

Grin and Bare It All

Against Liberal Conceptions of Sex Work

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Hi, I'm Luna Celeste! I've been stripping for about five years, and into all this anarchy stuff for about fifteen. In this zine I'll be speaking with some authority on my own experiences, and to some degree, on those of my co-workers and friends who perform other kinds of sex work. However, subjective experiences of sex work, and even just stripping, vary depending on one's location, gender (identity/presentation), particular line of work, working conditions, socialization, class, race, etc. I am no authority on every aspect of the sex industry, but have spent a lot of my free time thinking, reading, and writing about the industry from an anarchist and feminist perspective.

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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, contemplated within a variety of frameworks. Our theoretical analysis of sex work tends to mirror our feelings about gendered oppression, class society, the violence capitalist-patriarchy inflicts on our bodies and hearts, and the efficacy of various forms of resistance. I wrote this essay as a means to conceptualize 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 result in the undermining of sex workers’ autonomy and livelihoods, at the behest of ruling class men, in ways that benefit men sexually and perpetuate patriarchal and statist violence. This essay also posits that sex workers serve these same ruling class men, directly or indirectly, through the performance of paid reproductive labor¹ that helps stabilize the superstructure of heterosexual-monogamy, as a concurrent dynamic that in order to function 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, more easily-exploitable underclass.

Our discourse around sex work misses the point when it focuses on customers’ needs and lack of sexual capital — disabilities, social stigmas around marginalized sexual practices (kinks, fetishes, etc.), old age, lack of social skills or lack of sexual prowess. This is manifested as the understanding of strip clubs 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 devoid of 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 sort of empathy and centering of consumer-experience that attempts to weave a narrative that is palatable to men necessitates critique: it makes invisible the existence of the power-differential that is triangulated between bosses and exotic dancers and customers, such that dancers are inherently the least-powerful in the equation. “Abolitionist” feminists (the term for those feminists who oppose and seek to abolish sex work in particular) point to this empathy for customers as a hallmark of sex worker rights discourse, and in particular, those who take a “sex-positive” approach. I’d argue that, while the centering of customers’ needs and desires is a deplorable, liberal, anti-worker trend among some sex-positive feminists, its frequency is highly overstated and functions as a strawman to discredit sex worker rights activists as being more concerned with male orgasms than workers’ liberation.

¹ The undervalued, unpaid or underpaid, invisible labor that is typically performed by women as a means to “reproduce” the workforce, i.e. cooking, cleaning, comfort, socialization, education, sex, childbearing and rearing. Further reading on reproductive labor: *Caliban and The Witch* or *The Arcane of Reproduction*.

In addition to paying the strip club a base mandatory payment every night plus a cut of our sales, strippers pay externalized costs of operation such as wardrobe, staff wages (bouncers, DJ), and maintenance of our own physical and mental health. We work not only to generate personal profit but to front these “industry-standard” expenses imposed on us by the bosses. To do so, we perform a constant, precarious balancing act where we cater to the customer’s desires as attentively as possible within the limits of the law and club rules and are expected to keep the customer under control until things are already out of control, and are thus (victim-)blamed for rules/laws that are transgressed in the process. Given this dynamic of precarious anxiety, objectification, economic exploitation, and disempowerment, it’s unfair to expect sex workers to be sympathetic to customers’ sexualities, kinks, and entitlement when they play out in particular ways that can be uniquely invasive and uncomfortable to us. When we relay VIP room stories of customers with grotesque fetishes, of abusive “power exchanges” and pedophilic roleplays that sex workers grudgingly indulge, it’s not necessarily commentary about specific sexual interests, but the privilege of the socially- and situationally-powerful to purchase our consent (or sometimes, simply to rob us of it) in the marketplace of sexual fulfillment.

Meanwhile, we are excluded from the fulfillment of our own desires by the usual forces of slut-shaming, compulsory heterosexuality, our subjective identities which construct certain bodies as less desirable, and some individuals’ histories of violence & trauma which create barriers to sexual enjoyment. These roots of sexual exclusion are so systemic and internal(-ized) as to be socially invisible, exacerbated by customers’ own perceived feelings of exclusion from unhindered access to “desirable” bodies (that is, 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.

