Grin and Bare It All: Against Liberal Conceptions of Sex Work

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Sex work is a constant yet discreet presence in anarchist circles—commonly taken on by the young precarious part-time laborers that make up the bulk of our scenes, privately considered by many more of our cash-strapped comrades. Our theoretical analyses of sex work tend to mirror our personal and collective feelings about gendered oppression, class society, the violence that capitalist patriarchy inflicts on our bodies and hearts—and the efficacy of various forms of resistance. This essay conceptualizes sex work as a point where feminized labor (“women’s work,” caring labor) reproduces itself—that is, where a primarily-female workforce of social workers, scholars, writers, lecturers, professional sex work abolitionists, non-profits, “rescue” organizations, and bloggers exists to “serve” and “care for,” but ultimately control, another primarily female workforce: sex workers. The former workforce does this in ways that often undermine sex workers’ autonomy and livelihoods, at the behest of ruling-class men, in ways that benefit men sexually and perpetuate patriarchal and statist violence.

Sex workers serve these same ruling class men, directly or indirectly, through the performance of paid reproductive labor that helps stabilize the superstructure of heterosexual monogamy, as a concurrent dynamic that depends on the oppression of sex laborers as a class. As a result, sex laborers are pulled into the cycle of stigma and criminalization that helps to maintain a perpetually marginalized, easily exploitable underclass.

We Are Not Your Social Service

Strip clubs are normalized as a rite of passage for 18-year-old men, as an acceptable diversion for financially accomplished men who have earned it and want to relax (or working-class men who work hard and wish to treat themselves), as a judgment-free space without the pressure to conform to the “civilizing” social norms imposed by the women in their workplaces and romantic lives. A slightly more negative view of sex work consumption holds that seeing a sex worker is a pitiable last resort for men who are less physically desirable or socially savvy, but still entitled to sexualized services. This centering of the consumer experience to weave a narrative that is palatable to men conceals the power differential that is triangulated between bosses, exotic dancers, and customers, such that dancers are inherently the least powerful in the equation. Abolitionist feminists (feminists who oppose and seek to abolish sex work) point to this empathy for customers as a hallmark of sex workers’ rights discourse. While the centering of customers’ needs and desires is a deplorable trend among some liberal, anti-worker, sex-positive feminists, its frequency is highly overstated and functions as a straw man argument to discredit sex workers’ rights activists as being more concerned with male orgasms than workers’ liberation.

In addition to paying the strip club a base mandatory payment every night plus a cut of our sales, strippers cover additional costs of operation such as wardrobe, staff wages (bouncers, DJ), and the maintenance of our own physical and mental health. We work not only to generate personal profit, but also to front these industry-standard expenses imposed on us by the bosses. We perform a constant precarious balancing act: we cater to the customer’s desires as attentively as possible within the limits of the law and club rules, and the responsibility for keeping the customer from becoming unruly often falls on us—yet when customers break the rules or violate our boundaries, we are victim-blamed. Given this dynamic of precarious anxiety, objectification, economic exploitation, and disempowerment, it’s unfair to expect sex workers to be sympathetic to customers’ sexualities and entitlement when they play out in ways that can be uniquely invasive and uncomfortable to us. The recognition of sex work
as "real work" shouldn't depend on the perceived social value of the job, despite well-meaning (but ultimately ableist and ageist) arguments from some outspoken sex work activists that sex workers play a positive role in society as sexual outlets for the elderly, disabled, or kinky. Just as we shouldn't water down our feminism to make it sexy and comfortable to men, we should resist the urge to humanize ourselves through our social and sexual usefulness to male consumers.

Meanwhile, we are excluded from the fulfillment of our own desires by the usual forces: slut-shaming, compulsory heterosexuality, the social construction of certain bodies as less desirable, and histories of violence and trauma, which create barriers to sexual enjoyment. These roots of sexual exclusion are so systemic and internalized as to be socially invisible, exacerbated by customers’ own perceived feelings of exclusion from unhindered access to “desirable” bodies—that is, to the young, thin, light-skinned bodies considered desirable by the standards of white supremacist patriarchy. Essentially, customers like to think that we have unfettered access to gratifying sex and are thus its gatekeepers. This is a dangerous and misogynistic mythology.

