

Sex Work in Socialist Space

By Mila Lapente

As wealth inequality grows, cost of living continues to rise and force people into mobility, and bodily autonomy is increasingly infringed upon, the struggle towards an equitable, *liveable* future begs for urgency. Socialists' call for a worker-led movement, however, habitually excludes sex worker involvement or support, and a unified party position has yet to be reached.¹ Where is sex work's place in Marxist theory and socialist praxis? How have those who trade sex been left out of leftist discourse? Why are they important to a liberatory struggle? I seek to start a conversation around these questions by introducing discussions of sex work in Marxist theory, their categorization as part of the "lumpenproletariat" (or "underclass"), and how their presence in leftist movements has the potential to challenge colonial and heteronormative thought.

I've seen sex workers in leftist spaces be, at best, tokenized and, at worst, called gender traitors and labor deserters. I've watched as sex work issues have been disappeared from organizing campaigns, so as to not "alienate" potential member requisitions. Time and time again, those who trade or sell sex have been barred from engaging in conversations pertaining to their political self-actualization. This conservative morality exhibited by leftists and socialists who claim to value materialism above all else exposes enduring colonial capitalist ideologies within their movements.

At its origins in Marx's writings, and later in the writings of communist feminist Alexandra Kollontai, the denigration of the prostitute/prostitution in class-conscious theory acts as both a metaphor and martyr to the exploitation of marriage and labor: "Prostitution is only a particular expression of the universal prostitution of the worker" (Karl Marx, "Private Property and Communism" in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 1844). I object to such analogous objectification of sex worker's lived experience, which does little to hide Marx and Kollontai's moral disdain. Prostitution could only be understood as a symbol of formal worker oppression insofar as it serves a sensational and moral analogy to exploitation. This attitude is routinely reflected by (white) socialists who use selective interpretations of sex work's mechanization under capitalism to support their objection to sex work advocacy.

Under capitalism, sex work represents "the most abstract form of crisis" as "the metamorphosis of the commodity itself" (Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, 1861) - another challenge to classical Marxist beliefs: that the commodity is without voice and therefore

¹ The DSA (Democratic Socialists of America) remains to be one of the only socialist-geared organizations with an official position published in 2020 supporting the full decriminalization of sex work. Their statement was made in the wake of conflicting CPUSA (Communist Party USA) publications; one taking a radical feminist, anti-prostitution position, and the other rebutting with a sex work-inclusive position.

incapable of resistance. Again I protest: sex workers inhabit a space of prolific resistance!² Without arguing that engaging in sex work is empowering, or denying power hierarchies that may be at play, we can acknowledge the agency exercised by those who demand inclusion in an economy they have been pushed out of. Sex work defies capitalist subordination by working outside its boundaries of productive/reproductive and paid/unpaid labor. Erotic commodification monetizes emotional and sexual aspects of reproduction, but does not replace its unpaid existence; sex workers are cleaning their houses, clothing their babies, cooking for their neighbors and engaging their communities. Should they not also be afforded the opportunity to participate politically in conversations surrounding their exploitation?

A further categorization of sex workers by Marx as part of the lumpenproletariat - a criminal, “unproductive” underclass - provides more fodder for dogmatists to cast them aside as counterrevolutionary. To this point I argue in complete contradiction and turn to Fanon in believing that such an underclass, while not innately political, is a *crucial* part of the revolution as they are the group most intimately familiar with the consequences of capitalism, and stand the most to gain from the elimination of the source of their exploitation.³ It is materially inaccurate to reject sex workers on the basis of their inclusion in this class. Some of the most effective leftist political and mutual aid organizing in the U.S. has been done by groups who seek to mobilize the underclass as a vanguard: the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords. These groups operated in resistance to colonial racism that lingers in leftist thought and that is the backbone of capitalism by “embody[ing] non-heteronormativity because racialized bodies, just by virtue of being considered ‘different,’ already embody non-heteronormativity” (Tanya L. Saunders, “Black Lesbians and Racial Identity in Contemporary Cuba,” in *Black Women Gender and Families*, vol. 4, no. 1 [Champaign Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010], pp. 18). The race and class contexts of sex work overlap the same systems of challenging colonial thought.

