‘All work is prostitution’:
An Exploration of Sex Work, Exploitation, and Dis-Organising.

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Abstract

The sex workers' rights movement has rallied around the slogan that 'sex work is work'. However, this tells us surprisingly little about how this work can and should be understood. Through approaching sex work as *a form of work*, this project explores and clarifies how this work is best understood. This thesis constructs a conceptual framework for understanding sex work as a kind of work. The archives of the English Collective of Prostitutes and the Wages for Housework movement, available at the Bishopsgate Institute London, are used to historicises a perspective of approaching sex work as a form of work. This thesis expands upon the existing analysis of how exploitation in sex work can be conceptualised by incorporating the testimonies and writings of sex workers. Through an analysis of Nicholas Vrousalis' account of 'exploitation as domination' applied to independent sex workers, this thesis develops the existing 'anti-work' reading of sex work. The 'anti-work' perspective offered by some sex worker radicals is found to be the most fruitful for developing an understanding of the harms of sex work, including exploitation, and for constructing a critique of work generally. Finally, this thesis explores organising in the sex workplace and the potential for this to be a rich resource for other kinds of work organising. Drawing on the work of incarcerated queer abolitionist Stephen Wilson in his essay 'Dis-Organising Prisons', the concept of 'dis-organising' is adopted to offer insight into discussions on organising around marginalised and criminalised forms of work. The concept of 'dis-organising' is used to further illuminate the kind of 'non-reformist reforms' that sex worker radicals are aiming at. In particular, the discussion focuses on attempts by sex worker radicals to reform sex work whilst simultaneously seeking to deconstruct this work under existing systems of racialised capitalism.

Keywords: *Sex work, political theory, feminist theory, archives, Wages for Housework, English Collective of Prostitutes, social movements, labour organising, abolition, exploitation, Marxism, Marxist feminism, anti-work*

All work is prostitution, whether we work for money or room and board. All women are prostitutes. Whether we fuck for money, wait on tables, pack biscuits, type letters, drive lorries, bear children, teach in schools, or work in the coal mines, we are forced to sell our bodies and minds.

Our whole lives are stolen from us by work.

— *Power of Women Collective,* Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution,' 1976.

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Illustration of the sex workers' rights movement red umbrella produced by Jay Westwood for this project. Images and archive material from the English Collective of Prostitutes and the Wages for Housework archive collections reproduced with permission from the Bishopsgate Institute.

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Abbreviations

BWfWFH - Black Women for Wages for Housework

BDSM - Bondage, Domination, Sadism, and Masochism

COYOTE - Call of Your Old Tired Ethics

ECP - English Collective of Prostitutes

IWFHC - International Wages for Housework Campaign

LAW - Legal Action for Women

PoWC - Power of Women Collective

SEV - Sexual Entertainment Venue

SWU - Sex Workers' Union

TUC - Trades Union Congress

UVW - United Voices of the World

WEP - Women's Equality Party

WFH - Wages for Housework

WLM - Women's Liberation Movement

1 | Introduction

On 17 November 1982, several women shuffled into the back of Holy Cross Church in King's Cross during the final service of the day. Many of the women were clutching babies to their chests. They wore black cat eye masks to conceal their identities. The women sat patiently as they waited for the reverend to finish his sermon. After the service was over, their occupation began.[1]

These women were part of the English Collective of Prostitutes, a campaigning organisation for the rights of sex workers based in London.[2] They occupied Holy Cross Church for twelve days in protest of police violence and racism against sex workers. Banners from the Occupiers' read 'Mothers need money end police illegality + racism in King's Cross'.[3] The Occupation had been prompted by in-

1. Accounts of the occupation of Holy Cross Church are drawn from the English Collective of Prostites (ECP) archive and the Wages for Housework (WFH) archive at the Bishopsgate Institute, information presented by the ECP online, Selma James' pamphlet documenting the experience, newspaper reports, and Sarah Walker's — a participant in the occupation — oral history account given as part of the King's Cross Story Palace project. See English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*, https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/english-collective-of-prostitutes; Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*, https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/wages-for-housework-campaign-archive; Selma James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*, 40th Anniversary Edn (London: Crossroads Books, 2022); Frankie Miren, 'British Library: The English Collective of Prostitutes – Occupation of Holy Cross Church,' October 2020, https://prostitutescollective.net/british-library-the-english-collective-of-prostitutes-occupation-of-holy-cross-church/; English Collective of Prostitutes, 'Occupation of Holy Cross Church, King's Cross 1982,' https://prostitutescollective.net/church-occupation-1982/; Dan Carrier, 'English Collective of Prostitutes hold reunion in King's Cross,' Camden New Journal, https://www.camdennewjournal.co.uk/article/english-collective-of-prostitutes-hold-reunion-in-kings-cross; English Collective of Prostitutes, *Sex Worker Occupation of Holy Cross Church – News Footage 1982*, November 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIKYn20X07U; StoryPalace, 'Sarah Walker: Hot Dinners in a Cold Church,' May 2018, https://storypalace.org/stories/hot-dinners-in-a-cold-church/.

2. They were also joined by Women Against Rape.

3. At the end of James' pamphlet, she includes a selection of copied materials from the Occupation archive, including press statements and photographs, see James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*; English Collective of Prostitutes, 'Occupation of Holy Cross Church, King's Cross 1982.'

creasing police crackdowns on prostitution, particularly in the King's Cross area.[4] Holy Cross Church itself is based in the red light area of King's Cross, presumably one of the reasons it was chosen for the women to enter for sanctuary.[5] The Collective had purchased fifty black masks, which were worn so that prostitute and non-prostitute women would not be distinguishable from one another. Press photos of any of the occupiers would also not be dangerous.[6]

The women ate, slept, theorised, debated, and cared for their children in Holy Cross Church throughout those twelve short days. Sarah Walker — a participant in the Occupation — describes how the church was a flurry of activity full of women and their children, all from a range of backgrounds.[7] Walker recounts the daily routine of the women. In the morning they would clean the church, even polishing the pews. Then, they would hold a meeting to decide who would speak to the media, who would go out to speak to different groups, and who was in charge of the photocopying. After this, the women would get to work. In the evening, they would come back together for a meal and another meeting to reflect on how things had gone that day.[8]

Holy Cross Church was, and is, an active place of worship. Father Trevor Richardson, the vicar of the church, was broadly supportive of the Occupation. When questioned by Thames News, he stated that he 'thinks in the midst of all this the girls have got a point to make' and that:

> Too much concentration is directed in my mind to the girls themselves and not to the evils of society which cause them to be here in the first

4. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*; English Collective of Prostitutes, 'Occupation of Holy Cross Church, King's Cross 1982.'
5. English Collective of Prostitutes, 'Occupation of Holy Cross Church, King's Cross 1982.'
6. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*, Section: Going to Church.
7. StoryPalace, 'Sarah Walker: Hot Dinners in a Cold Church.'
8. See the recording titled 'Hot dinners in a cold church', StoryPalace.

place.[9]

He was happy for the women to remain in the church as long as they did not disrupt services. The women were happy for parishioners to attend services and were respectful of the activities of the church.

Over the twelve days, the Occupation would receive support from other leftist groups. Support was extended from Andaiye (Guyana's Working People's Alliance), Labour MP Tony Benn and education campaigner Caroline Benn, Black and Immigrant women's organisations, Sappho (the lesbian women organisation), and gay men from nearby bookshop Gays the Word supplied the occupiers with food and blankets. Walker describes fondly the food bought by the men from Gays the Word, and how nice it was to be supplied with a hot meal when the church was cold.[10] Two women from Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp also travelled to support the occupation.[11]

In spite of the 'authentic and collective life' being built behind their masks by the prostitutes and their allies of Kings Cross, I do not want to paint too rosy a picture of the occupied church.[12] Although Father Richardson supported the occupation, many other members of the congregation did not share his views and claimed they had to worship elsewhere.[13] The Occupation received significant backlash

9. See the Thames News interview clip, English Collective of Prostitutes, *Sex Worker Occupation of Holy Cross Church – News Footage 1982*.

10. See the recording titled 'Hot dinners in a cold church', StoryPalace, 'Sarah Walker: Hot Dinners in a Cold Church.'

11. English Collective of Prostitutes, 'Occupation of Holy Cross Church, King's Cross 1982'; Carrier, 'English Collective of Prostitutes hold reunion in King's Cross'; Nina Lopez-Jones, 'Workers: Introducing the English Collective of Prostitutes,' in *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, ed. Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander (Cleis Press, 1987); English Collective of Prostitutes, 'Photograph of the English Collective of Prostitutes occupation of Holy Church, Kings Cross,' 1982, https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/photograph-of-ecp-occupation-of-holy-church-1982.

12. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*.

13. English Collective of Prostitutes, *Sex Worker Occupation of Holy Cross Church – News Footage 1982*.

for what some saw as a publicity stunt by feminist groups. Controversy arose over the fact that not all members of the Occupation were prostitutes themselves. Some of the women involved were revealed to be long-time feminist campaigners. Journalists and critics suggested the sit-in was doing little to actually help prostitutes working in the area, in part because some prostitutes came forward and said that the police had cracked down even harder in some areas since the Occupation began.[14] Interviewers also suggested that the sit-in might risk having the public losing sympathy for the prostitutes of Kings Cross.[15]

Amongst the women occupying the church was Selma James, spokeswoman for the ECP. A well-known — some might say infamous — feminist writer, speaker, and activist. In a TV news interview about the Occupation of Holy Cross Church, Selma James was questioned in regards to her reputation as a so-called 'professional adopter of causes', an allegation that James promptly rebuffed.[16] James is known for her work in anti-racism and working-class activism, although she is perhaps best known as one of the founders of the Wages for Housework movement.[17] James documented the occupation in her short pamphlet, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*.[18] In the pamphlet, James reflects on the success of the occupation, noting that there were some short-term immediate gains. There was a much increased public awareness of violence against sex workers and a report was compiled that would compare illegal arrests of sex workers in the King's Cross area before and after a monitor was appointed to oversee the police. However, the Occupation's success was short-lived. The published report lacked data on ar-

14. English Collective of Prostitutes, *Sex Worker Occupation of Holy Cross Church – News Footage 1982*.

15. English Collective of Prostitutes.

16. English Collective of Prostitutes.

17. Forrester offers an overview of James' work and key intellectual development, see Katrina Forrester, 'Capitalism and the Organization of Displacement: Selma James's Internationalism of the Unwaged,' *Political Theory* Online First (2024): 1241–1299.

18. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*.

rest numbers, and it made no mention of the occupation which had prompted its publication.[19] James argues that this erasure was not a coincidence. Rather:

> *What we are witnessing before our very eyes is the process whereby women's struggle is hidden from history and transformed into an industry* ... "Feminists" making a career off prostitution has become a new branch of the sex industry and is as much pimping off women as men have ever done.[20]

Reflecting on the Occupation in 2020, Frankie Miren, a journalist, writer and sex worker activist, notes that its legacy is 'bittersweet'. Miren points out that: 'So many of those sex workers' demands are still our demands today. Change has come, but not enough.'[21]

Perhaps surprisingly, it is not the first time sex workers have occupied a church. The ECP followed in the footsteps of prostitutes in France some years prior. In 1975, sex workers in Lyon began a series of church occupations in France led by prostitutes. They too were protesting police brutality, increasing arrests, and fines, whilst the police did nothing to help stop the violence they experienced during their work.[22] It has been widely regarded that these occupations formed the beginnings of the modern sex workers' rights movement.[23]

19. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*; Miren, 'British Library: The English Collective of Prostitutes – Occupation of Holy Cross Church.'

20. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*, Emphasis original. Section: The Monitor's Report.

21. Frankie Miren's article is a republication of her article on the British Library website, see Miren, 'British Library: The English Collective of Prostitutes – Occupation of Holy Cross Church.'

22. Toupin details how WFH groups offered support to sex worker groups from the beginning, including from the 1975 French church occupations by prostitutes. See English Collective of Prostitutes, 'Occupation of Holy Cross Church, King's Cross 1982'; Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework: The History of an International Feminist Movement (1972-1977)* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 169–174.

23. The occupation of Saint-Nizier Church in 1975 by French prostitutes is widely regarded as the beginning of the global sex worker movement. The Occupation of Holy Cross Church by the ECP in 1982 was directly inspired by this. Although as Kurbanoglu notes, the occupation in

Years later, sex workers and their allies around the world would begin to mark an International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers on December 17th. The memorial day began in 2003 as a memorial for the victims of the Green River Killer, a serial killer who murdered at least 71 women in Washington state, the vast majority of whom were sex workers.[24] Those marking the date commemorate not only the women who died, but also sex workers who have been victim to all kinds of violence. Many sex workers and organisations advocating for their rights have since broadened out the discussion from individual acts of violence to structural harms such as arrest, incarceration, and entrenched stigma. Further to this, many sex workers' rights activists and academics have declared that *sex workers' rights are workers' rights*. This has led to a focus not only on the harms caused by criminalising sex work, but a growing discussion on working conditions, exploitation under contemporary forms of capitalism, and access to labour rights for sex workers.

1 Research Area

This thesis draws on political theory, feminist theory, the sociology of work, legal studies, and public policy to explore and assess the harms of sex work, including prostitution. This thesis develops an account of the *work* in sex work that both explains and locates the harms embedded within and surrounding (sex) work, prompting us to question the nature of work under contemporary forms of capitalism.

1975 is not the first time sex workers have gone on strike. See Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 104; Elcin Kurbanoglu, 'What Make Sex Workers Strike: A comparative analysis of France (1975) and the UK (1982),' *nternational Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 3, no. 6 (2011): 164.

24. NSWP, '17 December: International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers,' Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2010, https://www.nswp.org/event/17-december-international-day-end-violence-against-sex-workers.

The project revolves around the following questions:

- How should we define sex work?
- What are the historical and political reasons for approaching sex work *as a form of work*? What are the benefits of this conceptual lens?
- What, if anything, is wrong with (sex) work?
- How might an analysis of sex work *as work* help us to critique work under capitalism and reimagine future organisations of work?

The sex workers' rights movement has rallied around the slogan that 'sex work is work.' However, this tells us surprisingly little about how this work can and should be understood. Through approaching sex work *as a form of work*, this project explores and clarifies how sex work is best understood. With this aim in mind, this thesis constructs a conceptual framework for understanding sex work as a kind of work. In looking to explore the historical and political reasons for approaching sex work as work, this research investigates the broadly 'Marxist feminist approach' found in the archives of the English Collective of Prostitutes and the Wages for Housework movement, available at the Bishopsgate Institute London. These archival sources are used to historicise a perspective of approaching sex work as a form of work.[25] In exploring the problem(s) of sex work, this research expands upon the existing analysis of how exploitation in sex work can be conceptualised by incorporating the testimonies and writings of sex workers. This is explored through an analysis of Nicholas Vrousalis' account of 'exploitation as domination' applied to sex workers working independently, that is free of any third-party involvement.[26] Through the discussion of exploitation and sex

25. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*; Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

26. Nicholas Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination: What Makes Capitalism Unjust* (Oxford:

work, this thesis develops the existing 'anti-work' reading of sex work.[27] The 'anti-work' perspective offered by some sex worker radicals is found to be the most fruitful for developing an understanding of the harms of sex work, including exploitation, and for constructing a critique of work more generally.

Finally, this research is interested in asking: what does analysing the sex workplace, including how its workers organise, offer critiques of work more generally? This thesis explores organising in the sex workplace and the potential for this to be a rich resource for other kinds of work organising. Drawing on the work of incarcerated queer abolitionist Stephen Wilson, the concept of 'dis-organising' is adopted to offer insight into discussions on organising around marginalised and criminalised forms of work.[28] The concept of 'dis-organising' is used to further illuminate the kind of 'non-reformist reforms' that sex worker radicals are aiming at. In particular, the discussion focuses on clarifying the attempts made by sex worker radicals to reform sex work whilst simultaneously seeking to deconstruct this work under existing systems of racialised capitalism.

In the following sections, I clarify key terminology used in the thesis (section 2), outline the research context for the thesis (section 3), my methodology (section 4), information about archival resources used (section 5) and outlines for each of the chapters (section 6).

Oxford University Press, 2022), See.

27. For example, see Sonya Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World,' n+1, April 2020, https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/whores-at-the-end-of-the-world/; Vanessa Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped: Antiwork Politics and The Value of Embodied Knowledge,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 3 (2021): 573–590; Helen Hester and Zahra Stardust, 'Sex Work in a Postwork Imaginary: On Abolitionism, Careerism, and Respectability,' in *The New Feminist Literary Studies*, ed. Jennifer Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 69–82; Femi Babylon and Heather Berg, 'Erotic Labor Within and Without Work: An Interview With femi babylon,' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 3 (2021): 631–640.

28. Stevie Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*, December 2019, See, https://abolitioniststudy.wordpress.com/2019/12/05/dis-organizing-prisons-by-stevie-wilson/.

2 Defining Key Terminology

Throughout this thesis, I use a variety of terminology. I have offered definitions and explorations of these terms throughout where appropriate. Before continuing, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by the following terms: 'sex work' and 'sex workers'.

Sex Work

The language we use to describe the world around us, particularly something as polarising as sex work, is anything but neutral.[29] Though the term 'sex work' has been adopted into popular discourse, the term has a relatively short history after having been coined only in the late 1970s.

The invention of the term 'sex work' is frequently credited to sex worker and activist Carol Leigh in her essay 'Inventing Sex Work'. This was written after she attended a feminist conference organised by Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media in the late 1970s.[30] Due to attend a workshop on prostitution, Leigh noticed the title of the session hung up outside the door included the phrase: 'Sex Use Industry'. As a sex worker herself and wanting to open up feminist spaces for sex workers to be included in the discussion, Leigh suggested the title be changed to 'Sex Work Industry'. No one objected at the conference, and the title change was adopted. Leigh advocated for this change because she argued it reflected what the women did in the industry, not what is done to them. After all, as Leigh argues, it is the men who use the services and the women provide them.[31]

29. Material for this subsection on defining sex work has been adapted from my MPhil research, see Kushti Westwood, *Overcoming the Impasse: Competing feminist approaches to sex work*, Masters Thesis, University of Oxford, 2020.

30. Carol Leigh, 'Inventing Sex Work,' in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (London: Routledge, 1997).

31. Leigh, 229–30.

After the conference, Leigh would use the term 'sex worker' in her one-woman play 'The Adventures of Scarlot Harlot' which she began performing in 1980. According to the Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network, the member group that Leigh co-founded, the earliest documented use (understood as printed in the mainstream media) of the term 'sex worker' in its current usage is found in an article from the Associated Press Newswire from 1984 about the use of the term in Leigh's production.[32]

Though a simple change, this feminist contribution to language offered a different way to talk about those in commercial sex. The term sex work provided those working in the industry a single term to unite a variety of workers under one banner. Leigh advocated for the use of 'sex work' as it joins together prostitutes, strippers, porn actresses, and many more who are selling sexual labour that share common needs in their legal and social battles.[33] The term sex work is an umbrella term, uniting a variety of workers in commercial sex under one common term.[34]

Sex work refers to a broad range of activities where people trade their sexual labour for money or other resources. The term refers to activities in commercial sex like Bondage, Domination, Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM) work, stripping, sugar babying, camming, phone sex operators, fetish workers, and porn work. Sex work also refers to full-service providers, which cover a range of activities like street workers, people operating out of a flat or hotel, and brothel workers. Throughout this thesis, I will be referring to sex work in this broad sense — to

32. Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network, *The Etymology of the terms "Sex Work" and "Sex Worker"*, Sex Workers Education Network, http://www.bayswan.org/sexwork-oed.html; NSWP, 'Bold and pioneering sex work activist Carol Leigh has died,' December 2, 2022, https://www.nswp.org/news/bold-and-pioneering-sex-work-activist-carol-leigh-has-died; Associated Press News, 'Activist Carol Leigh, who coined term 'sex work', dies at 71,' November 18, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/crime-san-francisco-obituaries-7f603a07f0ce49bf18b5ff3d4fb5b0e6.

33. Leigh, 'Inventing Sex Work,' 230.

34. Vanessa Carlisle discusses the use of 'sex work' as an umbrella term, including what it may obscure in the process. See Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped.'

mean a variety of kinds of sexual labour that fall under this umbrella. I will at times refer to specific forms of sex work, such as prostitution, stripping or porn work. I will indicate when I am referring to these more specific forms of sexual labour.

Sex Workers

Who are the sex workers that we are speaking about? Juno Mac and Molly Smith begin their book *Revolting Prostitutes* with the following:

> Sex workers are everywhere. We are your neighbours. We brush past you on the street. Our kids go to the same schools as yours. We're behind you at the self-service checkout, with baby food and a bottle of Pinot Grigio. People who sell sex are in your staff cafeteria, your political party, your after-school club committee, your doctor's waiting room, your place of worship. Sex workers are incarcerated inside immigration detention centers, and sex workers are protesting outside them.[35]

There is no perfect representation of a sex worker, as much as we would probably like to think there could be. Sex work is highly varied, as you can see it covers a lot of different jobs. People might do it for a short period, and then 'exit'. They may do it periodically throughout their lives, or alongside other kinds of 'straight' work. In this context, and throughout this thesis, I will refer to work outside of the sex trades as 'straight' work.[36] Which people get into sex work is highly varied — and it does little justice to sex workers when we generalise them all as women who are poor, dependent on substances, and forced into this

35. Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London: Verso, 2018), 1.

36. Other names sometimes used in the literature include 'civilian work', 'civ work', and 'square work.'

line of work. This is of course not to say there are not women like this in sex work, but in thinking this way we are likely to make some big generalisations.[37] Part of Mac and Smith's work in their book is in humanising sex workers, as we consider that sex workers are all around us yet so often hidden. They are people's friends, sisters, and mothers, even attending the same book club as you. For a group that has been stigmatised and subject to violence, this move is pivotal to Mac and Smith's approach to getting us to think empathetically about the harms of sex work.

Sex worker activist movements often use the slogan, 'nothing about us, without us'.[38] This concept was mainstreamed from the disability rights movement in the 1990s, which used this slogan.[39] Activists and campaigners advocated for realising the principle of 'meaningful involvement'. This means demanding equal participation in and consultation on social matters. The sex workers' rights movement and other social movements have called for their meaningful involvement and the right to participate meaningfully in policy-making, research, and civil society.[40] For a community that have been marginalised and hidden, as well as excluded from public discourse, demands such as 'nothing about us, without us' are extremely important. This is also informed by a claim that it is sex workers, not journalists, politicians, the police, or even academics who are the experts on sex work.[41]

37. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 18–21.

38. The Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, *Nothing About Us Without Us! A brief guide on meaningful involvement of sex workers and their organisations in Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA)* (Published Online, 2019), 6, https://www.swannet.org/files/swannet/NothingAboutUsWithoutUs_ENG_web.pdf.

39. See James I. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

40. The Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, *Nothing About Us Without Us!*, 6–8.

41. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 21.

As feminists theorising about sex work, what should we take from this? At the very least, we must include the voices and perspectives of sex workers in our theorising. This must be with an awareness that we are unable to hold up the experiences of one sex worker, or a group of sex workers, and say 'this is what they all experience'. We will struggle to fully represent and reflect the diverse reality of commercial sex. This is not to say that because we do not have a perfect representative figure of a sex worker and that experiences may be hard to generalise from, we should not listen to sex workers' stories and experiences.[42] Or that we should not read the theory that they're writing.

To return to the question: who are sex workers? As Mac and Smith point out, 'sex workers are everywhere'.[43] Anyone, particularly any woman, could have had sex working experience. For Mac and Smith, and the sex workers' rights movement as a whole, this move is important to show solidarity with sex workers, to avoid their continued othering, and to combat the stigma they experience.

But it would be wrong to say that there is nothing in the question: who are sex workers? There is something to be said about paying attention to who it is that is selling sex for a living and their reasons why. Whilst 'sex workers are everywhere', it does not seem that all of us are as likely to have sex working experience. Equally, people's identities will shape their experiences of the sex trades. Those who are trans, particularly trans-feminine, are more likely to at some point work in the sex trades than their cis counterparts.[44] Neurodivergent people are overly

42. Raven Bowen, former CEO of National Ugly Mugs — a sex worker charity in the UK — writes on the necessity of working 'in service' of sex workers and not speaking over their needs and demands, see Raven Bowen, *Work, Money and Duality: Trading Sex as a Side Hustle* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2021), Chapter 7.

43. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 1.

44. There is limited research on trans sex workers, one study suggests that as many as 6 percent of all sex workers in Europe are transgender, which when compared with estimates that suggest that about 1% of the population identify as transgender, it appears that trans people are overrepresented in sex working populations. The numbers of trans sex workers are likely to be higher too, as research has often overlooked trans sex workers especially trans masculine and non-binary

represented amongst sex working population's.[45] In the UK, migrant women are overwhelmingly represented amongst the sex working population.[46] These are just a choice selection of statistics, and this does not tell the whole story about sex work, who does it, and how their experiences vary. However, it indicates something significant about who the sex workers we are speaking, writing, and theorising about might be. People's marginalised identities *do* matter in identifying the reasons people sell and trade sex for money or resources. Marginalised people are made more vulnerable to kinds of work that are more precarious, and sex work is no exception. As Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith points out that

> the clearest way to talk about sex workers' rights without resorting to

sex workers. See International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe, *Underseved. Overpoliced. Invisibled. LGBT Sex Workers Do Matter* (Published Online, 2015), 5, https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/Underserved.%20Overpoliced.%20Invisibilised.%20LGBT%20Sex%20Workers%20Do%20Matter%2C%20ICRSE%20-%202015.pdf; Alexandre Leal, *Red Light at The Intersection: The Stigma of Sex Work and the Double Oppression Inflicted Upon Trans Sex Workers*, Masters Thesis, European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation, 2016, 6–7; Angela Jones, 'Where The Trans Men and Enbies At?: Cissexism, Sexual Threat, and the Study of Sex Work,' *Sociology Compass* 14, no. 2 (January 2020).

45. As with analysing how many transgender people engage in sex work, it is hard to ascertain how many neurodivergent people are working in the sex trades. This is in part because research has, until more recently, focused on disabled people as consumers of sexual labour rather than in its sale. From the research that has been conducted so far, however, what is emerging is that neurodivergent people may choose sex work due to being excluded from the formal labour market and it offering a potentially more flexible work arrangement, see Shawna Felkins, 'Cripping Sex Work: Disabled Sex Workers and Racialized Disgender in the Online Sex Industry,' *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (October 2022); Angela Jones, '"I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal' Job": Disability, Sexual Ableism, and Sex Work,' *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (October 2022); Reese Piper, 'Autism, Sex Work, and Empathy,' Queer Majority, April 2019, https://www.queermajority.com/essays-all/autism-sex-work-and-empathy.

46. One study estimates that around 37% of female sex workers in the UK are migrants. Though this study was conducted some time ago, in 2006, and before the EU referendum which has created a more hostile environment for migrant sex workers. However, as with neurodivergent and trans sex workers, migrant sex workers are likely to enter into sex work for similiar reasons due to marginalisation and exclusion from formal labour markets. See UK Network of Sex Work Projects, *Working with Migrant Sex Workers: Good Practice Guidance* (Published Online, 2008), 5, https://eurotox.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/UK_Working-with-Migrant-Sex-Workers-2008.pdf; See also Laura Connelly and English Collective of Prostitutes, *EU Migrant Sex Work in the UK Post-Referendum* (Published Online, 2021), https://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Full-Report-EU-migrant-sex-work-in-the-UK-post-Referendum.pdf.

> empowerment as a justification, is to understand that other kinds of oppressions find their way into the oppression of sex workers. Sex workers who are people of colour, who are Indigenous, who are disabled, who are queer or trans, or neurodivergent, or chronically ill, experience an intersection of those identities which amplifies the effects of sex work stigma.[47]

In thinking about making sex work safer, it is necessary to pay attention to the marginalised identities of those who perform this work. This means adopting an approach that focuses not just on the sale of sex itself, but on how it intersects with structures such as ableism, racism, cissexism, and punitive immigration regimes.[48]

It is helpful to shift towards pointing out that 'sex workers are everywhere'. Sex workers are in our universities, our unions, and passing us by on the street.[49] This rhetorical move aids in showing how pervasive and seemingly universal the 'world's oldest profession' is. Importantly, this shift in perspective helps in combating stigma faced by sex workers, such as whorephobia. Though it is true that 'sex workers are everywhere' and anyone could be a sex worker or have sex working experience, it is also the case that being multiply marginalised makes one more likely to work in the sex trades at some point.[50]

47. Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith, 'Love What You Do (And it'll become increasingly difficult to agitate for workplace rights),' in *The Routledge Companion to Gender, Sexuality and Culture*, ed. Emma Rees (London: Routledge, 2022), 364.

48. Of course, this is not a complete list!

49. To be clear, Mac and Smith are acutely aware that some individuals are more likely to have sex working experience than others, and that marginalised identities will shape that sex working experience. See Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*.

50. Beth Richie discusses a similar rhetorical move that has occurred with campaigns against domestic violence, coining what she calls an 'every woman' analysis. This approach emphasises the vulnerability of all women to sexual violence, rather than locating the specificities of how this may be related to racial-ethnic community, class, sexuality, or other positions in life. Beth Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 90.

3 Research Context

Although feminist theory has historically focused on the moral desirability of prostitution, narratives emphasising that sex work 'contains work' have attempted to avoid a dichotomy that assesses sex work as either 'good' or 'bad'. These latter accounts have sought to shift the attention to the conditions that structure this work.[51] However, many of these accounts disagree on what it is that defines sex work as a kind of work. Some accounts emphasise that prostitution is a form of remunerated labour.[52] Other accounts, such as is offered by Julia O'Connell Davidson, argue that sex work is an institution where money is parted with to secure power over another.[53] Defining what work is has always difficult, and sex work appears as no exception to this.[54]

The WFH movement during the 1970s and 1980s saw much in common between prostitutes' situation and that of housewives. Their analysis of sex work was intended to reflect a critique of (paid and unpaid) work under capitalism. Activists from the ECP in the 1970s and 1980s argued that identifying sex work as a form of work allowed for sex workers to gain legitimacy alongside other workers through recognising what they had in common in their struggle against the problems of work.[55] Many sex worker organisations originated from the campaigning that

51. See Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore* (London: Verso, 2014); Katie Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism: Marxist Feminism, Migrant Sex Work, and Labour Unfreedom,' *Feminist Legal Studies* 26, no. 1 (April 1, 2018): 65–92; Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Morgane Merteuil, 'Sex Work Against Work,' Viewpoint Magazine, 2015, https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/sex-work-against-work/.

52. We Want a Women's Mag, 'English Collective of Prostitutes,' May 1, 2015, https://wewantawomensmag.wordpress.com/2015/05/01/english-collective-of-prostitutes/.

