Body meets class. An iquiry into the political economy of work

Abstract: *A lot of questions surround the sex work industry, from political to economic to social ones. While, generally speaking, the literature has been critically focused on one of these areas, there is a lack of a clear basis for a more definite understanding of the situation of the labourers. My purpose will be to build a Marxist framework of analysis that can illuminate a few crucial questions. I use the methodology of Analytical Marxism, while aspects of work relations are of feminist origin. After a brief introduction, in the first part I look at what sex work is, from a value perspective, offering an alternative refutation to some widely known feminist arguments in this area. In the second part, I look what the elements that come into play in sex work can tell us about how the labor is carried out, explaining why their is a need for conceptualizing the output as intimacy. After this overview, I categorize the workers as proletarians, for several reasons. The third part deals with the prospect of unionization in the field of emotional work. Necessarily, I will argue that sex work is intrinsically affective, in order to bring forward a recommendation for the process of representation. The final part contains a conclusion and some guiding ideas for both feminist and socialist political struggles.*

Keywords: *sex work, class, Analytical Marxism, feminism, labour rights, proletariat;*

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Introduction

A recent cultural piece[1] crucially draws attention to the multiple strata of rights and abuses and the false dichotomies involved in sex work. The article opens with a powerful statement: "Sex work will disappear the day we abolish capitalism. Until then, let's talk about labour rights" (Jaén 2018). If one wants a post-sex work future, it is crucial for to understand the problem in its essence. While some feminists analyzed the problem without an anti-worker discourse[2], the sex work should be analyzed from a Marxist standpoint. It should look at relations of production, the character of labour and its extraction and the class positions involved[3]. Simply put, the central question of this paper is *what exactly makes sex workers proletarians?* To respond to that, we need to consider if this is a productive activity, responding to some feminist arguments.

The first two parts deal with this question. After a short literature review, Part I creates a definition of sex work starting from use-value. Part II starts by analysing its characteristics as a productive activity and answers the question of commodification of sex. I use the analytical method developed by Cohen (1984). Afterwards, I look at the character of production in terms of the final output and discuss class positioning. The proletarian question is answered using the output of labour. Fur-

thermore, Part III examines the emotional aspect of labor in this trade and construct parallels with other job categories. Here, aspects of the specific character of unionization are explored. The concluding Part IV further develops a starting point for discussions on workers' struggle.

A final point: the problems affecting sex workers are not exclusively the topic of Marxist analysis. Gender, race, class, etc. come into play, as Crenshaw (1989) famously underlined. However, for this task, I will put aside a lot of socio-economic constraints. This is done with the purpose of elucidating the economic essence.

I. What is sex work?

Some feminist authors deny that this activity constitutes work. For reasons of brevity[4], I will consider an interesting argument made by Overall, in which the author states that this is a specific commodification present only under capitalism and is non-replicable when exchange is absent (1992: 716). She underlines that other forms of women's labour can be envisioned as non-commodities, while sex becomes just an activity; she arrives at the conclusion that a work-categorization would actually imply that sex is a commodity (1992: 717-8). Shrage (1994) cites the historical argument of White (1990) to refute this claim. If commodified sex work comes in a classist, sexist form, we should not find cases in which workers are more powerful than the customers. White's focus on a case in which this type of work is not commoditized and is done by petty-bourgeois women (e.g. 1990: 57) seems to disprove that. She also states that we are dealing mainly with commodification of labour (1990: 11). Shrage fortifies this, citing the presence of monetized sex work in pre-capitalist societies and arguing that monetary exchange does not imply commodification (1994: 568). These accounts are somewhat incomplete. First, Overall's point implies that sex is commodified only in prostitution without an analysis of the commodity and, more importantly, relies on a misunderstanding of what constitutes work. If we could not understand sex work other than in an exchange form, the argument fails: exchange-value represents only an appearance. Other forms of similar sexual production were present in the past, without exchange, like the sexual labour of priestess done for religious purposes (Dufour 1902 *apud* Dylewski and Prokop 2019)[5]. Her objections have only partly to do with the form of the exchange and more to do with the idea of expropriation of the output, because it implies difference in economic power. Under capitalism, what she talks about is the transfer of a sexual product *in commodity form.* But this transfer is present in other epochs. Her objection of unequal power applies also to those, but there is no reason to think it could not apply in a socialist society, as she implies (Overall 1992: 719-20, citing Le Guin 1993). Put simply, we need to analytically separate capitalism and patriarchy in order to see the essence. Finally, her conclusion (Overall 1992: 723) would then become: we should protect sex workers, not sex work. We will analyze the former after the latter. Second of all, White rightly points towards commodification of labour, but such a conclusion follows directly only from an analysis that looks at value production and surplus extraction. Finally, Shrage's account, should be, in my view, complimented by an understanding of the nature of production in sex work to acquire full force. The discussion that follows will hopefully dispel difficulties of evaluating sex work, through a distinction between value and use-value.