² Fred Moten argues the existence of a similar resistance in the face of commodification, or “objecthood,” in black radicalism. This is in opposition to Western classical Marxism, which assumes immediate subjectivity, rather than acknowledging the historic commodification of black bodies and black resistance to capitalism through critique of its imperial racist history (Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002]). See Moten’s concept of objecthood applied to a reinterpretation of the lumpen as a “productive” class in Armond Towns’ 2017 “The ‘Lumpenproletariat’s Redemption’: Black Radical Potentiality and LA Gang Tours” (in *Souls*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 39-58).

³ Though I’m intrigued by developing theorization of the modern “blurring” of class lines between proletarian and lumpen underclass through lived experiences (see more on this in Madden & Marcuse 2016), the racialization of the underclass must be recognized. In arrests for prostitution alone, 42% of adults and 50% of minors are black, according to most recent FBI data. Black trans people experience extremely high rates of incarceration, unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, and are represented disproportionately amongst sex worker demographics as a result. Further, Western conceptualizations of class theory privilege their own definitions of “contemporary” sexual or reproductive labor, failing to consider class-based variations in the Global South where the market and household may more often coexist.

In such a way, challenging the heteronormativity of race, class, and gender together is the only avenue towards a comprehensive, collective liberation. The conflated oppression of racialized, classed, and gendered groups has fed into, if not created, the stigmatization of sex. This has been used for centuries as a weapon against class solidarity, and in order to regulate heteronormative family structures that allow for unpaid reproductive labor and care work.⁴ Anthropologist Florence Babb suggests a “queering” of research surrounding gender, labor, and family systems in “Queering Love and Globalization” (Duke University Press, 2006), which I believe - when applied to leftist discourse - would allow for a reexamination of assumptions about heteronormative primacy, its colonial roots, and its entanglement with race and class. Questioning these assumptions in a politically driven, class-based analysis has the potential to aid in liberation from patriarchy and normativity. Challenges to heteronormativity through fields of study like traditional feminism or queer theory isolate sex and gender from class struggle; this is why class struggle is so important - it calls for liberation through working class (and underclass) vindication.

I have been more politically inspired in rooms full of sex workers than in any organizing space I have ever been in. Discussed more actionable strategies, heard from more powerful and intelligent speakers, developed more driven and resourced plans. The exclusion of sex workers from formal socialist and other leftist arenas has deprived some of capitalism’s most marginalized from opportunities for the autonomous improvement of their material realities, and deprived the leftist movement of some of the most knowledgeable, innovative resisters.

⁴ In *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), Silvia Federici writes about the decriminalization of rape that swept Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries as previous feudal systems began to be replaced by capitalist ones. Promoted as a form of “class protest,” proletariat men were encouraged to repossess what was lost to them by way of land privatization in (often the group) assault of poor women. Marked by abuse, their rejection from formal workplaces and marital opportunities led many to sell sex for survival - providing a steady stream of labor for state brothels (which at the time were considered to be preventative to homosexuality and, ironically, rape) and effectively dividing the class-consciousness of men and women that had preexisted (47-8). While this state strategy is notably class-based and inherently racialized (in that the assault of a wealthy woman would not have been condoned, and that the legalized abuse of enslaved black and brown women significantly predates and perhaps provided a foundation for such legislation), I am interested in the analogous relationship between class and gender this particular scenario foreshadows in modern liberal capitalist discourse. That in simplifying class conflict to a gender-based one, we damage not only the people who exist outside essentialized definitions, but also the political potency and solidarity that comes with the dialectic consideration of race, gender, and class in contiguity.



About the Author



Mila Lapente is a political activist, writer, and practicing prole. She received her BA in Gender and Labor Studies from SUNY Empire State College as a continuing-ed, student-debtor, and believes education should be accessible, non-elitist, and free. Through the lens of class-consciousness, her area of focus explores sex work and other informal economies in socialist contexts. She has organized on behalf of sex workers, poor people, and others exploited by capitalism from the Northeastern U.S., to Atlanta, to Cuba. Her creative writing has been published in St. James Infirmary/Red Umbrella Rides' Sex Worker Safety Zine.