

On the sale of sex & bodies

The view from Rio de Janeiro

Thaddeus Blanchett

You don't have to put on the red light
Those days are over
You don't have to sell your body to the night
– “Roxanne” (The Police)

Sting's lyrics neatly frame how prostitution is often popularly conceived of, no less by anarchist abolitionists than by moralists and those in between.

Living and teaching in Rio de Janeiro for the last 15 years while doing anthropological research about female heterosexual prostitution has demonstrated to me what a deeply flawed description this is of sex work.

One often hears those who would seek to abolish prostitution claim that when someone purchases sex, they somehow purchase the right to do whatever they want, as if money somehow trumps consent. The prostitutes of Rio have a name for the kind of man who believes this—psychopath—and they distinguish his type from their other clients. Those negotiate a mutually agreeable deal; psychopaths take, rape, torture, and kill. It's ironic that many abolitionists naturalize the psychopath's point of view. This is a belief every sex worker I have ever met vigorously rejects.

Yes, there are bad clients—just as there are bad lovers, spouses and one-night stands. Psychopaths, it should be noted, do not restrain their activities to prostitutes, but are perhaps more attracted to them because of the moral stigma attached to the sale of sex. This naturalizes violence towards prostitute women.

The abolitionist/psychopath belief that the sale of sex is actually the sale of bodies seems predicated upon a misunderstanding as to what actually goes on in most of the prostitution I have witnessed.

When an independent woman agrees to sex for cash, she retains exactly as much—or as little—control over her body as a woman who agrees to sex for love or pleasure. Nothing inherent in the sex-for-cash exchange magically alienates the woman's body from her control.

Abolitionists claim that prostitution cannot be work because in it, the woman transforms her body into a good that is then sold on the market.

However, as my friend Brazilian sex worker rights activist, Indianara Siqueira, often remarks, “Honey, if I sold my body, there'd be nothing left of it for you to see today.”

Time and performance are what are purchased in sex work, not bodies. Of course, if a sex worker is controlled by another person, then her body may, indeed, become a commodity. This is not something that is necessary or exclusive to prostitution, however. Any worker, enslaved, becomes a commodity. Absent that sort of control, it is the worker's labor that is the commodity, sold on the market in all instances of wage work.

Abolitionists make a more subtle point, however, when they claim that even freely consented to prostitution is not work like other labor. They anchor this by observing that a system organized around male dominance leads to the marginalization of women as laborers, socially erasing much of what women actually do, qualifying this as non-work. Given this, abolitionists argue that women cannot freely choose prostitution; they are compelled to it by greater social constraints which offer them a choice between marriage, prostitution, or devalued labor. This compulsion, according to abolitionists, qualifies sex work as a form of slavery.

Abolitionists do not seem to take their own argument seriously, however, for given this system, what's the difference between marriage and prostitution? Why should most abolitionists be violently against the one, but not the other? After all, Emma Goldman famously equated the two when she said, “To the moralist, prostitution does not consist so much in the fact that the woman sells her body, but rather that she sells it out of wedlock.”

Other revolutionaries have gone even farther in their critique, pointing out that the wife traditionally stands in relation to the prostitute as the slave does to the worker. It is the wife who actually *sells*

herself, while the prostitute hires out to do piecework. While prostitution does not necessarily entail possession of women's bodies, engendered family roles have historically meant exactly that.

Today's abolitionist critiques of sex work rarely discuss this point. It is as if prostitution were either the nadir or origin of women's oppression, when almost every classical feminist-socialist-anarchist theorist situates *marriage* as the principal institution responsible for making women's oppression operational.

As Simone de Beauvoir pointed out 40 years ago, sex work can indeed be empowering for some women in that it at least asserts that women have possession of their own body. If we accept that economic power increases women's options in the world, then getting paid for sex can, indeed, be liberatory, as many sex working women point out, especially if it stands in opposition to not getting paid for sex and having to do it anyway.

I have never met a sex slave prostitute in Rio de Janeiro. I have met plenty of men and women working under unjust labor conditions, who are more or less trapped in terrible situations because they don't have the capital to look for something else. Sex work, however, is not particularly special in this regard.

I have met hundreds of sex working women who claim that prostitution, however noxious it might be to them, is a more flexible, less demanding, less controlled and—crucially—much higher paid form of labor than anything else available on their horizon of possibilities.

