitution? Marxian analysts have rarely engaged with questions about the myriad historical and contemporary forms of sexual and gender oppression. Indeed, class theorists have often failed to critique liberal fictions about “public” and “private” as two distinct and clearly separated realms of human experience, instead focusing almost exclusively upon the injustices affecting (straight, white, male, skilled) workers in the supposedly “public” sphere of productive labor. Though they have very effectively critiqued liberal discourse on property, labor, and contractual consent as fictions concealing class power, Marxists have traditionally paid little attention to the ways in which liberal discourse shrouds and naturalizes power relations that are gendered, sexualized, and raced.

The concepts of class and social relations of production, as found in the conceptual toolbox of orthodox class theorists, may thus prove to be unwieldy instruments with which to explore the specificity of prostitution as a form of exploitation. To conceptualize prostitution without reference to questions about the relationship between sexuality, gender, selfhood, and community would be as unsatisfactory as to conceptualize prostitution without reference to class. We need to return to the fact that sex occupies a special and privileged place in both abolitionist and “sex work” feminist accounts of the rights and wrongs of prostitution. In this, both “sides” of the prostitution debate recognize and take seriously aspects of human existence and forms of oppression that are typically overlooked or trivialized in Marxian theory. What happens if we take such concerns seriously but simultaneously remain critical of liberal discourse?

Thomas Laqueur (1995) has observed that for centuries, masturbation and prostitution have been condemned with almost equal vigor in Judeo-Christian thought. Both have been constructed as fundamentally asocial, degenerative sexual practices, the antithesis of the “socially constructive act of heterosexual

intercourse" (1995, 157). Both therefore represent a threat to the heterosexual family unit: "While masturbation threatened to take sexual desire and pleasure inward, away from the family, prostitution took it outward. . . . The problem with masturbation and prostitution is essentially quantitative: doing it alone and doing it with lots of people rather than doing it in pairs" (Laqueur 1995, 159–60; see also Agustin 2000).

The fact that in Euro-American societies, people who do not choose to embrace reproductive heterosexual coupledness have historically been, and still often are, viewed with such loathing, fear, and repugnance tells us something about how little we have actually managed to realize ourselves as the "abstract individuals" or "sovereign selves" of liberalism. Marx may have been correct (at least insofar as white middle-class male experience was concerned) to say that capitalism "is the realized principle of *individualism*; the individual existence is the final goal; activity, work, content, etc., are *mere means*" (in Sayer 1991, 58), but the idea of the solitary individual, as a subject, was and is conceivable primarily in relation to economic life. As sexual and engendered beings, we remain largely tied to our social context, our identities given by our position within a sexual community and gender hierarchy.

Marx observed that in the act of commodity exchange, "the individual, each of them, is reflected in himself as the exclusive and dominant (determining) subject of the exchange. With that the complete freedom of the individual is posited" (in Sayer 1991, 59). Sex radicals apply this bourgeois fiction to prostitution, imagining that by exchanging money for commodified sex, the individual is liberated from her or his fixed relationship to the sexual community, recognized as a sexual subject and set completely free. But any such "freedom" is contingent upon the existence of a particular, and highly unequal, set of political, economic, and social relations, since in general, people "choose" neither wage labor nor prostitution unless denied access to alternative means of subsistence. It is merely the "freedom" to picture the self in radical abstraction from social relations of power and to become a "despotic subject." We need an alternative vision of the self. As Laura Brace observes, we need to "move beyond the liberal conception of the abstracted individual, without drowning the sovereign subject in the ocean of nondifferentiation" (1997, 137).

Masturbation may offer a useful starting point for any re-visioning of the sovereign sexual subject. Prostitute use can largely be understood as a response to the social devaluation of masturbation and sexual fantasy, the construction of masturbation as a form of sexual expression and experience which simply "does not count." But as Paula Bennett and Vernon Rosario argue, "Beyond the constraints of orthodox reproductive practices, solitary pleasure is a fundamentally generative form of sexual behavior, deeply implicated in the creative process and therefore basic to much that is good and enriching in human life" (1995, 15). To recognize masturbation as such would carry enormous equalizing potential.

We would not be debating whether disabled people need “sex surrogates,” but rather emphasizing the need to develop and make available technologies which would allow the disabled to enjoy the same access to solitary pleasure that is currently enjoyed by the able bodied. It would no longer be assumed that within a couple, it was each partner’s absolute responsibility to fulfill the other’s sexual “needs” or that love and emotional intimacy implied a sexual claim over our partner’s person. No one would “need” to sublimate and displace masturbation by paying a prostitute to temporarily surrender aspects of her will.

I am not proposing that we attempt to sidestep the relational nature of sexuality by simply replacing sexual interaction with masturbation, nor am I arguing that fantasies and fetishes should never be enacted. I would not even claim that masturbation and fantasy are necessarily as pleasurable or satisfying as sex with other people and/or the enactment of fantasies. But if masturbation was socially valued in the same way that heterosexual coupling now is, we would all be in a position to recognize and realize ourselves as sexual subjects, without turning anyone else into an object. And on those occasions that we happened to be lucky enough to find mutual and reciprocal desire with another or others, whether partner, friend, or stranger, it might then be possible to appreciate, value and *choose* non-masturbatory sex for its relational qualities and connective potential.

As well as being right to call for prostitutes to be accorded the same legal and political rights and protections as their fellow citizens, it seems to me that “sex work” feminists are right to (implicitly) argue that we should refuse traditional demands to subordinate our sexual selves to socially “productive” goals through heterosexual coupling. But if they wish to represent or advance the interests of more than just a privileged minority of “First World” women, they need to look beyond the market for an alternative to the yoke of tradition, and beyond liberal discourse on property, contractual consent, and freedom for ways of conceptualizing the rights and wrongs of prostitution as a form of work.

NOTES

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1. The chapter provides an account of how Chapkis and twenty other women paid a “sacred prostitute” and her “consort” to provide a milieu within which they could have group sex with each other. Nobody had any form of sexual contact with the women who organized and charged for the event. It seems unlikely that many prostitutes’ clients would part with money for this, and Chapkis does not explicitly stake out her position

on the rights or wrongs of more conventional forms of prostitute use. However, it seems reasonable to conclude that she does not find anything problematic in the demand for commercial sex *per se*.

2. It is true that people can be profoundly harmed when they are socially, politically and legally excluded or marginalized on grounds of their supposed sexual "Otherness," but the psychological and emotional distress they may suffer is linked to something rather more complex than the inability to instantly gratify a wish for a particular kind of sex at a particular moment in time.

3. Skilled and professional prostitutes who work independently and who are not economically desperate certainly impose limits on the contact (refusing clients who are drunk or threatening, turning down requests for unprotected sex, or for sexual acts that they find particularly intrusive or unpleasant, for example). But few prostitutes would be able to make a living if they only ever agreed to sex with clients they found attractive or to perform acts they personally found sexually or psychologically gratifying.

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