

Letters

Our readers respond

Various Authors

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Want to write a letter about our Anti-Marx section?

We assume our essays critical of Marxism will generate a large number of responses. Limit letters to 400 words. If you want to suggest an essay in reply, please contact us.

Prostitution Comment I

Aaron Lakoff's article "Solidarity or Abolition? Anarchists & Sex Work" (see FE Spring/Summer, 2014) was a valuable contribution to the discussion of the topic.

I agree with Lakoff's conclusion that, "An anarchist approach to sex work is one that supports workers who want to get out of the industry, while at the same time supporting people who want to stay and fight for better conditions."

Several of our anarchist predecessors adopted such a position, including both Emma Goldman and some of the Spanish anarchist women of *Mujeres Libres* of the 1930s. These anarchists were impressed with the findings of Freud and other psychologists of their time, which led them to the conclusion that sex work involves psychological and social factors that impact individuals and society well beyond the kind of alienation that results from other forms of wage labor.

In various speeches, articles and books, Emma Goldman asserted that prostitution is more than simply one form of wage work. For her, the trade is the product of the impoverishment women suffer under capitalism combined with a sexually exploitative and repressive society.

She felt that psychological and social/cultural factors are as important as economic factors in gaining a full understanding of the various aspects of sexual relations and sex work. Although Goldman had sympathy for wives and prostitutes, she felt that marriage and prostitution were bad for both women and men, as well as for the creative impulses that lead to social revolution.

With this in mind, she advocated sex education, access to birth control, and abandoning repressive morality, while fighting for the abolition of wage slavery. Some anarchists I know feel that Goldman romanticized the power of authentic sexual intimacy and love, and overemphasized their importance for human liberation and revolution.

In order to decide for oneself, it is best to read some of Goldman's articles and books directly rather than accept anyone else's interpretation of what she says. Her writings can be found in bookstores, libraries and on the internet, especially in the Anarchist Library at theanarchistlibrary.org/authors/emmagoldman where there are currently more than 40 articles and books available.

One strong tendency in the 1930s Mujeres Libres group viewed prostitution as “the greatest of slaveries.” They felt that the best solidarity they could offer prostitutes was to establish a network of centers offering support to those working as prostitutes and encouraging them to leave the sex industry and join the revolutionary movement.

Until quitting became a realistic option, others in Mujeres Libres and other women’s organizations of the time supported prostitutes’ unions to struggle against their exploitation. Due to conditions created by the civil war and the thwarted aspects of the revolution of 1936 through 1939, neither approach could be successfully put into effect.

Those wanting to know more about this should check out *Free Women of Spain*, Martha Ackelsberg’s study of Mujeres Libres during the Spanish Revolution, based on personal interviews along with the writings in their journals of the time. A free PDF version of the book is available from Libcom.org at libcom.org/library/free-women-spain-anarchism-struggle-emancipation-women-martha-ackelsberg. Also available in print from AK Press. (Also see “Lessons from Spain’s Mujeres Libres” by Martha Ackelsberg, *Fifth Estate* #372, Spring 2006, available in the FE Web archives.)

Becoming more familiar with our anarchist predecessors’ ideas and attempts at solidarity with prostitutes might possibly help us come up with some new and more effective approaches.

Marie Louise
Tacoma, Wash.

Prostitution Comment II

After reading Aaron Lakoff’s article and Thaddeus Blanchett (See “On the Sale of Bodies: The View from Rio de Janeiro,” FE, Fall/Winter 2014) views on prostitution, I am at loss to comment on such meager pickings.

A selective view of a controversy will always serve whoever does the selecting and this is what we got: semantic exercises setting up moralists against sex workers, as if no morality was involved and no prostituted women actively support the Nordic model.

The writers rendered invisible almost all the women fighting their exploiters, even though they have been the main stakeholders in the massive sea-change shifting criminalization away from the prostituted class and onto profiteers. Anarcha-feminist writers such as Kajsa Ekis Ekman, Helene Hernandez, and Elisabeth Claude were entirely omitted, along with the tremendous anti-authoritarian insights of prostitution survivors such as Rebecca Mott and Andrea Dworkin.