What does 'sex work' mean? In this phrase, 'sex' denotes a wide range of activities that have a sexual character in common[6]. Ranging from phone sex to pornography, not all activi-

ties imply intercourse. Definitionally, this activity is defined by performing and/or mimicking actions with a sexual content.

The work part merits some clarification. In Cohen's argument, 'working' seems sometimes implicitly synonymous with 'labouring': the process of spending 'labour power' – i.e., all of one's productive faculties (1983: 32). Marx too seems to use 'labourers' and 'workers' interchangeably sometimes (cf. 1993: 391, 396).

A distinction will bring the value-form to light. On this topic, Engels praises the difference between use-value production (work) and value production (labor)[7]. Any purposeful activity which uses up your capacities and produces a thing of want or need is work. Value[8], under capitalism, is only relatively observed; it is presented in the form of exchange-value – from a relation between use-values, through the mediation of market[9] exchange[10]. Therefore, under fully-formed capitalism, the productive activity has always this dual aspect of use-value and value (masquerading as exchange-value). An activity producing use-value is work[11], present in all forms of social production[12]. In capitalism, the value-form obfuscates, in this case, the fact that we see the same process, but socialized and abstracticized.

Accordingly, the definition of sex work becomes: *the production of use-value through performing and/or mimicking actions with a sexual content*. This show that transfers of the output happen in more circumstances than Overall analyzes. In the absence of commodification, it is still labour, it does not just become a 'sexual event', as Overall claims (1992: 716-7). Irrespective, then, of the value form, we see this is primarily a question of labour, which culminates in a sexual output. The use-value cannot be divorced of the labour that produces it. Even though there is commodified sexual output throughout history, this is possible if and only if we are dealing with proto-commodified labour[13]. The question furthermore depends on relations of production: labour is a commodity if and only if it is a generally bought, and not taken by extra-market means. Still, this represents a first, partial reason for treating the sex trade as work under capitalism.

II. Are sex workers proletarians?

In his defense of Marx's theory of history, Cohen (1984) expounds the analytical categories that characterize the proletariat as the productive class in capitalism.

How does the *ideal* profile of a sex worker look in a Marxist framework? We need to look at 1) relations of production: a) control of means of production and b) control over one's labour power[14]; 2) subjugation; 3) subordination; 4) producing character. For our purpose, let S be a sex worker.

(1) By relations of production we mean those that obtain between person(s) and productive forces – i.e. a) means of production (instruments of production, space and raw materials) and b) labour power[15].

a) Broadly speaking, proletarians and slaves control none of the means, while petty-bourgeois producers and serfs control some, and independent producers, all[16]. It is sometimes the case that S owns some means of production but, if they are not sufficient to support her existence, she remains a proletarian (Cohen 1984: 72). In our case, the instruments of production are those that connect S and other workers, and the client(s), be it in person or at a distance, while the spaces are the premises in which the work takes place. In the particular case of pornography or sex works that involves the transmission of the product towards consumers,

objects that contribute productively to this process, such as cameras, computers and the like are also included. It would seem that there is a problem in what concerns the body as means of production, but that is contingent on what is produced and how. There are no raw materials involved, for nothing is materially transformed. For simplicity, if a pimp, call agency or the like are involved, let us say that they provide the complete set of means of production and, if they are not, let S, alone or with other workers, control those means.

b) Looking at labour power, the question arises whether S controls her labour power completely (like proletarians, independent producers, petty bourgeoisie), partially (serfs) or not at all (slaves)[17]. This serves for broad distinctions, inside of which multiple sub-types can form, but they remain useful nonetheless. By complete ownership, it is meant the capacity to choose in which direction to direct it and for whose benefit[18]. Generally speaking, if S is employed under (quasi)contractual situations, she effectively controls her labour power. In the case of forced labour, such as the case of trafficking, she does not. The notions that follow apply *only* to free workers.

(2) Subjugation is applicable only under capitalism and it has two sides: i) formal subjugation refers to the incapacity of S to produce her means of subsistence outside of the employment of the capitalist class; and ii) real subjugation denotes the loss of the worker's skills and abilities to operate other tools than those the capitalist owns (Cohen 1984: 101-2). Under employment, S seems to be subjugated in sense i), but this and especially questions regarding sense ii) need to be based on a much broader analysis of general conditions than I am able to provide here.

