
Representing the Prostitute

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Can feminists theorize prostitution if they have never worked as prostitutes? Feminist analysis would be very partial if we could only speak of that which we had personally experienced. In the absence of personal experience feminist theorists can rely upon other women's accounts and upon the exercise of their own critical political intelligence. In the area of prostitution the exercise of political intelligence is particularly necessary since the voices of prostitutes even within the literature of the prostitutes' rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s do not agree. The main voices in this literature proclaimed that prostitution was a job just like any other or even a form of sexual self-determination for women. But others described prostitution as seriously and inevitably abusive.

Before the prostitutes' rights movement began, Kate Millett (1975) analysed prostitution in *The Prostitution Papers* as 'paradigmatic, somehow the very core of the female's condition'. It declared her 'subjection right out in the open' more clearly than marriage which hid the cash nexus behind a contract. It turned the woman into a thing to be bought, it effected her 'reification'. It showed that a woman is no more than 'cunt'. The prostitute was selling not really 'sex' but 'degradation' and the john bought 'power over another human being, the dizzy ambition of being lord of another's will for a stated period of time' (Millett, 1975: 56). But Millett considered that authentic action around prostitution had to come from prostitutes themselves 'if anything, ultimately, is to be done or said or decided about prostitution, prostitutes are the only legitimate persons to do it ...' (Millett, 1975: 15). Millett's analysis had become very unfashionable for feminists by the 1980s. Shannon Bell, in her 1994 book *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, offers a postmodern feminist position in which her 'overarching strategy' is to show that there is 'no inherent meaning' in prostitution (Bell, 1994: 1). She does not hesitate to 'represent the other' with her own meaning which is that the prostitute should be seen as 'worker, healer, sexual surrogate, teacher, therapist, educator, sexual minority, and political activist' (Bell, 1994: 103). Initially the writings of women in prostitution that emerged in the 1970s under the influence of feminism were not celebratory. The collection *Prostitutes: Our Life* contains the oral histories of six of the French women involved in the 1975 prostitutes' strike (Jaget, 1980). The argument of the strike was that prostitution was work which should be respected and decriminalized, but no attempt was made to sanitize it. The three books that emerged from the much more developed prostitutes' rights movement in the late 1980s show a rather different approach. In these texts many of the accounts still show prostitution to be a damaging experience but the main

ideological message is much more positive. Feminists who emphasize the injury of prostitution are accused of making prostitutes into victims. These collections are: *Good Girls, Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face* (Bell, 1987); *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (Delacoste and Alexander, 1988); and *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (Pheterson, 1989).

These books were all published by feminist presses and they all directly challenge what is seen as a hostile feminist analysis of prostitution. Prostitutes' rights activists argue that prostitution is not just a job like any other but a form of work with positive advantages. It allows women to be in control, particularly of their sexuality. An example of this positive argument comes from Terry van der Zijden from the Netherlands who says prostitution allows women to enjoy sex without complications and is a way to become 'sexually autonomous' and the sexual self-determination can lead to self-determination 'in all other areas of our existence as women' (cited in Pheterson, 1989: 161). But other prostitutes' voices in this literature adamantly reject the notion that prostitution has anything to do with women's liberation. A French woman in the collection from the 1975 prostitutes' strike asserts, 'Prostitution and sexual liberation have got nothing to do with each other, they're exactly the opposite'. She says it is 'quite absurd' to think that 'there'd be girls who'd do this for pleasure'. She explains that she does not feel 'free' with her body. In fact she feels 'bad about it' and 'self-conscious' and comments: 'I don't really feel like my body's alive, I think of it more as bruised, as a weight' (cited in Jaget, 1980: 112).

At a Canadian conference on pornography and prostitution, Peggy Miller, a member of Toronto's CORP, was positive about the sex in prostitution: 'What is so terrible about fucking for a living? I like it, I can live out my fantasies' (cited in Bell, 1987: 48). But another participant challenges her directly, saying that she was a prostitute for 8 years since the age of 15 and does not believe that she can 'like every sexual act' or work out fantasies with a trick that she's 'putting on an act for'. She asks 'Isn't it about having money to survive?' and says 'If I had had to fuck one more of them — boy, I would have killed him' (cited in Bell, 1987: 50). A woman at the Second Whores Congress pointed out that while some women purported to enjoy their work when they were speaking publicly more negative stories were being told in private (see Pheterson, 1989: 178). Another sceptical participant argued that if Priscilla Alexander's estimate in her theoretical piece, 'Prostitution: a Difficult Issue for Feminists' (in Delacoste and Alexander, 1988), that street prostitutes serviced an average of 1500 men a year, were true, then it was very hard to imagine that in every case they were revelling in sexual freedom. Other prostitutes in this literature argue that prostitution is not suitable for the young. Margo St James at the Canadian conference said prostitution was unsuitable for women under 25 because 'a young person should find their own sexual self before they are subjected to a lot of commercial leering and lusting' (cited in Bell, 1987: 129). The desire to protect young women does give the lie to the very positive accounts of prostitution's advantages.