A parallel top-down dynamic coexists with our servicing of the male workforce — that of the enforcement of “caring” *upon* sex workers (particularly those who perform illicit, undocumented, full-service, or street-based work). The logic of “saving” women (savior rhetoric tends to ignore people who aren’t women) from performing this kind of marginalized labor is a direct legacy of the emerging 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 particular subject in need of saving, reforming, and steering into respectable middle-class life 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.”*² Modern non-sex-working feminists who support abolitionist/savior tactics or engage in these caring-projects themselves presume a more dignified identity than that of the sex worker, and often end up replicating a system of enforced docility based on misogynistic, bourgeois notions of respectability and the proper placement of women within the public sphere. Middle-class academics and writers who make their living off 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 over-regulates the sex industries. This over-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 (see Britain’s Policing and Crime Act of 2009).

Thus, sex workers are triangulated in a system of caring labor: that which is enacted upon us (sometimes forcibly) by carceral feminists, paternalistic liberals, the prison-industrial complex, the surveillance

² “Helping Women Who Sell Sex: The Construction of Benevolent Identities,” Laura Augustin.

State,³ and the superstructure of capitalist-patriarchy—and that which we perform for middle- to upper-class men (to say nothing of the unpaid reproductive labor we are often mandated to perform in our homes and communities). In some ways this system self-replicates harmoniously — “*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 let off steam, secretaries take on the invisible labor that preserves executives’ marriages.*” (“Self As Other: Reflections on Self-Care,” CrimethInc. 2013). Other times, the State and the hierarchical institutions that collude with it to oppress sex workers (such as academia and the nonprofit-complex) are positioned in contradiction to the selling of sexualized services, often by way of support for or enactment of various forms of direct or indirect/“backdoor” criminalization.⁴ These institutions passively align with the State to oppose sex work by controlling the discourse around sex work, feminism, and labor via the creation and maintenance of a professional class of “experts” on these intersections, who have often never engaged in sex work themselves but assume entitlement based on their positioning as members of “the sex class.”⁵

It’s hypocritical that, while sex workers who critique non-sex-workers’ skewed analysis of the industry are criticized for being “privileged” and thus “not representative” (or assumed to be “privileged” in certain ways), scholars, authors, non-profit representatives, policymakers, abolitionist activists, professional feminists, and other “experts” on sex work are not held to that same standard of scrutiny themselves. The flawed notion of an “unbiased” third-party, the idea that workers currently in the sex industry are “too close” to it and “too invested” in its labor abuses to have good analysis, reinforces the belief that non-sex-working feminists are more qualified and entitled to speak on behalf of the “most marginalized” in the sex industry than actual sex workers. Sex workers who don’t fit into our culture’s perception of what the “worst off” looks like in an obvious way are assumed to be “not representative” of the “average sex worker,” regardless of the actual reality of our individual situations. This functions similarly to how the ruling class works to divide the “fringe,” “out of touch” 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 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 statistically have high rates of poverty), 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 all across the globe (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, that none have adopted their views as a result of their experiences working in the sex industry themselves.

³ The FBI was founded in 1908 specifically to investigate and combat supposed “white slavery” in American brothels, leading to the White-Slave Traffic Act (Mann Act) of 1910. International policing, in fact, developed in the late 19th/early 20th centuries in response to both the increased “anarchist terrorism” of the 1890s and the threat of international prostitution/“white slavery” (Deflem, 2005. “International Police Cooperation —History of.” Pp. 795–798 in *The Encyclopedia of Criminology*, edited by Richard A. Wright and J. Mitchell Miller. New York: Routledge.

⁴ The “Swedish Model” criminalizes the buying of sex but not the selling of it, as well as criminalizing whatever “third party” the law determines to be “profiting” off of someone else’s work; in some instances, charges of “brothel-keeping” and “pimping” have been misattributed to the friends and lovers of sex workers. Many sex workers consider this a form of “back-door” criminalization, a way of making sex work more burdensome and dangerous due to increased difficulty screening clients or being open about their work, etc.

⁵ “The sex class” is a second-wave feminist term which doesn’t refer specifically to sex workers, but to [usually cisgender] women as a whole.