Instead, a mini-theatre of factoids, straw men and soliloquy, reminiscent of The Playboy Philosophy. Not an honest word about the feminist, anti-racist and anti-poverty advocacy brought to bear on Canadian and French parliamentarians and populations, after a similar process in Nordic countries.

A former stripper, Tennis Milk, recently gave her impression of the faux intellectuals who went on and on about their solidarity with her:

“Something I noticed when I was stripping was that the younger, ‘hipper,’ generally white patrons I came into contact with were by far the most vested in the whole ‘emotionally invasive performance of enthusiastic consent’ thing. They all wanted to hear how I was doing it because I was empowered’

“I am entirely convinced that men only care about women being ‘empowered’ by things like sex work because it’s easier on their ego as consumers, not because they give a shit about our well-being. Sex positive feminism is a dream come true for these men. All the benefits of exploiting women as sexual commodities without any guilt or stigma for being a creepy ass john.”

Martin Dufresne
Montreal

Thaddeus Blanchette responds: I am not aware of sex workers who support the Nordic model. I do know people who claim to be survivors who support it. The two groups are different.

Sex workers are actually, currently selling sex and their voices need to be primary in this debate. The vast majority of these people are not helpless, agencyless victims who need rescuers.

Survivors are generally people who've been through processes analogous to slavery, not sex work.

Dworkin herself is an example. She did not work as a prostitute. She engaged in transactional survival sex while escaping an abusive marriage.

Curiously, however, we don't see people calling for "models" that criminalize marriage and arrest spouses, for all that certain anarcho-feminists claim to be anti-marriage.

In fact, Dworkin herself married again, making use of the privileges granted to such "respectable" sexual/affective unions. So much for ideological purity.

My opposition to the Nordic Model is not based on theory, but on discussions with hundreds of sex workers. What every one of them emphatically denied needing was state harassment of them or of their clients.

It is not labor that leads to slavery, but the capitalist conditions under which it is undertaken. These conditions are always worsened by criminalization. State-led initiatives (such as the Nordic model) do not attack slavery, nor do they reduce sex work: they have led to an increase in anti-immigrant policing and racial profiling, however. They have also made life much more precarious for the many people who sell sex.

Finally, I am amused that you feel you have the moral standing to imply that I'm some sort of "Playboy philosopher."

I invite you to come to Rio and go to the brothels with me and my partner. You might learn a thing or two from the sex working women here in Brazil, presuming you'd listen to them.

Aaron Lakoff responds: Martin Dufresne's comments seem to have completely missed the point of my original article. To return to my central argument, it wasn't that anarchists haven't advocated the abolition of prostitution. Indeed, some of them have.

Rather, my contention was that sex-work abolitionism is not coherent with anarchism if we are to understand its main pillars as self-determination, autonomy, and combating all forms of oppression.

Arguments like Dufresne's play well into the hands of conservative patriarchs who would sooner silence sex workers than have them organize for their own self-determination and liberation.

Eventually, abolitionists are going to have to reckon with this fact, or they'll end up applauding Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government in completely criminalizing sex work.

As anarchists and feminists, we need to get on the right side of the class war and start supporting women on the frontlines.

Not Generalist Poetry

This being the 110th anniversary of the Industrial Workers of the World, I'd like to respond to the "Wobbly Without Work?" article by Anu Bonobo in FE #370, Fall 2005, a special issue on the Industrial Workers of the World centenary. The article's interpretation of the IWW took quite a feat of logic to arrive at.

It begins, "If there's any idea promoted by the Wobblies that needs revision, it's their concept of One Big Union." And, later, "The Wobbly spirit of revolution isn't really about owning the means of production and controlling them through a bureaucracy of councils and syndicates."

The Preamble of the IWW constitution in its third line declares, we "must organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system and live in harmony with the earth."

Far from being "generalist poetry," as Bonobo writes, the Preamble outlines the basic framework of such an organization that could challenge international capitalism, "formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry or all industries if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lockout is on in any department, thus making an injury to one an injury to all."