53. Julia O'Connell Davidson, *Prostitution, Power and Freedom* (London: Polity, 1998).

54. Lydia Medland et al., *The 'Future' of Work? A call for the recognition of continuities in challenges for conceptualising work and its regulation* (2018), 3.

55. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

took place during this period.[56] However, for others, to call it work means just that: sex work is just a job. Along with this, there have been those that have argued we could reimagine sex work to be one potentially acceptable employment option amongst many.[57]

Despite the popular adoption of the term 'sex work' to describe the commercial sex trades, what has emerged are divergent and often conflicting understandings of what (sex) work means and what is at stake when something is understood as work. Additionally, there have been relatively few histories of sex worker movements written, particularly with a focus on the contributions and perspectives of sex workers themselves.[58] This thesis aims to address this former gap by providing more conceptual clarity on how we understand sex work as *a kind of work*. In addressing the latter gap in the extant literature, the thesis looks to contribute to the intellectual history of feminist thought through exploring the concept 'sex work'. This project analyses the archives of the ECP from the 1970s to the 1990s, and looks to centre perspectives from sex workers throughout. I discuss this in the methodology section and chapter summaries below.

There is also an empirical dimension to the problem of assessing (sex) work and its harms that normative reflections of sex work have often neglected. Sex work is often thought of as an 'ideological' problem, such that we might want to assess whether it is 'good', 'bad', or something in between, which is why it is often a

56. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*; Melinda Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

57. For example, see Sibyl Schwarzenbach, 'Contractarians and Feminists Debate Prostitution,' *Review of Law and Social Change* 18 (1990): 103–130; Carol Queen, 'Sex Radical Politics, Sex-positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma,' in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (London: Routledge, 1997).

58. Kate Lister presents a wide-ranging history of the commercial sex trade from the perspective of sex workers. Melinda Chateauvert also presents a history of the organising struggles of sex workers from the late 1960s through to the 2010s, see Kate Lister, *Harlots, Whores & Hackabouts: A History of Sex for Sale* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2021); Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk*.

topic of concern for normative theorising. However, engaging with empirical social science about the impact of policies and conditions surrounding prostitution, such as the impact of regulatory legal systems like decriminalisation, is necessary to ground theoretical and normative reflection in the actual reality of sex work and its institutional context. This also entails engaging with those directly affected by sex work and its harms.

Some of the extant literature on sex work and its harms have attempted to combine empirical research about harm and sex work's institutional context when engaging in projects in normative theory.[59] Much of this existing literature has grounded their accounts of what is wrong with sex work predominantly in the specificity of the work. Within these accounts, many claim that other key harms, such as exploitation or precarity, arise because of sex work's status *as work* under conditions of contemporary capitalism. Many accounts of the harms of sex work by sex workers' rights activists and academics have provided a robust assessment of the harms of criminalisation as the most pressing. This has created a central and unifying demand of the sex workers' rights movement: to decriminalise consensual adult sex work.[60] Decriminalisation is the removal of the regulation of sex work by criminal laws and instead it is regulated by civil and labour law.[61] However, as Katie Cruz argues, the decriminalisation of sex work does not present a neat end to the 'criminalisation of work' for sex workers. Criminal law still has a signif-

59. For example Grant, *Playing the Whore*; Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism.'

60. For example, the major UK sex worker organisations (National Ugly Mugs, Decrim Now, Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistancy Movement) all support the decriminalisation of sex work. All projects associated with the Global Network of Sex Worker Projects support the decriminalisation of sex work. See Raven Bowen et al., *Sex Workers Too: Summary of Evidence for VAWG 2020-24 Consultation*, technical report (February 2021); DecrimNow, *About DecrimNow*, https://decrimnow.org.uk/about/; Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement, *About SWARM*, https://www.swarmcollective.org/about-swarm/; NSWP, *Who We Are*, https://www.nswp.org/who-we-are.

61. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 193.

icant role in the regulation of sex work, and indeed many 'non-standard' forms of work.[62] It also requires that we critically assess other harms such as precarity, alienation, and exploitation that are involved in work more broadly if we are to understand the harms at play in (sex) work. In addition to addressing the ongoing role of criminalisation in the sex workplace, this thesis addresses other harms in (sex) work through a discussion of structural domination.

Several philosophical traditions have experienced a resurgent interest in work, from 'utopian' theorising about the future of work in some Marxian approaches, to concerns about the meaningfulness of work in analytical philosophy, and debates in republicanism about domination in the workplace.[63] Conceptualising sex work as work provides normative and theoretical opportunities that allow us to understand it as a case study for the nature of work in general. We can explore how harms such as exploitation, precarity, and alienation are manifested, as well as how technology and innovation might feature in work organisations. Additionally, we can explore the intersection between forms of work and their regulation, both in criminal and labour law depending on the context.

For example, a 2020 report by the sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling provides insight into the use of online technologies such as sex worker advertisement platforms and the impact of their recent criminalisation by the US government when introducing FOSTA-SESTA.[64] The report concludes that removing

62. Katie Cruz, 'The Work of Sex Work: Prostitution, Unfreedom, and Criminality at Work,' in *Criminality at Work*, ed. Alan Bogg et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

63. For example, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (And Why We Don't Talk About It)* (Princeton: University Press, 2017); Nicholas Vrousalis, 'How Exploiters Dominate,' *Review of Social Economy*, 2019, 103–130; Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (London: Duke University Press, 2011); Ruth Yeoman et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Russell Muirhead, *Just Work* (London: Harvard University Press, 2004); Raymond Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

64. See Danielle Blunt and Ariel Wolf, *Erased: The Impact of FOSTA-SESTA and the Removal of*

access to online tools, often used for safety reasons by sex workers, contributes to isolation, poverty, and further entrenched stigma of marginalised groups.[65] Research like this provides insight into the impact of policies regulating sex work and prompts important questions about parallels with other kinds of work that are similarly characterised by positions of precarity and uncertainty, such as work performed by migrant workers or those without employment protections. Although the existing literature has sought to address what harms mean in the context of sex work, there has been minimal extrapolation to think about what sex work itself can tell us about other kinds of work that are also characterised by precarity, alienation, technological changes and regulations. With this in mind, this thesis addresses the possibilities that thinking of sex work *as work* can lend itself to constructing a critique of work more generally.

4 Methodology

This research draws methodological and conceptual insights from a range of disciplines. This project combines insights from normative political theory, feminist theory, the sociology of work, legal studies, and public policy.[66]

This thesis adopts a particular stance towards sex work — first and foremost that it is *work*. Understood in the simplest sense this means sex work is the sale of sexual services for money or other goods/resources. This approach therefore takes sex work not to be an instance of sexual exploitation or sexual perversion. By stating that I begin from an approach that takes sex work to be a form of work, it does not

Backpage (Published Online: Hacking//Hustling, 2020), https://hackinghustling.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Erased_Updated.pdf; *S.1693 – 115th Congress: Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act of 2017*, https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1693.

65. Blunt and Wolf, *Erased: The Impact of FOSTA-SESTA and the Removal of Backpage*, 42–43.

66. The methodology section here is developed from my MPhil thesis, see Westwood, *Overcoming the Impasse*.

mean that there is not more to say about what this work looks like, its problems and what we might do about it. In stating that I begin from understanding sex work as a form of work, however, I note that I do not dedicate a substantial amount of time to 'proving' sex work's status as work (thought of either legitimately or otherwise). Many works of feminist theory preceding this thesis, that I draw on, have done a thorough job of debating whether sex work is 'really' work. Further to this, many sex workers themselves have waded in on this debate on what we, as outsiders, should think of their work.[67] What I seek to do instead in this project is further elucidate the nature of this work and how it is understood.

Throughout this thesis, I take note of the empirical contexts of societies and injustices as they *do* matter when developing theory. Lobbying for institutional change has been where many of the battles over sex work have been fought, as it is not only through ideological commitments but through policy and government action that this plays out. Insights from legal studies and public policy are incorporated as the analysis presented builds in a sensitivity to the real-world context of injustices. Just as a person working in public policy ought to take seriously the often-hidden political theory implications of their role, the reverse is also true when considering the policy implications of theorising.[68] In particular, the criminalisation of sex work features heavily in many accounts of how we understand the buying and selling of sexual labour. This debate often plays out over discussing whether criminalising those selling or buying sex is the *solution* to the harms of sex work or whether criminalisation *produces* harm through arrest and incarceration. When addressing the movement to decriminalise consensual adult sex work,

67. For some examples, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World'; Leigh, 'Inventing Sex Work'; Pluma Sumaq, 'A Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes: Complicity & The Beloved Community,' *LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism* 2 (2015).

68. Adam Swift and Stuart White, 'Political Theory, Social Science, and Real Politics,' in *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, ed. David Leopold and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

a sensitivity to the empirical realities of the role of criminal law in the sex workplace can help us to better understand the relationship between criminality and work.

In drawing on insights from feminist epistemology, this research adopts a feminist standpoint methodology. This involves incorporating the perspectives of those marginalised in discourses surrounding sex work to 'begin thought' from their standpoint through utilising sex worker-led accounts.[69] However, this is not without an awareness that there is no perfect representation of a sex worker and that experiences are varied. In keeping with this methodological commitment, the project also undertakes archival research on the sex workers' rights movement in the UK. I conducted archival research on the ECP — a campaigning organisation for the rights of sex workers based in London — and the WFH movement from resources available at the Bishopsgate Institute.[70] I discuss the use of archival research in the thesis further in the section below.

This thesis seeks to understand further the meanings that sex workers ascribe to their labour and experiences of exploitation. My work aims to be sensitive to the lived experiences of sex workers, as well as valuing what Vanessa Carlisle has termed sex workers' 'embodied knowledge'.[71] Embodied knowledge as a practice and research methodology seeks to acknowledge where such knowledge originates: in the body.[72] As Moore and Matthias argue, 'the body' refers not only to its flesh. In this context, the body should be understood as the locus of identity and

69. Sandra G. Harding, 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is Strong Objectivity?,' in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004); Sarah Fine, 'Refugees, Safety, and a Decent Human Life,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119, no. 1 (January 4, 2019): 25–52.

70. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*; Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

71. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped.'

72. Lisa Jean Moore and Jeffrey Mathias, 'Embodied Knowledge,' in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 1.

social structure. Bodies, of course, are material. They are flesh and bone, as well as accompanied by histories, capabilities, and their existence in life and death.[73] Bodies also are enacted in and through social relations. Moore and Matthias note that embodied knowledge exists at this nexus of social structures and materiality, it is the knowledge production and acquisition that occurs 'between power and lived experience'.[74]

Sex workers' possess a particular kind of embodied knowledge due to their experiences as bodies that exist at one of the sharpest edges of power and lived experience.[75] The knowledge that sex workers possess relates to work, time, and labour, something that this thesis addresses at length.[76] However, Carlise argues that sex worker embodied knowledge also expands to and exceeds

> sex itself, sexuality, sexual health, and sexual cultures, gender, race, power, boundaries, trauma, class, especially ... navigat[ing] precarity, community building, dealing with cops, plus a wealth of information that workers hold about their local environments, both material and political.[77]

This embodied knowledge has been integral to sex workers' own survival and the survival of their communities. Carlisle recognises that this knowledge is also of value to those outside sex work, and it is potentially indispensable to current labour struggles.[78] Integral to my research methodology is this insight that the collective knowledge held by sex workers is of use to non-sex working people. These insights can help us in thinking through wider problems on exploitation

73. Moore and Mathias, 'Embodied Knowledge,' 1.
74. Moore and Mathias, 1.
75. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 586–588.
76. Carlisle, 586.
77. Carlisle, 586.
78. Carlisle, 586.

and other harms in work.

5 Archival Research

This thesis is informed greatly by archival research conducted on the ECP and on the (primarily UK) WFH movement. This project undertook archival research on the sex workers' rights movement in the UK to bring in historical perspectives from sex worker activists. I conducted archival research on the ECP from resources available at the Bishopsgate Institute.[79] I also conducted archival research on the WFH movement using materials available from the Bishopsgate Institute.[80] The WFH movement which was an internationalist, anti-capitalist and feminist movement founded on the principle of rejecting an economic order that relies upon women's un-regonised domestic labour.[81] This archival research is used to historicise the perspective of approaching sex work as a form of work in chapter two. My research covers material from the early 1970s through to 1990.

The ECP collection was deposited in 2019, with materials dating from 1975-2019. The archive contains material that includes educational pamphlets that were handed out to working women, newspaper clippings, impassioned articles written by campaigners, a sex worker's newspaper, photographs of the ECP's occupation of Holy Cross Church, and several satirical cartoons. As a whole, the archive contained a wealth of material and presented a colourful picture of an organisation that continues to campaign for sex workers' rights today. A majority of the materials were produced anonymously, either being unsigned or signed by the

79. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

80. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

81. I present a brief history of the WFH movement in chapter two. For a more extensive history of the movement, see Toupin, *Wages for Housework*.

Collective themselves. It appears that women may also have used pseudonyms too, as is common for sex-working women. Many of the women did not want their identities revealed. Not only were they sex-working women, but many were also mothers or migrants and would face further penalties were their identities revealed.

The collection is not without some women who feature more heavily, however. For example, Selma James and Nina Lopez-Jones are far more frequently named on materials. James was the first spokeswoman for the the ECP, although she does not have sex working experience. Lopez-Jones is a feminist campaigner and has made her connections with the ECP open. She authored a brief history of the Collective in the book *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*.[82] Of particular note is that the ECP, unlike many other sex worker organisations, does not require members to 'out' themselves as sex workers or not. This would become a particular point of contention at the International Whores Convention in Amsterdam in 1985.[83] The ECP would criticise organisers for asking members to identify who is a sex worker and who is not, arguing that 'forcing women to identify themselves as prostitutes is to help the police to control prostitutes'.[84]

I also consulted the Wages for Housework Campaign archive at the Bishopsgate Institute, which covers the years 1970-2022.[85] This archive was collated in celebration of fifty years since the launch of the campaign. This archive similarly includes posters, educational pamphlets, cartoons, newspaper articles, and mani-

82. See Lopez-Jones, 'Workers: Introducing the English Collective of Prostitutes.'

83. For a further discussion of these rifts, see Meg Weeks, 'A Prostitutes' Jamboree: The World Whores' Congresses of the 1980s and the Rise of a New Feminism,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 31, no. 3 (2022): 273–301.

84. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Typescript statement made by Nina Lopez-Jones and Gigi Turner to the International Whores Convention in Amsterdam. The statement is titled 'For Prostitutes, Against the Police', catalogue ref. ECP/3*, February 14, 1985.

85. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

festos. The archive also contains some unpublished correspondence from leaders in the WFH movement, such as from Selma James, Wilamette Brown, and Nina Lopez-Jones. My use of this archive covered the early 1970s through to 1990. What was of interest in this archive was that it covered activities from the US, and organising ativities in Europe and the Caribbean during the same period. In consulting the materials in this archive, I looked predominantly for discussions of sex worker activism and campaigning in the UK. The archive contained some repeat materials that were also found in the ECP archive. My focus for the historical research for this thesis has been on the UK sex workers' rights movement. However, as the WFH movement was intended to be international in outlook, it was also useful to further contextualise my research by looking at materials produced by the WFH-affiliated groups in the UK, the US, and beyond.

The archival research I conducted at the Bishopsgate Institute was supplemented with access to online archives on the WFH movement and the ECP.[86] For example, I utilised the online oral history given by Sarah Walker, a participant in the Holy Cross Church Occupation.[87] I also utilised information online from the ECP about their history, and online materials from WFH archives that have been digitised.[88]

6 Chapter Outlines

Below is a summary of the chapters of the thesis.

86. This was especially helpful during the earlier stages of my research which began during the COVID-19 pandemic.

87. StoryPalace, 'Sarah Walker: Hot Dinners in a Cold Church.'

88. For example, English Collective of Prostitutes, 'ECP Occupation Statement, a press release document outlining the demands of the occupation,' 1982, https://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Document-01.jpg; Black Women for Wages for Housework accessed via WikiCommons, 'Paper titled 'Birth Announcement' announcing the launch of the Black Women for Wages for Housework group,' 1976, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Black_Women_for_Wages_for_Housework_Birth_Announcement.pdf.

Chapter Two

This chapter uses the archives of the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) as a case study to explore the redefining of sex work as work. This chapter contributes to the history of Marxist feminist thought on thinking about sex work as a form of work. I focus on several texts produced by the ECP and other relevant organisations from 1970–1990.

This chapter aims to do two things: first, serve as an exercise in the intellectual history of feminist thought to explore the history of the concept 'sex work' and, second, as a project in political theory, to recover tools and meanings from these texts for use in the present. Through reconstructing central claims from the archive, I locate a perspective on sex work founded in feminist and anti-capitalist movements. Sex work can be thought of as historically being part of other collective struggles for unrecognised forms of work, such as housework. This chapter shows that although sex work's recognition as work has been related to struggles for labour rights more broadly, this has not necessarily always been an easy or comfortable alliance. For example, the recognition of sex work as a form of work was rejected by sections of the wider labour movement, including the Trades Union Congress in the UK in the 1980s.[89]

Approaches linking sex work to forms of socially reproductive work — such as is offered by many WFH feminists — presents considerable problems as it obscures the specifics of who is doing this work, why, and its conditions. Through evaluating the ECP's reasons for redefining (sex) work, I show that claims of something being 'work' often contain other assertions about what work is that need to be unpacked.[90] In engaging with these texts, my aims in this chapter are not only his-

89. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

90. For more on unpacking the claims within certain declarations of something being 'work',

torical, but that in looking back we can look forward to the present and the future. As Kathi Weeks points out: 'the point is to go back in order to bring some of the insights from the 1970's [–1990's] forward, to use them in this time and place'.[91] With this in mind, this chapter argues for careful consideration of the kinds of work organisations advocated for.

Chapter Three

How should we understand sex work? As I mentioned above, sex work can be understood as 'work' in that the term describes a broad range of activities where people trade their sexual labour for money or other resources. How 'work' is understood in this context varies considerably. Organising under the 'sex work is work' banner are those who adopt liberal perspectives on sex work, as well as scholars, activists, and campaigners who understand the work of sex work from Marxist, libertarian, trans, queer, and a range of other perspectives. How the 'work' in sex work is understood is not clear cut — there are considerable variances in its supposed value, what 'work' means, and what we should do about it. Moreover, as Amia Srinivasan has argued in her final chapter in the *The Right to Sex*, despite the necessity to emphasise that 'sex work is work' and to campaign for legal and material protections for sex workers, it is an equally important task for feminism to explore what sort of work this is.[92] This chapter takes up the task of thinking about what sort of work sex work is.

Rather than addressing the question : 'Is sex work "work"?' This chapter makes the case this is better reframed as: What kind(s) of understanding(s) of sex work as work should we endorse? Which concept(s) would serve our purposes best? In

particularly within the WFH campaign, see Amelia Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' *Theory & Event* 24, no. 4 (2021): 1110–1129.

91. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 118.

92. Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 83.

recognition of the variable understandings of the 'work' of sex work, this chapter argues in favour of endorsing a particular understanding of the 'work' in sex work. Drawing on the work of Amelia Horgan and Sally Haslanger, I endorse an ameliorative account of sex work.[93] This chapter sketches what kind of account should be endorsed if, as Horgan has argued, our concepts about work are to analyse some element of social injustice or some wrongfulness about work.[94] This chapter explores how sex work can be thought of as a kind of commodified reproductive work. However, an analysis that understands sex workers as 'waged housewives', as the ECP and the WFH campaign offered, presents considerable problems. Rather, I discuss the potential for an updated perspective on social reproduction in sex work. As Ray Filar argues, it is also necessary to consider sex work through the lens of it as a form of precarious service work.[95]

Chapter Four

In work-oriented accounts of sex work, exploitation is often cited as a harm that emerges from the conditions that structure this work in contemporary capitalism.[96] Much of this existing literature has offered an account of exploitation that emphasises that what is wrong with exploitation is the unequal exchange of labour and

93. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work"'; Sally Haslanger, 'Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?,' *Noûs* 34, no. 1 (2000): 31–55; Sally Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions? Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds,' in *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Online Edition: Oxford Academic, 2012); Sally Haslanger, 'Theorizing With a Purpose,' in *Natural Kinds and Classification in Scientific Practice*, ed. Catherine Kendig (New York: Routledge, 2016).

94. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1111.

95. Ray Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?,' *Invert Journal* 1, no. 1, https://web.archive.org/web/20200714115955/https://invertjournal.org.uk/posts?view=articles&post=7295549.

96. Several radical feminist accounts analyse sex work as a form of 'sexual exploitation.' I do not dedicate a considerable amount of time or space to these accounts, however I offer a limited engagement to some of their objections to understanding sex work as work in chapter 3. For some examples of this kind of account, see Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1987); Andrea Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy,' *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 1 (1993): 1–12; Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

value involved in (sex) work.[97] Whether it is this unequal exchange of labour that is specifically what is *wrong* with exploitation, and sex work more broadly, or whether other factors such as precarity are as critical, remains to be assessed.

This chapter discusses the problems posed by the 'classical' Marxian exposition of the role of exploitation in work. This account argues that what is contained within the worker-employer relationship is exploitation because those who are selling their labour-power, as in their capacity to labour productively, do not receive the full rewards of that labouring and they are forced to sell their labour-power because they have no other commodity to sell. In this chapter, I term this the unequal transfer account. As Nicholas Vrousalis notes, it is one of Marxism's enduring legacies to exploitation theory.[98]

Vrousalis' account of exploitation as domination and structural domination appears to offer a plausible alternative.[99] The chapter reconstructs this account and explores how this applies to the specific case of sex work. Vrousalis argues that capitalism can be distinguished historically in how it produces a structural dilemma between dominated work and no work.[100] As Vrousalais argues, capitalism and other systems of domination like white supremacy and patriarchy, restrict the choice sets of marginalised peoples. They then must face a dilemma between unfree action and merely contingently free action.[101] The double-bind of capital therefore consists in that (sex) workers must either produce unfreely, or that they

97. See Tithi Bhattacharya, 'How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global Working Class,' in *Social Reproduction Theory*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Helen Colley, 'Labour-power,' in *Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Shahrzad Mojab (London: Zed Books, 2015); English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

98. Vrousalis, 'How Exploiters Dominate,' 3.

99. See Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*.

100. Vrousalis, 80.

101. See Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*; Nicholas Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage: Structural Domination and Collective Agency in the Market,' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2021): 40–54.

produce freely, but only by the leave of capital.[102] This structural dimension is key to understanding how exploitation can be considered a central harm in sex work. When we consider sex work as a 'non-standard' form of work because it often lacks many traditional forms of work organisation, such as the presence of bosses, understanding the structural dimension of exploitation is imperative.

It is necessary to consider (sex) work in its gendered context, and with an awareness of who is doing this work, why, and under what conditions. Approaching exploitation in sex work requires understanding capital as a system and that exploitation does not only occur between individuals (e.g. between workers and bosses) but that workers must face the choice between no work and dominated work in contemporary capitalism. Whether a sex worker can be considered exploited by a boss or that she is self-exploiting because she is self-employed, these processes all occur within capitalist relations of (re)production and all workers must face having to earn wages or engage in monetised activity to subsist.[103]

Following the discussion of how Vrousalis' account of exploitation as domination applies to the specific case of sex work, this chapter proposes considerations for theorists thinking about sex work and exploitation. A reading of sex work as 'anti-work' is used to suggest that sex work may have a more complicated relationship with the concept of 'exploitation'.[104] This chapter discusses how the declaration that 'sex work is work' contains within it a critical perspective on work and work's

102. Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage,' 47–48.

103. Michael Denning, 'Wageless Life,' *New Left Review*, no. 66 (2010): 79–98; Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism,' 78.

104. The concept of resistance to the work ethic is drawn from Kathi Weeks. Some recent Marxian and critical accounts of work have experienced a resurgent interest in theorising about the future of work with an emphasis on the possibility of 'post-work' societies, such as the work by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams. For more on sex work and anti-work/post-work imaginaries, see the chapter by Helen Hester and Zahra Stardust, and Vanessa Carlisle's exploration of sex work and anti-work. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2016); Hester and Stardust, 'Sex Work in a Postwork Imaginary'; Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped.'

refusal in some of its permutations. Often termed the 'anti-work account', I argue that such accounts are amongst the most appealing and fruitful for constructing a critique not only of sex work but also of work under capitalist structures. Here I utilise a range of testimonials drawn from sex worker writings to explore the complex relationship many sex workers have with their own 'exploitation' in work. What is revealed is that sex workers might seek out sex work because it provides them more autonomy and control over their working lives. As just one example, this is particularly the case for sex workers who may be disabled and have great difficulty being accommodated in 'straight' work. This does not mean that it is absent of exploitation, or that it is some "queer crip paradise".[105] Instead, it is to think through how this work might be a provocation to 'straight' work, and what these particular fault lines might tell us about exploitation more generally.[106]

This chapter argues for an orientation towards ongoing struggle when theorising exploitation and sex work. Drawing on the work of Heather Berg, I argue that an orientation towards ongoing struggle can help us avoid a potentially totalising account where the 'capitalist cage' is all-consuming.[107] However, it is necessary to avoid an account that romanticises worker struggle. As Berg points out, a focus on ongoing struggle aids our analysis in helping us to avoid the trappings of over-romanticising resistance on the one hand and overestimating managerial or

105. Jones, "I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal' Job".'

106. Berg's discussion around what paid sex is to free sex, and the potential for it to be a confrontation or at the very least a provocation (understood as a challenge to existing heteropatrichal capitalist systems) was enlightening to my thinking here. In particular, though sex work as it is currently structured may not be the large confrontation with work (paid or otherwise) that we might hope, it may yet offer a provocation. For more on Berg's discussion, see Heather Berg, 'Free Sex,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 122, no. 3 (2023): 505–523.

107. Berg discusses what she calls 'porno dialectics'. This is the idea that many things can be true, and that it is precisely the 'meat' of our story that that workers are exploited *and* they find freedom and fulfilment in their work sometimes. Berg offers a discussion relevant to this on reading gig work in a similiarly dialectical way. See Heather Berg, *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 3–11; Heather Berg, 'Reading Gigs Dialectically,' *Critical Historical Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2022): 35–61.

capitalist state power on the other.[108]

Chapter Five

Throughout this thesis, I argue that there is a relationship between sex work and other kinds of work under conditions of contemporary capitalism. Often in accounts of work, sex work is treated as an outlier and an example of an 'extreme' kind of work.[109] Rather, I argue that sex work has more in common with other kinds of work under present conditions, despite differences in what the job practically entails. With this in mind, I assess what the conditions of the sex workplace itself and the resistance by sex workers can tell us about other kinds of work that are similarly characterised by precarity, technological changes, and regulations.

Chapter two discussed organising in the historical sex workplace. In this chapter, I discuss organising in the contemporary sex workplace and look at what this kind of organising over dispersed, diverse, and often criminalised workers can offer when thinking about organising (sex) workplaces to mitigate harms such as exploitation. This chapter adds to the existing body of analysis of how sex workers collectively organise around their labour and in response to their criminalisation.[110] I have focused on how sex workers organise outside of 'traditional'

108. Berg, *Porn Work*, 4–5.

109. The term 'sex work exceptionalism' can be to describe the treatment of sex work as if is a self-evidently extreme form of exploitation. I discuss this further in chapter 3. See Heather Berg, 'Working for Love, Loving for Work: Discourses of Labor in Feminist Sex-Work Activism,' *Feminist studies* 40, no. 3 (2014): 694.

110. For some examples, see Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk*; Yvette Butler, 'Aligned: Sex Workers' Lessons for the Gig Economy,' *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, no. 26.2 (2021): 337–369; Crystal A. Jackson, '"Sex Workers Unite!": U.S. Sex Worker Support Networks in an Era of Criminalization,' *Women's Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2019): 169–188; Merteuil, 'Sex Work Against Work'; Samantha Majic, *Sex Work Politics: From Protest to Service Provision* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Kate Hardy and Katie Cruz, 'Affective Organizing: Collectivizing Informal Sex Workers in an Intimate Union,' *The American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no. 2 (2019): 244–261; Carolina Moraes, Juma Santos, and Mariana Prandini Assis, '"We Are in Quarantine but Caring Does Not Stop": Mutual Aid as Radical Care in Brazil,' *Feminist Studies* 46, no. 3 (2020): 639–652; Gregor Gall,

means, such as labour unions. The sex workplace itself prompts many questions and proposes some ways forward for transforming the world of work.

Sex workers' rights activists and academics have rallied around a unified demand to decriminalise consenting adult sex work. This is posited as the removal of the regulation of sex work by criminal laws and into civil and labour law. As I explore throughout this thesis, the risk this demand comes with is that it can position sex work like any other kind of work.[111] For those of us concerned about developing an anti-capitalist and anti-work response to sex work: how do we hold together an argument for the decriminalisation of sex work when it is at risk of making this work more institutionalised under capitalism, and simultaneously argue for post-work futures?

In making some inroads into this problem, this chapter offers a discussion of the concept of 'dis-organising'. This concept is drawn from Stephen Wilson, an incarcerated queer abolitionist, in his essay 'Dis-Organising Prisons' in 2019.[112] The concept was later used by the sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling in their toolkit 'Dis/Organizing: How We Build Collectives Beyond Institutions'.[113] Dis-organising describes the ways that organisers generate techniques to work both within and against the system they are looking to disrupt. Simultaneously, organisers and groups must also work to protect themselves from becoming dis-organised by the same structures.[114] In my discussion of dis-organising in/around marginalised forms of work, this chapter discusses how the concept can help un-

Sex Worker Unionization: Global Developments, Challenges and Possibilities (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Katie Cruz, 'Unionising Sex Workers and Other Feminists,' *Social & Legal Studies* Online First (2023).

111. Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World.'

112. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.

113. Rachel Kuo and Lorelei Lee, *Dis/Organizing: How We Build Collectives Beyond Institutions a non-comprehensive community toolkit and report* (Published Online: Hacking//Hustling, October 2021), https://hackinghustling.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/DisorganizingToolkit.pdf.

114. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*; Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*, 4–5.

derstand the non-reformist reforms that sex worker radicals are aiming at when they both attempt to reform sex work and deconstruct this work under existing systems of racialised capitalism.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

The thesis concludes with a summary of the main arguments presented and some reflections on what further research is needed. The thesis covers a wide range of theory and approaches to how we understand sex work and its harms, and I offer an account of how we can understand sex work as *a kind of work*, as well as an exploration of what this perspective offers when proposing a critique of work and its organisation.