(3) Subordination summarizes the distinctions between producers and non-producers. These are two non-reciprocal relations and a distinction in status: i) they produce for others that do not produce for them; ii) they are subjected to the authority of others who need not listen to them in return; and finally iii) they are poorer than their superiors (Cohen 1984: 68-9). If S is employed, it is done probably in a subordinated fashion under all three criteria.

(4) By the producing character, I refer to the output of labour in its market form, specifically whether it is a commodity. By definition, commodity producing is production for the increase of surplus-value (Cohen 1984: 82-3) and those involved in that process constitute productive labourers (e.g. Marx 2016: 401-2). Until now, some of the analysis seemed odd partly because it seems this is not commodity production. Indeed, the absence of an object to be transformed in production indicates that there is no physical commodity involved. The labour input of the worker still counts as producing use-value, but we have yet to identify what she is producing to say that S is a proletarian.

Sex work as the production of intimacy

Marx is clear that he does not distinguish commodities as outputs based on their physical characteristics[19] and he believes it unimportant if the use-value disappears at the end of the productive process, as is the case in a service commodity (Marx 2016: 165). But this disappearance is only important for the consumer who gets the use-value immediately. The question is: is the buyer effectively employing the sex worker for a given period of time – in which case her labour is unproductive -, or is he acquiring a commodity for which the capitalist already got surplus-value? Our analysis will point towards the latter. Insofar as a price had al-

ready been set, even if not effectively paid, before a customer gets the use-value produced by the workers, the extraction of surplus-value is virtually complete.

Another question is, given the nature of non-pornographic sex work, if the commodity can exist without the involvement of the buyer. In cases that imply direct contact between the buyer and the worker, the use-value results from interaction. This is only the case if the commodity itself is sex. However, what is effectively produced with or without the presence of the buyer is *(the illusion of) intimacy*[20]. We are dealing with production of the potential for sexual intercourse and, therefore, with a service commodity. This definition stands if we are looking for a common product in various types of sex work, given the similarities between them. Even in the production of a pornographic material we see the same thing, only the labour is embodied in a (physical) commodity. It can be seen as intimacy, in terms of the use-value the consumer gets, which is exactly the point. Even if the consumption of the commodity service implies effort (i.e. labour) towards a given goal, the realization of value is independent of this. What matters for the capitalist is the surplus, which is extracted only through the labour of the sex worker herself and is realized in payment-agreement. There are multiple acts that are involved, but the trade merits a common label if and only if there is a semblance of the *type of commodity service* they produce[21]. Sex is often a result of this intimacy, of course. But intercourse between two or more people cannot be produced without the contribution of all of them, which would mean that the capitalist is, somehow, extracting surplus-value from labour from the customer(s) as well. To clarify, let us put the production process in a more straightforward way, to illustrate the point of thinking about it as intimacy. The worker interacts with the means of production – even if we are only considering spaces -, but is not simply 'added', as a kind of *de facto* object to be interacted with. It is expected of the worker – and, indeed, the practice – to appear in a certain kind of way. This means that one is supposed to behave in a certain way, in order to appear pleasant. It is hard to imagine, under capitalist and patriarchal constraints, that a lot of workers would actually enjoy taking part in this process. In other words, some might object to the idea that workers make themselves appear attractive, smile, flirt, etc., but it is not from one's own desire that one acts in this way. It is the rationale of profit and competition that constrain the capitalist to enforce a punitive system that instills in the worker the need to create this 'want-me' image. This is true even if the emotion is fake, as I will detail in the next section. But, for now, it is sufficient to say that this kind of transaction does not rely solely on authenticity. In a more empirically oriented work, one might posit the hypothesis that, as we go up on the income scale, the need of the consumer for more 'authentic' emotions (i.e. better enactment, probably) would rise as well. Although it is an interesting path to explore, it is beyond the scope of this paper. If we look at the idea that it is not only sex that is bought, but some form of illusory compassion, caring or even other sexually-charged acts, we need to find a broad category to integrate them all in. Therefore, thinking of sex work as producing intimacy makes much more sense than any other scheme, from the point of view of 1) the different aspects of the work itself, 2) who produces value and 3) how surplus is extracted.

The conclusion is that, by all accounts, sex workers are proletarians. They create a use-value, even if there are grounds to object to the nature of production, and, independently of what the customer does after acquisition (inside limits that apply to other commodity services as well), they produce surplus-value for the capitalist.