The positive view of prostitution in the literature is belied by the common experience of very serious violence that many women describe. One French woman describes a 'respectable' client pulling a gun on her and another trying to strangle her. She says that assaults happen 'very often' (cited in Jaget, 1980: 124). All of the French women described the threat and experience of violence as a very negative part of the work. One says she was attacked several times when she began in prostitution, so 'I've reached the point now where I get really scared of all of them, even

the regular clients. They could easily come ten times, twenty times, and then one fine day get some crazy idea in their head' (cited in Jaget, 1980: 85).

In one of the 1980s volumes, *Sex Work* (Delacoste and Alexander, 1988), dedicated to refashioning the image of prostitution, many of the women speak of experiencing severe violence or having to take precautions to avoid it. A street prostitute speaks of the precautions she takes such as searching the glovebox, keeping a hand on the door handle at all times. She tells of having had a knife to her throat and having a gun pulled on her and says she has to have a 'sixth sense' (cited in Delacoste and Alexander, 1988: 94). The threat of death is very real, as suggested by the figure in the same volume for the murder of prostitutes in the Seattle area: 81 from 1983–1986. An Australian study found that a third of the women had experienced some kind of non-sexual violence, 11 percent experiencing it on more than seven occasions. A fifth of these women had been raped at work (Perkins and Prestage, 1994: 172). A contemporary female brothel owner in Sydney with lengthy experience does not see the situation in respect of violence against prostitutes as improving: 'The modern client is more demanding, wanting to pay less, looking for kinkier sex and, I believe, more likely to turn to violence' (Barlow, 1994: 139). Women in prostitution who would assert in surveys that they had not been raped would attest to having clients who go 'overtime', a situation that the prostitute is powerless to redress. It is likely that there is an under-reporting problem in surveying prostitutes on experiences of violence (Perkins and Bennett, 1985: 75). Going overtime can be a sign of more serious violence. One brothel prostitute tells of an incident: 'She went overtime so I looked in and there she was, dead, with a leg of a chair shoved through her eye and into her brain' (Perkins and Bennett, 1985: 240).

Toby Summer is the pseudonym of an ex-prostitute who wrote an angry rebuttal of the positive arguments of the Delacoste and Alexander (1988) *Sex Work* anthology. She offers a useful explanation from her own experience of why there is presently such a denial of the damage and celebration of prostitution in pro-prostitution literature. She seeks to explain how prostitution can be said to have 'something to do with women owning our own bodies ...' while at the same time these bodies are being sold 'to men who hate women, whores and lesbians ...'. She says that though not always a feminist she had always wanted to be 'free'. She felt 'closer to freedom' when espousing what she calls the 'Man's lie' about her independence in prostitution, when she told herself she chose 'even the rapes' and that the 'nausea–alienation–bruises–humiliation–STDs ... poverty–abortion all were somehow fixable with what amounts to an EST positive attitude'. She lied to herself, she says, because this made her feel better and that she maintained this lie after leaving prostitution even though it allowed no explanation of why she chose to work in a 'hot commercial laundry for \$1.00 per hour [rather] than fuck another man' (Summer, 1993: 233). She found that 'confronting how I've been hurt is the hardest thing that I've had to do in my life' (Summer, 1993: 234). It is hard because 'it is humiliating to acknowledge victimization'.

Why are there so few critical theoretical accounts of prostitution from feminists? There has been little attempt to fit prostitution into an analysis of women's oppression apart from Kathleen Barry's *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979), republished as *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (1995). This is so considerably revised as to constitute a quite new book. Barry exercises a critical political intelligence to make the argument that prostitution is a violation of women's human rights. If feminist squeamishness about challenging men's use of women in prostitution is really the result of not wanting to 'represent the other', or not wanting to choose between 'others', then this

needs to be got over in the interests of integrating prostitution into a feminist analysis of sexuality and sexual violence.

The desire not to choose constitutes an abandonment of the prostitutes and ex-prostitutes who are critical, such as Toby Summer and the brave feminists who founded groups in the USA such as WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt) and the Council for Prostitution Alternatives. I suggest that when feminists are deciding what they think about prostitution that they must weigh up women's accounts against what they already know about sexuality and male violence under male supremacy. Rather than backing away from 'judgementalism' or depending on the rhetoric of 'choice', they need to see prostitution in its context, to see how it fits into and shapes the construction of women as objects for men's sexual use, which affects the status of all women. They need to consider how the sexual harassment and unwanted sexual intercourse that prostitutes are paid to endure relate to their own reasonable feminist aims of eliminating male violence for all. Feminists cannot hide from using their political intelligence behind the argument that only prostitutes can speak about their experience when such very diametrically opposite views are all posing as the truth of prostitution.

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