2 | Sex Work as Work, Sex Work Against Work

At the end of the 12-day occupation by the English Collective of Prostitutes, Selma James reflects in *Hookers in the House of the Lord* on the experience of the women in Holy Cross Church:

> We were very sorry to leave ... our lives had literally stopped for twelve days: the milkman had not been paid, the post not collected and money not earned. We were physically exhausted and we craved a bath and a bed. Yet we were loath to re-enter the flat atmosphere of daily life. We dreaded slipping away from the authentic and collective life inside the church, back into the harness and blinkers of daily routine. In masks we had glimpsed what could happen: we created change. Taking off the masks, our collective power was as hidden as the reality to which it had penetrated. Going back to work — housework, whoring, office work, school work — is never a victory. It was hard to remember we had won.[1]

What potential, beyond work, had the Occupiers glimpsed? As James notes, though they were there campaigning to make prostitute's work safer, returning to work is not a victory. That is not because it is sex work and it is somehow particularly abject. James herself positions 'whoring' alongside housework, office work and school work, and some years prior the Power of Women Collective — the London Wages for Housework group — would declare in a statement that 'all work is prostitution'.[2] It is not because prostitution is a 'uniquely degrading' kind

1. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*, Section: Winning.

2. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*; English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in*

of work.[3] Rather, the problem for the English Collective of Prostitutes and the women of the Wages for Housework movement cuts far deeper: all work under capitalism presents considerable problems.

This chapter uses the archives of the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) and the Wages for Housework (WFH) campaign as a case study to explore the re-defining of sex work *as work*.[4] This chapter contributes to the history of Marxist feminist thought on thinking about sex work as a form of work. Founded in 1975 within the WFH movement, the ECP are a campaigning organisation for the rights of sex workers. They are based in London with a national network throughout the UK. I focus here on several texts produced by the ECP and other relevant organisations within the WFH camapign from 1970–1990. This chapter explores how sex work came to be considered a kind of work out of feminist organising during the 1970s and 1980s, with a focus on the WFH campaign and the sex worker organisations originating in this movement.

To situate this chapter in the broader argument of this thesis, I explore some of the historical and political reasons for adopting a perspective that considers sex work *a form of work*. Through reconstructing the claims for reconceptualising sex work from the ECP's archive material, I locate a perspective of sex work *as work* founded in feminist and anti-capitalist movements and related to struggles for labour rights more broadly. This demonstrates how identifying sex work as a form of work has also historically been a part of other collective struggles for unrecognised forms of work, such as housework. Though the slogan 'sex work is

London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.

3. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes against prostitution — crossing the divides between sex workers and other women' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/18*, March 1990.

4. For information on the contents of the archives consulted, see English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*; Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

work' has been commonly accepted, declarations of the work of sex work should be done with careful consideration of the kinds of work organisations advocated for. As I note in the conclusion of this chapter, when removed from this context and history, the term 'sex work' risks losing its links to critical perspectives on work and this approach can be liable to reproducing problematic employment relations. This chapter explores how we also have reasons to also be critical of this history itself. For example, the study here reveals our reasons for locating the 'workness' of sex work in why it is that people actually sell sex: to fulfill a material need. However, there remains considerable problems with comparisons made by the ECP and the WFH movement between the situation of sex workers and unpaid housewives that can obscure the specifics of who is doing this work, why, and the conditions in which it is happening.

This chapter covers archival materials from 1970s through to 1990. This period is commonly referred to as the 'second wave' of feminist organising. Though such a term can be helpful to refer to particular periods in feminist history, it comes with several problems. The 'wave' metaphor suggests there to be a more united and homogenous feminist approach that would constitute such a 'wave' of organising, which is not the case. This kind of conceptualisation about the legacies of feminist thinking can mislead us into believing that little theorising and feminist work occurs between said 'waves'.[5] For the purposes of discussion here, it may be of more use to understand the period, that is from the 1970s through to 1990s, as one of intensified political activity and theorising for feminist organising.

With this in mind, to speak of a homogenous 'Marxist feminist approach' would be disingenuous. However, what does unite a broad understanding of the 'Marx-

5. For more on the problems of the 'wave' metaphor, see Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Kathi Weeks, 'Scaling-Up: A Marxist Feminist Archive,' *Feminist Studies* 47, no. 3 (2021): 842–870.

ist feminist' approach is its attempts to offer a materialist analysis of women's oppression, and increasingly other experiences of oppression such as racism or queerphobia.[6] Most notably has been the Marxist feminist contribution to understanding what it means to labour and work, and how this relates to specifically gendered experiences under capitalism. Although, it is necessary to reiterate that such an anti-capitalist approach is not only found in those termed 'Marxist feminist'. Many who could be aligned with Marxist feminism may not explicitly identify themselves as such, and the boundaries between other feminisms, womanisms, and this position are far more porous. This is particularly the case with the lines between Marxist, Black, and intersectional feminisms.

The control of women's labour, and women's sexuality as an integral part of this, by men and by capital has been a subject sparsely covered in classical Marxist literature. Most often cited in this regard is Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* where he discusses the creation of the modern family form, its relationship to monogamous marriage, and women's choice — or lack thereof — to enter into this.[7] Marxist feminist literature has attempted to incorporate an analysis of 'women's work' and their sexuality in varying ways as they have grappled with the so-called 'women question,' with an awareness of sexual violence and gendered labour at the fore. Emerging out of Marxist feminist activism and scholarship from the 1970s onwards has been an attempt to provide an ongoing analysis that broadens a definition of 'the economic' to encapsulate gendered labour and work previously unrecognised, such as through including housework and mother-work into an analysis of structures of contemporary capitalism. Importantly for the discussion developed in this chapter, sex work also

6. For a wide-ranging history of the relationship between Marxism and feminism, see Cinzia Arruzza, *Dangerous Liaisons: The Marriages and Divorces of Marxism and Feminism* (Pontypool: Merlin Press Limited, 2013).

7. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and The State* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010).

began to be considered a kind of work that was both gendered in certain ways and unrecognised in its status as work. These developments in Marxist feminist thought frequently come under the rubric of 'social reproduction theory', and I address some of the literature that self-consciously identifies itself as such here. However, I have avoided using the term 'social reproduction theory' here for a few reasons. First, some of the literature and arguments I am addressing pre-dates social reproduction theory as a distinctive set of ideas that emerged out of Marxist feminist scholarship and activism. Second, the arguments in this chapter seek to also look at those that diverge from this.[8]

The chapter proceeds as follows. In section 1, I provide an overview of the Wages for Housework movement and the founding of the English Collective of Prostitutes including its early history from 1975 to 1990. The section begins with a discussion of my approach to the archival sources used in this chapter. Following this, I present a brief overview of the ECP and WFH campaign. In section 2, I reconstruct claims from the archive materials and discuss them. In this chapter, I have offered a more formal reconstruction of the claims for reconceptualising sex work *as work* from the materials. This is done because of the wide variety of source material and the audiences they are written for, therefore the claims for the reconceptualisation of sex work are not always presented consistently and clearly. In this section, I reconstruct and discuss the following three claims for reconceptualising sex work *as work* from the ECP archive materials:

1. All work and prostitution are similar in that we all 'sell our bodies' in selling our labour.

2. All women, prostitutes or not, experience a dependence on men in a similar

8. For a history of the term and some of the relevant key discussions related to this concept, see Kirstin Munro, 'Social Reproduction,' in *Marx: Key Concepts*, ed. Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024).

way.

3. All work, including prostitution, fulfils a material need.

In section 4, I examine why the ECP and the WFH campaign sought to reconceptualise sex work as a form of work and what use this perspective had for them. To do this, I reconstruct three reasons for the reframing of sex work as work. Sex work was reframed *as work* because:

1. It shifted the discussion from sex work as a crime and prostitutes as victims towards a discourse centered on sex workers as workers demanding rights and justice.

2. It served, for some in the WFH movement, as an example of a form of pre-existing commodified reproductive labour.

3. It was part of a broader project of reconceptualising work under capitalism to account for gendered labour, and questions of race, migration status, policing, etc.

I characterise these reasons as (1) *agency*, (2) *power*, and (3) *conceptual*. In this final section, I elucidate further how claims of something 'containing work' often contains other claims about what work is/contains that need to be unpacked.[9] Following this, I conclude the chapter with a summary of the main arguments.

1 A (Short) History of a Movement

Although a comprehensive history of the WFH movement and associated sex worker organising is beyond the scope of this chapter, this section provides an introduction to the campaign and its aims, with a particular focus on the organ-

9. Horgan elaborates further in her article on some of the claims made by the WFH movement about what work is or should be, see Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work".'

ising efforts of the ECP. In subsection 1.1, I outline my approach to the archive materials utilised in this chapter. In subsection 1.2, I provide an overview of the WFH campaign. In subsection 1.3, I briefly outline the support the Wages for Housework movement extended to sex worker organising and in subsection 1.4, I discuss the history of the early activities of the ECP.

1.1 A Marxist Feminist Archive

This project undertook archival research on the sex workers' rights movement in the UK to bring in historical perspectives from sex worker activists. The ECP's archives cover the years 1975–2019.[10] I also conducted archival research on the WFH movement using materials available from the Bishopsgate Institute.[11] The WFH archives available at the Bishopsgate Institute cover the years 1970-2022 and contain material from the UK, the US, Canada, and Europe. The early years of the WFH campaign have been dated from 1972–1977, although this chapter covers material that goes beyond this to the end of the period of so-called 'second wave' of feminist organising.[12] My discussion in this chapter focuses primarily on the early 1970s through to 1990, and on organising activity in the UK.[13]

This chapter focuses on several texts produced by the ECP and other organisations affiliated to the WFH movement during the years 1970 to 1990. I concentrate on the ECP archives not because what they contain should be considered representative of all sex worker movements or of all in the Wages for Housework movement. The WFH movement represents an international movement with a variety of au-

10. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

11. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

12. See my note above in the introduction above about issues of the 'wave' metaphor. For more on the dating on the early years of the campaign, see Toupin, *Wages for Housework*.

13. I outline more about the archive and its materials in the introduction to the thesis.

tonomous local groups that formed coalitions with other organisations.[14] It is difficult to encapsulate the varied views on sex work expressed by these groups, and I remind readers that generalisations do of course occur. One point of comparison to the ECP illustrating this difficulty would be the group Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE). Founded in 1973 by Margo St James in San Francisco, they had similar aims in recognising sex work as legitimate work, protecting the rights of women to use their own bodies, and to campaign for the decriminalisation of prostitution. They also formed a coalition with the Wages for Housework movement. However, their analysis of sex work differed in some significant ways, for example, COYOTE placed a greater emphasis on 'personal choice' in doing this work.[15]

It is difficult to assign static positions to these movements and the organising figures that carried them forward. The organisers of the different autonomous groups were in regular contact with one another, despite the differences in their analysis. For example, in June 1977, Margo St James wrote to Wilmette Brown — one of the organisers of the Black Women for the Wages for Housework in the UK — and the English Collective of Prostitutes. A copy for the letter was to be sent to Selma James too.[16] The letter details organising tactics and approaches, particularly for organising with the Wages for Housework movement around the

14. Toupin discusses the organisational structure of the movement and why autonomous groups were chosen to 'guarantee the expression of different interests of different categories of women', see Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 112–113.

15. See Elaine Zhong, 'COYOTE: Background,' Duke University Libraries, https://exhibits.library.duke.edu/exhibits/show/theworldsoldestprofession/coyotebackground; Valerie Jenness, 'From Sex as Sin to Sex as Work: COYOTE and the Reorganization of Prostitution as a Social Problem,' *Social Problems* 37, no. 3 (1990): 403–420; Stephanie Gilmore, 'Strange Bedfellows: Building Feminist Coalitions around Sex Work in the 1970s,' in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

16. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *typescript (photocopied) letter to Wilmette Brown and the English Collective of Prostitutes from Margo St James [founder of COYOTE prostitutes' coalition], catalogue ref. WFH/8*, June 13, 1997.

issue of prostitutes' rights. As St James writes:

> The American movement has been 'afraid of the split' the issue of prostitution could facilitate among those already struggling for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in three more states by 1979. However, the legislators who turn around on the vote ... are usually the same hypocritters who patronize call girls — an obvious reason for housewives, hookers, and feminists to pool their information ... With Wages coming out so strong for hookers rights and the value of women's work, it could be the catalyst necessary to effect the coalition.[17]

St James' writing to Wilmette and the ECP is warm and familiar, she signs off that she 'hope to see everyone later this year'.[18] Letters between the organisers and other key leftist figures at the time, for example between Selma James and Tony Benn, are similarly comradely in their style.[19] Despite the differences between autonomous groups, such correspondence reminds us as readers that members of these movements were often in regular communication with one another. Materials were freely circulated between groups and organisers, and they were frequently revised. In reading these materials, we have to be cautious not to overstate apparent differences. Readers are also reminded that positions are seldom static.

The texts discussed provide rich insight into the Marxist feminist perspective on

17. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *typescript (photocopied) letter to Wilmette Brown and the English Collective of Prostitutes from Margo St James [founder of COYOTE prostitutes' coalition], catalogue ref. WFH/8*.

18. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022.

19. See also the letter James writes to Andaiye, the co-founder of Red Thread in Guyana Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Letter to Tony Benn MP from Selma James, catalogue ref. WFH/20*, December 20, 1989; Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Letter from Wages for Housework to Andaiye regarding Red Thread, catalogue ref. WFH/19*, November 30, 1988.

prostitution. The materials from the ECP archive offer a variety of reflections on the nature of (sex) work, the women's labour movement during the 1970s, and campaigning activities for the decriminalisation of prostitution. This chapter utilises these materials in a way that is intended to situate them as part of the history of Marxist feminist thought, in part because the WFH movement and the ECP form a key part of this history during the long 1970s. I also draw on sources from other sex workers' and allied organisations where appropriate.

It may be helpful to clarify why it is useful to focus on the English Collective of Prostitutes and the Wages for Housework campaign at all. As Kathi Weeks noted in her discussion of the WFH campaign:

> One would be hard-pressed to find a political vision within feminism that has less credibility today than wages for housework; indeed, it is frequently portrayed in histories of feminism as a misguided movement and, when discussed in feminist anthologies, is typically represented as a rather odd curio from the archive of second-wave feminist theory.[20]

I quite agree with Weeks that we have a lot of reasons to reject the central demand of the movement — that is, the claim for wages for housework. Why then, return to this 'half-remembered hope' and 'failed dream'?[21] In more recent years, I am not alone in finding inspiration from what Heather Berg has termed these 'older feminisms' and looking back to see what conceptual resources we might find to bring to bear on the present.[22]

What perhaps was once a 'rather odd curio' has more recently been revisited by

20. 114 K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.
21. K. Weeks, 114.
22. Berg is more concerned in her paper with discussing the 'older feminisms' of the 'radical' feminisms of the period, see Berg, 'Free Sex.'

several feminist theorists.[23] As Berg points out though, we are more likely to be joining left sex worker theorists in looking back at these 'older feminisms' at a slant than head on.[24] These texts provide rich resources for considering questions pertinent to our contemporary feminism today: What does exchange have to do with heterosexual sex? Is pay an effective mode of confrontation? If commodification dominates our lives already, can getting paid really be the undoing of this current system?[25] However, as is the case for when we revisit the 'older feminisms' of the radical feminists of the long 1970s, their analysis is not one that can simply be supplanted easily into our own time.[26] Within these texts we find expansive political horizons — many of the thinkers do not shy away from utopian theorising and how the world can be made entirely anew.[27] The discussion in this chapter reveals that we have to remain critical of this history, how concepts are adopted from it, and their adaptation for the present. For example, the WFH campaign and the ECP locate the 'workness' of sex work in that it fulfills a material need. However, there are considerable problems with comparisons made by the ECP and the WFH movement between the situation of sex workers and (presumably middle-class, white) unpaid housewives that obscure the specifics of who is doing this work, why, and the conditions in which it is happening.

My method in approaching these texts draws heavily on Weeks' study of Wages for Housework texts in *The Problem With Work*.[28] In her investigation into the WFH movement, she argues that when approaching these texts the point is not for

23. For example see K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; M. Weeks, 'A Prostitutes' Jamboree'; Katrina Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework,' *American Political Science Review* 4, no. 4 (2024): 1278–1292; Forrester, 'Capitalism and the Organization of Displacement.'

24. Berg, 'Free Sex,' 510.

25. These are just some of the questions Berg raises in her article, see Berg, 506.

26. Berg.

27. Berg, 506.

28. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, Chapter 3.

us to treat them as a legacy to be preserved, but that we may recover tools from them for use in the here and now.[29] Similar to that which Weeks investigates, the texts I discuss in this chapter are very much of their time: they are manifestos and political interventions designed to change the hearts and minds of their particular time and place. For this reason too, my aims here are not only historical, but 'to go back in order to bring some of the insights from the 1970's [–1990's] forward, to use them in this time and place.'[30] However, the project of looking back is one to be done at a slant. The insights and concepts from the long 1970s require us to rework and rethink them for our purposes.[31]

1.2 The Wages for Housework Campaign

The most comprehensive history of the movement can be found in Louise Toupin's *Wages for Housework: The History of an International Feminist Movement (1972-1977)*.[32] The history presented in the following subsections is intentionally kept brief. These subsections are intended to introduce readers to the WFH campaign and the actions of the ECP, their main aims and their theoretical perspectives.

In 1971, the *Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* was published to serve as a book-manifesto for the beginnings of the WFH movement.[33] What Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James sought to reveal was the role of

29. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 117–118.
30. K. Weeks, 118.
31. See Berg, 'Free Sex.'
32. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*.
33. Forrester discusses the authorship issues with the text, including James' gradual erasure of Dalla Costa as the author of the 'Women and the Subversion of Community' essay. The first 1971 British edition of *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* included James' introduction, an English translation of Dalla Costa's 'Donne e Sovversione Sociale' and an earlier version of James' essay, 'A Woman's Place'. By the third edition in 1973, James listed herself as co-author of 'Women and the Subversion and the Community' and later claiming sole authorship. See Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework,' 3–4; Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, 3rd (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975).

unwaged and unrecognised labour, often performed in the home, and how this work was the hidden face of the waged world. Beginning in 1972, the WFH campaign included groups active in Italy, the US, England, English-speaking Cananda, Switzerland, and Germany.[34] The campaign was launched with the publication of the 'Statement of the International Feminist Collective' in July 1972.[35] Within this document, the Collective self-consciously identified themselves as 'Marxist feminists', proposing that a rethinking of class was necessary. They argued that an old definition of class had limited scope and effectiveness for the activity of both the traditional and the New Left. For the Collective, a new understanding of class had to be based on understanding "the subordination of the wageless worker to the waged worker".[36] This meant incorporating into an understanding of class the unwaged work that occurs in the home that waged workers depend upon. I deal in more detail with the rethinking of class given by the movement in section 4.

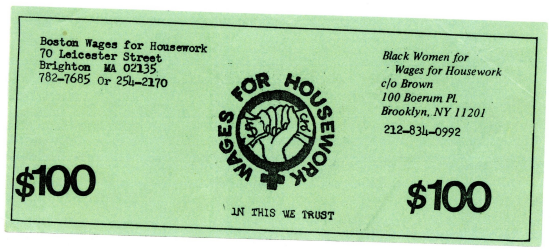


Figure 2.1: Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Facsimile flyer for 'a street trial' – 'Come Testify: How Government and Business Pimp off YOUR Work', Boston Commons, catalogue ref. WFH/8*, May 16, 1977

The WFH network and groups comprising the campaign has gone through several periods. The first is dated from 1972-1977, where the movement was established

34. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 2.
35. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Statement of the International Feminist Collective, catalogue ref. WFH/3*, 1972.
36. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022.

and organised under the International Feminists Collective. Following this, between 1977 to 1978 there was a period of reorganisation where some groups withdrew, new ones arrived, and some older groups continued their existing activities. However, the 'International Feminist Collective' was no longer used to describe the WFH's network of groups after this period.[37] Following this, the network was known as the International Wages for Housework Campaign (IWFHC).[38] Several autonomous groups affiliated to the IWFHC, including Wages Due Lesbians, Women Against Rape, International Black Women for Wages for Housework, and the English Collective of Prostitutes.[39] Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these groups continued to campaign for the recognition of unpaid work. The IWFHC groups were active around UN conferences on women, particularly in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995. Resulting from this campaign, they achieved the inclusion of information about unpaid work in the satellite accounts of GDP of different countries in their closing reports. The IWFHC continues to campaign with various groups globally around the question of recognition of social reproduction.[40]

The WFH movement is most often known for two distinct claims: the demand for a wage and the refusal of work. These are two of the predominant concepts that emerge from discussions about the WFH movement. They have also had a lasting impression on feminist theorists. For example, Weeks has written on the

37. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 10–13.

38. It has been difficult to date exactly when the International Feminist Collective became known as the International Wages for Housework Campaign. The IWFHC continues today under the Global Women's Strike, however in the history given of their movement they identify that they were founded as a collective under the IWFHC banner in 1972. However, Toupin notes that during this early period the autonomous groups organised the IFC as an early 'feminist internationale' that was founded in 1972. It then went under a period of reorganisation that began in 1977 or 1978. She notes that certain components of the collective remained active following this period, the IWFHC being one example, see Toupin, 10-11, 258 n. 29.

39. International Wages for Housework Campaign, 'Flyer for the International Wages for Housework Campaign, including details of aims and affiliated organisations,' Freedom Archives, https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC500_scans/500.020.Wages.for.Housework.pdf.

40. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 259 n.29.

demand for a wage and the refusal of work.[41] Katrina Forrester has discussed the idea of feminist demand making, looking at the demand for wages from the WFH movement. Forrester has also recently written on Selma James' idea of wagelessness.[42] Juno Mac and Molly Smith have borrowed the idea of the refusal of work, looking back to the legacies of the WFH movement.[43] The demand for a wage and the refusal of work are significant organising principles for the activism of the WFH movement. These informed the variety of organising that the WFH movement did across many issues. The structuring of the WFH movement into autonomous groups that could collaborate and form coalitions meant that their organising covered significant ground across a range of issues. When reviewing the archive materials of the WFH movement, although the demand for wages and the refusal of work are present throughout, what is striking is that the campaign is immensely broad and stretches beyond this alone. To name a few examples, a significant amount of campaigning activities were dedicated to welfare including the family allowance campaign in the UK, abortion rights, support for striking nurses, campaigns against racism, and — of course — against prostitution laws.[44]

In *The Problem with Work*, Weeks asks whether the demand for wages made by the WFH campaign should be read literally or figuratively. Should we understand it as a concrete policy objective or a means to other ends?[45] In the *Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*, frequently cited as a pivotal text in the Wages

41. See K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

42. See Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework'; Forrester, 'Capitalism and the Organization of Displacement.'

43. See Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Note that the 'refusal of work' is an idea drawn from the autonomist Marxist tradition, see also K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, Introduction, Chapter 3.

44. The variety of this campaign activity can be seen in the Power of Women Journal volumes for example, see Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Power of Women: Journal of the Power of Women Collective Vol. 1 No. 1, March/April, catalogue ref. WFH/5*, 1974; Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Power of Women: Journal of the Power of Women Collective Vol. 1 No. 2, July/August, catalogue ref. WFH/5*, 1974.

45. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 128.

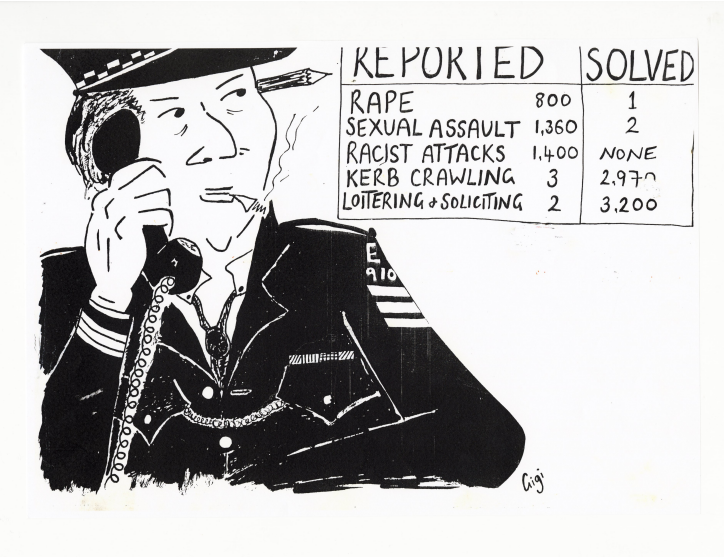


Figure 2.2: English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Black and white cartoon drawing of a police officer on the phone. Cartoon by GiGi, catalogue ref. ECP/13*

for Housework corpus, the demand for wages receives only a brief mention:[46]

> the demand that would follow, namely "pay us wages for housework", would run the risk of looking, in the light of the present relationship of forces in Italy, as though we wanted further to entrench the condition of institutionalized slavery which is produced with the condition of housework — therefore such a demand could scarcely operate in practice as a mobilizing goal.[47]

Dalla Costa and James dismiss the demand for wages for housework on the grounds that it would further entrench the sexual division of labour. This appears similar to the critique of the demand for Wages for Housework that Angela Davis would make in 1981 in *Women, Race and Class*:

> The idea of a paycheck for housewives would probably sound quite

46. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 128.
47. Costa and James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, 36.

> attractive to many women. But the attraction would probably be short-lived. For how many of those women would actually be willing to reconcile themselves to deadening, never-ending household tasks, all for the sake of a wage? ... It would seem that government paychecks for housewives would further legitimise this domestic slavery.[48]

Davis argues that demanding wages would only further entrench the position of the housewife. However, in two footnotes in the *Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* that were amended to the text later, the demand for wages receives a cautious endorsement.[49] Still, Dalla Costa and James note that 'wages for housework' should be read not only as a *demand* but also as a *perspective*:[50]

> it is clear in any case that the demand for a wage for housework is only a basis, a perspective, from which to start, whose merit is essentially to link immediately female oppression, subordination and isolation to their material foundation: female exploitation. At this moment this is perhaps the major function of the demand of wages for housework.[51]

Although the monetary demand of the movement can seem simple and has been characterised as reactionary, in her history of the movement Toupin points out that further investigation into the campaign reveals instead its international perspective.[52] WFH theoreticians proposed a global analysis of the gendered division of labour, constructed as 'female', and offered a strategy to deconstruct and subvert

48. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 236.

49. Costa and James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Footnotes 16 & 17, p. 54-55.

50. Weeks discusses the demand as a 'perspective' in chapter 3. Forrester also discusses the WFH tactic of demand making, see K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Forrester, 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework.'

51. Costa and James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Footnote 16, p. 54.

52. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 1, 46.

this.[53] One example that illustrates this nicely is the 1980 'Statement from Black Women for Wages Housework to All Third World Women'.[54] The statement calls for unity of the struggle for wages in 'developed' and 'developing' nations, arguing that:

> We cannot allow the power structure of the so called "Developed" nations to split our struggle into one the one hand, "Developing" Third World struggle and the "Developed" Third World struggle on the other. There are differences which we can better understand if we understand what we have in common.[55]

What is particularly interesting about this statement, and the perspective offered, is that the Black Women for Wages for Housework (BWfWfH) constructs both subjects (the women in 'developed' and women in 'developing' nations) as a part of Third World struggle.[56] This perspective identifies that there are differences in their experience, however 'Hunger is hunger' and 'Unpaid work is unpaid work', whether it is in a 'developed' or 'developing' nation or not.[57] Something that the WFH perspective looked to draw attention to was the commonalities shared by these different struggles and tried to unearth the logic(s) that structured them.

The WFH movement suggested that by identifying the labour that goes unseen and unwaged by women, this could challenge the often accepted 'natural' division of labour between men and women. To name domestic labour as work:

> is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fuck-

53. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 46–47.
54. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *typescript (photocopied) Statement from Black Women for Wages for Housework to All Third World Women, catalogue ref. WFH/11*, 1980.
55. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022.
56. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022.
57. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022.

> ing. At the same time, it shows that we have cooked, smiled, fucked throughout the years not because it was easier for us than for anybody else, but because we did not have any other choice.[58]

However, to say that housework was work was not to make this one neutral employment option amongst many. Silvia Federici and other WFH feminists saw gaining recognition of labour as a strategy to gain rights, and ultimately the bargaining power to refuse this work in its present form.[59] Writing in 1975, Federici penned her essay 'Why Sexuality is Work' along with her influential article 'Wages Against Housework'. This shaped much of the discussion about why women's domestic labour is work and should ultimately be refused.[60] These essays sought to offer insight into domestic labour and to make the unseen seen by naming the work that women do.[61]

1.3 'Hookers and Housewives Come Together'

A large proportion of the theory and organising struggles emerging from the WFH movement have subsequently focused primarily on reproductive labour defined by housework, child rearing or elder care.[62] However, the WFH movement did have a focus on the so-called 'labour of love' of women's sexuality.[63] From early on

58. Silvia Federici, 'Wages Against Housework,' in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (California: PM Press, 2012), 19.

59. Federici, 'Wages Against Housework'; Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'A General Strike [1975],' Caring Labor: An Archive, October 21, 2010, https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/10/20/mariarosa-dalla-costa-a-general-strike/.

60. Silvia Federici, 'Why Sexuality is Work,' in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (California: PM Press, 2012); Federici, 'Wages Against Housework.'

61. Federici would later call this project 'naming the work', see Rebecca Panovka and Barrow Kiara, '"Naming the Work": An Interview with Silvia Federici,' The Drift Mag, October 21, 2020, https://www.thedriftmag.com/naming-the-work/.

62. For example, a large amount of social reproduction theory has focused on these discussions, see Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

63. Federici, 'Why Sexuality is Work.'

in the WFH movement there was a concern not only for the 'private' sexuality of housewives performed in the home, but that this concern was extended to sex workers. From the beginning of the WFH campaign, autonomous groups within the movement extended their support to sex workers. Public support was first extended by the Black Women for Wages for Housework (BWfWFH) in a statement released in 1977.[64] The BWfWFH was founded in New York as an autonomous group of black women within the International Feminist Campaign. They first came together at a conference sponsored by the New York WFH Committee on Wages for Housework and Welfare that was held in Brooklyn on April 24, 1976. Although based in New York, the group travelled to other areas in the US and called on black women everywhere to contact them for information about the WFH campaign.[65]

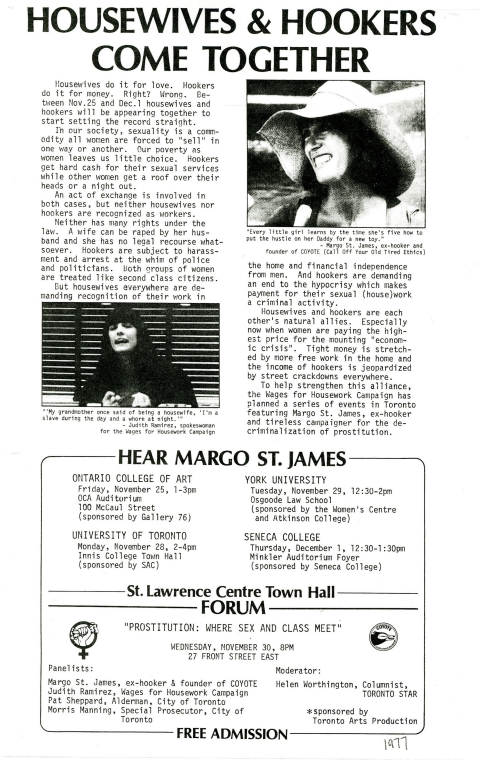
The BWfWFH's support to sex workers was offered in response to an increasing number of police raids, known as 'street sweeps', occurring in areas frequented by sex workers in Europe and North America.[66] This repression would lead sex workers in Lyon to occupy Saint-Nizier Church in 1975, which inspired several other actions across Europe and North America.[67] Those of the BWfWFH saw their own struggle reflected in that of sex workers who were hassled and arrested by police. They expressed solidarity with sex workers as they too faced harassment from police, fines, the threat of having their children taken away, being declared

64. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'Money for prostitutes is money for black women' (by Black Women for Wages for Housework - U.S.A.', catalogue ref. ECP/19*, February 1977.