Let me describe to you what happens in the brothels I research. To meet charges that I am romanticizing “happy hookers,” I'll describe the daily grind in what was probably one of the worst knocking shops I've been in, which finally closed down last year after almost two decades of operation in downtown Rio, the late, but not much lamented, Snail.

The Snail got its name from the cast iron circular stairway that linked its six separate brothels, piled one on top of the other in a decrepit 19th century townhouse located in downtown Rio, six kilometers from where the recent soccer World Cup games were held. On the average day, close to 50 scantily clad women could be found turning tricks in the Snail's cabins.

The women would show up for work in the morning to catch early birds out on their coffee breaks from the surrounding office towers. Business would peak at lunch and again at quitting time. Prices for sexual services were standardized and posted on the wall, beginning at around \$USD10 for 15 minutes of sex. Slightly more than half of this would go to the worker while the rest went for cabine rental to the house.

The women were not controlled by pimps. They came in when they wanted—some every day, some once a week—and fucked who they wanted. They could refuse to go with any client, but this wasn't a big issue because the focus of most of the Snail's workers was turnover. On a slightly-better-than-average day, they'd do 10–12 tricks and take home about \$USD 50–60.

It should be noted in this context that the Brazilian minimum wage was around a dollar an hour. The women at the Snail (most of whom had no more than a high school education) were making 6–8 times that.

But the real money came through negotiation of services and tips.

The ten dollar trick bought a general programa, a blow job and vaginal sex, both with condoms. Anything else—including kissing—had to be negotiated. Unprotected blow-jobs, anal sex, girlfriend experience sex (i.e., kissing and caressing) all cost more. The big money makers were steady clients, who'd tip their favorites. Between extra services and tips, the women could often increase their pay by 50 percent or more.

None of this—including the basic programa—was the right of any man who walked into the Snail. It was all negotiated; take it or leave it. It was, in short, a market and a very active one at that. What was being sold was time and services, and woe betide the man who thought that he was “buying a body,” to do with as he pleased.

Unfortunately, because of sexism and pornophobia, men will make that mistake (just as they notoriously do in singles pick-up scenes and in relationships). It's not one they generally repeated in the Snail, however.

I'll let my friend "Belinda," who worked in the building for several years explain why:

"Men are thugs, but I can be a thug, too. Guys show up here out of their skulls. There's always a psycho in every crowd. I react. If he does anything I don't like, it's out the door. If he gets violent, I go right upside his head. We had a guy in here last week who slapped me. All three of us grabbed chairs and pounded him. He was down the stairs so fast he left his jacket on the railing!"

Violent? Yes, as sexual relations of all sorts too often are. What it is not, is the testimony of a passive sex slave whose body is being sold, who must allow clients to do whatever they like, who has no concept of her boundaries, or the will to set them.

Ultimately, then, this is the root of the question: does a woman have a right to decide whether or not she will engage in sexual activities and under what circumstances? If the answer is that she does and that this right is inalienable (which should be the correct anarchist response), then neither society nor the State can ethically restrict that.

As the late Brazilian prostitute rights activist Gabriela Leite never tired of pointing out, mistaking the sale of sex for slavery or rape only means that resources and energy which could be directed against those things go, instead, towards anti-vice campaigns.

And, why does this occur? I think Emma Goldman's comments regarding prostitution and trafficking, published 104 years ago, are just as valid today:

"What is really the cause of the trade in women...? Exploitation, of course; the merciless Moloch of capitalism that fattens on underpaid labor, thus driving thousands of women and girls into prostitution...[T]hese girls feel, 'Why waste your life working for a few shillings a week in a scullery, eighteen hours a day?'"

Naturally our reformers say nothing about this cause. They know it well enough, but it doesn't pay to say anything about it. It is much more profitable to play the Pharisee, to pretend an outraged morality, than to go to the bottom of things.

Anarchism goes to the root and does not preach simple reform. And, this is why, dear readers, that those anarchists who believe that prostitution can somehow be stopped through criminalization—of prostitutes or clients—really need to rethink their priorities. By repressing prostitution without eliminating capitalism, we only endanger sex workers.

Thaddeus Blanchett is a professor of anthropology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. A long-time anarchist and activist, he currently conducts action research with sex working men and women in Brazil. He has published many articles and book chapters on sex work, sexual tourism, and trafficking in women. Much of this production can be found on-line.



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Fifth Estate
Fifth Estate #392, Fall/Winter 2014 — Art & Anarchy

thelul.org