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 do overwhelmingly take up space at the table where sex workers, especially sex workers who are particularly marginalized & institutionally disenfranchised (street workers, drug users, trans women, single parents, people of color, etc.) should be debating effective strategies for liberation, resistance, and survival, in whatever forms these may materialize. We should be finding ways to help each other avoid exploitation without contributing to a culture of stigma or perpetuating rhetoric that makes 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 off appropriating our experiences, our anger, and our struggles as ideological talking points, with the presumption that they're a mouthpiece for all women as a monolithic class with shared interests, a "voice for the voiceless." According to their 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 and her ilk believe 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 they haven'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 important to recognize the context within which these experts function as a mediated apparatus of State power vis-à-vis 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 Clauses 14 and 21 of Britain's Policing and Crime Act (which UK feminist organization Object lobbied to have passed as part of their "Demand Change!" campaign in conjunction with scores of other women's groups) under the pretense that the women working together were "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/immigrant sex workers in particular become reconceptualized as "trafficking victims," thus providing a convenient moral imperative for increased State surveillance and control (racial profiling, raids, invasive searches, forced placement into factories and "rehabilitation centers," deportation, 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. Moral panics about the sexual exploitation of minors are induced through the spread of misleading and even fabricated statistics, which solidify deeply-held moral convictions, and assuage reservations, about the continued criminalization of 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 land one an appearance on the local police department's "vice" crime website or the weekly mugshot tabloids, and often disqualifies one from obtaining "straight" employment. It can also disqualify one from other sexualized jobs — cities that require strippers be licensed demand a criminal background check as a precondition of employment, a condition which specifically targets and weeds out 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 in addition to higher penalties and fines than a conventional prostitution charge also required workers to register as sex offenders for a period of fifteen years to life.⁷ A prostitution arrest is effectively a scarlet letter, presumably an inextricable binding of the offender to a life of indefinite systemic violence and exclusion.

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 rounds 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/for-their-own-good-swap-phoenixs-campaign-against-diversion-initiatives/

⁷ "Almost 40 percent of registered sex offenders in New Orleans are on the registry because of a [Crimes Against Nature] conviction." (www.wav-no.org)

The specter of incarceration looms over other kinds of sex workers (pro doms/dommes/switches and other fetish workers, strippers, as well as legal brothel workers) as a self-policing mechanism, which becomes internalized and maintains 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 whorephobia, and fear of being victim-blamed and branded “dirty.” This hierarchy of sexual laborers severs full-service, undocumented, and criminalized workers off from solidarity with more “respectable” sex workers. Drug use, HIV status, and rates charged are some other intersections where these divisions occur. 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, 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 been relied on as a rhetorical device to justify various ideological positions on sex work, including justifying support for oppressive policies against sex workers and reaffirmation of stigma against us. I recently read an article and subsequent discussion that examined what “consent” meant in the context of sex work, which called for a reimagining of our framework for how we talk about consent, as sex workers and as feminists. It critiqued “enthusiastic consent” as a model that doesn’t accommodate for the reality that many people have sex for other reasons beyond compelling erotic desire — for procreation, to please a partner with a higher sex drive than oneself, 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 does sexual consent mean in the context of an institution (labor under the capitalist-patriarchal social arrangement) that is inherently exploitative & coercive?

Our praxis should reflect and in turn be applicable to our individual conditions and desires (or, lack of desire) as sex workers.⁸ Perhaps consent can have very different parameters in different contexts — it feels futile to apply to my workplace the same standards I use in my romantic life to determine whether good consent was practiced. Anarchists’ high expectations for “good consent” are, inherently, rarely achieved in the strip club. When the theorizing of consent is restricted to the interpersonal/sexual, though, we fall short of critiquing the social landscape within which ideas of consent are formed and practiced. Critiquing the larger context of consent is a positive contribution that both anarchafeminists and radical feminists have made to the discourse — that 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. The institution and the power relations therein must be critiqued and challenged — if not in the situation itself, then in other parallel situations and relationships.

It’s the paradox of the self-employed radical sex worker to simultaneously resent and anticipate male sexual entitlement, to both privately condemn the objectification of women and perform/present in ways that are meant to encourage that same logic of objectification at work. 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 an end to all patriarchal-capitalist institutions that mediate our feelings of alienation from our own bodies and loved ones, and I don’t imagine that they can be reformed in any meaningful way that fosters mutually-healing, non-market human interactions. In order to avoid

⁸ Discussing a “community” or “class” of people while erasing the individuals who form it is the same kind of logic that has traditionally subsumed women into 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 (usually white, cisgender, middle-class, Western) experiences/socialization in the first place.

the pitfalls of reformist thinking that falls short of challenging these institutions themselves (or conversely, succumbing to a mentality that ignores those most affected by these institutions in favor of a counterproductive ideology that presupposes a false sense of class-cohesion), we need analysis of sex work, and labor generally, that is born from a synthesis of various anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist feminisms. This synthesis of thought must acknowledge that the cycle of “caring” can often play out in oppressive, destructive ways within inherently flawed institutions and systems, particularly with regard to marginalized, precarious laborers. “Helping” as a means to exert social power over us “for our own good” or the good of women as a class serves and strengthens the carceral/surveillance State and justifies its continued existence. We must additionally look beyond sex-positive leftist rhetoric around consent, consumption, and sex workers’ “rights,” to a more totalizing critique of capitalism and the sex industry.



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Unconventional Lives

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