65. Black Women for Wages for Housework accessed via WikiCommons, 'Paper titled 'Birth Announcement' announcing the launch of the Black Women for Wages for Housework group'; Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *press cutting (photocopy) 'Birth Announcement' regarding Black Women for Wages 'as an autonomous group [...] within the International Wages for Housework Campaign', catalogue ref. WFH/7*.

66. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 169–175.

67. Toupin, 169.



HOUSEWIVES & HOOKERS COME TOGETHER

Housewives do it for love. Hookers do it for money. Right? Wrong. Between Nov.25 and Dec.1 housewives and hookers will be appearing together to start setting the record straight.

In our society, sexuality is a commodity all women are forced to "sell" in one way or another. Our poverty as women leaves us little choice. Hookers get hard cash for their sexual services while other women get a roof over their heads or a night out.

An act of exchange is involved in both cases, but neither housewives nor hookers are recognized as workers.

Neither has many rights under the law. A wife can be raped by her husband and she has no legal recourse whatsoever. Hookers are subject to harassment and arrest at the whim of police and politicians. Both groups of women are treated like second class citizens.

But housewives everywhere are demanding recognition of their work in the home and financial independence from man. And hookers are demanding an end to the hypocrisy which makes payment for their sexual (house)work a criminal activity.

Housewives and hookers are each other's natural allies. Especially now when women are paying the highest price for the mounting "economic crisis". Tight money is stretched by more free work in the home and the income of hookers is jeopardized by street crackdowns everywhere.

To help strengthen this alliance, the Wages for Housework Campaign has planned a series of events in Toronto featuring Margo St. James, ex-hooker and tireless campaigner for the decriminalization of prostitution.

"My grandmother once said of being a housewife, 'It's a slave during the day and a whore at night.'"
- Judith Ramirez, spokeswoman for the Wages for Housework Campaign

"Every little girl learns by the time she's five how to put the hustle on her Daddy for a new toy."
- Margo St. James, ex-hooker and founder of COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics)

HEAR MARGO ST. JAMES

ONTARIO COLLEGE OF ART
Friday, November 25, 1-3pm
OCA Auditorium
100 McCaul Street
(sponsored by Gallery 76)

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
Monday, November 28, 2-4pm
Innis College Town Hall
(sponsored by SAC)

YORK UNIVERSITY
Tuesday, November 29, 12:30-2pm
Osgoode Law School
(sponsored by the Women's Centre and Atkinson College)

SENECA COLLEGE
Thursday, December 1, 12:30-1:30pm
Minkler Auditorium Foyer
(sponsored by Seneca College)

St. Lawrence Centre Town Hall
FORUM

"PROSTITUTION: WHERE SEX AND CLASS MEET"

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 8PM
27 FRONT STREET EAST

Panelists:
Margo St. James, ex-hooker & founder of COYOTE
Judith Ramirez, Wages for Housework Campaign
Pat Sheppard, Alderman, City of Toronto
Morris Manning, Special Prosecutor, City of Toronto

Moderator:
Helen Worthington, Columnist, TORONTO STAR

*sponsored by Toronto Arts Production

FREE ADMISSION

1977

Figure 2.3: Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Photocopied flyer, 'Housewives & Hookers Come Together' advertising talks and events featuring Margo St. James and Judith Ramirez, catalogue ref. WFH/8*, 1977

as 'unfit mothers,' and difficulty in making enough money to feed their families.[68]

At this time in the mid-1970s, when many WFH groups openly extended support to sex workers, few feminist groups analysed prostitution in the same way. Rather, prostitution had been argued to be the worst degradation of women possible by some feminist groups.[69] However, Judy Ramirez, spokesperson of the Toronto

68. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'Money for prostitutes is money for black women' (by Black Women for Wages for Housework - U.S.A.', catalogue ref. ECP/19.*

69. I have listed here some examples of other feminist thinkers, namely radical feminists, who have analysed sex work differently. It is important to note that their objection should be read as nuanced and not be seen as 'pearl clutching' or prudishness as some have characterised it. Although I lack the space here, they raise valid criticisms about the nature of sex under heteropatriarchy. However, many have rightly criticised their treatment of sex work and sex workers themselves, in particular for ignoring the conditions that lead to sex work being a necessary option in the first

Wages for Housework Committee in 1977 sums up the position of the WFH feminists on sex work: '*nothing* is more degrading than having no money.'[70] Across the WFH movement, sex workers were recognised as struggling for economic survival and being penalised for this by punitive law enforcement.

1.4 The English Collective of Prostitutes (1975–1990)

The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) was established as an autonomous group within the International Wages for Housework Campaign in 1975. The group is a self-help organisation for sex working women and a campaigning organisation for the removal of prostitution laws. The founding of the ECP was inspired by the occupation of the Saint-Nizier Church in Lyon by French prostitutes who were campaigning against police violence.[71]

The ECP issued their first statement in 1976 entitled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' where they outline some of their aims and their approach to sex work.[72] The statement was released in response to the London's Women's Lib-

place, as well as for proposing carceral solutions to sex work. See Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 1989); Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'From Practice to Theory, or What is a White Woman Anyway?,' *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 4, no. 13 (1996): 13–22; Dworkin, *Intercourse*; Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy'; Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*.

70. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 173, Emphasis original.

71. English Collective of Prostitutes, 'English Collective of Prostitutes History,' 2019, https://prostitutescollective.net/ecp-history/.

72. The archive does not date this document, though it is most likely dated to 1976. Nina Lopez-Jones references the paper in her chapter reviewing the history of the ECP, stating that this was their 'first statement in 1975.' The authorship of the document is attributed the Power of Women Collective, an autonomous group in the WFH campaign from which the ECP was formed. The statement makes reference to PUSSI, an organisation founded in 1975, and the document is responding to the London Women's Liberation Workshop's (WLW) newsletter. This is likely to be 'Shrew', the newsletter of the London WLW and was published from the 1969–1974 with additional issues appearing sporadically from 1976 until 1978. Although Lopez's reference to the document would date this to 1975, it is more likely dated to 1976. Shrew was not published between autumn 1974 and autumn 1976, and PUSSI was founded in the autumn of 1975. Additionally, all of the publications listed at the bottom of the ECP's document are published in 1975, suggesting either it was published late that year or more likely the following year. See English Col-

Figure 2.4: English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Black and white photograph of women wearing eye masks and holding a 'English Collective of Prostitutes' banner, catalogue ref. ECP/13*, 1982

eration Movement (WLM) Newsletter published in 1976. The ECP state that the WLM Newsletter argued that they 'support prostitutes but not prostitution'. Challenging this, they argue that the minutes from the meeting suggests that the workshop had not in fact taken the decision to support prostitutes. The ECP provide an eight point response to the statements given in the meeting for how one might 'support prostitutes' but 'oppose prostitution'.[73] Nina Lopez-Jones, ECP member and author, argues that the slogan 'for prostitutes, against prostitution' encapsulates their viewpoint about prostitution.[74] This position means supporting those

lective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18*; Lopez-Jones, 'Workers: Introducing the English Collective of Prostitutes'; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 'Founding of PUSSI,' https://www.nswp.org/timeline/event/founding-pussi; Grassroots Feminism, 'Shrew: Women's Liberation Workshop (1969-1978),' Grassroots Feminism, 2009, https://www.grassrootsfeminism.net/cms/node/520; Florence Binard, 'The British Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s: Redefining the Personal and the Political,' *French Journal of British Studies* 22 (2017): 1–17.

73. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18*.

74. Lopez-Jones, 'Workers: Introducing the English Collective of Prostitutes,' 272.

engaging in sex work, as the ECP recognises it is driven by economic need, whilst criticising the conditions that make prostitution a reality for many.

In October of 1976, the ECP released their first public statement detailing their aims as an organisation. The statement was issued as a letter addressing the first national conference of the Wages for Housework campaign in the UK.[75] The ECP outlines that they are set up to campaign for the removal of all prostitution laws, an issue they argue is integral for the fight not only for the liberation of prostitute women but all women. They state that members of the ECP were unfortunately unable to attend the conference as they could not afford to be outed as sex working women for fear of repercussions, such as losing custody of their children or being deported — which only serves to underline the point of their statement. To prevent many sex working women from being outed, unlike some other sex worker organisations, the ECP does not require women to identify themselves as a sex worker or not.[76] Their spokesperson initially was Selma James, who herself was not a prostitute and was able to publicly speak out without fear of repercussions.[77]

The ECP has provided commentary on and campaigned against the policing of

75. The WFH conference was intended to be a 'conference for all women', see English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Open letter from the English Collective of Prostitutes which was addressed to the first national conference of the Wages for Housework Campaign in October 1976 (this was the first public statement made by the English Collective of Prostitutes in Britain), catalogue ref. ECP/19*, October 1976; Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Poster titled 'On the first anniversary of the Women's General Strike in Iceland a conference for all women Wages for Housework: How to Get it', London Wages for Housework Committee & Wages Due Lesbians, catalogue ref. WFH/7*, 1976.

76. This would later become an issue with the International Whores Congress in Amsterdam in 1985. The Congress would require women to identify their status with respect to whether they were sex working women or not. The ECP boycotted the Congress and issued a statement detailing the dangers of outing women for prostitution and the potential this has for dividing the women's movement, see English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Typescript statement made by Nina Lopez-Jones and Gigi Turner to the International Whores Convention in Amsterdam. The statement is titled 'For Prostitutes, Against the Police', catalogue ref. ECP/3*; English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Photocopied press cutting, 'The unhappy hookers shun congress' [by Simon de Bruxelles] (from The Observer), catalogue ref. ECP/3*, September 21, 1986; M. Weeks, 'A Prostitutes' Jamboree.'

77. Lopez-Jones, 'Workers: Introducing the English Collective of Prostitutes,' 271.

prostitution in the UK. In 1979, the ECP supported MP Maureen Colquhoun's 'Protection of Prostitutes Bill', which was passed.[78] The bill would amend the Sexual Offences Act 1956 and the Street Offences Act 1959. The amendments would serve to offer prostitutes some protection from police harassment, abolish imprisonment for soliciting, and remove the police description of 'common prostitute'.[79] In 1981, the ECP picketed the High Court in London over the case of the Yorkshire Ripper and the perceived disregard of sex workers' lives.[80]

Figure 2.5: English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Black and white photograph the English Collective of Prostitutes during the Occupation of Holy Cross Church. Caroline and Tony Benn are pictured in the front row., catalogue ref. ECP/13*, 1982

In 1982, as the introduction to this thesis outlines, the ECP garnered widespread

78. English Collective of Prostitutes, 'English Collective of Prostitutes History.'

79. Graham Heathcote, 'Hookers win one, but don't understand what's happening,' The Lewiston Daily Sun, March 7, 1979, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=HWEgAAAAIBAJ&pg=3939%5C%2C1205033; Associated Press, 'Prostitutes go to British Parliament,' Herald Journal, March 7, 1979, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=hYIsAAAAIBAJ&pg=6692%5C%2C1375225.

80. The ECP also wrote to the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police regarding the failure of police to take seriously prostitute lives, see English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Letter sent from the English Collective of Prostitutes to David McNee (Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police) regarding the Yorkshire Ripper, police attitudes regarding violence towards prostitutes, and laws regarding prostitution, catalogue ref. ECP/4*, February 1980.

attention and support when their members occupied Holy Cross Church in King's Cross for 12 days. They protested against police violence, arrests, and racism. In a statement issued from the Occupation, the demands from the ECP were as follows:

1. An end to illegal arrests of prostitutes;
2. An end to police threats, blackmail, harassment and racism;
3. Hands off our children — we don't want our kids in care;
4. An end to arrest of boyfriends, husbands, sons;
5. Arrest rapists and pimps instead;
6. Immediate protection, welfare, housing for women who want to get off the game.[81]

Figure 2.6: English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Black and white cartoon drawing of a police officer talking to an individual with a clipboard on the corner of a street. The cartoon was to commemorate the occupation of the Holy Cross, Kings Cross, London, 17-29 November 1982, by the English Collective of Prostitutes. Cartoon by Hector Breeze, catalogue ref. ECP/13*, 1982

81. English Collective of Prostitutes, 'ECP Occupation Statement, a press release document outlining the demands of the occupation.'

Labour MP Tony Benn and education campaigner Caroline Benn extended public support to the protest. When visiting, Tony Benn compared sex workers to other working people.[82] In *Hookers in the House of the Lord*, James writes of the occupation, saying that:

> One black woman ... spelled out that the prostitution laws are to young black women what the "sus" laws are to young Black men. This is a real breakthrough for us. After years of work, we could begin to see the illegality and racism of the police against hookers being lifted out of the exotic, even the erotic, where it could be dismissed and ridiculed; and onto the deadly serious terrain we share with others who are up against the law.[83]

The ECP's work has also focused on advising and educating sex working women about their rights. In 1981, they published a pamphlet entitled 'A Guide To The Rules of the Game for Working Girls'. This included information on the policing of sex work in the UK to empower women to protect themselves from punitive law enforcement.[84] In 1982, the ECP created Legal Action for Women (LAW). This is a free legal advice service for all women, and some of those who run it are themselves sex workers. The service was set up in response to a lack of information available for prostitute women.[85] LAW is still running today as an independent service separate from the ECP.[86]

The ECP also published a regular newsletter called 'Network' from 1983–1985.

82. NSWP, 'The Occupation of the Holy Church,' 2014, https://www.nswp.org/timeline/event/the-occupation-the-holy-church#:~:text=On%2017%20November%201982%2C%2050,%2C%20constant%20arrests%2C%20and%20racism..

83. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*, Section: Going to Church.

84. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Leaflet titled 'Know Your Rights An A-Z for sex workers' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. 12*.

85. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *newsletter, 'Network: News from the English Collective of Prostitutes' (Issue No.1), catalogue ref. ECP/1*, July 1983.

86. LAW, 'Legal Action for Women Website,' http://legalactionforwomen.net/.

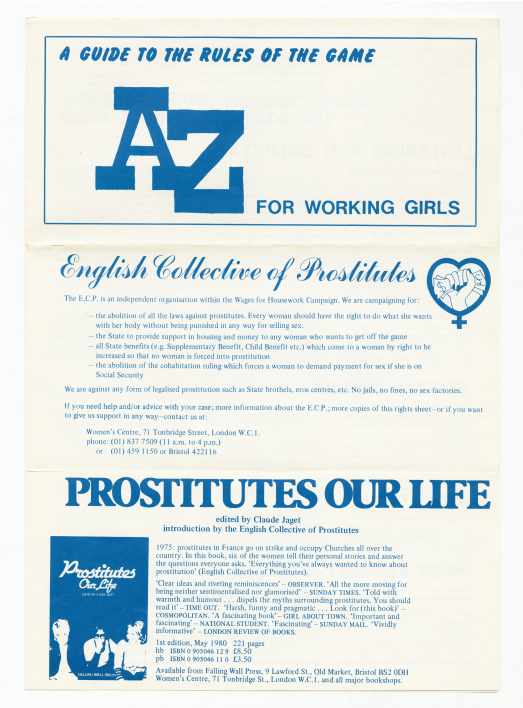


Figure 2.7: English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Leaflet titled 'A Guide to the Rules of the Game for Working Girls' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/9*, 1980 This is the original version of the leaflet disseminated in 1981.

They published 5 issues, which included one single issue and two double issues. Network provided information on campaigns, news and updates on activities from sex worker collectives around the globe, satirical cartoons, and articles on issues affecting sex workers.[87]

This subsection provides only a cursory glance at the actions taken by the ECP. The organisation continues to campaign for the decriminalisation of prostitution and advise sex workers on their rights since its founding in 1975. In particular, in 1995, with support from the ECP and Women Against Rape, two sex workers

87. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *newsletter, 'Network: News from the English Collective of Prostitutes' (Issue No.1), catalogue ref. ECP/1*; English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Newsletter, 'Network: News from the English Collective of Prostitutes' (Double Issue: No.2 & 3), catalogue ref. ECP/1*, June 1984; English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Newsletter, 'Network: News from the English Collective of Prostitutes' (Double Issue: No.4 & 5), catalogue ref. ECP/1*, June 1985.

were able to bring forward a successful private prosecution of rape.[88]

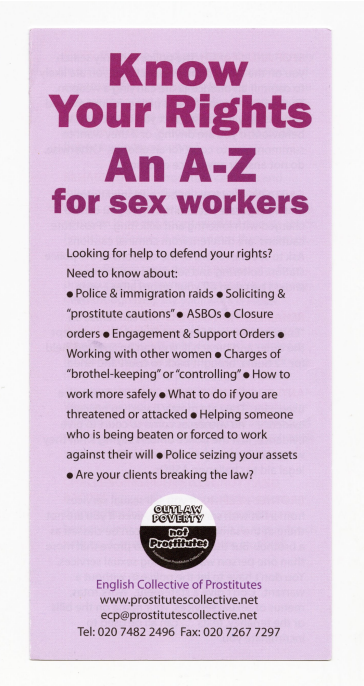


Figure 2.8: English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Leaflet titled 'Know Your Rights An A-Z for sex workers' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. 12* This is a later version of the pamphlet on sex workers rights developed by the ECP.

2 Sex Work as Work

Sex work is different to other forms of work typically performed. It does not often involve activities we would typically expect to see in a working day, such as sitting at a desk in a HR department or punching in a time card when starting a shift in a factory. However, that it is comparatively different to other jobs seems poor grounds to exclude it from having status as work. It appears more hinges on what

88. English Collective of Prostitutes, 'English Collective of Prostitutes History'; English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Photocopied press cuttings, including: 'Prostitute wins compensation for rape attack' (by Clare Dyer), untitled letter [to the editor] by Lisa Longstaff of Women Against Rape, and 'Anger over rape discrimination' (by Duncan Campbell) (all from The Guardian), catalogue ref. ECP/1*, March 1996.

it is that we think work involves, or — more accurately — *should* involve. One of the central goals of the WFH movement and the sex worker organisations affiliated with this was to challenge presuppositions about the nature of work under contemporary capitalism. This section explores how the the ECP and the WFH campaign sought to reconceptualise not only domestic labour as work, but that prostitution be rethought of as work in the same way.

In this section, I reconstruct and discuss the following three claims for reconceptualising sex work *as work* from the ECP archive materials and the WFH campaign:

1. All work and prostitution are similar in that we all 'sell our bodies' in selling our labour.

2. All women, prostitutes or not, experience a dependence on men in a similar way.

3. All work, including prostitution, fulfils a material need.

To reconstruct the above claims, I utilise archive materials from the ECP and other organisations affiliated to the WFH campaign, such as the Power of Women Collective (PoWC).[89] Many of these materials are pamphlets, private correspondence, speeches, newspaper articles, or circulars. Resulting from this wide variety of source material and the audiences they are written for, the claims for reconceptualising sex work are not always presented consistently and clearly. This section evaluates these resources and systematically present the claims for reconceptualising sex work *as work*.

89. The Power of Women Collective was one of the first UK Wages for Housework groups founded in 1973. The ECP formed as a distinct and autonomous group within this collective. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 87–88, 96.

2.1 All Work is Prostitution

In their paper, 'For prostitutes and against prostitution', the PoWC argue that seeing prostitution as work changes the discussion from pathologising sex workers to how we might recognise them as workers. This represents a conceptual shift from seeing prostitution as an 'unnatural practice where prostitutes are more or differently degraded than women who work in factories or restaurants or offices' to understanding prostitute women as like other workers.[90] What bridges the gap between prostitutes and other workers is a shared condition whereby 'all work is prostitution ... [and] our whole lives are stolen from us by work.'[91]

The PoWC argue that prostitutes have been stigmatised in their work, as they are regarded as 'depraved, a nymphomaniac or mentally unhinged' for working in the sex trades.[92] Whilst the PoWC argue that we need to move away from pathologising and stigmatising sex workers, at the same time they argue that to recognise it *as work* does not mean arguing that it is a respectable or 'good' occupational choice. Instead, they warn against a glamorisation of sex work and stress the dangers that many prostitute women face. For sex work to be recognised as a form of work we must recognise that 'all work is prostitution.' This reflects a sentiment that all of us may 'sell our bodies' in selling our labour.[93]

What does it mean to say that 'all work is prostitution'? Comparisons made between prostitution and other kinds of work often take the form various plays on the slogan 'sex work is work'. To rephrase this, we might say that 'prostitution is like all work'. At one level, these slogans express that sex work has more in common with other forms of work than what sets it apart. Contained within slo-

90. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.*
91. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.
92. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.
93. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.

gans like this are arguments that sex work should not be 'othered', either as an illegitimate sexual practice or as a symbolic expression of the patriarchal oppression of women, because it has more in common with other forms of work. It is commonly argued that what sex work has in common with other types of work is the presence of a wage/payment. However, it does beg the question, what other forms of work is it like exactly? What we think work is and contains is seldom clear cut, and this is particularly challenging when we consider unwaged work.

However, to say that 'all work is prostitution' flips this script. It is not that sex work has more in common with other forms of work and that this is what gives it legitimacy (often in the form of access to rights or the removal of punitive laws, for example). To say that 'all work is prostitution' is to claim that supposedly 'legitimate' forms of work have more in common with sex work. Prostitution is exposed for containing exploitation, bad working conditions, and a myriad of other harms. At the same time, other 'legitimate' forms of work are revealed to contain these harms too. Although, this of course raises the question whether this is a problem of degree of these harms rather than of kind. We know that some jobs are considerably better than others and sex workers face an ever-present threat of criminalisation that many other workers do not contend with.

The WFH movement used this rhetorical format for making arguments and demands quite frequently. For example, during the police crackdowns on prostitutes — the aforementioned 'street sweeps' — the San Francisco and Los Angeles WFH branches released a statement in 1977 stating that 'an attack against prostitutes is an attack on all women'.[94] The statement was endorsed by over 60 organisations internationally.[95] Another example is the formulation of the argu-

94. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Facsimilie flyer, 'An Attack Against Prostitutes Is An Attack on All Women', catalogue ref. WFH/8.*

95. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Facsimilie flyer, 'An Attack Against Prostitutes Is An Attack on All Women', catalogue ref. WFH/8*; Wages for Housework

ment by the BWfWfH who argued that 'when prostitutes win, all women win' and that 'money for prostitutes is money for black women' in a 1977 statement in support of the Los Angeles and San Franscisco WFH group's 'when prostitutes win we all win' statement.[96]

Prostitution is recognised as a means to earning a living. Although, the condition of having to work for money is not specific to prostitution. Hence, the Power of Women Collective argues that:

> Whether we fuck for money, wait on tables, pack biscuits, type letters, drive lorries, bear children, teach in schools, or work in the coal mines, we are forced to sell our bodies and minds.[97]

This shifts a conception of sex work from one based on a personal choice — for example, because a sex worker may be 'deranged' or because it could be potentially glamorous — to recognising that for the majority of women in commercial sex they are 'refusing poverty by working in the sex industry.'[98] Sex work, like all work, should therefore be conceptualised as forced upon us by the conditions we live in under contemporary capitalism to make ends meet. This challenges the idea that sex workers are uniquely exploited in the sex industry. To say that 'all work is prostitution' reveals not only the bad conditions sex work occurs under, but that work in general is suboptimal.

As the ECP argue in their paper 'For Prostitutes Against Prostitution — Crossing

(WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Facsimilie Wages for Housework [Los Angeles] Newsletter Spring, catalogue ref. WFH/8*, 1977.

96. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'Money for prostitutes is money for black women' (by Black Women for Wages for Housework - U.S.A.', catalogue ref. ECP/19.*

97. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.*

98. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes against prostitution — crossing the divides between sex workers and other women' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/18.*

the Divides Between Sex Workers and Other Women' in March 1990:

> The women's movement is split on the issue of women working as prostitutes ... We demanded that the struggle of prostitute women for equal human, legal and economic rights with other women be acknowledged as part of the women's movement for financial independence and control over our own bodies, and as part of the working class movement for more money and less work. To connect the situation of prostitute women in this way was then completely new. It is still controversial. Most of the Women's Liberation Movement was hostile to prostitute women on the grounds that exchanging sex for money was *uniquely degrading*. They said it encouraged rape by leading men to believe that all women are available, conveniently forgetting that men already thought that. The sex industry is not the only industry that is male-dominated and which degrades women, but it is an industry based on sex — which tends to pluck many repressive strings in many psyches.[99]

The ECP argue that often work in general falls short of being satisfactory. It is not only sex workers that experience harassment by men or are in a degrading job. We encounter low wages, terrible bosses, and bad working conditions in many, if not most, jobs.

The ECP and PoWC are not arguing that sex work has good conditions, does not exploit women, or has no patriarchal basis. Instead, they argue, that the conditions sex workers find themselves in are not 'uniquely degrading' and many of their experiences are shared with other kinds of work. What they point out is that

99. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes against prostitution — crossing the divides between sex workers and other women' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/18*, Emphasis added.

prostitution allows for some women is to escape absolute poverty, especially as the state falls short in supporting women with benefits.[100] Sex workers are thought of as making a rational choice when they sell sex as they choose between absolute poverty or having access to some money. What is important for the women's movement is demanding higher wages, better conditions, and more power for women, regardless of if women sell sex for money or packs biscuits.[101]

However, prostitute women face an additional challenge as punitive laws put her at further risk of worse conditions. Sex workers experience arrest, incarceration, detention on immigration charges, deportation, harassment, and sexual abuse at the hands of the police.[102] Although the ECP and PoWC argue that sex workers share many of the same harms other workers experience, there is a difference in degree of harms experienced. Punitive law enforcement presents an additional challenges that many other 'legitimate' (i.e. legal) forms of work do not face, even if workers may also experience similar harms such as exploitation or sexual harassment.

2.2 Dependence on Men

Another aspect defining sex work *as work* for Marxist feminists is the connection made to the dependence on men. The PoWC argue that what defines the condition of all women, sex working and non-sex working women alike, is that their lives

100. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes against prostitution — crossing the divides between sex workers and other women' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/18.*

101. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.*

102. For some examples where cases of violence from interactions with the criminalising state are cited, see Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement, *No Silence to Violence: A report on violence against women in prostitution in the UK* (Published Online, December 2018); Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Grant, *Playing the Whore*; Miriam Ticktin, 'Sexual Violence as the Language of Border Control: Where French Feminist and Anti-immigrant Rhetoric Meet,' *Signs* 33, no. 4 (2008): 863–889.

are characterised by a dependence on men. This appears as women being:

> partly or wholly dependent on men for food, money, clothes and accommodation. Fucking with these men is part of the work — part of the prostitution — we undergo this for this "support". Even those of us who are not living with men or who have some money of our own can't escape the definition of ourselves that comes from this universal work and dependence. The jobs and wages we get are determined by the fact that we have no money of our own and desperately need it.[103]

What this points out is the gender imbalance in power that is present in many women's lives. Many women depend on a man's wages, either to supplement her own or entirely, as well as there being broader power struggle at play where men dominate the majority of positions of power.

Elsewhere in the Women's Liberation Movement at this time the term 'patriarchy' was being used to analyse power relations between men and women. This describes a social system of domination of men over women and was adopted commonly in radical feminist discourse.[104] However, Marxist, socialist and other anti-capitalist feminists sought to extend the term to capitalist patriarchy or otherwise identify a materialist basis for patriarchy.[105] Terms such as 'patriarchy' or 'capitalist patriarchy' are absent from the documents written by the ECP, rather the gender imbalance is described in terms of 'male domination.' In many of the documents this is extended from the level of the individual where women may be 'partly or wholly dependent on men' to discussing the state and women's col-

103. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18*.
104. The coining of the term 'patriarchy' is often attributed to Kate Millett, see Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
105. For example, see Zillah R. Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

lective dependence.[106] The state is frequently framed as a 'pimp' particularly for extracting taxes for work that it criminalises and for pushing women into sex work through economic need. For some examples, the BWfWfH, the ECP, and Women Against Rape argue that, 'the government, whose economic crisis is forcing more women into prostitution at every level, [is] the biggest pimp.'[107] In double issue 2 and 3 of Network, the headline 'The Courts are the Biggest Pimp' is used, and in double issue 4 and 5 the headline 'Inland Revenue is a Pimp' is employed.[108]

The ECP argues that sex work is characterised by male dominance, although they point out that for non-sex working women their lives are also dominated by men. The sex industry is not the only industry to degrade women, and patriarchy persists throughout women's lives.[109] However, recognising that sex work is patriarchal has led to many feminist attempts to curtail it. The ECP point out that:

> the government uses feminists' ambivalence towards prostitute women to strengthen police powers against everyone. Anti-porn crusades and kerb-crawling legislation are two examples of how feminism fed into the repressive economic and sexual climate of the 1980s.
>
> Anti-porn feminists have concentrated on attacking attitudes, not power relations, blaming violence against women on naked images while ignoring the violent economic reality those images reflect. These fem-

106. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.*
107. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Open letter titled 'Violence Against Women in the Sex Industry: An open letter to all women' (by the Black Women for Wages for Housework, the English Collective of Prostitutes and Women Against Rape), catalogue ref. ECP/19.*
108. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Newsletter, 'Network: News from the English Collective of Prostitutes' (Double Issue: No.2 & 3), catalogue ref. ECP/1*; English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Newsletter, 'Network: News from the English Collective of Prostitutes' (Double Issue: No.4 & 5), catalogue ref. ECP/1.*
109. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes against prostitution — crossing the divides between sex workers and other women' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/18.*

> inists tell other women what men have always told us: to ignore our real experience — and submit to their priorities. Not money, not housing, not even non-sexist, non-racist, non-violent policing, but an end to pornography becomes the key to every woman's welfare.[110]

When men's access to commercial sex is made harder, either through criminalising the practice or other punitive measures, this does not stop the commercial sex industry. Women still need to sell sex. As Juno Mac and Molly Smith have argued in *Revolting Prostitutes*, there is an asymmetry of need present in the commercial sex industry: sex workers need to sell sex more than men need to buy it.[111] The women still need to receive an income or other resources — as measures to stop prostitution seldom involve giving sex workers cash — so, instead of stopping selling sex, the women absorb the risk. As the ECP, the BWfWFH, and Women Against Rape argue: 'The connection between economic vulnerability and sexual vulnerability is evident for all to see.'[112]

2.3 Material Needs

Throughout this section, I have explored how sex work for the ECP and many in the WFH campaign seems not only like many other forms of 'legitimate' work (such as factory work), but that it has much in common with unpaid forms of work like housework and mother-work. However, there is a third and final defining feature to sex work that sets it apart from unpaid socially reproductive work: the receipt of a payment.

110. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes against prostitution — crossing the divides between sex workers and other women' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/18.*

111. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 53.

112. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Open letter titled 'Violence Against Women in the Sex Industry: An open letter to all women' (by the Black Women for Wages for Housework, the English Collective of Prostitutes and Women Against Rape), catalogue ref. ECP/19.*

In their letter to the first national UK conference of the WFH campaign in 1976, the ECP argue that: 'The line between unpaid sex and paid sex is a question of what we get in return'.[113] People ultimately sell sex for money or other resources. Although we should be careful to avoid too simplistic an understanding of what receiving payment means in this context. The receipt of a wage was a central demand of the WFH campaign, and they understood this to represent more than its monetary value alone. To that effect, it can be understood in political terms as a power relationship that structures society.[114] For the purposes of this section, I am discussing wages as the receipt of money or other resources in exchange for goods and services.

Between May and September of 1980, the ECP exchanged a series of letters with the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the federation that represents the majority of trade unions in England and Wales. Margaret Valentino of the ECP wrote to Len Murray, then general secretary of the TUC, in response to the conviction of Cynthia Payne. Payne was arrested in 1978 on prostitution charges and in 1980 was sentenced to 18 months in prison, although this was reduced to 6 months in prison and a fine on appeal. She served 4 months in Holloway Prison.[115] Writing to the TUC concerning the conviction of Payne, the ECP argued that:

> You must be aware that Ms. Payne is one of the millions of women in

113. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Open letter from the English Collective of Prostitutes which was addressed to the first national conference of the Wages for Housework Campaign in October 1976 (this was the first public statement made by the English Collective of Prostitutes in Britain), catalogue ref. ECP/19*.

114. I discuss this in more detail in section 4 below.

115. It should be noted that Ms Payne's case was especially high profile, in part because of the alleged clientele she entertained. Though Ms Payne did have a successful career — particularly after her conviction — her case seems particularly appealing to the ECP because she turned to prostitution to avoid getting evicted from her flat. See BBC News, 'Brothel keeper Cynthia Payne dies,' November 15, 2015, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34828890; Duncan Campbell, 'Cynthia Payne Obituary,' The Guardian, November 16, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/16/cynthia-payne.

> Britain, mostly mothers, who are now forced to work on the game and are persecuted by the law. It is time that the TUC publicly recognise that our campaign against the prostitution laws is a trades dispute.[116]

They argue that their campaign against prostitution laws should be regarded as a 'trades dispute' and call on the TUC for their support. The ECP argue that the rights they are fighting for are broader than prostitute rights and that this is about worker's rights. They argue that recognition of sex workers' rights — as workers — is an essential part of the fight for justice for workers, those on low pay, for migrants, and all in the working class.

The ECP point out that people enter into prostitution for the most part to fulfil a material need as they are selling sex to get money or other resources. To show this, the ECP make a connection between prostitution and other social issues, for example problems related to low wages or unemployment which force women into prostitution to make ends meet. As they argue:

> In this period of crisis, the T.U.C. must be concerned with and must publicise all the consequences of unemployment, one of which is that even more women are forced to take up prostitution and face illegality. This is no time to be coy. We are not talking about sex but about women, jobs and money.[117]

The TUC rejected their request to recognise the dispute over prostitution laws as a 'trades dispute', citing the legal definition of a trades dispute under the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974 in response. The ECP rejected the TUC's characterisation of a trades dispute and that this 'technical-bureaucratic attitude'

116. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Correspondence between Trades Union Congress and the English Collective of Prostitutes regarding the abolition of laws on prostitution and a discussion about whether campaigns against laws on prostitution should be considered a trades dispute, catalogue ref. ECP/6*, September 1980.
117. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.

discourages many women and men from joining trade unions.[118]

Although they failed to get the TUC to recognise the fight over sex workers' rights as a 'trades dispute', their correspondence reveals something important about the ECP's approach to sex work. They note that they are 'not talking about sex' but what prostitution provides for those engaged in it: an income. Going further, the ECP says that, 'It is a fact that less women would be forced onto the game if the TUC supported women's fight against their poverty.'[119] Prostitution, they argue, for many women has little do with the sex involved at all, but rather that it is work because it provides for them and their families.

3 Rethinking (Sex) Work

In section 2 above, I outlined three central claims for reconceptualising sex work as a kind of work by the ECP and the WFH campaign. In this section, I discuss why the ECP and many in the wider WFH campaign sought to redefine sex work as a kind of work. To do this, I reconstruct three reasons for the reframing of sex work as work by the ECP and the WFH campaign.

Sex work was reframed *as work* because:

1. It shifted the discussion from sex work as a crime and prostitutes as victims towards a discourse centered on sex workers as workers demanding rights and justice.

2. It served, for some in the WFH movement, as an example of a form of pre-existing commodified reproductive labour.

118. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Correspondence between Trades Union Congress and the English Collective of Prostitutes regarding the abolition of laws on prostitution and a discussion about whether campaigns against laws on prostitution should be considered a trades dispute, catalogue ref. ECP/6*.
119. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.

3. It was part of a broader project of reconceptualising work under capitalism to account for gendered labour, questions of race, migration status, policing, etc.

I have characterised these reasons as (1) *agency*, (2) *power*, and (3) *conceptual*. I discuss each of these in turn below.

3.1 Workers Demanding Rights and Justice

Through naming sex work *as work*, WFH feminists and sex worker organisations like the ECP intended this recognition to provide agency to those women working in commercial sex. As in the example Leigh came across when feminists were discussing prostitution and referred to it as the 'sex use industry', sex workers are perceived both as victims in need of saving and as passive subjects.[120] However, to frame the selling of sex as 'work' is not to say that it is desirable or good. Rather, to name sex work as a kind of work enables the moral terrain of the debate to shift. Rethought of as work, sex workers can be seen as workers demanding rights and justice, with the potential to be collectively organised as (sex) workers. Due to the precarious legal position of prostitution and other forms of sex work, the focus of many sex workers' rights activists has been on its decriminalisation in most jurisdictions.

Defining sex work this way:

> involve[s] the disavowal of such a positive view of work, taking as their starting point the *worker* status of sex workers. That is to say, they are not a boss or manager. Such accounts would allow us to get a grasp on the "work" elements of sex work that might be troubling to anti-capitalists. Similarly, some accounts flag the centrality of eco-

120. Leigh, 'Inventing Sex Work.'

> nomic exchange: "[p]eople sell sex to get money. This simple fact is often missed, forgotten, or overlooked."[121]

It follows from this emphasis on the 'workness' of sex work for the ECP and those in the WFH movement that sex work should not be punished by criminal laws. They argue that sex work, though not unproblematic, should not be regulated by criminal law and instead workers should be entitled to rights and protections. They also consider the ways in which reconceptualising sex work in this manner can allow for sex workers to organise, either amongst themselves or with other workers, around labour rights issues.

In their open letter to the first national WFH Conference in the UK in 1976, the ECP outlined one of their central demands as an organisation:

> Our demand, as prostitute women, is that laws on prostitution be removed. If there were no laws and regulations concerning our job, it would not be separated from the other work that women do. We would be less isolated from each other and from women who aren't on the game.[122]

Prostitution laws are argued keep women divided, therefore the state can regulate some work as 'unacceptable' and who is perceived as an 'acceptable' woman. As Selma James argues in an article in the sex worker journal Network:

> The prostitution laws are an attack on all women, to keep us women from having too high an economic standard, keeping sex and money separate in our minds but not in our lives: and making us all aware

121. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1118.
122. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Open letter titled 'Violence Against Women in the Sex Industry: An open letter to all women' (by the Black Women for Wages for Housework, the English Collective of Prostitutes and Women Against Rape), catalogue ref. ECP/19.*

> constantly that if we don't dress 'properly', if we wear too much make-up, if we walk with too easy a gait, we might be a prostitute. So really the repression of prostitutes is the repression of all women from expressing their sexual feelings and their bodies as they like ... Prostitutes aren't persecuted because society doesn't like prostitutes, but because it's a very important way of keeping women in their place.[123]

The regulation of prostitution is not only about its seeming lack of 'legitimacy' as work. Its regulation is an important way of regulating *all* women's sexuality and behaviour. Violence against prostitutes affects all women, including state-sanctioned violence by the police.[124] The presence of punitive prostitution laws risks all women being labelled a prostitute, whether correctly or not. The laws themselves are vague, and women may be labelled a sex worker for loitering, dressing a certain way, or even being in a red light district whether they're selling sex or not. Prostitution laws therefore serve not to 'protect' women then but to regulate their behaviour.

The ECP's campaign has been for the removal of all laws surrounding prostitution, including laws that would allow legal red light districts or state brothels. Although the term is not used in the production of the ECP's earlier materials, this is what has been termed the 'decriminalisation' of prostitution which involves the removal of all criminal laws surrounding sex work. To encapsulate their approach, the ECP adopted the slogan 'no bad women just bad laws' to illustrate how the legal framework serves to divide women.[125] Many advocating from this perspective

123. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *newsletter, 'Network: News from the English Collective of Prostitutes' (Issue No.1), catalogue ref. ECP/1*.

124. A discussion of the role of prostitution laws is taken up by Nagle and Grant too, see Jill Nagle, 'Introduction,' in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (London: Routledge, 1997); Grant, *Playing the Whore*.

125. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *newsletter, 'Network: News from the English Collective of Prostitutes' (Issue No.1), catalogue ref. ECP/1*; English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Photocopied flyer, 'No Bad Women Just Bad Laws!: Public launching*

positioned themselves as 'against prostitution' but 'for prostitutes', although in a markedly different way from their radical feminist contemporaries.[126] Many were sex workers themselves, or working with sex workers, and a counter-narrative emerged that advocated for the agency of those performing the work of sex work. As the founders of the English Collective of Prostitutes writes in one of their contemporary statements from 2015: 'We are not victims in need of being saved, we are workers demanding rights and justice.'[127]

This shifts the identification of harms in sex work from being inherent to the selling of sex to considering the structural harms that are surrounded and embedded within this work. They are not stating that work is good or desirable, rather this position holds that it is the material conditions around sex workers that makes a tangible difference to their lives.[128] This position presents the possibility of thinking that a woman who experiences unjust circumstances in performing sexual labour through sexual violence or criminalisation has the right to justice and a safer way to conduct this work.[129]

There is a tension throughout much of the WFH corpus of wanting to ground their analysis within the material specifics of women's lives — in this case, prostitutes

of the NETWORK, the first bulletin by the English Collective of Prostitutes' (2 copies of flyer on one page), catalogue ref. ECP/1, September 1983.

126. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Typescript statement made by Nina Lopez-Jones and Gigi Turner to the International Whores Convention in Amsterdam. The statement is titled 'For Prostitutes, Against the Police', catalogue ref. ECP/3*; English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18*.

127. We Want a Women's Mag, 'English Collective of Prostitutes.'

128. Contemporary theorists have extended this account, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism'; Grant, *Playing the Whore*.

129. One example of this in practice would be the successful private prosecution of rape two sex workers were able to bring forward with support from the ECP and Women Against Rape. See English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Photocopied press cuttings, including: 'Prostitute wins compensation for rape attack' (by Clare Dyer), untitled letter [to the editor] by Lisa Longstaff of Women Against Rape, and 'Anger over rape discrimination' (by Duncan Campbell) (all from The Guardian), catalogue ref. ECP/1*.

and that they sell sex for money, experience poverty, and are hounded by the police — whilst also looking to make connections across the women's movement. Sometimes these attempts to unite the specifics of prostitute's marginalisation with wider aim's in the women's movement is successful. It helps with not othering sex work as claims that 'all work is prostitution' therefore expose all work for being subpar.[130] As in this case, claims that the prostitution laws are 'a very important way of keeping women in their place', and that 'prostitution laws are an attack on *all* women'.[131] At other times this analysis sits uneasily. To make such connections across the women's movement is likely to result in the material reality of some of these women's lives being obscured in the process. Claims like 'all work is prostitution' and that the 'prostitution laws are an attack on all women' do serve their role in emphasising that sex work should not be othered. I take the point is to attempt to connect the material reality of the work one does and build commonality and connections across the women's movement. As the PoWC declare in their statement that: 'All women are prostitutes'.[132] However, I — a white and femme presenting person with a university degree — am less likely to be policed like a working class black trans woman who might happen to be carrying condoms and simply walking in certain areas in the US.[133] Some of us are more likely than others to be constructed as a 'prostitute' and being attuned to the structures of power and inequality that makes that a reality is essential.

130. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18*.

131. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *newsletter, 'Network: News from the English Collective of Prostitutes' (Issue No.1), catalogue ref. ECP/1*, Emphasis added.

132. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.

133. Thrasher writes about the 1976 antiloitering statute in New York that, whilst technically meant to criminalise prostitution, allowed police in practice to arrest women based on their clothing or if they were carrying condoms. It has been referred to as the 'walking while trans' law. See Stephen Thrasher, *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Inequality and Disease Collide* (New York: Celadon Books, 2022), 133.

3.2 What's In a Wage?

Sex work occupies a special position for those in the WFH campaign as it provides an example of a socially reproductive activity (usually heterosexual sexual relations) where payment is already present. As I outlined in subsection 2.3, one aspect defining prostitution as work for the ECP and many in the WFH campaign is that it fulfills a material need. People sell sex for money or other resources — and this normally appears in the form of a payment. The receipt of a wage was, as the name might suggest, a central demand of the WFH campaign. However, in this context it should be understood as more than a demand for receiving payment for work done. Wages must also be understood in political terms, as a power relationship that structures society.[134] Through receiving payment and monetising sexual relations, some WFH feminists have used sex work as an example (albeit a recognisably imperfect one) to place wages in their gendered context and reveal the power relationships that structures them. Sex work was therefore considered closer to achieving their demands of receiving 'wages for housework'. This is not to say that sex work was thought to offer a blueprint, many WFH feminists recognised that sex workers face unjust conditions and this isn't 'aspirational' work. However, for several in the WFH campaign, sex work was revealed to be feminised labour that has been monetised, in a way that packing biscuits or desk work might not be.

Wages have much to do with the power relationships that structure society. In arguing to understand sex work as one kind of gendered labour amongst many, the PoWC state that:

> all women benefit from prostitutes' successful attempts to receive cash for sexual work, because the cash makes it clear that women

134. Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, 47.

> are working when we are fucking, dressing up, being nice, putting makeup on, whenever we relate to men ... The existence of women who demand payment makes it clear to men that soon they will have to be grateful for anything they get from women. The prostitute, lesbian or 'straight', refuses the unlimited emotional and sexual work (and laundry) that normally accompany relations with men, in favour of a cash demand.[135]

This is not to say that simply because sex workers are able to demand money or other resources for sexual labour, that is often provided for free in the context of domestic labour, that they do not experience exploitation or other dangers. What the PoWC are arguing for is the recognition of work implicit when sexual labour is compensated for financially, when it is often performed for free. As the ECP argue in a paper from 1990: 'for some women to get paid for what all women are expected to do for free is a source of power for all women to refuse any free sex work they wish to'.[136]

Identifying sex work as remunerated labour differentiates commercial sex in an important way and locates sex workers as workers performing a certain kind of feminised labour contained within 'fucking, dressing up, being nice'. Aspects of sex work are shared with other kinds of feminised labour performed by women, as looking aesthetically pleasing, having sex, and being emotionally to men available are not a condition that is exclusive to sex workers. However, a defining feature of sex work appears to be that they have monetised what other women do for men without compensation.

135. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.*
136. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes against prostitution — crossing the divides between sex workers and other women' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/18.*

In the context of the demands of the WFH movement, the recognition of labour through receipt of a wage is thought to be a necessary precondition to being able to demand better pay, conditions, and ultimately to refuse work. That 'all women benefit from prostitutes' successful attempts to receive cash for sexual work'.[137] means sex workers occupy a significant position in their monetisation of sexual relations. In this context, the 'cash makes it clear that women are working ... whenever we relate to men'.[138] Through monetising what other women provide for free by receiving a wage for 'the unlimited emotional and sexual work ... that normally accompany relations with men' sex workers are able to denaturalise these relations.[139] For the PoWC, the payment that prostitutes receive makes it clear that *all* women are working when they relate to men, it is just that prostitutes have already monetised this.

This perspective does reveal the gendered dynamics at play in performing sexual work, monetised or not, and that receiving a wage can be more than simply getting money. However, this conceptualisation of sex work neglects several other factors relevant to our understanding of what work is and how we understand what is wrong with it. Sex workers often perform both *paid* and *unpaid* sexual/domestic labour — they have not monetised all relations with men — and many experience high levels of violence whilst working.

Moreover, this approach neglects why it is that sex workers are selling sexual labour for money, and risks hiding this from view. As outlined, one defining feature of sex work is that it fulfills a material need. As the PoWC present the problem of having to sell one's labour in exchange for payment, whether sexual service or packing biscuits in a factory, the reality of contemporary capitalism

137. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.*
138. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.
139. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.

means: 'we are forced to sell our bodies and minds.'[140] Comparisons between the unpaid housewife and the sex worker can seem troubling, especially when sex work is thought to represent an already paid form of work that housewives have yet to achieve. As Angela Davis argues, those who may know best about the claim for 'wages for housework' are indeed the 'cleaning women, domestic workers, maids.'[141] Perhaps too sex workers could be included among them. In their reflection on the usefulness of the WFH perspective for understanding sex work, Ray Filar points out that:

> The major, compelling criticism of the domestic labour theorists is that their (presumably white, heterosexual, potentially middle class) housewife is not a structural representative of all women's work. This argument obscures the differentiation's within racial capitalism that mean the majority of women provide care work in and out of the places where they might live.[142]

What this comparison between sex worker and housewife risks obscuring is the specifics of who is doing this work, why, and the conditions in which it is happening. Further to this, it neglects that many women have had to be wage earners first and housewives secondarily.[143]

3.3 Reconceptualising Capitalism

As I've explored in this chapter, the ECP and the WFH campaign adopted a labour rights focus on sex work. Though their approach shares some of the same aims with other approaches in the sex workers' rights movement, for example in its

140. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.*
141. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 237.
142. Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'
143. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 239.

campaign to decriminalise consenting adult sex work, it is distinct in other ways. This is most apparent in their critique of work and that they offer sex workers a way to reframe their struggle within a broader labour rights framework. For those in the ECP and the WFH campaign, reconceptualising sex work as work formed a part of a larger theoretical shift to rethinking work under capitalism. This meant they sought to reconceptualise work under capitalism to more accurately account for gendered labour, as well as questions of race, migration status, etc. Housework and other kinds of domestic labour provide examples of other kinds of work being redefined in similar ways to sex work.

The reframing of sex work as work has come under significant scrutiny from a range of positions. For example, radical feminists have found the reconceptualisation of sex work as a form of work particularly contentious, although their arguments for this are not something I address here.[144] A challenge to the rethinking of sex work as work has also come from within Marxist feminist approaches. In her book *The Problem with Work*, Weeks expresses concern over the conceptualisation of sex work *as work*. She argues that:

> As a replacement for the label prostitution, the category [sex work] helps to shift the terms of discussion from the dilemmas posed by a social problem to questions of economic practice; rather than a character flaw that produces a moral crisis, sex work is reconceived as an employment option that can generate income and provide opportunity ... The approach usefully demoralizes the debates about the nature, value, and legitimacy of sex for wages in one way, but it often does so by problematically remoralizing it in another; it shifts the discussion from one moral terrain to another, from that of a suspect

144. I discuss some of their objections to understanding sex work as work in the following chapter.

> sexual practice to that of a respectable employment relation.[145]

For Weeks, sex workers' rights groups such as US-based COYOTE (Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics), might have succeeded in 'calling off one of our old tired ethics' — that is its moralisation particularly concerning sex and sexuality. However, Weeks argues that in reconceptualising sex work as work, groups like COYOTE reproduce traditional conceptions of employment relationships uncritically.[146] She warns that this may construct work as a site of voluntary choice and understandings of the employment contract as one of equitable exchange and individual agency.[147]

Her warnings are not without credence. Several conceptions of sex work as work adopt this kind of theorising.[148] They leave the employment relationship unchallenged, and conceptualising prostitution as work from this perspective means emphasising that it can be a site of individual agency and equitable exchange.[149] However, for those in the broadly Marxist feminist tradition, work in capitalist relations has not been accepted as uncritically when reconceptualising sex work, as well as other forms of gendered labour.

The ECP sought to redefine prostitution as a form of work not so that this shifts it into a morally unproblematic realm, but by reframing it we can identify and address several other pressing concerns related to sex work. In their correspondence with the TUC, the ECP argue to reconceptualise a criminal case over prostitution as a 'trades dispute'. They list several groups who may have been forced into sex work to achieve a more decent standard of living, including: single mothers need-

145. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 67–68.
146. K. Weeks, 67–68.
147. K. Weeks, 67.
148. I discuss this in more detail in the following chapter.
149. For an example of this kind of approach, see Schwarzenbach, 'Contractarians and Feminists Debate Prostitution.'

ing to top up their benefits, wives and girlfriends who need to top up their men's low wages, and black and immigrant women who can only get the worst paid jobs and need additional income.[150] Through shifting to conceptualising prostitution as work and cases regarding it as being bought forward as 'trade disputes', they are not in a morally unproblematic terrain where sex work is a neutral employment option. Rather than 'neutralising' prostitution, framing it as work is intended to situate it within its structural context.

The ECP further criticises the TUC for having a narrow focus on what they see as a strict definition of what would be deemed more 'traditional' forms of work. As discussed, the TUC provides a legalistic definition of a 'trades dispute' in response to the ECP's calls for support. The ECP condemns them for missing out large portions of the 'working class' as a result, as they argue that:

> The cuts have hit women hardest and the TUC so far has done almost nothing to prevent this. When there's a wage rise, the ones who get least are the ones who have least to begin with. As for the housewives, their pay rise is 0% of 0. For women, issues such as lower prices, more social services and welfare benefits, equal pay and wages for housework are not a matter of 'party politics.' They're trade issues: our working conditions and our pay.[151]

We can take from this an argument about who constitutes the working class. For the ECP, this is not only men in traditional forms of employment who could join a trade union. For them, a full analysis of women's oppression, and by extension an analysis of working class lives, constitutes looking at sex work. Additionally, any

150. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Correspondence between Trades Union Congress and the English Collective of Prostitutes regarding the abolition of laws on prostitution and a discussion about whether campaigns against laws on prostitution should be considered a trades dispute, catalogue ref. ECP/6*.
151. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.

analysis must be done through a lens that considers other structural forces such as sexism, racism, and migration status.

Marxist feminists have sought to utilise Marxist theory and writings with an eye to the ways in which it can be extended and reimagined to fit the lives of those it likely was not written for or did not consider, such as women, queer people, or sex workers. This process of rethinking Marxism and building upon it has been described by Tithi Bhattacharya as how we 'build from Marx' in much of critical theory, and this has been an integral part of various Marxist feminist projects.[152] One aspect of this 'building from Marx' has been to develop an expanded account of capitalism outside of a narrow definition of 'the economic' to encapsulate a range of social relations and structural forces not previously recognised.

Expressed in the founding statement of the International Feminist Collective was a claim that Marxist feminists had to expand a definition of labour to encompass socially reproductive labour such as housework and mother-work.[153] This was in recognition that waged labour depends on the unwaged work of women and marginalised people, often in the family-household, and this is essential for the reproduction of capital.[154] Sex work, like all work, does not exist in a vacuum. It is influenced by a myriad of social and economic factors which invite criticism. Labelling sex work *as work*, as much as it may function to supplement wages, increase someone's standard of living, or provide just a means to get by, allows us to locate it in its appropriate context and critique this. It also allows us to understand the functions of both paid and unpaid work and the wider function of

152. Bhattacharya, 'How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global Working Class,' 2.

153. Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Statement of the International Feminist Collective, catalogue ref. WFH/3*.

154. This idea was expressed in a number of Marxist feminist works at the time as they reconfigured classical Marxist categories to account for the oppression of women and other marginalised peoples, see Costa and James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*; Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

work in society.

4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the history of the Wages for Housework movement and the early history of the English Collective of Prostitutes from 1975–1990. As I have shown, Marxist feminists hold a concern for the material conditions that structure and influence this work, such as access to labour rights, the criminalisation of the sex workplace, and access to social welfare. I discussed how through reconceptualising sex work as work, this was intended to provide agency to those women working in the commercial sex industry by allowing them to organise as (sex) workers and fight for rights and justice, including against prostitution laws. Additionally, I discussed how some in the WFH movement used sex work as an example of a pre-existing commodified reproductive labour to place wages in their gendered context and reveal the power relationships that structures them. Finally, I discussed how the reconceptualisation of sex work for the ECP and the WFH movement has to be understood within a broader conceptual shift to rethinking work and capitalist relations of reproduction.

Since Leigh coined the term in the late 1970s, the term 'sex work' has been adopted into mainstream discourse on commercial sex.[155] Although it is seldom used by sex workers when advertising to clients and is opposed by anti-prostitution feminists, it has largely been adopted as the descriptor to describe the selling of sexual labour for money. Despite the increased acceptance of the term and its widespread use, there remains a concern that emphasising the *work* of sex work fails to interrogate the social structures influencing this. Whilst the renaming of

155. I have adapted these final points from my MPhil thesis, see Westwood, *Overcoming the Impasse*.

prostitution and working in other aspects of commercial sex to 'sex work' is not necessarily the 'rebranding' of prostitution to make it more palatable as some have argued, this account is in danger of being misunderstood as defending work under capitalism.[156]

As Weeks aptly points out, when asserting that 'sex work is work' we risk uncritically defending an exploitative employment relationship.[157] In 2014, *The Economist* ran an article called 'A Personal Choice' that argued for the right of consenting adults to buy and sell sex online safely.[158] This demand is broadly in line with the sex workers' rights movement's aims to decriminalise consensual adult sex work. The article noted that:

> Some prostitutes do indeed suffer from trafficking, exploitation or violence; their abusers ought to end up in jail for their crimes. But for many, both male and female, sex work is just that: *work*.[159]

The article makes the case that sex workers selling sex online operate much like freelancers do. They take bookings and market themselves, and that there is even a graduate premium in the profession.[160]

What is troubling about this article is its emphasis that sex work is *just* work, therefore it should be regulated by the market alone. What the account of sex work given by the ECP reveals is that it is seldom 'just' work. Absent of the history of the development of the term 'sex work' and the account given by Marxist feminists

156. Kat Banyard, 'The Dangers of Rebranding Prostitution as 'Sex Work',' The Guardian, June 7, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jun/06/prostitution-sex-work-pimp-state-kat-banyard-decriminalisation.
157. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 67–68.
158. The Economist, 'A Personal Choice,' *The Economist*, August 9, 2014, https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21611063-internet-making-buying-and-selling-sex-easier-and-safer-governments-should-stop.
159. Emphasis added, The Economist.
160. The Economist.

of harms in (sex) work under capitalism, a focus on work can be liable to lose all political critique. However, to say that sex work is work is not to make it benign and a question of 'personal choice'. The shift to thinking about sex work as a kind of work prompts us to consider who is doing this work and why — as the ECP argues, it is mostly women, many of whom are working mothers and migrant workers. Further to this, it prompts questions about how people might do this work safely, as well as questions about living standards, reducing poverty, housing, safe migration, and how people make ends meet.

3 | Theorising Sex Work

Early in 2019, the anti-strip club campaign Not Buying It paid for private investigators to pose as customers in strip clubs in Sheffield and Manchester in the UK for two nights.[1] During this, dancers and customers were secretly filmed to show that the clubs were permitting behaviours that violated the rules of the sexual entertainment venue (SEV) licencing laws.[2] SEV licences were introduced in the Policing and Crime Act 2009, an act forming part of the complex legal scaffolding leading to the partial criminalisation of prostitution in the UK.[3] The men, who filmed the partially or fully nude performers without their consent, allegedly recorded them performing sex acts which would violate the SEV licencing.[4]

The Women's Equality Party (WEP), a national political party founded in 2015 with an egalitarian focus, were found to have links to the sting operation conducted at the strip clubs though they did not send the investigators.[5] Charlotte Mead, the WEP Sheffield branch leader, claimed that prostitution has been going on at one of the clubs in Sheffield. Mead argues that this is 'not only a breach of their licensing conditions but a possible unlawful activity.'[6] Steph, a dancer at one of the clubs targeted in Manchester, responded to the allegations saying that she 'can't understand why a group of women who say they are feminists are

1. The discussion of this example was adapted from my MPhil thesis. Material for this chapter was also developed from a lecture I gave as part of the undergraduate course on Feminist Theory, see Westwood, *Overcoming the Impasse*; Kushti Westwood, *Sex Work*, Lecture to Undergraduate Students as part of the Feminist Theory UG Paper, University of Oxford, November 2, 2022.

2. Sophie Hemery, 'Strippers Take Aim at Women's Equality Party Over 'Sting' Operation,' Novara Media, April 2019, https://novaramedia.com/2019/04/25/strippers-take-aim-at-womens-equality-party-over-sting-operation/.

3. Note that the use of a premises as a sex establishment is defined by schedule three of the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982*, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1982/30.

4. BBC News, *Spearmint Rhino Sheffield: Club 'should lose licence'*, April 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-47806257.