It should be noted that the Preamble posits unity by all producers (or distributors) of industry as the active force in re-organization into an equitable system. Noam Chomsky describes his view of a Libertarian Socialism exactly as "a system of workers councils, consumer councils, commune assemblies, regional assemblies," etc.

Whether it implies a strictly Industrial Union movement akin to the One Big Union or more of a syndicalist approach should be discovered in action, not theory.

The fight for the 4 hour day, with the motto “Less hours; more pay,” reflects the demand for time to enjoy life, while providing a solution to unemployment and poverty. Contrary to Bonobo’s opinion, we praise worker-owned collectives that build cooperation and eliminate wage labor. Eliminate the idle classes who do no work, but receive all the benefits. No Bosses! No Managers!

If we are to create a society that provides the basic needs of the population and moves away from a profit-based system, it would require the participation of a democratic economic organization of the working class. In this era of climate change and international trade, direct action and solidarity unionism is the most practical plan for our goal.

The IWW was, and is, such an organization that seeks to “Build the new world within the shell of the old.”

Nacazqualtia Tecetliani

Detroit

On Polyamory

I don’t get out of the woods much, so I am catching up on the last couple of issues and read the commentary on polyamory in the last couple of issues. (See “Polyamory and Power” by Andrew William Smith, Summer 2013 *Fifth Estate*).

Anti-dyadic and non-dyadic coupling has a long and rich history, something the anthropological and biological record clearly indicates. Dyadic coupling is most definitely not the experience of humanity and certainly not the norm of the species.

The authority and merits of serial monogamy among the bourgeoisie are largely a fiction that imposes a quiet sort of self-deluded, pathetic and infantile existence on its adherents who generally are loath to admit it but force others to bear witness to the nonsense.

Most dyadic relationships are little more than a woven tissue of lies, a fetid swamp within which bodies live in quiet desperation until the libidinal energies are drained completely usually 5- 10 years into a relationship. Dyadic couples are generally really boring and lifeless or some retarded morality play.

Fortunately, monogamy is little more than a comforting illusion, the saving lie as we know the human animal, particularly the female, is more than willing to seek out covert sexual encounters, contrary to popular myth of the male being the promiscuous one.

Such is the secret life of women and this behavior may have deep roots in evolutionary biology, but more realistically, it is the untenability of the absurd notion that someone can be and should be fulfilled by only one other person: emotionally, sexually, and otherwise.

This pathetic narrative is central to every Hollywood production, shit rock song, and crap romance novel, and is a central feature of the dynamic of social control in North America where the cult of Individualism is its keystone.

The object being to keep the libidinal energies of the vast majority of human beings contained in as small and dysfunctional social network as possible, channeling the excess into the complex of power we call the Machine; mass warfare, consumption, etc.

There are many examples of human societies whose sexual relations are not caged by the fear and neurotic manifestations of the psychosocial dynamic of bourgeois ideology and these societies tend toward egalitarian and non-violent social relations.

The Mosou, Canela, Bar, Ach, the meat-for-sex tribes in South America, as well as those communities who celebrate the “three days that God does not have eyes,” the Toda and Omaha, the Latter Day Saints cult, old hippie communes in northern California.

There were a string of North American communes in the 19th century that practiced group marriage such as Oneida in New York state. Then, there is the reality of wide-spread consensual and non-consensual infidelity in Western and non-Western societies. Swinging is also a popular sub-culture, a phenomena that emphasizes and celebrates female control over her multi-partner sexual experience devoid of Victorian romanticism, morality, and its patriarchal framework of fear and control.

In many ways, such phenomena are similar to festivals where a Canela woman of Brazil can enjoy as many partners of her choice and with the overt support and approval of her husband.

Societies that impose monogamy as the only sanctioned type of relationship always have unwritten rules for negotiating sex outside of the dyad and very often it is tacitly encouraged and seen as socially beneficial.

Having known innumerable married female lovers who pursue sex outside of their stable, often dreary monogamous relationship with their “steady eddy,” with or without their partner’s approval, testifies to the fact that, often, we have to live in two worlds to make this one tolerable.

One is necessary to the stability of the other. Highly repressed libidinal energies are indicative of hierarchical methods of social control and destructive to the health of the human organism.

Ivo

Williams, Ore.

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