Sex and Sex Work from an Anarcha-Feminist perspective

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In “Sex and Sex Work from and anarcha-feminist perspective”, Leticia looks at the theoretical background to the debate between those who argue for decriminalisation and those who “see sex work (or even sex in general) as violence against women”. She argues that because sex is commodified, sex workers should be treated in the same way as others who engage in exploitative labour.

There is an on-going debate within anarchism about sex work, feminism and sex in general. While there is general agreement on the difference between sexual freedom and sexual exploitation, there is conflict between anarchists who argue for decriminalisation and those with radical feminist tendencies who see sex work (or even sex in general) as violence against women. The latter are mainly influenced by Andrea Dworkin and Melissa Farley.

Anarcha-Feminism or Radical Feminism?

Dworkin’s analysis of heterosexual sex and porn in her book Intercourse concludes that intercourse is a synonym for rape. She tries to clarify at the end that what she really means is that “sex must not put women in a subordinate position. It must be reciprocal and not an act of aggression from a man looking only to satisfy himself.”

Melissa Farley, an academic left wing radical feminist, believes that the only feminist approach to sex work should be abolition. Farley has said that “If we view prostitution as violence against women, it makes no sense to legalize or decriminalize prostitution.”

From an anarcha-feminist perspective, this approach is problematic. When radical feminists (“good” women) feel they have the privilege and the right to exercise power to force sex workers (“bad” women) to adapt to the dominant cultural norms with regard to sex, they are simply using the same tools that patriarchy has used historically in order to dictate the social norms that control the lives of women.

This poses several questions: what kind of feminist “assists” other women without asking them what kind of assistance they really want? What kind of feminist “assists” other women by treating them as if they were unable to decide for themselves what is best for them? What kind of feminist “assists” other women with methods that these women believe in fact to be harmful?

The Commodification of Sex

Sex work however, is more diverse and has many different fields than prostitution. A sex worker refers to any person who is paid to engage physically in a sexual way with clients: prostitutes, street workers, brothel workers, in-call or out-call workers, escorts, call boys, call girls, rent boys, bar girls, in-house prostitutes, adult film actors or actresses. Other sex workers are paid to engage in sexual performance directly or indirectly: exotic lap dancers, adult film producers, phone sex operators, nude models, full body masseuses, pimps, madams, strippers, escort service owners, webcam models, adult website owners.

Sex is a commodity because as much as we like it or not, everything under capitalism tends towards commodification. I find that a lot of the anarchist arguments about sex in general are puritanical and conservative about our sexuality, rather than just seeing it as exploitative work. If we see all work to be exploitative, why is sex work different?

Class, Gender and Morality

For example, in Madrid there was a campaign to shut down a brothel a few years ago. I don't know how many anarchists were involved in this action but a lot of my comrades thought it was a positive campaign. But what of the people who were working there who relied on that work for their income? What is the difference between this and people trying to shut down a supermarket where many workers who are also exploited will lose their jobs. Why should we have a different attitude?

There is a history of puritanical and conservative approaches in anarchism. There is the very famous scene of Emma Goldman being confronted for dancing with the lads by a comrade; and during the Spanish Revolution a lot of male CNT members believed that revolutionary anarcho-communists should live like nuns and monks for the spirit of the revolution.

Sex is still a big taboo in anarchist and left wing circles. People who choose to attack the brothel but not their local McDonalds do so because of sexual morality. Sex is made into a moral issue because we are not only taking about an economic relationship. So when some anarchists have a problem with a brothel or with a specific sex shop, it is not just a class or gender analysis that informs them, it is also what they think is morally good or bad for the rest of us.

Further Debate and New Approaches

Sex is a very big part of our lives. The anarchist attitude to sex and sexuality should be that sexual activities and relations should be safe, free, diverse and consensual; acknowledging that people are trans, queer, bi or hetero, from the monogamous to the polyamourous, from the asexual to the polysexual.

In relation to sex work, I also believe that anarcho-communist critiques of work, of legislation and of trade union structures have the potential to move forward the entrenched debate between those either advocating for the sex industry or fighting stigma, and those calling for its abolition through state legislation. I would like to see future discussions in anarchist circles of ways forward for grassroots organising by prostitutes and sex workers against their control by the state, the sex industry and the market.

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