5. Hemery, 'Strippers Take Aim at Women's Equality Party Over 'Sting' Operation.'

6. Hemery.

threatening to take away our source of income that feeds our kids, pays our rent and our education fees'.[7] The trade union United Voices of the World (UVW) condemned the investigation, claiming it to be a misguided attempt to 'save' the women involved whilst simultaneously putting their livelihoods at risk.[8]

Those involved in anti-strip club campaigns, such as Not Buying It, are not only outraged at the violation of the SEV licencing laws. Their campaign is informed by presuppositions about what sex work is and who it harms. Not Buying It's work to shut down strip clubs is based upon a claim that these clubs, and commercial sex in general, are founded upon the exploitation of women for the benefit of men.[9] This is a presupposition also shared by many radical and anti-prostitution feminist approaches to sex work. A representative for the WEP noted that although they did not send the private investigators, they oppose strip clubs because they believe them to represent a culture of male entitlement to women's bodies.[10]

In response to their exclusion from mainstream discourses, many dancers have argued that their job as a stripper does not necessitate that they are in a disempowered or degraded position.[11] The dancers working in the clubs targetted and the UVW have stressed that sex work represents their livelihoods, which would be threatened should the clubs lose their licences.[12] They have emphasised that women should have a right to choose what work they do, even if that means working in a strip club.[13] Stripping for many keeps the lights on and kids fed, just like any other job. Many sex worker theorists have argued that what is exploitative is work more broadly rather than sex work specifically. Criticism should instead be

7. Hemery, 'Strippers Take Aim at Women's Equality Party Over 'Sting' Operation.'
8. The UVW previously represented strippers and other sex workers as part of the Sex Workers' Union. They are now represented by the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union. Hemery.
9. Not Buying It, 'About Us,' https://notbuyingit.org.uk/about-us-2/.
10. Hemery, 'Strippers Take Aim at Women's Equality Party Over 'Sting' Operation.'
11. Hemery.
12. Hemery.
13. Hemery.

focused on the economic coercion that features heavily in the choice to engage in certain kinds of work.[14]

In the book *The Right to Sex*, Amia Srinivasan notes that it is important to emphasise that 'sex work is work', and that sex workers need legal and material protections. However, she argues that it is an equally important task for feminism to explore what sort of work this is.[15] Srinivasan thinks it is essential that we consider

> just what physical and psychical acts are being bought and sold, and why it is overwhelmingly women who do it, and overwhelmingly men who pay for it — surely we have to say something about the political formation of male desire. And surely there will be related things to say about other forms of women's work: teaching, nursing, caring, mothering. To say that sex work is 'just work' is to forget that all work — men's work, women's work — is never just work: it is also sexed.[16]

Such a project of understanding sex work means beginning to consider the specifics of the work, why people do it, and what kinds of harms they face. Srinivasan's line of enquiry also raises considerations for what we might lose or gain when sex work is considered through a lens that makes comparisons to other kinds of work.

This chapter remains faithful to my prior commitment to understanding that sex work is 'work'. However, what 'work' is can be understood in a variety of ways, which is where I begin as a jumping-off point. Analysing sex work as 'work' can result in liberal, libertarian, Marxist, and a variety of other understandings of

14. For some examples, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Grant, *Playing the Whore*; Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism.'

15. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 83.

16. Srinivasan, 83.

what makes sex work 'work'. The question therefore is perhaps better phrased not as, 'Is sex work "work"?', but rather as: What kind(s) of understanding(s) of sex work as work should we endorse? Which concept(s) would serve our purposes best? Drawing on the work of Sally Haslanger and Amelia Horgan, I argue that we should endorse an ameliorative account of the 'work' in sex work.[17] In attempting to understand the 'work' of sex work and defining this concept, rather than engage in a descriptive project — which would mean trying to understand the objective type that our usage of this term tracks (if any) — this chapter is engaged instead in an ameliorative project.[18] Such a project aims to reveal the target concept(s), that is to say I am engaged in a project that seeks to reveal the concepts we should be using given our purposes and goals. This chapter provides a sketch of what kind of account should be endorsed if, as Horgan has argued, our concepts about (sex) work are to analyse some element of social injustice or some wrongfulness about work.[19]

Sex work can be thought of as a kind of commodified reproductive work. However, viewing sex workers as 'waged housewives', as the English Collective of Prostitutes and the Wages for Housework campaign analysed sex work, presents considerable problems. Instead, an updated perspective on social reproduction is necessary. Rather than focusing on the ways in which sex work may serve to 'reproduce' the (usually male) client, the social reproductive framework can be illuminating to discuss the kinds of community care that sex workers are engaging in to sustain themselves.[20] Additionally, as Ray Filar argues, it is helpful to also

17. See Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions? Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds'; Haslanger, 'Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?'; Haslanger, 'Theorizing With a Purpose'; Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work".'

18. I offer a more detailed account of this approach in section 1, see Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions? Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds,' 386–387.

19. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1111.

20. See Heather Berg, '"Today Solidarity Means, Fight Back": On Militant Care,' *Essays in Philosophy* 24, nos. 1-2 (June 2023): 26–40; Filar discusses how we might shift this conceptual

consider sex work through the lens of it as a form of precarious service work.[21]

The chapter proceeds as follows. In section 1, before the discussion, I offer a note on questions concerning the 'work' of sex work. This section serves to frame the discussion in the following sections. In section 2, I discuss radical feminist and anti-prostitution critiques of sex work and the opposition to defining it as work. I discuss two objections to this account. In section 3, I draw on the work of Amelia Horgan and Sally Haslanger to argue in favour of an ameliorative account of sex work. Following this, section 4 offers a brief sketch of what such an account of sex work might contain. I discuss sex work as a form of commodified socially reproductive work. I conclude with a summary of my arguments.

1 Thinking About 'Work'

Before taking up the task of thinking about what sort of work sex work is, I propose we consider a warning given by sex worker and theorist Vanessa Carlisle in her paper 'Sex Work is Star Shaped: Antiwork Politics and the Value of Embodied Knowledge'.[22] Carlisle warns against making generalising statements about what kind of work sex work is, including how we might regulate it. Approaches looking to generalise about sex work are likely to fail to engage in the nuanced reality of this work as a criminalised activity under racial capitalism.[23] This is not, though, to say that we're unable to answer Srinivasan's call to explore what sort of work this is. Instead, I think, it is to say we should proceed with caution.

Is sex work a unique kind of labour? This question lingers in much of feminist theory's reflections on sex work.[24] What is perhaps most interesting about this

lens towards sex workers themselves, see Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'

21. Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'
22. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped.'
23. Carlisle, 583.
24. For example, Berg notes how many of the pieces in the special issue she is introducing come

question than the answers it receives is its presence at all. Berg reflects on how this question is often of more interest to us as spectators than to workers themselves.[25] Investigations into sex work that ask: 'What sort of work is sex work?' or 'What makes sex work *work*?' frame many feminist reflections on sex work. For the most part, this makes sense. Selma James notes of the sale of sex by prostitutes:

> It is true that sex workers sell a service which we all hope will be connected with intimacy and deep personal feeling. But feminists have been at pains to spell out that sexuality is romaticized to hide how it sometimes a tragedy or dissapointment or danger — or all of these — for women. It is also sometimes a job.[26]

As feminists, we are faced with something that has been the subject of much fraught theorising, debate, and activism: sex. Not only this, it has been commodified. As a result, we are often preoccupied with the *sexual* dimension of sex work.[27]

Questions about whether sex work is work and what kind of work it is need to be considered for why they are useful, particularly for people doing this work. Why is it useful to explore the nature of this work? To what end is it to serve? What do we want the concept of 'work' to do here? It is not helpful, for example, for those in the sex trades if we are looking to debunk sex work's status as work. It is also limited if investigations into this work are only part of an academic or philosophical exercise. What, instead, can make these lines of questioning useful? Part of the role we — the 'we' referred to here is intended to refer to outsiders taking part in debates and discussions over sex work — can play is in developing

back to this same question, see Heather Berg, 'Reading Sex Work,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 3 (2021): 490.

25. Berg, 490.
26. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*.
27. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 22.

concepts that can help track elements of injustice in this work.[28] For example, through identifying the work as 'precarious'. This term, along with others, can be useful in locating what is wrong with sex work under present conditions.

What I am indicating here is that our investigation into sex work and how we might understand it as 'work' has less to do with uncovering the 'true' nature of what it means to work. This, I think, might be a rather difficult exercise given work's own historical and cultural variance. Instead, I am indicating a concern for *our purposes* and to what end we might direct our considerations about sex work.[29] An enquiry that adopts this as a starting position therefore has less to say about establishing whether sex work is 'really' work or fits into a fixed criteria of work. This is in part because sex work's existence does not depend on whether I believe it to be 'really' a form of work or not. Regardless of the fact, people still continue to trade sex for money or other resources. As Haslanger notes:

> Theorizing ... must be guided by more than the goal of achieving justified true belief. Good theories are systematic bodies of knowledge that select from the mass of truths those that address our broader cognitive and practical demands.[30]

Returning then to the questions I introduced in the introduction to this chapter: What kind(s) of understanding(s) of sex work as work should we endorse? Which concept(s) would serve our purposes best? The question is better revised as: What kind(s) of understanding(s) of sex work *as work* should we endorse, given our commitments to engaging in a specifically feminist and anti-racist social theory?[31]

28. This is, of course, just one of the many roles that feminist theory can play.

29. Haslanger, 'Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?,' 34–37; Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions? Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds,' 386–387.

30. Haslanger, 'Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?,' 53.

31. Our theory should be anti-carceral too, for reasons I elaborate upon in this chapter. See Haslanger, 35–36.

As Horgan attends to in her account of housework and sex work in the Wages for Housework movement, this kind of theorising is best characterised as 'ameliorative'.[32] As she argues, this kind of account:

> look[s] to a future of struggle around work and non-work: what benefits (legal, conceptual, ethical, politically strategic, and so on) might be gained from making some activities "work"? These are done with some future goal in mind — to change something to do with that activity, to remove some harmful, unfair, or exploitative element.[33]

Ameliorative projects therefore tackle why we have the concept we do (why frame sex work as 'work'?) and ask what concept would do the work best (is 'work' the best framing for sex work?).[34] In taking up this task, affirming the legitimacy of the experiences of those in the sex trades is also a large part of the conceptual work. Questions exploring the work of sex work have often historically (and presently) been imposed from the 'outside' looking 'in'. Sex workers rarely define their work for themselves. More recently, sex workers have been involved in research about their profession. With this has come more scope for sex workers to define their experiences for themselves, however this is still limited. It is also worth acknowledging the role that sex workers have too in knowledge creation about their profession. For example, there are also sex worker academics. However, as Berg points out, though the academy may show more support for research on sex work, it is not always a friendly place for sex workers.[35] Sex workers who

32. Haslanger refers to this project as 'analytical' in prior work. She later adopts the term 'ameliorative' to help distinguish this from Anglo-American philosophy in general and in her work to introduce a more fine-grained framework for the term, see Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions? Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds,' 384, n. 5; Haslanger, 'Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?'; Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work".'

33. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1126.

34. Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions? Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds,' 387.

35. Berg, 'Reading Sex Work,' 487.

are 'out' face significant social stigma in the academy, even if more research on sex work is being funded and produced.[36]

Throughout any reflection on sex work, it is important to be cognizant of the hostilities that those doing sex work face. As Berg also notes, whilst sex work research is growing, sex workers themselves are facing more uncertainty and unsafe conditions globally.[37] In exploring what sort of work sex work is, it is unlikely there will be any easy answers. With such warnings in place, Carlisle also offers up the proposal that, 'There need to be more ways to think sex work.'[38] This is not to close off the potential to think through this kind of work and what concepts can be helpful. Rather, it tentatively opens up the space to think through sex work and what it means to call it 'work'.

2 An Unequal Transaction

One of the biggest challenges to thinking of sex work as 'work' has been to say that because of its (hetero)patriarchal basis it is not therefore 'work'. It is often regarded as some form of sexual exploitation. This section explores the radical feminist and anti-prostitution critique of sex work and the opposition to defining it as work. Out of this critique, two significant objections emerge:

1. This perspective on sex work fails to provide an analysis rooted in those actually being harmed by the buying and selling of sex.

2. Many of the complaints raised about sex work apply equally to much other 'feminised' work.

In subsection 2.1, I outline the 'problem' sex work presents for radical feminists

36. Berg, 'Reading Sex Work,' 487.
37. Berg, 488.
38. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 583.

thinking about its status as work. In subsection 2.2, I discuss objection (1) above. Following the work of Melissa Gira Grant, Juno Mac, and Molly Smith, I argue that an analysis of sex work should be oriented towards those actually selling sex.[39] This is not to dismiss insights about the role of male desire or heteropatriarchal relations in sex work. It is, instead, to say that sex workers should not function as a stand-in for women's presumed general condition in society. In subsection 2.3, I discuss objection (2) above.

2.1 Male Desire

Whilst we may say that 'sex work is work', do we not have to say something about male desire and the patriarchal conditions in which it operates?[40] What then of the *sex* in sex work?[41] In reflecting on what prostitution does in the world, Catherine MacKinnon sums up what she sees its point as:

> The point of prostitution is to transgress women's personal security. Every time the woman walks up to the man's car, every time the man walks into the brothel, the personhood of women — not that secure in a male dominated society to begin with — is made more insecure.[42]

This raises several important questions that feminists are rightly concerned with. Doesn't sex work legitimise harm against all women? If we were to fully decriminalise sex work, wouldn't this send the message that women's bodies are there for male consumption? Are we to make nothing of the fact that it is, for the most part, women who sell sex and men who buy it?

39. See Grant, *Playing the Whore*; Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*.
40. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 83.
41. The arguments presented in this section are adapted from my MPhil research, see Westwood, *Overcoming the Impasse*.
42. Catharine A MacKinnon, 'Prostitution and Civil Rights,' *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law*, no. 1 (1993): 14.

The radical feminist analysis of sex work has been expansive, and I do not wish to simply categorise it as 'merely' an anti-prostitution position. Many in the radical feminist tradition oppose sex work in its various forms, from prostitution to stripping, or sugar babying to porn work.[43] The approach adopted by many in the radical feminist tradition towards forms of sex work is expressed well by Robin Morgan's statement on pornography: 'Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice.'[44] This is to say that types of sex work such as prostitution or escorting are seen by radical feminists to uphold patriarchal structures and relations of power in the same way that pornography does. Further to this, they observe that there is a connection between the acts bought and sold in sex work and the violence that women suffer under patriarchial power structures. MacKinnon expresses the 'problem' of prostitution as she sees it:

> How hard can it be to prove that women are prostituted as women? Not only is prostitution overwhelmingly done to women by men, every aspect of the condition has defined gender female as such and as inferior for centuries. Evelina Giobbe explains how the status and treatment of prostitutes defines all women as a sex: "[T]he prostitute symbolizes the value of women in society. She is paradigmatic of women's social, sexual, and economic subordination in that her status is the basic unit by which all women's value is measured and to which all women can be reduced."[45]

This analysis rightly points out that sex work is gendered in particular ways. Sex

43. For examples, see Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Trafficking, Prostitution, and Inequality,' *Harvard Civil Rights Civil Liberties Law Review* 46, no. 2 (2011): 271–309; Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy'; Robin Morgan, 'Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape,' in *Take Back The Night: Women On Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (London: Bantam, 1982).

44. Morgan, 'Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape,' 139–40.

45. Catharine A MacKinnon, 'Prostitution and Civil Rights,' 29.

work is also inflected by white supremacy, poverty, ableism, and colonialism.[46] It is a deeply unequal transaction for many of these reasons.[47]

For many radical and anti-prostitution feminists, prostitution represents the essential condition of women under patriarchy, and sex work itself is considered to be a site of violence.[48] Kathleen Barry argues that, for her, the 'fullest patriarchal reduction of woman to sexed body is prostitution'.[49] Barry argues that the sale of sex, and the sex involved in the transaction, are a source of immense harm and a violation of women's human rights.[50] This is a shared view amongst much of the radical feminist literature, as we see in accounts given by Dworkin and MacKinnon.[51] On this view, the harm in sex work arises from the patriarchal relations argued to be inherent to the sale of sex because it is a gendered process between the client and sex worker. Not only does this establish the sex worker as subordinate to the client, as her essential condition is one for the use of sex, but this harm is also thought to extend out to other women. As we see with the argument made by Barry, there is a conflation between the direct harm believed to be involved in the sale and purchase of sexual services and a violation of women's rights more broadly.

This perspective on sex work establishes that women are in an 'essentially sexed condition' to both clients and the world at large. That is, the sanctioning of commercial sex positions women, whether they are a prostitute or not, as a sexual object.[52] Present in the radical feminist approach are some of the most emotive

46. This is, of course, not an exhaustive list.

47. The radical feminist analysis is not the only perspective to indicate that sex work contains such problems, for example see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Grant, *Playing the Whore*.

48. Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, 21.

49. Barry, 22.

50. Barry, 21.

51. See Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy'; Dworkin, *Intercourse*; Catharine A MacKinnon, 'Prostitution and Civil Rights.'

52. Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, 21–22.

accounts of the treatment of sex workers and harm experienced which, as Scott Anderson argues, call for us to take these injustices seriously.[53] Dworkin, an 'exited' sex worker herself, writes about how prostitutes are perceived by the men who purchase sex from them and offers detailed accounts of the injustices sex workers can suffer. For example, she argues that the prostitute is

> a generic embodiment of woman. She is perceived as, treated as — and I want you to remember this, this is real — vaginal slime. She is dirty; a lot of men have been there.[54]

Similar statements are made by Barry as she refers to sex workers as blow-up dolls for penetration and ejaculation.[55]

For the moment, I will set aside discussions of this discursive treatment of sex workers, including how this neglects the ability of many to define their own experiences and practices and contributes to the stigma that surrounds sex work.[56] Rather, I want to draw attention to the way in which the radical feminist and anti-prostitution accounts are locating the problems and harms of sex work in hetero-patriarchal relations. Sex workers are therefore constructed as an essentially sexed subject who experience violence and objectification in prostitution. Within the radical feminist critique of the liberal model of consent, this indicates that sex without the commercial aspect should be problematised. That is, free sex under hetero-patrichal relations should not be thought entirely 'free' in the sense that structures such as patriarchy and racism shape and construct desire.[57] Com-

53. Scott A. Anderson, 'Prostitution and Sexual Autonomy: Making Sense of the Prohibition of Prostitution,' *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002): 752–54.

54. Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy,' 6.

55. Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, 35.

56. For a discussion of this discursive treatment of sex workers, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 10–12.

57. Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: "Pleasure under Patriarchy",' *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 314–346; Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*.

mercial sex, that is paid sex, serves then for radical feminists to exemplify male entitlement to women's bodies.

2.2 The Prostitute Imaginary

Seeing prostitutes as a stand-in for all women and clients representing men who dominate women perhaps seems appealing, particularly from a feminist perspective. Mac and Smith argue that the figure of the prostitute can come to represent the pain and trauma inflicted on *all* women in a patriarchal society.[58] The client becomes the symbol of all violent men — he is the archetypal perpetrator.[59] It is easy to sympathise with this perspective. After all, gendered violence shapes many of our lives in particular ways. As Mac and Smith point out, there is also a political impulse to punish the man who has come to symbolise this trauma.[60] Though the radical feminist analysis draws attention to the patriarchal conditions sex work occurs within, I want to prompt, instead, a consideration of *which* women are being harmed in regards to sex work and in which ways. As I outlined in objection (1): this perspective on sex work fails to provide an analysis rooted in those actually being harmed by the buying and selling of sex.

Quite rapidly, the conditions of actual sex workers selling sex are removed from the conversation as the figure of the prostitute comes to represent *all* women.[61] In her book, *Playing the Whore*, Melissa Gira Grant terms this the 'prostitute imaginary'.[62] These are the ways that we conceptualise and argue about prostitution to produce discourses driven by our fantasies and fears about sex and the value of human life.[63] It could be added that the prostitute imaginary is also crucially driven

58. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 141.
59. Smith and Mac, 141.
60. Smith and Mac, 141.
61. Grant, *Playing the Whore*; Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*.
62. Grant, *Playing the Whore*, 4.
63. Grant, 4.

by fantasies and fears about the value of human labour.[64] As one example from the radical and anti-prostitution literature discussed, MacKinnon cites Evelina Giobbe who refers to to how the prostitute 'symbolizes the value of women in society.'[65] The prostitute imaginary is also present as a more subtle rhetorical move. It can be seen through the conflation between the harm allegedly done to sex workers in client/sex worker interactions and a general rights violation for all women.

It is necessary to consider who is harming sex workers and which women are being harmed in the process.[66] The radical feminist account risks of offering an account that conflates the direct harm potentially involved in selling sex with a violation of women's rights more broadly. An alternative focus on who exactly is being harmed by and in sex work is not intended to ignore the harms contained within sex work — rather, it is quite the opposite. In the previous chapter, I referred to the paper 'For prostitutes, against prostitution' by the Power of Women Collective.[67] This would become a slogan used by the ECP in their organising during the 1970s and 1980s. The slogan 'for prostitutes, against prostitution' encapsulates a particular viewpoint on prostitution, even two seemingly contradictory ideas. This is to say that it offers a perspective that says it is necessary to support those engaging in sex work because it is driven by economic need whilst also criticising the conditions that make prostitution a reality for many.

When reflecting on the legalisation of sex work, MacKinnon argues that 'brief jail time can, some say, be a respite from the pimps and the street'.[68] Mackinnon footnotes a reference from Margaret A. Baldwin in her article 'Split at the Root:

64. Annie McClanahan and Jon-David Settell, 'Service Work, Sex Work, and the "Prostitute Imaginary",' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 3 (2021): 494.

65. Evelina Giobbe cited in Catharine A MacKinnon, 'Prostitution and Civil Rights,' 39.

66. The discussion in the rest of this subsection on the policing of sex work is adapted from my MPhil research, see Westwood, *Overcoming the Impasse*.

67. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.*

68. Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Trafficking, Prostitution, and Inequality,' 306.

Prostitution and Feminist Discourses of Law Reform' where she argues that 'jail is the closest thing many women in prostitution have to a battered women's shelter'.[69] MacKinnon also cites others that suggest, in light of the lack of appropriate women's services, that time spent in prison can be relatively benign or even a good thing for the sex workers in question.[70]

There are a myriad of first-hand accounts from sex workers who do not share this view of their own policing and interactions with law enforcement. As part of a 'feminist' solution to the harms of sex work, it is essential to challenge benign views of policing and the criminalisation of how people make a living.[71] Many sex workers experience arrest, incarceration, detention for months on immigration charges, deportation, harassment, and sexual abuse at the hands of the police.[72] In addition to the direct harms faced by interactions with law enforcement, many sex workers also experience distrust in their interactions with the police and feel stigmatised. Certainly, the comparison between jail and a place of safety, such as a women's shelter, misunderstands the experience of being criminalised. For many sex workers, particularly those who may be doubly marginalised such as by race or through being trans, they regularly cite the police as the predominant threat they face.[73]

69. Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Trafficking, Prostitution, and Inequality,' 306 n. 123.

70. Catharine A. MacKinnon, 306 n. 123.

71. See Elizabeth Bernstein, 'Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The Politics of Sex, Rights, and Freedom in Contemporary Antitrafficking Campaigns,' *Signs* 36, no. 1 (2010): 45–71; Elizabeth Bernstein, 'Carceral Politics as Gender Justice? The "Traffic in Women" and Neoliberal Circuits of Crime, Sex, and Rights,' *Theory and Society* 41, no. 3 (2012): 233–259; Koshka Duff, 'Feminism Against Crime Control: On Sexual Subordination and State Apologism,' *Historical Materialism* 26, no. 2 (July 30, 2018): 123–148; Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*.

72. I have selected only a small handful of pieces outlining the violence sex workers experience in interacting with the police, see Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement, *No Silence to Violence: A report on violence against women in prostitution in the UK*; Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Grant, *Playing the Whore*; Ticktin, 'Sexual Violence as the Language of Border Control'; Molly Smith, 'Feminists, you can't fight for women and support the Nordic model,' The Independent, June 11, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/sex-work-ireland-kildare-brothel-new-york-trades-act-a8954151.html.

73. For example, in the 2019 study by the ECP comparing sex work to other jobs done by

Any analysis of sex work must also account for the harms caused as a result of the criminalising state, such as arrest, incarceration, or sexual abuse experienced in law enforcement. Typically these have not themselves been considered a part of the harms of sex work in radical feminist and anti-prostitution accounts. Through maintaining a commitment to criminalisation, theorising about other harms such as arrest and incarceration are overlooked.

2.3 Feminised Work

This subsection discusses objection (2): many of the complaints raised about sex work apply equally to much other 'feminised' work. I argue that many forms of feminised work are male-dominated and have a patriarchial basis, similar to sex work. Radical feminist and anti-prostitution accounts therefore risk exceptionalising sex work. In this subsection, I explore how in the radical feminist and anti-prostitution accounts it is unclear what sets sex work apart from many other kinds of feminised work — apart from the sex involved. Many other kinds of feminised work also involve forms of 'intimate labour'. I draw on Berg's concept of 'sex work exceptionalism' to explain why such an approach to sex work is inadequate.

In trying to get away from the charges levied against sex work by anti-prostitution campaigners, many have attempted to argue that the work is not patriarchal or that male domination is not the problem radical feminists think it is.[74] Some have

women, sex workers report the police as a significant harm in their work. Similarly, National Ugly Mug's study on reporting offences against sex workers to police also cites that sex workers experience fear in these interactions. See English Collective of Prostitutes, *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Job Like This? Comparing sex work with other jobs traditionally done by women* (Published Online, 2019); Raven Bowen et al., 'Why Report? Sex Workers who Use NUM Opt out of Sharing Victimisation with Police,' *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 18, no. 4 (2021): 885–896.

74. For example we might consider Mac and Smith's 'Erotic Professional' as one example here or Queen's 'sex positive' account of sex work, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 31–36;

attempted to counter claims of sexual exploitation by emphasising that sex work is 'empowering' for those who engage in it.

Rather than engage in this line of reasoning, I want to point out that the radical feminist account is right in many respects. Sex work, and prostitution in particular, *does* have a patriarchal basis.[75] As discussed in the prior chapter, the ECP identified that many complaints about male domination and the patriarchal basis of sex work were indeed correct. However, the ECP also pointed out that many of the complaints raised by anti-prostitution campaigners applied equally to other feminised jobs. For example, they argue that:

> Most of the Women's Liberation Movement was hostile to prostitute women on the grounds that exchanging sex for money was *uniquely degrading*. They said it encouraged rape by leading men to believe that all women are available, conveniently forgetting that men already thought that. The sex industry is not the only industry that is male-dominated and which degrades women, but it is an industry based on sex — which tends to pluck many repressive strings in many psyches.[76]

The point here is not to say that sex work does not have a basis in patriarchal relations. It is instead to point out the prominence of such relations in a wide variety of other kinds of feminised work too — sex work is not the exception. However, though, 'it is an industry based on sex'.[77]

Queen, 'Sex Radical Politics, Sex-positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma.'

75. Although, as noted above, the way this has been discussed by many anti-prostitution feminists is abhorrent and othering to many sex workers. For a further discussion of this and the problem of the language used to describe sex work and sex workers by many self-identified 'feminists', see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 45–46.

76. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes against prostitution — crossing the divides between sex workers and other women' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/18*, Emphasis added.

77. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019.

Even when adopting a thin conception of 'exploitation', such as understanding this to be taking an unfair advantage of somebody and to benefit at somebody's expense, there is clear evidence of sex workers' experiencing exploitation.[78] For example, some feminists draw on personal testimonies from sex workers when arguing that they experience exploitation, particularly in prostitution. Perhaps the most cited example of this is Andrea Dworkin's testimonies of her experience in the sex trades.[79] When considering the working conditions of sex work, theorists such as Katie Cruz propose understanding these conditions as ranging from those experiencing trafficking to other labour unfreedoms such as being fined arbitrarily, having your pay docked, threats at work etc.[80] This is to say that, the presence of exploitation in sex work is often not disputed. The question is then better posed: Are sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation than other kinds of workers? Is there something inherent in sex work that generates these vulnerabilities?

Disagreement arises over not whether sex workers are exploited or not, for that the evidence seems rather clear.[81] Rather, considerable disagreement arises over whether sex work should be considered an 'extreme' form of exploitation in and of itself.[82] Berg has termed the treatment of sex work as if it is a self-evidently extreme form of exploitation to be subjecting it to a kind of 'sex work exceptionalism'.[83] To engage in 'sex work exceptionalism' means thinking that there

78. I have adopted here a relatively uncontroversial understanding of exploitation that is mostly intuitive to illustrate the point here. However, there is considerable disagreement on how we understand this concept when it is explored in more detail, see Gabriel Wollner, 'Anonymous exploitation: non-individual, non-agential and structural,' *Review of Social Economy* 77, no. 2 (2019): 143–62.

79. See Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy.'

80. Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism,' 38.

81. Although, *how* exploitation is understood is a point of contention. For example, radical feminists make the case that it is an instance of sexual exploitation, whilst several sex workers have emphasised that they are exploited just like they would be if they worked 12-hour shifts in fast food restaurants. See my discussion in chapter four.

82. Berg, 'Working for Love, Loving for Work,' 694; McClanahan and Settell, 'Service Work, Sex Work, and the "Prostitute Imaginary",' 494.

83. Berg, 'Working for Love, Loving for Work,' 694.

is something different or distinct about sex work when it comes to other kinds of work.

This sort of exceptionalism is found in many anti-sex work accounts. It is often the case that sex work is not considered a form of work at all, though it is positioned as a form of exploitation. Mac and Smith note in *Revolting Prostitutes* that many anti-prostitution feminists and campaigners argue that sex work could not be 'work' precisely because of the exploitation it is thought to contain and represent.[84] A refrain repeated often about sex work is that: 'It's not work, it's exploitation'.[85] This engages in one kind of sex work exceptionalism through positioning sex work as 'exploitative' and that, by contrast, work is positioned as something 'good' and free of exploitation.[86] In answering the question as to whether there is something inherent in sex work that generates vulnerabilities to exploitation (sexual or otherwise), the radical feminist account locates these in it being 'an industry based on sex'.[87]

Perhaps more surprisingly, examples of sex work exceptionalism can also be found in accounts from those that do think sex work is a kind of work. However, despite the identification of sex work as a kind of work in some accounts, Annie McClanahan and Jon-David Settell point out that several in the Marxian tradition readily cite prostitution as an example of an 'extreme' form of exploitation.[88] The figure of the prostitute and sex work readily stands in as a metaphor for the 'living death' that is feminised service work.[89] For many of these accounts,

84. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 42.
85. Smith and Mac, 42.
86. Smith and Mac, 42.
87. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes against prostitution — crossing the divides between sex workers and other women' (by the English Collective of Prostitutes), catalogue ref. ECP/18.*
88. McClanahan and Settell, 'Service Work, Sex Work, and the "Prostitute Imaginary",' 493–494.
89. McClanahan and Settell, 501.

sex work is frequently cited and used as an example of a particularly abject kind of labour.[90]

What's wrong with exceptionalising sex work in this way? The anti-prostitution account fails to offer a robust critique of other kinds of work, particularly when work and 'awfulness' are considered antithetical.[91] Additionally, it is unclear what kinds of inherent vulnerabilities there are to sex work apart from the presence of sex, which is what gives rise to accounts that find it exploitative or harmful on these grounds.[92] For accounts that do emphasise that sex work is work, and treat it as an exceptional example of exploitation, sex work is thought to be different from all other kinds of work, even other feminised forms of service work. This is unlikely to adequately capture what is wrong with either kind of work. This kind of analysis also misses the potential for comparisons between sex work and other forms of work.