**Benevolent Coercion and Unenthusiastic Consent**

A parallel top-down dynamic coexists with our servicing of the male workforce: the enforcement of caring upon sex workers (particularly those who perform illicit, undocumented, full-service, or street-based work). The logic of “saving” women from performing this kind of labor is a direct legacy of middle-class social-working women of Victorian England and their contemporaries in the US. Rarely discussed is the classist, coercive, and hypocritical history of women’s entry into the caring professions—particularly with regards to the construction of the prostitute as a subject in need of saving by benevolent ladies during the “rise of the social” of the late 19th century. During this era, “those doing charitable works entered into a governmental relationship with the objects of their charity, and created themselves as important social actors in the process... ‘Helping’ became a profession that relied on identifying subjects and then placing them in closed spaces where they could be worked upon and controlled.”

† Savior rhetoric tends to ignore people who aren’t women.
† "Helping Women Who Sell Sex: The Construction of Benevolent Identities," Laura Augustin

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Modern non-sex-working feminists who support abolitionist/savior tactics or engage in these projects themselves presume a more dignified identity than that of the sex worker. They often end up replicating a system of enforced docility based on misogynistic, bourgeois notions of respectability and the proper place of women in the public sphere. Middle-class academics and writers who make their living promoting a framework that casts sex workers as an inherently victimized identity “for their own good” do so at the direct expense of the agency and economic livelihood of women of lower socioeconomic status. Statist feminists’ rhetoric of “fighting the sex industry” typically relies on State power in the form of legislative reform that criminalizes at least some aspects of sex work, increases the power of law enforcement, and regulates the sex industries. This regulation can have the unintended effect of further marginalizing the least privileged workers by making their safe participation in these economies prohibitively expensive or difficult.

Thus, sex workers are bound in a system of caring labor: on one hand, that which is enacted upon us, sometimes forcibly, by carceral feminists, paternalistic liberals, the prison-industrial complex, the surveillance State, and the superstructure of capitalist patriarchy; on the other, that which we perform for middle- to upper-class men, not to mention the unpaid reproductive labor we are often mandated to perform in our homes and communities. In some ways, this system self-replicates:

“From homemaking to professional housekeeping—not to mention nursing, hospitality, and phone sex—women and people of color are disproportionately responsible for the care that keeps this society functioning, yet have disproportionately little say in what that care fosters. Likewise, a tremendous amount of care goes into oiling the machinery that maintains hierarchy: families help police relax after work, sex workers help businessmen set off steam, secretaries take on the invisible labor that preserves executives’ marriages.” (Self As Other: Reflections on Self-Care, CrimethInc. 2013).

At the same time, institutions that collude with the State (such as academia and the nonprofit complex) are often positioned against the selling of sexualized services, supporting direct or indirect criminalization. These institutions passively align with the State by controlling the discourse around sex work, feminism, and labor via a professional class of experts, most of whom have never engaged in sex work themselves but assume that they are entitled to speak on these intersections based on their position as members of “the sex class.”

While sex workers who critique non-sex-workers’ skewed analysis of the industry are criticized for being privileged, scholars, authors, non-profit representatives, policymakers, abolitionist activists, professional feminists, and other “experts” on sex work are not held to the same standard of scrutiny. Regardless of our experiences, sex workers who don’t fit into our culture’s perception of what the “worst off” looks like are assumed to be “not representative of the average sex worker.” The idea that workers currently in the sex industry are too close to it and too invested in it to have good analysis also reinforces the notion that non-sex-working feminists are qualified to speak on behalf of the “most marginalized” in the sex industry. This is similar to how the ruling class works to divide the “fringe” elements of resistance from the real “People,” not acknowledging the possibility that those of us embedded most deeply in capitalist misery are the ones pushing back against the ideological policies that most severely affect us. Portraying radical sex workers as white middle-class women, as a highly-paid minority, erases the work of people of color, poor people, undocumented immigrants, and queer and trans people who not only agitate for better working conditions in the industry, but are also on the cutting-edge of gendered labor theory. It also erases the decriminalization and harm-reduction campaigns spearheaded by sex-worker-led activist groups in the US and across the globe.

† The “Swedish Model” criminalizes buying sex but not selling it, as well as criminalizing whatever “third party” the law determines to be “profiting” off someone else’s work. In some instances, charges of “brothel-keeping” and “pimping” have been pressed against the friends and lovers of sex workers. Many sex workers consider this a form of “backdoor” criminalization, a way of making sex work more burdensome and dangerous due to increased difficulty screening clients or being open about their work.