III. A union for all. The question of the emotional proletariat

Macdonald and Sirianni (1996) start from the notion of emotional labor and analyze the growing service industry, coming up with the idea that feelings are so involved in this sector that the workers from the 'emotional proletariat'. What is the place of sex workers in this field? This section tries to answer the question by looking at similarities with other job categories and proposing a unionization fight that takes all these categories into account. First of all, let us point out that intimacy is intrinsically tied with emotion. Granted, emotions can be faked or forced, as many things are under capitalism. But the work that the labourers do, as we saw, answers a sexual need. This is not only a physical need, but also an emotional one; it fulfills a longing for attention, touch, closeness and so on,transcending the barriers of physicality.

If one is inclined to believe the characterization of sex workers as the producers of intimacy, then it is clear one should qualify such labor as emotional one, under the definition offered by Hochschild (1983). What I will attempt to prove here is that, under the current conditions of labor in the affective trades, there can and should be a common struggle of emotional laborers. Yet, as some authors point out, the majority of jobs nowadays imply an emotional undertone, be it positive or negative (Steinberg and Figart 1999: 9). The aspect that can unite sex workers and other emotional laborers is not the affective character in itself, but the fact that there is a notion of care implied. In other words, it is the 'niceness' of the emotions that stands out in the sex trade[22], as well as in others. Although there is an emotional character involved in many job areas, only some exhibit emotion *productively*. It is those we need to identify.

As in the case of sex workers, let us say that a worker W in trade T directly produces an emotional commodity if and only if the output is necessarily positively affective. In other words, the commodity needs to be, in the language of ethicists, a personal relationship good, such as care, hospitality, love, and so on[23]. Let us look at some clear examples; babysitters and nannies are employed to ensure the physical safety and the emotional well-being of small children. In this way, the labour that they do is emotional in character. Nurses cater to the psychological concerns of patients, but they also fulfill an emotional task of caring for them in the most difficult moments. Hospitality workers, such as waiters, ensure that the atmosphere in which eating and drinking take place is pleasurable. Multiple examples could follow.

There are a number of jobs in which, under the current conditions of capitalism, emotional labor is required, besides any physical or mental labor that the worker is employed to do. Moreover, what is relevant here is that the cycle of production is similar in all of these trades. That is, workers directly interact with the customers. They create a personal relationship with them, no matter how thin it might be; thus, the socializing aspect of their labour becomes readily visible. Furthermore, in many cases, workers depend on the good impression that they leave with the customers, for tipping and other informal monetary practices. Similarly, they depend on the capitalists or managers as well. Personal relations are important in this last aspect for informal raises, gifts and so on. The creation of such a relationship is a calculated one – albeit imperceptibly – on the part of the bosses. It is better to create an atmosphere of closeness in which gifts are given, rather than giving in to demands for better contractual pay. As such, a union in these sectors has to complete additional tasks, beyond the usual representative ones. It needs to dispel the illusion of friendliness and thankfulness that the worker might feel towards the capitalist. It needs to bring forward the exploitative economic aspect that is even more obscured in this sector than in the industrial one.

As a final point, a lot of these trades are gendered. In our times, we cannot ignore the fact that there is a distinction between male labor and its female counterpart. The purpose of a union, then, is to educate the workers not only in resistance tactics and class consciousness, but gender perspective as well. At the same time, a federation union should make the emotional aspect its driving force, bridging social gaps between sex workers and 'acceptable' job categories.

The failure of some feminists to consider sex work as emotional labor should, therefore, be rectified in the realms of class struggle.

IV. Conclusions – the character of class struggle

Now, some limitations of this paper. This is an ideal type, which paints only the broadest of strokes and requires further sociological inquiries to be proven valuable. Inasmuch as the conceptual apparatus is concerned, it is hardly or even not at all applicable in hybrid social forms. A deeper study of the various historical forms of sex work, put in the context of the entire economy, is required. The account of surplus-value generated by the workers rests, in part, necessarily on the labour theory of value and, as far as that theory is attackable, my account is as well. It is worth noting, however, that there are sound reasons not to dismiss the theory offhand (see Roberts 2018).

Some conclusions and future suggestions follow. What makes sex workers proletarians is the fact that they are producers of a commodity, thus fulfilling a human need. They are exploited, but the work that they do is, I argued, not intrinsically objectionable. Furthermore, the emotional aspect makes them possible flag-bearers of this affective segment of the global proletariat. In any sense of the word, they are workers, and any Marxist should think about the character of class struggle while taking into account the actual problems that arise in the current state of affairs.