Sex work can be considered as one kind of 'intimate labour'. This is a type of work where interpersonal and intimate forms of labour plays a constitutive role.[93] Many other kinds of work involve similar kinds of close bodily contact and intimate labour. For example, care labour can involves close intimate contact between care-giver and care-recipient, or the work of a massage therapist. Rather than theorising care work, domestic work, and sex work as distinct forms of labour — the term 'intimate labour' recognises that they all share common attributes.[94] Comparisons between various kinds of intimate labour pose questions of the anti-prostitution account: When compared to other intimate labours, why

90. McClanahan and Settell, 'Service Work, Sex Work, and the "Prostitute Imaginary",' 501.
91. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 43.
92. For a further discussion of the 'sex in sex work' and whether this might generate inherent vulnerabilities to exploitation see Smith and Mac, Chapter 1.
93. See Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and The Politics of care* (Stanford: Stanford Social Sciences, 2010); Berg, 'Working for Love, Loving for Work.'
94. Boris and Parreñas, *Intimate Labors*, 2.

does prostitution represent a particular outlier? What makes sex for sale, as compared to say the intimate labour involved in personal care work, more vulnerable to wrongs such as exploitation? What is it about the crossing of physical boundaries involved in penetrative sex that is markedly different from the other intimate labours involved in personal care work or massage therapy? These questions are not easily answered by anti-prostitution accounts.

Two things are worth mentioning in response. The first is that many anti-prostitution accounts appear invested in what Mac and Smith call treating *sex as symbol*.[95] As the authors note:

> Rather than focusing on the 'work' of sex work, both pro-sex feminists and anti-prostitution feminists concerned themselves with *sex as symbol*. Both groups questioned what the existence of the sex industry implied for their own positions as women; both groups prioritised those questions over what material improvements could be made in the lives of the sex workers in their communities. Stuck in the domain of sex and whether it is 'good' or 'bad' for women (and adamant that it could only be one or the other) it was all too easy for feminists to think of The Prostitute only in terms of what she represented to them. They claimed ownership of sex worker experiences in order to make sense of their own.[96]

Through adopting this perspective, sex and by extension sex work becomes thought of symbolically. What Smith and Mac are pointing out here is that this perspective on sex work quickly becomes removed from the material conditions and actual lives of sex workers.[97] Debates over sex work, and prostitution specifically,

95. Srinivasan discusses how these accounts are engaged in symbolic politics in her final chapter, see Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*.
96. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 11.
97. Smith and Mac, 3.

become an ideological battleground for other questions such as what can be said about sex under conditions of heteropatriarchy.

The second point to raise in response is that exceptionalising sex work in this way potentially treats sex as something 'special'. Berg points out that one thing sex work challenges is the idea that sex should be free.[98] This is a point that was raised by many WFH feminists, such as those in the ECP. Recall from the previous chapter's discussion on wages, the ECP argued that:

> all women benefit from prostitutes' successful attempts to receive cash for sexual work, because the cash makes it clear that women are working when we are fucking, dressing up, being nice, putting makeup on, whenever we relate to men ... The existence of women who demand payment makes it clear to men that soon they will have to be grateful for anything they get from women.[99]

The objection to the sale of sex can risk treating sex as something 'special' that holds a particular value.[100] This 'specialness' might be based in that sex should only occur within 'loving' relationships or that there is something unique to sex that makes its commodification particularly troubling (as compared to other intimate labour, say). As Berg argues, sex work is not exploitative because there is anything unique to sex. It is exploitative because it is labour under capitalism.[101]

98. Berg, *Porn Work*, 6.
99. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18.*
100. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 28–30.
101. Berg, 'Working for Love, Loving for Work,' 694.

3 Defining (Sex) Work

This section returns to the question of what we might want from a conception of sex work. Drawing on the work of Horgan and Haslanger to argue that we must endorse a particular understanding of the 'work' in sex work. I, therefore, argue in favour of an ameliorative account of sex work. In subsection 3.1, I outline that sex work thought of as work can be understood in a variety of ways. I compare two dominant interpretations of how sex work as work has been understood: the liberal and Marxist feminist approaches. In subsection 3.2, I discuss the difficulty of defining 'work'. In subsection 3.3, I address how our frameworks for defining work shape our concerns about work. In this final subsection, I discuss two prior questions: what is it that we want out of a definition of work? What does defining work do?

3.1 Competing Accounts of 'Work'

To illustrate the range of interpretations of the 'work' in sex work, we can contrast some liberal perspectives on sex work with those often termed 'Marxist feminist'. For some broadly liberal perspectives, they argue that sex work is work in the sense that it may — at least in the abstract — be an employment option like any other.[102] For many with this perspective, the problem with sex work is two-fold: 1) unjust background conditions prevent sex work from truly being one legitimate employment option amongst many, and 2) the stigma that surrounds sex work is

102. I am using 'liberal' here to denote a particular perspective that is sometimes referred to as a 'liberal contractarian' account. However, it is important to note that 'liberalism' is a broad church, and not all liberal perspectives approach sex work in this way. For example, there are other liberal approaches that endorse restrictive prostitution laws in order to limit autonomy and advocate for paternalistic policies, but they don't consider these objectionably moralistic or violating individual rights, for example see Peter De Marneffe, *Liberalism and Prostitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

itself constitutive of a significant harm.[103] This means that someone may engage in commercial sex as one option amongst very limited options, for example they may have to engage in sex work out of economic necessity, it is in this sense that it could not be considered a 'free' choice. Additionally, that sex work is seen as a 'lesser' form of work, if it's considered work at all, is itself constitutive of harm.

This kind of liberal perspective does not object to the sale of sex itself, rather the focus is turned towards the ways it can be reformed towards a more ideal version. This would mean resolving unjust background conditions that limit our choices and removing the stigma associated with sex work so that it might be respected as a profession. For example, Sibyl Schwarzenbach argues that sex work could be reformed to be a sort of 'erotic therapy' where a sex worker is 'respected for her wealth of sexual and emotional knowledge'.[104] Similarly, Martha Nussbaum argues that the stigma associated with sexuality in sex work is comparable to that once endured by women actors or singers, which are now more respected professions.[105] The idea that sex work can be considered a 'sacred practice' and the archetype of the 'sacred whore' features in writings by some sex workers, who have argued for the value and usefulness of their profession were it decriminalised and the stigma associated with it removed.[106]

Both liberal and Marxist feminist accounts converge on placing sex workers, such as prostitutes, in the same category as other workers. They also share a common concern for unjust background conditions that can shape and limit our choices. Despite this overlap in their accounts, the Marxist feminist perspective does not

103. See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex & Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Schwarzenbach, 'Contractarians and Feminists Debate Prostitution.'

104. Schwarzenbach, 'Contractarians and Feminists Debate Prostitution,' 125.

105. Nussbaum, *Sex & Social Justice*, 285–288.

106. For example, see Queen, 'Sex Radical Politics, Sex-positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma'; Vero Rocks and Tasha Tasticake, 'Positions: Is Sex Work a Sacred Practice or Just a Job?,' in *$pread: The Best of the Magazine that Illuminated the Sex Industry and Started a Media Revolution*, ed. Rachel Aimee, Eliyanna Kaiser, and Audacia Ray (Feminist Press, 2015).

emphasise the supposed value or usefulness sex work might provide, either for society or the client involved. The Marxist feminist account argues that the harms embedded within and surrounding sex work arise not because of the sexual acts being bought and sold. Instead, sex work is thought to contain certain harms (for example exploitation and/or a lack of autonomy) because of the material conditions that structure and influence the work being done when people trade sexual labour for money or other resources.[107]

For Marxist feminists, to resolve the 'problem' of sex work we do not need to reform it to make it one 'acceptable' employment option amongst many.[108] Instead, they argue that the focus should be on raising questions about working conditions, safety mechanisms, and negotiating power, rather than on what a sex worker may potentially (erotically) gain from the interaction or on what sex work may provide for clients or society.[109]

The claim, then, that sex work 'is work' or 'contains work' is not an unproblematic or morally neutral shift in the debate over sex work. It is not a singular shift either as what exactly work is or how it's defined is often seldom clear cut. There are a variety of different perspectives that emphasise that sex work 'is work.' These perspectives might range from liberal, libertarian, 'sex positive', queer, trans, and other feminisms and womanisms. As moses moon, sex worker and erotic labour theorist, points out: sex workers themselves are a broad collective drawn from every political party, class, race, ethnicity, and they each have a range of expe-

107. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*.

108. This is not to say that Marxist feminists and liberals do not sometimes, or perhaps often, share similar concerns over sex work. It is important to remember that the sex workers' rights movement is itself a complex coalition of sex workers, activists, and academics drawn from a range of political affiliations and backgrounds. Within this, they often do share goals, such as to decriminalise consenting adult sex work.

109. For more recent examples of this perspective, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Grant, *Playing the Whore*; Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism'; Cruz, 'The Work of Sex Work: Prostitution, Unfreedom, and Criminality at Work.'

riences.[110] Although the sex workers' rights movement has broadly agreed on a common slogan that 'sex work is work', what work means and contains remains a point of contention. When we come to think of sex work *as work*, what emerges is multiple, shared, overlapping, and often competing accounts of the work in sex work.

3.2 Semantic Slipperiness of 'Work'

Work evades a neat and compact definition. Some jobs that are done today would not have been conceivable a hundred years ago or perhaps even thirty years ago. It is precisely this that is so interesting about the nature of work and demonstrates how adaptive it is. Over time, work changes and what we consider work adapts. A further challenge is raised by activities being work in one context and not-work in another. As Joanne B. Cuilla notes in her chapter on 'The Moral Conditions of Work', what may be work for one person might be play for another. For example, a group of people playing a game of football casually at the weekend is thought of as play, but when a professional football team plays this is work.[111] A similar challenge is raised as we begin to consider types of work such as prostitution or care work that have commodified activities provided for free elsewhere. Further to this, increased homeworking during the COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured the distinction many of us have had between our 'place of work' and where we carry out the rest of our lives.

Within the wider context of this thesis, I am specifically addressing sex work through the conceptual lens of thinking about this as *a kind of work*. Briefly step-

110. Note that moses moon is also known as femi babylon, see moses moon, 'Symposium Introduction: Sex Workers' Rights, Advocacy, and Organizing,' *Human Rights Law Review Online* 52, no. 3 (2021): n.37.

111. Joanne B. Cuilla, 'The Moral Conditions of Work,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work*, ed. Ruth Yeoman et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

ping back from this and reflecting on how I am approaching work more broadly provides clarity on what we think it means to work in the more general sense of the term. This is especially important because when we claim something to be 'work' this regularly carries with it certain implications such as labour regulations.[112] When sex workers' rights academics and activists have treated sex work *as work*, its status has often given rise to arguments for protections for the workers involved. As I explored in chapter two, some of these arguments have been based upon comparisons to workers elsewhere who enjoy similar employment protections and the claim that work should be regulated in certain ways.[113]

When it comes to developing a definition of work Hogran notes in her recent book, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism*, that there is a 'semantic slipperiness' of concepts related to and including work.[114] 'Work' is an immensely general concept. In his discussion of work, Raymond Geuss notes that at a broad level 'work' may be reduced to something as simple as 'expending effort'.[115] The 'semantic slipperiness' of the term 'work' is related to the general and broad use of 'work' meaning 'expending effort' and the narrow use of 'work' meaning 'paid expending of effort'. Horgan notes that this usage often tracks a cleavage between the paid or unpaid reproductive activity that is usually a condition of paid activity.[116] This is to say that, it is not only the variability of paid work that makes it difficult to define work. Such that some of us work in factories, some of us deliver packages, flip burgers, or work in big corporate offices where it appears there is little in common between our work other than getting paid. The unpaid forms of work

112. Horgan offers a discussion on what it is we do when we claim something to be 'work', including how this may be related to the claiming of certain rights, see Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work".'
113. See the discussion of the correspondence between the TUC and the ECP in chapter two and the disagreement over framing disputes over prostitution as a 'trades dispute'.
114. Amelia Horgan, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 34–35.
115. Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, 9–13.
116. Horgan, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism*, 34–35.

involved in reproducing workers and creating the conditions for paid work present us with further problems when attempting to construct neat definitions of what it means to work.

Lynne Pettinger proposes that one way of conceptualising work is to think of it as the *business of making life possible*. This means that 'work' encompasses:

> care work, provisionary work, informal exchange of home-produced goods. It's voluntary work and domestic work. It's forced work and slavery, prison labour and welfare-to-work. It's even the prosumption ('production through consumption') and co-creation attached to leisure and lifestyle activities. It's gig work and forced self-employment, in which case it's paid but without the normal extras of a job employment contracts, employment rights and state regulation.[117]

This approach defines work as a series of practices that produce, create, alter and affect life.[118] This expansive understanding of work exemplifies an approach to work that takes much of these 'hidden' and unpaid forms of work as starting points for a definition of work rather than beginning from paid employment alone. In this sense, domestic work, care work, prison labour, etc. are not 'othered' or defined as 'grey cases', as Andrea Veltman has refered to them in her analysis of 'meaningful work'.[119] These forms of work — often unpaid and underappreciated — are not contrasted against paid work which is taken as the supposed norm for what it means to work. Instead, hidden and unpaid forms of work can be taken as starting points for defining what it means to work. Paid work is one kind of work but does not encompass the whole lot. As a method for thinking about work, when applied to sex work this can be helpful. It offers a way to begin a definition of this

117. Lynne Pettinger, *What's Wrong With Work?* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2019), 5.
118. Pettinger, 7.
119. Andrea Veltman, *Meaningful Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 26–27.

work from sex work as a marginalised and often hidden form of work, instead of beginning from more 'acceptable' forms of work.

3.3 The Usefulness of Defining 'Work'

What does defining work do? It is important to understand how the lens through which we understand work shapes the concerns we have about it, as well as the policies that influence the work being done. That is, the ways in which we think about work can influence the concerns we have about it. In his book *The Thought of Work*, John Budd argues that corporate and public policies like incentive-based compensation, minimum wage laws, and international trade agreements all can be understood as reflecting specific conceptualisations of work.[120] This is to say that, if we conceptualise work as a commodity, it is liable to be left to the hands of the marketplace. At the same time, if we see work as an important source of personal fulfillment, it is possible to structure it in ways to provide this. If work is understood as caring for others, then care workers may get greater respect for the work they provide.[121]

In her paper, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work"', Horgan argues that there is much at stake when we ask the question: What is 'work'?[122] Conceptualising an activity as work, she argues, contains two significant political possibilities: first, we can identify the activity within a local and internally defined framework of rights that can be appealed to and negotiated, and second, we may appeal to the theoretical tradition and legacy of radical political theory and the labour movement. Here we see that 'work' operates on two levels — work is something that is legally instantiated and regulated, but work also has a deep and

120. John Budd, *The Thought of Work* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), 17–18.
121. Budd, 17.
122. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1110.

often contentious social meaning.[123]

Consider here the tensions between strict definitions of 'worker', 'employee', and 'self-employed' that are enshrined in UK labour law which give rise to rights such as sick pay and how we also use the term 'work' to also describe housework, homework, etc.[124] The two possibilities (recognition within law and social recognition) can coexist in tension with one another, as we see in the example of the Wages for Housework movement. Here labour in the home was labelled as 'work' for the purpose of refusing this work rather than codifying it in law.[125] As Horgan argues:

> "Work," then, is not just a site of a variety of social meanings but also a legally codified institution, and, given its place in radical theory, possesses an ethical register that is automatically familiar to many people ("a fair day's work for a fair day's pay", etc.) as well as well-trodden theoretical apparatus. These varying instantiations of "work" are not entirely distinct, they overlap and interact with each other.[126]

What, then, are we doing when we define 'work'? When we claim an activity to be 'work', we are either directly or indirectly offering an interpretation of 'work' (in its legal or social meaning, or perhaps both), as well as of the activity in question.[127] This means that claims about the 'workness' of activity are also claims about what we think work is. When we claim an activity is work, packed into this claim is usually some other claim(s) about work. Declaring an activity to be work means that our descriptive and normative ideas of work are carried across

123. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1113–1114.
124. Horgan, 1113.
125. Whilst true, as Horgan argues, in the previous chapter I discussed how some aspects of the WFH movement did also want legal recognition for forms of work, as in the case of sex work, see Horgan.
126. Horgan, 1114.
127. Horgan, 1114.

to that activity.[128] If I am to claim that domestic labour is work, this claim about the 'workness' of the activity invokes a particular understanding and concept of work.

In borrowing from Horgan, I have also referred to work as a concept that has a 'semantic slipperiness' to it, and that in addressing work we are faced with the indeterminacy of concepts. The concepts we have to explain the world and how we wield them are inapt, partial, misleading, or even harmful. How we make sense of human activity, including work, is not neutral.[129] As Horgan notes, feminists have drawn attention to this dynamic at the level of the semantic content of words and in looking to understand their social meanings. Social meaning can be understood, broadly, as the signs and symbols that are attached to various actions, inactions, or statuses in a particular context.[130] Social meaning is of particular importance in that we cannot simply opt out of it, and the significance this approach draws to our actions and the relationship they can have to oppression.

In theorising about social meaning and social justice, Sally Haslanger asks what function we want concepts to serve:

> [W]e should be asking not simply what concepts track truth, even fundamental truth, but rather: What distinctions and classifications should we use to organize ourselves collectively? What social meanings should we endorse? Determining what is required for knowledge, or virtue, or autonomy, is not just a matter of describing reality for ... definition is a political act.[131]

In conceptualising (sex) work, it is necessary to be cognizant of how this definition

128. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1115.
129. Horgan, 1111.
130. Horgan, 1111.
131. Sally Haslanger, 'Social Meaning and Philosophical Method,' *APA Proceedings and Addresses* 88 (2014): 33; See Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1112.

is itself political. We have to ask what activities are included, and excluded. What do our definitions say, either implicitly or explicitly, about what it means to work? Though, as I have pointed out, there are variable interpretations of the 'work' of sex work, this prompts considerations of the kind of understanding(s) about work we should endorse. As Horgan notes, if our concepts about work are to analyse some element of social injustice, or some wrongfulness about work, then they need to also track that element of injustice as well as meaningfully include those affected by it.[132]

Our world is shaped by the concepts and words we choose to describe it.[133] Electing to use the word 'work' to describe the selling and trading of sexual labour, has a real material effect, particularly for those actually selling sex.[134] Invoking particular understandings of the word 'work' is influential for those selling and trading sexual labour. Most importantly, it can help in the fight to win rights.[135] As Haslanger notes, 'Philosophy has the power to create culture; we are not just bystanders but producers', and she urges us to be attentive to social meanings as we theorise.[136] Our concepts have the power to shape the world, including being able to be wielded for the purposes of social justice. At times, it can be necessary to pragmatically engage with the meaning of the word 'work', particularly when it is required to emphasise its potential usefulness or value. This strategy can be used to gain rights, combat societal stigma, and reaffirm that sex work is 'real' work. At other times, it can be possible — perhaps even necessary — to resist definitions of sex work as 'work' understood in the sense that it may be useful, productive, or have value. This is a point to which I will return in discussing the

132. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1111.
133. Amia Srinivasan, 'Does feminist philosophy rest on a mistake?,' KCL MAP Conference: Identity and Underrepresentation (July 2015), 14–15.
134. Srinivasan, 14–15.
135. For more on the potential to shape the world with concepts and words, see Srinivasan.
136. Haslanger, 'Social Meaning and Philosophical Method,' 33.

anti-work reading of sex work in the following chapter.

4 Waged Housewives?

Is the work of sex work best characterised as socially reproductive labour? This section discusses sex work as a form of commodified socially reproductive work. In subsection 3.1, I define social reproduction and the way this expands the category of work. In subsection 3.2, I discuss how an expansive approach to work is helpful for theorising the relationship between paid and unpaid work. In subsection 3.3, I discuss whether sex work is best characterised as a form of paid social reproduction. Drawing on the work of Ray Filar, I argue that the social reproductive lens is useful to an extent. But, it is also necessary to supplement such an analysis, such as through considering sex work as a form of precarious service work.

4.1 Defining Social Reproduction

To explain the role played by unpaid work, Tithi Bhattacharya modifies the question 'who teaches the teacher?'. She asks this of work: If workers' labour produces all wealth in society, who then produces the worker?[137] 'Socially reproductive labour' or 'social reproduction' describes the activities that nurture future workers, regenerate the current workforce, and maintain those who cannot work.[138] This includes activities such as housework, mother-work, and elder-care. These are the tasks involved in staying alive and helping others to stay alive. Women have traditionally performed these roles for either no wages or low

137. Tithi Bhattacharya, 'Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory,' in *Social Reproduction Theory*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 1.

138. Helen Hester, 'Care Under Capitalism: The Crisis of "Women's Work",' *Progressive Review* 24, no. 4 (2018): 343–352; Bhattacharya, 'How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global Working Class.'

wages.[139]

Socially reproductive work includes a wide range of activities involved in preparing workers to engage in paid work. In many analyses of work, childrearing, domestic work and elder care had been excluded from what was thought of as 'work.' As many feminists from the 1960s and 1970s pointed out, this was 'hidden' labour upon which the (predominantly) male worker depended. What had been coded as 'leisure', was revealed to be work.[140] This expanded the category of work, as well as the necessary sites of analysis. As Weeks points out:

> Feminists [of the 1960s/1970s] insisted that the largely unwaged "reproductive" work that made waged "productive" work possible on a daily and generational basis was socially necessary labor, and that its relations were thus part and parcel of the capitalist mode of production.[141]

Caretaking tasks had traditionally been thought of as an expression of femininity. The analysis offered by feminists of the 1960s and 1970s denaturalised the work performed by women, usually in the home.[142]

Significant amounts of socially reproductive work occurs in the home and within families. However, this is not the only site of this work.[143] Many of the life-making processes involved in nurturing future workers, regenerating the current workforce, and maintaining those who cannot work occur within the sphere of paid work. People hire cleaners, children attend nurseries, and nursing homes care for the elderly. This (paid) work inside and outside of the home is often done by our most marginalised. Migrant women and other marginalised workers

139. Hester, 'Care Under Capitalism: The Crisis of "Women's Work".'
140. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 24.
141. K. Weeks, 24.
142. K. Weeks, 24.
143. Bhattacharya, 'Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory,' 6–8.

perform the majority of this life-making work.[144]

4.2 An Expansive Approach to Work

Political theory and many other disciplines have primarily focused on paid work. But, limiting analysis of work only to paid work leaves our theorising wanting. The dominance of paid work is a more recent phenomenon and it is also culturally specific in many ways. This risks limiting the comparisons between various kinds of work. The problem with focusing on paid work is not a problem only of its cultural or historic specificity. Defining work only by the exchange of money for labour excludes a large amount of work from the analysis. The second-wave Marxist feminists who sought to expand the category of work had a variety of historical and political reasons for this reconceptualisation. The previous chapter addresses much of this. This subsection focuses on some of the normative reasons for adopting an expansive approach that includes unpaid and paid work.

It is important to emphasise the ways in which work is something that is seldom clear-cut. Take parenting for example. When viewed on the whole, parenting looks like work on some views. However, if we break down the work of a parent day-by-day and the activities involved, what is work becomes less clear. It becomes difficult to draw distinctions between parenting-as-work and other activities like leisure and idleness. If I read the newspaper while my child plays at the park, does this still count towards the work of parenting? Caregiving resists a traditional 9–5 structure. This makes it difficult to define as the work is seldom temporally bounded like many other jobs. Many of the specific activities involved in caregiving evade a neat definition as work or leisure when these categories are conceptualised as being clearly demarcated.[145]

144. For discussions of the commodification of care, see Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*.

145. Beate Rossler, 'Work, Recognition, Emancipation,' in *Recognition and Power*, ed. Bert van

Paid work faces moments of similar indeterminacy. What of the workers who scroll social media while on the clock? Or who spend their hours listening to podcasts to pass the time? In the context of paid employment, these kinds of activities are referred to as 'empty labour'.[146] This is where we may reply to private emails, take breaks, surf the web, etc., as we spend time on non-work activities. Various reports suggest that the average time of empty labour per employee is between 1.5 to 3 hours a day.[147] In both paid and unpaid work, there are significant portions of the activities involved that are ill-defined. The lines between work, leisure, or idleness are not hard boundaries. Geuss reflects on this in his consideration of work. He notes that when discussing work, we face the indeterminacy of some concepts.[148] Though Guess argues that there is nothing inherently wrong with this.[149] Often times our concepts are unwieldy with blurred borders. This indeterminacy is not something we should shy away from. Rather these 'boundary cases' are likely to be where contradiction thrives, and for this reason it can be productive for theorising.

The expansive definition of work offered by social reproduction theorists appears like this: I am working when I am directly producing for capital (so, on the factory floor), but I am also working when doing the associated activities that help me to get myself and others back to productive labour (so, outside of the factory too). The activities involved in social reproduction are integral for preparing workers for paid work. Yet, there remains a concern that an expansive approach to work stretches the concept too far. Am I working when I am napping, eating dinner, or zoning out after work? In some sense, all of these things could be reproducing

den Brink and David Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 141–142.

146. Roland Paulsen, *Empty Labor: Idleness and Workplace Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), See.

147. Paulsen, 5.

148. Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, 53.

149. Geuss, 53.

me and serve to then reproduce capital. Similarly, if we take the moments of indeterminacy of work that I discussed above. Am I working when I read the newspaper whilst watching my child at the park? Again, such activities could form part of the reproduction of others and myself. Considering work in this expansive way is potentially troubling. It seems I am at risk of 'working' non-stop. If we understand work in such broad terms, the concept risks being expanded too far and becoming meaningless.[150]

In response to the charge that the broad use of the term 'work' may result in loss of its analytic power, Pettinger argues that:

> It might seem that this [expanding the definition of work] would mean losing the analytic value of work defined as paid work, or of assuming that *everything* is work. I find that daft. As long as it's clear why and how an activity is defined as work, and what the analytic purpose of that is, then it seems reasonable to me. Paid work is one way of organising work, it relies on other kinds of work.[151]

Pettinger's expansive view of work includes many activities outside the sphere of paid work. For example, she includes care work, domestic work, prison labour, and welfare-to-work.[152] The distinction she makes in the quote above is an important one. Paid work is one kind of work, but it relies on other kinds of work to make it happen.

For social reproduction feminists, recognising that socially reproductive labour is 'work' enables an understanding of how the employer class benefits from and relies upon unpaid labour. This is what Silvia Federici has more recently called

150. Some further explorations of this objection can be found in Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work"'; Horgan, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism*; Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'
151. Pettinger, *What's Wrong With Work?*, 5.
152. Pettinger, 5.

the act of *naming the work*.[153] Federici sees this project as:

> reveal[ing] the work that is already being done, the work that has already been there — that generations of women and children and also men have done. It must be made clear that the whole employer class has benefited from unpaid labor — that there's been a social injustice, perpetrated over a long period of time.[154]

This expansive approach to work offers a powerful critique of work and capitalist relations as a whole. Marxist and socialist feminists of the 1960s and 1970s expanded the category of 'work'. They also sought recognition for this 'hidden' labour. The role of socially reproductive activities is to reproduce the worker. This is to reveal childrearing, domestic labour, and other associated (feminised) activities as work. Central to their analysis is also the relationship between paid and unpaid work. As Federici argues in her essay 'Wages Against Housework', socially reproductive activities are work and should be thought of as 'money for capital' even if the boss is not in the home.[155]

Recognising the activities involved in reproducing the workforce as only an essential precondition to work leaves this relationship under-theorised. As Helen Hester argues, we must understand paid labour in the workplace and unpaid labour in the home as part of the same integrated crisis of contemporary capitalism. She argues that paid and unpaid labour represents two sides of the same coin.[156] Disregarding this 'work' neglects the home or other sites of social reproduction as important sites of resistance. For example, consider the recent Women's Strike that organises around refusing all the work that women do, paid and unpaid.[157] Actions such

153. Panovka and Kiara, "Naming the Work": An Interview with Silvia Federici.'
154. Panovka and Kiara.
155. Federici, 'Wages Against Housework,' 19.
156. Hester, 'Care Under Capitalism: The Crisis of "Women's Work".'
157. Cinzia Arruzza, 'From Social Reproduction Feminism to the Women's Strike,' in *Social*

as this are part of the important efforts to restructure work relations.

4.3 Sex Work and Social Reproduction

The previous chapter discussed the English Collective of Prostitutes and the Wages for Housework analysis of sex work as a form of commodified socially reproductive labour. Their analysis understood sex workers, namely prostitutes, as a kind of 'waged housewife'. Housewives and sex workers played a similar role in the reproduction of the (male) worker. What set prostitution apart is that it was an already waged form of work, unlike housework. As the ECP argue: 'The line between unpaid sex and paid sex is a question of what we get in return'.[158] Sex work is a kind of work that troubles the boundaries between forms of reproductive work. McClanahan and Settell note that the sex worker:

> troubles the boundaries between productive, unproductive, and reproductive work. She constructs the differences between them, but often by her exclusion from all of them. Sometimes she symbolizes wage labor's total commodification of human activity; at other points she must be expelled from the working-class in order to establish its proper place on the stage of world history. Always, she complicates distinctions between waged and unwaged labor, concrete use values and ephemeral services, formal and informal payment, the production of goods and the reproduction of labor itself[159]

To return to the question asked at the beginning of this section: Is sex work best

Reproduction Theory, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

158. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Open letter from the English Collective of Prostitutes which was addressed to the first national conference of the Wages for Housework Campaign in October 1976 (this was the first public statement made by the English Collective of Prostitutes in Britain), catalogue ref. ECP/19*.

159. McClanahan and Settell, 'Service Work, Sex Work, and the "Prostitute Imaginary",' 498.

characterised as a form of socially reproductive labour? This has proved a popular way to conceptualise sex work, even if analyses have moved away from theorising sex workers as 'waged housewives'. In this subsection, I consider how applicable the social reproductive framework is to theorising about sex work.