‡ “The sex class” is a second-wave feminist term that doesn’t refer specifically to sex workers, but to (usually cisgender) women as a whole.

§ Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers, SWEAT [Sex Work Education and Advocacy Taskforce] in South Africa, Scarlet Alliance in Australia, SWOP-USA, and AINSW [All-India Network of Sex Workers] are some examples; see swaay.org’s list of groups.

That’s not to say that these experts are always blinded by their economic and social privilege, or that none have adopted their views as a result of their experiences working in the sex industry themselves. Identity itself isn’t always the deciding standard for sound analysis. The problem is that (usually relatively privileged) non-sex-working feminists or former sex workers overwhelmingly take up space at the table where sex workers, especially marginalized and institutionally disenfranchised sex workers (such as street workers, drug users, trans women, single parents, and people of color) could be debating effective strategies for liberation, resistance, and survival. We should be finding ways to help each other avoid exploitation without contributing to a culture of stigma or perpetuating rhetoric that makes the criminalization of sex work a winning strategy for politicians and good PR for celebrities and CEOs.

Professional feminist academics like Gail Dines make their living appropriating our experiences, anger, and struggles as ideological talking points, with the implication that Dines is a mouthpiece for all women as a monolithic class with shared interests—a “voice for the voiceless.” According to Dines’ logic, the process of our objectification bleeds out into the rest of this feminized class and taints mainstream culture with a kind of sick, unnatural “pornification.” If Dines believes inner-city street-based workers, or Eastern European cam girls, or Asian brothel workers, or strippers with drug addictions are truly voiceless, it’s only because she hasn’t been listening.

It’s tempting to focus our ire primarily on the experts (radical feminist or otherwise) who actively advocate against the interests of sex workers. But it’s important to recognize that the chief reason these experts are dangerous is because they act as a mediated apparatus of State power upon socially stigmatized and criminalized classes of workers. Poor street-based workers are shuffled into the prison system by way of “prostitution diversion programs” funded and spearheaded by non-profits and universities.6 Sex workers’ bases of operations have been raided under Britain’s Policing and Crime Act” on the pretense that the women working together were

6 Project ROSE (Reaching Out to the Sexually Exploited) is a collaboration between the Phoenix Police Department, Arizona State University’s School of Social Work, and a number of local service organizations, which round up “prostitutes” en masse in 2–3 day stings and forces them to enter into the 6-month diversion program or face criminal charges. See titsandsass.com/fatan-good-swop-phoenixs-campaign-against-diversion-initiatives/.

** The UK feminist organization Object lobbied in favor of the Policing and Crime Act as part of their “Demand Change!” campaign, in conjunction with scores of other women’s groups.
"trafficked" and that these spaces were "brothels"; the Act effectively criminalizes those who are attempting to stay safe by selling their services indoors with other sex workers, forcing them to operate in isolation and out on the streets. Undocumented and immigrant sex workers in particular are framed as "trafficking victims," a convenient justification for increased State surveillance and control: racial profiling, raids, invasive searches, forced placement into factories and "rehabilitation centers," deportation, and State acquisition of sex workers' children. This, in turn, drives workers further underground in response to increasing difficulty crossing borders, obtaining licenses, and finding and screening clients. Similarly, moral panics about the sexual exploitation of minors are induced by means of misleading and sometimes fabricated statistics, using the existence of child sex trafficking to justify the consequences of criminalizing full-service sex work.

Incarceration is a toxic cycle that reinforces itself in the lives of sex workers—a prostitution arrest in the US can result in an appearance on the local police department's vice crime website or the cover of the weekly mugshot tabloid, and often prevents the arrestee from obtaining other employment. It can also disqualify you from other sex工作的 jobs—cities that require strippers to be licensed demand a criminal background check as a precondition of employment, a condition which specifically targets those charged with prostitution as undesirables, "liabilities" to the strip club. Up until as recently as 2011, escorts in New Orleans were arrested and prosecuted under the local Crimes Against Nature statute, which occasioned higher penalties and fines than a conventional prostitution charge—and required workers to register as sex offenders for a period of fifteen years to life.* A prostitution arrest is effectively a scarlet letter, inextricably binding the offender to a life of indefinite systemic violence and exclusion. The specter of incarceration looms over other kinds of sex workers—professional doms/dommes/switches and other fetish workers, strippers, and legal brothel workers—as a self-policing mechanism. This becomes internalized, maintaining a "whorearchy" of workers. For instance, strippers who perform illegal sex acts inside the club (or who are known for doing so outside its walls) are referred to as being "dirty," branded "whores," and are subject to alienation, harassment, and even violence from their "clean" coworkers. And strippers who are assaulted or otherwise violated on the job by customers (especially dancers who are taken advantage of while drunk) can be apprehensive about reporting this abuse due to internalized whorophilia and fear of being victim-blamed.