Finally, I have tried to offer an alternative response for those who object to sex work as constituting 'acceptable' work. In a lot of countries, sex work is still criminalized and is often mixed with trafficking. These issues are not as easily separable as I tried to do here, but the discussion in this paper will, hopefully, contribute to offering responses to the brutal practice of enslavement, towards a more just practice.

While we might find ethico-political objections to the transfer os a sexual commodity, we should not ignore the economic aspect. Workers do have some degree of choice as to *which* capitalist they sell their labour power to, but sell it they must! It takes welfare to pick and choose. There are a lot of problems, from a socialist and feminist perspective, in what concerns the actual practice of sex work, as Overall and others point out. The point I thought to be important was to analyze its economic essence – production. Additionally, it is crucial for unions to realize, on the one hand, the liberatory potential of feminist perspectives and, on the other hand, the necessity of unification with other emotional labourers. The struggle is seldom simple, but a conscious union does more for the rights of workers than a thousand academic articles.

In an optimistic reading, this paper can contribute meaningfully to the debates surrounding sex work. It is my hope that the gap between feminists and sex workers can be bridged. There is no fight without the workers. We should remember what the old song tells us: 'Yet what force on Earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?/ But the union makes us strong!'[24]

Notes

[1] Jaén, "Sex Work Is Work. That's the Problem… and the Key.", 2018.

[2] For the labour-and-rights sensitive position see, for example Brock and Stephen (1987).

[3] Some readers will point out that it is sometimes difficult to separate Marxist analysis from its political counterpart. For a brief discussion concerning what the results of this characterisation can tell us about the workers' struggle, see Part IV.

[4] Positions arguing against work-categorization can be found in Cole (1989), also in the volume edited by Bell (1987). See also a simple explanation of the positions in Overall (1992: 706-8).

[5] Or, as a counterfactual displaying the relation between producers and non-producers, the role of the handmaid in Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 2011, in which the ruling class is not extracting surplus-value.

[6] Lawless, a worker, gives illuminating examples in this direction. See: Sciortino, "Sex Worker and Activist, Tilly Lawless, Explains the Whorearchy", 2016.

[7] See the footnote on p. 138 in Marx, *Capital*, 1981.

[8] Defined as the objectification of abstract (undifferentiated, quantitatively taken) labour, whose measure of magnitude is socially necessary labour-time (i.e. the duration of the productive process under normal conditions of production, with the average required skill, etc.) (Marx 1981: 128-30)

[9] The relation shows itself as between use-values, but, in order to be commensurable, the comparison is, in fact, of their values (Marx 1981: 128).

[10] And, we need to add, the exchange-value is used for the purpose of accruing more of this form of value, as capital is, by definition, self-expanding exchange-value; it is seeking to increase the value it put in, i.e. a search for *surplus value* (Cohen 1984: 189, 350-2).

[11] Or we could distinguish it as useful labor, as Marx does (e.g. 1981: 131)

[12] Furthermore, on linguistic ground, the distinction makes sense, in the usage at the end of the 19th century. As the Capital's translator Ben Fowkes points out (1981: 87), the term 'labourer' has a negative ring to it, so 'worker' was introduced in its place. But even now, in common use, one is working (usefully) around the house, as well as in his place of occupation, while 'labour market', 'labour power', etc. still denote value-related concepts.

[13] It would be improper to say 'commodified labor', for there was not, before capitalism, a generalized market for it.

[14] Traditionally, this is termed 'ownership of one's labour power'; the non-legal terminology comes from Cohen (1984: 217-25)

[15] Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, 1984, 32, 35, 51-5.

[16] *Ibid.,* 66. For the characterization of the petty bourgeoisie, see p. 86.

[17] *Ibid.,* 66

[18] *Ibid.,* 240-1

[19] 'Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values' (Marx 1981: 138)

[20] As Overall herself remarks accurately (1992: 715) but returns to sex as the commodity and does not explore this path.

[21] Compare the notion of the industrial proletariat. There is a specific cycle of production and there is a general category of outputs that are produced, even if each trade produces a different final commodity.

[22] A trivial response could be given here, saying that, for example, bondage or other sadomasochistic practices do not exhibit a positive emotional character. But there is an obvious difference between the nastiness of a bank foreclosure officer and the one of a dominatrix, in that the latter acts violently to produce a pleasurable reaction on the customer.

[23] For a more exhaustive list, see the first chapter in Gheaus (2018).

[24] Seeger. Solidarity Forever. 1998.

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