This hierarchy of sexual laborers cuts full-service, undocumented, and criminalized workers off from solidarity with more "respectable" sex workers. Drug use, HIV status, and rates charged are some other factors that contribute to such divisions. Statist oppression of sex workers, combined with sex workers' social marginalization and isolation from other workers (and one another), renders us particularly vulnerable to the most extreme forms of economic exploitation by bosses, customers, and the Market—all invariably male-dominated, all working to maintain capitalist patriarchy from different angles.

A further point of tension in feminist, liberal, and radical discourse around sex work is the issue of consent. The presence or lack of meaningful consent in our context has served as a rhetorical device to justify a variety of ideological positions on sex work, including supporting oppressive policies against sex workers and reaffirming stigmas against us. I recently read an article examining what "consent" means in the context of sex work. It critiqued "enthusiastic consent" as a model that doesn't accommodate the reality that many people have sex for other reasons beyond compelling erotic desire—for procreation, to please a partner, for an ego boost, for a sense of closeness, for practice, for money—and that none of these invalidate the fact that consent was given: "freely consenting to unwanted sex." It left me wondering what sexual consent means in the context of an institution that is inherently exploitative and coercive, like all labor under capitalism and patriarchy?

Our praxis should reflect and be applicable to our individual conditions and desires (or lack thereof) as sex workers.† Perhaps consent can have very different parameters in different contexts—it feels futile to apply in my workplace the same standards I use in my romantic life to determine whether good consent was practiced. Anarchists' expectations of "good consent" are rarely achieved in the strip club. When the theorizing of consent is restricted to the interpersonal and sexual, however, we fall short of

* "Almost 40 percent of registered sex offenders in New Orleans are on the registry because of a [Crimes Against Nature] conviction." (wwwav-no.org)

† Discussing a "community" or "class" of people while erasing the individuals who form it is the same kind of logic that has traditionally viewed women as one nebulous mass under the pretense of common interests or shared experiences of "womanhood." This universalization of experience was what prompted women of color, trans women, poor women, and queer women to argue for an intersectional feminist analysis that contradicted the universalizing of one set of women's experiences (usually white, cisgender, middle-class, and Western) in the first place.
critiquing the social landscape in which ideas of consent are formed and practiced. Critiquing the larger context of consent is a positive contribution that both anarcha-feminists and radical feminists have made to the discourse: it’s not enough that customers ask us what makes us “feel good,” because the answer will always be motivated by the economic coercion inherent in the transaction. We have to challenge the institution and the power relations it imposes.

It’s the paradox of the self-employed radical sex worker to simultaneously resent and anticipate male sexual entitlement, to privately condemn the objectification of women and yet to perform at work in ways that are meant to encourage that same objectification. My desire isn’t for a world full of hip alternative strip clubs, run by “sex-positive” or “radical” bosses, populated by Chomsky-quoting customers whose desire for “authenticity” necessitates an increasingly emotionally invasive performance of enthusiastic consent. I want to end all the patriarchal capitalist institutions that mediate our alienation from our own bodies and our loved ones; I don’t imagine that they can be reformed to foster mutually healing interactions. We should avoid the pitfall of reformist thinking that falls short of challenging these institutions themselves, and the pitfall of ignoring those most affected by these institutions in favor of an ideology that presumes a false class cohesion. We need an analysis of sex work and of labor in general that synthesizes various anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist feminisms. We must acknowledge that “caring” can often play out in oppressive, destructive ways within inherently flawed institutions and systems, particularly as it affects marginalized precarious laborers. “Helping” as a means to exert social power over us “for our own good” or for the good of women as a class serves and strengthens the carceral surveillance state and justifies its continued existence. We must look beyond sex-positive leftist rhetoric around consent, consumption, and sex workers’ “rights,” for a more totalizing critique of capitalism and the sex industry.