Sex work can helpfully be thought of as a form of paid socially reproductive work. This is similar to nursing or working in a care home. These are tasks often performed for free normally in the home, but now much of this 'life-making' work is occurring outside the home and in the sphere of paid work.[160] In this sense, then, how is sex work socially reproductive? On the understanding of social reproduction outlined in the section above, 'social reproduction' describes the activities that nurture future workers, regenerate the current workforce, and maintain those who cannot work.[161] Much like sex in marriage, sex work has been thought to be a form of reproductive work in that it offers up a sexual and emotional 'release' for the (nominally) male clients.[162] The social reproduction framework helps with thinking through this work as a part of the 'life-making processes' that regenerate the workforce through the sexual and emotional labour sex workers perform. Sex workers are reproducing others and reproducing themselves. They perform both waged and unwaged reproductive labour.[163]

Such an analysis, however, is not complete. In many ways, this view of sex work mirrors the view of sex workers as 'waged housewives' and appears to be plucked straight from the 1970s. It offers little in the way of answering many of the critiques levied against the domestic labour feminists.[164] In the previous chapter, I

160. For discussions of the commodification of care, see Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*.
161. Hester, 'Care Under Capitalism: The Crisis of "Women's Work"'; Bhattacharya, 'How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global Working Class.'
162. See Federici on the work of sexuality, Federici, 'Why Sexuality is Work.'
163. Berg, 'Free Sex,' See.
164. Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'

indicated that comparisons between the unpaid housewife and sex worker are troubling. Such allusions risk obscuring the different power relations at play when each performs sexual labour. Recall Davis' critique of the WFH campaign as she argued that those who might know best about the claim for 'wages for housework' are indeed the 'cleaning women, domestic workers, maids.'[165] To answer the question of whether it is best to characterise sex work as a form of socially reproductive labour means that the original analysis offered by domestic labour feminists needs to be rethought.[166]

The power relations when performing unpaid social reproduction in the home to working in the sex workplace differ in significant ways. Horgan raises a concern with defining socially reproductive labour as work because, although these activities share a lot in common with waged activities, she argues they lack a direct power relation the same way that workers facing bosses do.[167] She points out something important here: in our place of waged work, capitalist power relations are ever-present. The same is not true of the home. Even if we accept that paid work relies upon this — for example, workers must be fed and clothed in order to turn up tomorrow — we may call this labour a pre-condition for work in contemporary capitalism, but it may not be work in the strict sense.

Read one way, it would seem that sex work is there to reproduce the male client. Understood through a social reproduction lens, sex work serves the function as a form of expanded care work in taking care of the emotional and sexual needs of male clients. As Filar points out, in theory much of the work that falls under the label of sex work (and many other forms of reproductive service work), could be performed for free in communities or gone without as luxuries.[168] This analysis,

165. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 237.
166. Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'
167. Horgan, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism*, 45–47.
168. Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'

though, is inadequate as it does not take into consideration the need for the worker to survive. As Filar argues:

> [T]he ultimate point of prostitution is not to reproduce the male client but to keep the sex worker alive. *The lens needs to be turned back on itself: prostitution is not, after all, for clients but for prostitutes.*[169]

The relation of sex work to capital is defined primarily not by its reproductive role. Rather, it is defined by capital's maintenance of an 'underclass of criminalised, feminised, racialised, dispossessed workers who will suffer the consequences ... of their decision to survive'.[170] The same could be said of all kinds of reproductive service work — that it is defined not by it being reproductive in the sense of its ability to reproduce the worker, but it in it being work — which is precisely the point.

Any analysis of sex work requires it also be analysed as a form of service work.[171] It is a form of reproductive service work, and this indicates several important things about what kind of work it is, as well as where the workers performing it may be located against in the race, class, and gender heirarchies that structure work.[172] Considering sex work as a form of service work offers up additional conceptual tools and comparisons, such as other kinds of work in the gig economy.[173] An analysis of sex work as a part of the gig economy and service work can compliment a social reproductive analysis, they are not mutually exclusive.

I noted above that the social reproductive account of sex work has been a particularly enduring one. For example, Hester and Stardust define sex work as a socially reproductive kind of work because it 'involves physical and affective labour

169. Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?,' Emphasis added.
170. Filar.
171. Filar.
172. Filar.
173. Filar.

intended to foster the emotional regeneration of the workforce'[174] At times, this analysis has focused more on how it is that sex work may 'reproduce' the male client. As Filar notes, this is not exactly the point of prostitution. An expanded social reproductive approach that looks at it through a lens of caring labour, particularly with in a focus of the reproductive labour that sex workers do to reproduce themselves and their communities appears as a more fruitful way to theorise this work. This can open up questions about how workers sustain themselves, their communities, how they resist their own exploitation, and attempt to flourish even in the face of 'manufactured vulnerability to deprivation, violence, and early death'.[175] Berg discusses what this kind of care ethics presented by sex workers can look like in her article on militant care. She argues that the work sex workers do to reproduce each other ('We keep each other alive' ... 'Every safe call, every pack of condoms stolen from the drugstore, every recording of cops harassing workers on the street, every fentanyl test strip, every teach-in, every shared client so a friend can pay rent') is part of working class self-activity.[176] It is world-build and valueless work, at least to the status quo, because it is not simply reproductive.[177] As a result, sex work sits uneasily with many dominant arguments in feminist care ethics that assert that care must be valued because it produces for the state.[178] This is an understanding of sex work and reproductive labour focused on sex worker community care. It offers a way of thinking about caring labour beyond any claims to its value to the social as the world currently exists.[179]

174. Hester and Stardust, 'Sex Work in a Postwork Imaginary,' 70.
175. Berg, "Today Solidarity Means, Fight Back",' 28.
176. Sophia Rossi quoted in Berg, see Berg, 27, 29.
177. Berg, 29.
178. Berg, 29.
179. Berg, 30.

5 Chapter Summary

It has been said that sex work is the oldest profession. But that is not strictly true. In Kate Lister's history of sex work, *Harlots, Whores and Hackabouts*, she points out that in cultures without money, there were no professions and little evidence of prostitution.[180] Lister also points out how Rudyard Kipling coined the phrase 'the world's oldest profession' in his short story *On the City Wall*. The story opens with the line 'Lalun is a member of the most ancient profession in the world' — since then we've adopted this into common parlance and taken this as a historical truth.[181] Lister points out that what Kipling says after this first line might offer us more insight into this 'most ancient profession', as he says: 'In the West, people say rude things about Lalun's profession and write lectures about it, and distribute the lectures to young persons in order that morality may be preserved.'[182] Perhaps they even write PhD theses about it.

Whilst it may not be the oldest, it certainly is a 'most ancient profession'. How we think, speak and write about sex work matters. Its workers are so often hidden from view, theorised about, and spoken for. We should be reminded again that in our exploration of this work to begin to pay attention to those actually doing this work.

I concluded subsection 3 by asking: What is it that we want from a definition of (sex) work? Drawing on Horgan and Haslanger's scholarship, I argued that although we may be unable to establish a 'pure' form of what it means to work, we should (re)conceptualise work around our concerns for social injustices. This kind of approach would necessitate that our concepts track elements of those injustices

180. Lister, *Harlots, Whores & Hackabouts: A History of Sex for Sale*, 10.
181. Lister, 10.
182. Lister, 10.

as well as meaningfully include those affected by them. Though I think this kind of approach and way of understanding work offers a lot of use in constructing concepts that can be helpful in light of our commitments to developing feminist and anti-racist social theory, some caution ought to be exercised. We should take note of Pettinger's warning about what we might find when looking to conceptualise (sex) work:

> There are no recipes for cures here, quick marches from the concept of justice to a practical plan of action. Instead, there could be continuing debates that draw pragmatically on information, risks, benefits and that think about individual capacities and freedoms and self-formations, not universal ideas.[183]

In reflecting on what is to be done about sex work, and how this relates to the concepts that guide us — there are few easy or universal answers. As Horgan notes, we may encounter concepts that are ill-fitting, that do not track elements of what is wrong with work for a certain group, or concepts that are even harmful.[184] But this openness to revision and reshaping, and resistance to wielding a single universal concept applied everywhere, is a part of the process.

183. Pettinger, *What's Wrong With Work?*, 21.

184. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1112; Haslanger raises a similar point noting that the need for revision is essential if it appears that the 'scaffolding is unsteady or insufficient to take us where we need to be', see Haslanger, 'Theorizing With a Purpose,' 142.

4 | Sex Work, Exploitation, and Struggle

In 2021, the online sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling hosted a panel discussion on 'Work and Anti-Work: What are people in the sex trades fighting for?'[1] This was part of a wider webinar series on 'Informal, Criminalized, Precarious: Sex Workers Organizing Against Barriers', which looked to bring sex workers into conversations with designers, academics, policymakers, and a range of other stakeholders.[2] The panel explored why discussions on the sex trades have been framed around 'work' as opposed to some other framing in fighting for the liberation of people in the sex trades. Panel participants Maitresse Madeline, femi babylon, Kitty Milford, Jaylanee, and moderator Lorelei Lee explored why trading sex has been called 'work' and not something like 'anti-work'.[3] Lee offered participants the following question:

> Work is central to public understandings of social membership in the United States, so much so that the legitimacy of one's claim to a job is often used as a proxy for legitimate claim to residency as in when people say immigrants are stealing American jobs. So, where does this leave people like many of us who are disabled, who aren't or can't be part of what's traditionally under the workforce? Do we have to be workers to be part of the American social body ... can we imagine a different way of calling for our liberation?[4]

1. Angela Jones offers an insightful discussion of the panel discussion, see Jones, "I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal' Job".'

2. Hacking//Hustling, *Informal, Criminalized, Precarious: Sex Workers Organizing Against Barriers*, https://hackinghustling.org/informal-criminalized-precarious-sex-workers-organizing-against-barriers/.

3. Hacking//Hustling, *Work and Anti-Work: What Are People in the Sex Trades Fighting For?*, https://hackinghustling.org/event-work-and-anti-work-what-are-people-in-the-sex-trades-fighting-for/.

4. Jones offers a discussion of this passage and the panel, see Jones, "I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal' Job"'; Hacking//Hustling, *Work and Anti-Work*.

Disabled and chronically ill people may choose sex work because it offers a form of work that can be more accommodating than many forms of 'straight' work.[5] In their study discussing the intersections sex work and disability, Angela Jones notes that we should be careful not to construct sex work as some sort of economic utopia or queer crip paradise, as this work is still fraught with various forms of exploitation.[6] However, the respondents in Jones' study — all of whom are disabled sex workers — indicated that sex work could be far more accessible and forgiving on the body, which guides many disabled and chronically ill sex workers' choices to engage in this work.[7] In discussing Lee's question above, Jones points out that the experiences of disabled and chronically ill sex workers show us that 'it is ok to want to work less, not to want to destroy our bodies for a job'.[8] Instead, Jones argues that there is an opportunity to turn towards caring more for ourselves and our communities.[9]

When writing about sex work and exploitation, we are faced with constructions of this work that fall either into it being only exploitative or that it is a beacon of (often sexual) empowerment for its participants. The story, as is often the case, is that sex work falls somewhere in between. Through being attentive to sex workers' experiences of this work, what is revealed is that sex work can be a site of (capitalist) exploitation and also a site of 'freedom', expression, and autonomy.[10] Berg reflects on this tension in how we theorise porn work:

> Dialectical thinking understands contradiction as the meat of our story rather than as a wrinkle to be smoothed over. Porn work can be better

5. Jones, "I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal' Job".'
6. Jones.
7. Jones.
8. Jones.
9. Jones.
10. I have put freedom is put in quotes here to indicate a distinction made between 'freedom' and freedom that is clarified in section 5 below.

> than straight work and also just as extractive. Both things are true, and that is the point.[11]

The problem, as Berg has pointed out, is precisely how we hold these two seemingly contradictory ideas together.

This chapter illuminates further approaches to understanding exploitation in sex work. Exploitation has garnered much attention in regards to sex work. For many in the radical feminist and anti-sex work traditions, sex work is frequently referred to as a kind of 'exploitation'. What distinguishes this analysis is that sex work is thought of as a kind of exploitation (sexual or otherwise), rather than that it may contain this wrong or not depending on the circumstances.[12] By contrast, for many work-oriented accounts of sex work, exploitation is often cited as a harm that emerges from the conditions that structure this work in contemporary capitalism. Much of this existing literature offers an account of exploitation emphasising that what is wrong with exploitation is the unpaid transfer of labour and value involved in (sex) work.[13] This is to say that what is contained within the worker-employer relationship is exploitation because those who are selling their labour-power, as in their capacity to labour productively, do not receive the full rewards of that labouring and they are forced to sell their labour-power because they have no other commodity to sell. Whether this unpaid transfer of labour is specifically what is wrong with exploitation, and sex work more broadly, or whether other factors such as alienation, precarity, and unfreedom are as critical, remains to be assessed. This chapter seeks to expand upon existing Marxian analysis that looks

11. Berg, *Porn Work*, 5.

12. This chapter does not discuss the radical feminist or anti-prostitution account of sex work. I offer a discussion of some of their objections to understanding sex work as a kind of work in chapter three.

13. For some examples of this kind of approach, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Colley, 'Labour-power'; Bhattacharya, 'How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global Working Class.'

to understand how sex work *contains exploitation* because of the work involved.

An alternative explanation to the unpaid transfer account for understanding exploitation in work is proposed by theorist Nicholas Vrousalis. Across a series of articles and more substantially in his 2022 book, *Exploitation as Domination: What Makes Capitalism Unjust*, he has developed an account that makes the case for considering exploitation to be an instance of domination.[14] When applied to work, Vrousalis argues that domination consists in having unilateral control over an agent's labour capacity.[15] Further to this, Vrousalis is concerned with the structural character of domination, and by extension exploitation. He develops an account that explores the three-place relation between dominator(s), dominated, and regulator(s).[16] His account argues that exploitation is occurring not only between individual bosses and workers. Vrousalis addresses what he terms the 'double bind' condition and argues that structurally dominated agents are restricted not only in their actual choice-sets but also in their subjunctive choice-sets. This is to say that they can be dominated even if they do not directly interact with the dominator. In terms of capitalism as a structural form of domination, one of the central problems for Vrousalis consists in that workers face the choice between no work (unemployment) or dominated work (work for a capitalist/boss).[17] Vrousalis' account allows us to recognise how this structural domination is regulated by certain other forces, for example by states, market norms, and sexist norms.

For Vrousalis, sex work appears to be a particularly concerning example when it comes to exploring exploitation and work. In *Exploitation as Domination*, at the beginning of the chapter on theories of exploitation, he cites sex work as one

14. See Vrousalis, 'How Exploiters Dominate'; Nicholas Vrousalis, 'Exploitation: A Primer,' *Philosophy Compass* 13, no. 2 (February 1, 2018); Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage'; Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*.
15. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, Chapter 2.
16. Vrousalis, Chapter 4.
17. Vrousalis, 99–100, 103.

example that is part of a 'series of practices that look like excellent candidates for exploitation'.[18] Similarly, in a 2023 interview in *Jacobin* magazine to promote the book, Vrousalis again cites the example of sex work, amongst other examples like precarious contracts and sweatshop labour, to show that the domination theory of exploitation is 'attractive'.[19] He argues that considering exploitation as an instance of domination is able to explain why kinds of work like sex work are exploitative even if they have particular 'virtues' that economists might sometimes attribute to them.[20] Much of his recent book, however, only cites sexual labour and sex work as an example a small handful of times directly.[21] Rather, Vrousalis deals with work mostly considered in the abstract. A significant portion of this chapter is dedicated to considering the problems of Vrousalis' structural domination account when applied to sex work specifically.

This chapter explains the application of Vrousalis' structural domination account by working through how it applies in the case of sex work. In the latter half of this chapter, I develop further the 'anti-work' reading of sex work. This is intended to show the relevance of this reading to understanding exploitation. I argue that in understanding exploitation in sex work, the agency of sex workers must be considered. This chapter looks to incorporate insights from anti-work writings and testimonies on sex work. Despite the potential for the 'capitalist cage' of structural domination to be all-encompassing, as Vrousalis has argued, sex workers are frequently seeking 'freedom' from other forms of 'straight' work and making

18. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 12.

19. Nick French, 'Only Socialism Can Put an End to Exploitation,' Jacobin, https://jacobin.com/2023/02/nicholas-vrousalis-exploitation-as-domination-interview-capitalism-labor-justice.

20. I assume here the 'virtues' Vrousalis is referring to are consent, mutual benefit, and enhancement of autonomy as he discusses in the interview, see French.

21. Most of Vrousalis' direct exploration of his theory's application to sex work is contained to his short thought experiment titled 'lecherous offer' which is within his exploration on how lucrative offers can also be considered exploitative. See Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 78–80.

pragmatic decisions about their own lives.[22] Developing an account that emphasises worker struggle can resist analysing sex work as a story of workers only falling prey to increasingly vicious forces. Without this emphasis, the choices sex workers are making and have historically made to resist capital fail to be adequately accounted for.

It is worth noting here, before I continue, that I am not looking to offer a kind of 'grand theory' of exploitation in my critique of Vrousalis' account. Although such an approach is quite common, as one might offer a rejoinder to the account and propose an alternative way to 'make it work'. What I am concerned with here is the application of such a theory to the case of sex work. Also, I recognise that in developing my 'anti-work' reading of sex work, this may be compatible with Vrousalis' theory and likely other Marxian-inspired accounts of exploitation. This is not to say that I am opposed to 'grand theories' of exploitation. This chapter just does not offer one. When discussing exploitation and sex work, Kotiswaran notes that 'an overarching theory of exploitation in sex work is not possible given the heterogeneity of sex markets and the varied modes of organization that mediate it'[23] — I am inclined to agree, though I leave open here the question of 'grand' theories of exploitation and sex work. In part this chapter serves to indicate the difficulty there is in creating a 'neutral, universal yardstick against which "exploitation" can be measured'.[24] As Anderson notes,

> Questions about what constitutes an exploitative employment practice are much disputed — indeed they have historically been, and remain, a central focus of the organised labour movement's struggle to protect

22. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped.'

23. Prabha Kotiswaran, 'Beyond Sexual Humanitarianism: A Post Colonial Approach to Anti-Trafficking Law,' *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2013, 397.

24. Bridget Anderson, *Motherhood, Apple Pie and Slavery: Reflections on Trafficking Debates*, Working Paper No. 48 (Published Online: Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, 2007), 9; Kotiswaran, 'Beyond Sexual Humanitarianism,' 397.

> workers. There is variation between countries and variation between economic sectors in the same country in terms of what is socially and legally constructed as acceptable employment practice.[25]

As I discuss in this chapter, there is much to be gained through a focus on the specific conditions of the work and worker's experiences.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In section 1, I provide an outline of one work-oriented approach to sex work (the Marxist feminist account). I discuss the unpaid transfer account of exploitation that informs this account of sex work and its problems for explaining exploitation in (sex) work. In section 2, I describe Vrousalis' account of structural domination and how he understands exploitation to be an instance of domination. In section 3, as Vrousalis does not elaborate in detail in *Exploitation as Domination* how his account maps onto sex work, I offer a reconstruction of his account and how it applies to sex work. To narrow this further, I explore the application of this account to sex workers that work *independently*. This is understood in the sense that they are working for themselves in selling their sexual labour without another boss or third-party involved such as pimps or brothel owners.[26] In section 4, I discuss three key areas of concern related to Vrousalis' account and how it applies to sex work. First, I discuss the issue of the structure of sex work and how it relates to other kinds of work. Second, I discuss

25. B. Anderson, *Motherhood, Apple Pie and Slavery: Reflections on Trafficking Debates*.

26. 'False self-employment' is not uncommon in sex work. For example, in strip clubs where sex workers may work under the guise of working independently as freelancers but they are subject to a large amount of managerial control by club owners. I am not concerned about the application of Vrousalis' argument to these cases, even if they may make up a number of sex work accounts (although it is hard to obtain accurate empirical data about how many sex workers operate under what conditions). Regardless, my concern here is with those operating independently. However, I think my argument may hold even in some of these other cases of 'false self-employment', particularly regarding my later concerns about emphasising the importance of sex workers' own understandings of their work. Though I do not defend this in detail here. For more on false self-employment and sex work, see Katie Cruz, Kate Hardy, and Teela Sanders, 'False Self-Employment, Autonomy and Regulating for Decent Work: Improving Working Conditions in the UK Stripping Industry,' *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 55, no. 2 (2017): 274–294.

the problem of strictly treating the capitalist state as a regulator in this account. Third, I discuss the treatment of clients as dominators in the account.

Finally, in section 5, I turn towards an understanding of sex work as work that contains within it a critical perspective on work and work's refusal. These accounts, often termed the 'anti-work account', are amongst the most appealing and fruitful for those of us who want to construct a critique not only of sex work, but of work more generally. I propose three considerations for thinking about sex work and exploitation. To begin with, I outline a reading of sex work as 'anti-work' through a discussion of testimonies and writings from sex workers in the anti-work tradition. I argue that by taking seriously the insights from anti-work accounts of sex work and testimonies emphasising the refusal of (other 'straight') work, it is possible to see that sex workers may find some 'freedom' in sex work from other forms of exploitation found in 'straight' work. Following this, I discuss the space for considering human agency in changing and shaping work. Finally, I outline the importance of a focus on ongoing worker struggle in accounts of exploitation and sex work. This final section argues that these considerations can enrich an account of understanding exploitation in sex work and when, how, and under what conditions actions might be considered dominated. Following this, I conclude with a summary of the main arguments.

1 Unpaid Transfers Account of Exploitation

In many work-oriented accounts of sex work, 'exploitation' is often cited as a harm emerging from the conditions that structure this work in contemporary capitalism. Much of this existing literature has offered an account of exploitation emphasising that what is wrong with exploitation is the unpaid transfer of labour

and value involved in (sex) work.[27] To summarise, this account of exploitation argues that what is contained within the worker-employer relationship is exploitation because those who are selling their labour-power, as in their capacity to labour productively, do not receive the full rewards of that labouring and they are forced to sell their labour-power because they have no other commodity to sell. This subsection discusses accounts utilising this Marxian interpretation of exploitation, which will be termed here the 'unpaid transfer account'.[28]

In subsection 1.1, I discuss one work-oriented approach to sex work, often termed 'Marxist feminist'. In this first subsection I outline further the classical Marxian account of exploitation found in many of the Marxist feminist accounts of sex work, termed here the 'unpaid transfer account'. In subsection 1.2, I discuss three main problems with this approach to exploitation.

1.1 Marxist Feminism and The Unpaid Transfers Account

Work-oriented accounts have been appealing to many in the sex workers' rights movement. This is particularly because of the emphasis they place on the work of sex work whilst offering a distancing from the dimensions of sex and sexuality. As Weeks puts it, the shift to thinking about sex work *as work* is a shift to a different moral terrain.[29] Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, understanding sex work as work is considerably variable. The slogan 'sex work is work' encapsulates a range of interpretations, and what emerges is multiple, shaped, overlapping, and

27. For example see Colley, 'Labour-power'; Bhattacharya, 'How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global Working Class'; Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*.

28. This account does have a variety of other names, for example Vrousalis refers to this account as the 'unequal exchange of labour' account. However, I have opted here to refer to this as the 'unpaid transfer account', for one because Marx appears concerned with exploitation as it happens in the sphere of production not exchange. See Vrousalis, 'Exploitation: A Primer'; Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*.

29. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 67–68.

often competing accounts of the work in sex work.[30] In this subsection, I address one specific work-oriented approach to sex work, often termed 'Marxist feminist'. This approach has informed a considerable number of recent works on sex work and its harms.[31] This approach, broadly, argues that the harms embedded within and surrounding sex work arise not because of the acts being bought and sold (that is, sex or sexual performances), but because of the material conditions that structure and influence the work being done when people trade sexual labour for money or other resources.[32] The narrative offered by several Marxist feminists sought to break with a dichotomy that categorises sex work as either 'good' or 'bad', instead looking to shift attention toward the conditions that structure and influence commercial sex. To do this, they have drawn from the Marxian tradition to offer a critical perspective on what work means and where the harms in it lie. Broadly speaking, this position presupposes that work under capitalism is rooted in exploitation in some form. This approach follows in a tradition that draws a comparison between the exploitation considered to be inherent in the selling of sexual labour and the selling of other forms of labour to point out that the harm is not to do with sex but to do with *work*.

When considering sex work, and work more broadly, Mac and Smith in *Revolting Prostitutes* cite one of the central harms of (waged) work to be exploitation. They argue that 'waged work *is* exploitation'[33] and that this has its roots in the appropriation of surplus value by bosses. Whether you flip burgers in McDonald's or you work in an HR department in a corporate firm, or you trade sexual labour for money — capital makes money precisely *because it exploits your labour*. As Mac

30. See the discussion in Chapter 3 for a comparison between 'liberal' and 'Marxist feminist' declarations of the work of sex work, as one example.

31. For some examples that this approach has influenced, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism'; Merteuil, 'Sex Work Against Work'; Berg, *Porn Work*; Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'

32. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Grant, *Playing the Whore*.

33. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 45, emphasis original.

and Smith argue, 'in a capitalist economy, bosses generate profits by paying you less for your labour than the money they make when the product of your labour is sold'.[34] Therefore, they argue that it is not reasonable to assume waged work to be necessarily *good* under such conditions.

The naming of sex work *as work* by several Marxist feminists only begins to make sense in the context of the recognition of the asymmetry of need between buyer and seller.[35] This approach is informed by Marxian presuppositions about what work is and entails under the capitalist mode of production, particularly related to the buying and selling of labour-power. Although a full review of Marx's writings on labour-power and work under capitalism are beyond the scope of this chapter, it is useful to indicate some of the central presuppositions that inform the Marxist feminist approach to work, and sex work specifically.[36]

Marx defines labour-power in Chapter 6 of Capital Volume I as:

> [T]he aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind.[37]

As Tithi Bhattacharya notes, this capacity to labour is a transhistoric quality possessed by people regardless of the specific social formation to which they belong to. However, what is particular to capitalism is that commodified labour becomes the dominant mode of exploitation.[38] Typically, it is thought that when we enter

34. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 45–56.

35. Smith and Mac, 53–54.

36. For Marxist feminist discussions of Marx's writings on labour-power and work under capitalism see Colley, 'Labour-power'; Bhattacharya, 'How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global Working Class'; Heather A. Brown, *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study* (Boston: BRILL, 2012).

37. Karl Marx, *Capital. Vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 270.

38. Bhattacharya, 'How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global

the workplace, we are selling our *labour* to our employer, in that we would expect to have a direct relationship between the number of hours, days, and weeks worked and the wage we receive for this.[39] However, Helen Colley argues that, for Marx, this understanding obscures the employer-employee relationship, and rather what is actually being purchased is our labour-power, as in our capacity to work productively.[40] Marx refers to this in Capital, stating that

> The possessor of labour-power, instead of being able to sell commodities in which his labour has been objectified, must rather be compelled to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power which exists only in his living body.[41]

With this, Marx points out two things: the first is that the possessor of labour-power is forced by economic need to sell her labour-power, although in one sense she is 'free' to sell it to whoever will buy it though she has no other commodity to sell.[42] The second is that in the selling of labour-power as a commodity, the worker does not receive the full and fair amount that she produces, as her wage only represents what is deemed the value necessary to reproduce her labour-power and the rest produces profit for the capitalist.[43] As Colley points out, it is worth considering how feminists have extended Marx's writings on labour-power, of which the application to sex work is undoubtedly a part.[44]

Working Class,' 72.

39. Colley, 'Labour-power,' 223.
40. Colley, 'Labour-power,' 223–24; Marx, *Capital. Vol. 1*, Chapter 6.
41. Marx, *Capital. Vol. 1*, 272.
42. Marx, 272–273.
43. Marx, *Capital. Vol. 1*, Chapters 4-8; Bhattacharya, 'How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labour and the Global Working Class,' 71; Colley, 'Labour-power,' 223–225.
44. Colley, 'Labour-power,' 222.

1.2 Problems With The Unpaid Transfer Account

In this subsection, I discuss three critiques of the unpaid transfer account. The first two are the main critiques that have been levied at the unpaid transfer account and they focus on the account applied more broadly.[45] The third looks at its application to sex work specifically.

The first critique concerns whether exploitation necessarily involves the *forced* transfer of surplus value. As I outlined in the subsection above, Marx argues that a worker is forced by economic need to sell her labour-power to capitalists. The only other alternative is starvation, as she would not be able to meet her subsistence needs. However, we could imagine that the government could offer a safety net that means it is sufficient for workers to meet their subsistence needs.[46] In this situation, someone may choose to work and earn a discretionary income, but it seems possible that they still could be exploited by a capitalist who appropriates the surplus value that the worker creates.[47] This is to then say that the worker is not forced to work in this situation out of economic need as she will not face starvation otherwise. However, it seems possible that a worker might still be exploited in this situation if she is paid an unfair wage.[48]

The second concerns whether all cases involving the *forced* transfer of surplus value are necessarily exploitative.[49] For example, governments might tax workers and then use some of these proceeds to offer support to children, the elderly, or

45. See Matt Zwolinski, Benjamin Ferguson, and Alan Wertheimer, 'Exploitation,' The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, in collab. with Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/exploitation/.

46. This has a lot of contemporary relevance if we consider recent discussions about implementing systems such as universal basic income within existing capitalist systems. See Zwolinski, Ferguson, and Wertheimer.

47. Zwolinski, Ferguson, and Wertheimer, 'Exploitation'; Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 179.

48. Zwolinski, Ferguson, and Wertheimer, 'Exploitation.'

49. Zwolinski, Ferguson, and Wertheimer.

people unable to work. The unpaid transfer account claims it is exploitative for capitalists to appropriate some of the surplus value of the objects produced by workers, would it also then be exploitative for the government to do so through taxation? Some libertarians have argued just this as they argue that this is how we should understand the coercive power of governments.[50] Gerald A. Cohen argues that the commitment to this libertarian idea that workers own their labour and what they produce is problematic.[51]

It is also important to consider the suitability of the unpaid transfer account for explaining exploitation in the specific case of sex work. There are some clearly defined situations in which sex workers work for particular bosses. However, 'sex work', when employed as an umbrella term, is a very large umbrella. Carlisle points out how it is used to refer to legal, illegal, and decriminalised work. Used this way, the term 'sex work' refers to kinds of work with bosses at specific locations like stripping in clubs or working at brothels, as well as independent work at multiple locations such as escorting or by-the-hour-full-service work, as well as other kinds of working arrangements.[52] The unpaid transfer account may be helpful when considering how surplus value is appropriated and profit for capital generated, however, this account struggles to explain whether exploitation is present in all forms of work organisations. For example, those working as self-employed sex workers in some accounts have been referred to as 'self-exploiting' or 'self-appropriating'.[53] This is a point I will return to again in my analysis of the structural domination account of exploitation.

50. Zwolinski, Ferguson, and Wertheimer, 'Exploitation.'

51. Zwolinski, Ferguson, and Wertheimer, 'Exploitation'; G. A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, Studies in Marxism and Social Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Chapter 6.

52. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 574.

53. See Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism,' 78; See also Julia O'Connell Davidson, 'Will the Real Sex Slave Please Stand Up?,' *Feminist Review* 83, no. 1 (2006): 4–22; Kotiswaran, 'Beyond Sexual Humanitarianism.'

2 Structural Domination Account

It appears that the unpaid transfer account of exploitation needs amending. In addition to this, we may want to consider an account of exploitation that goes further than the unpaid transfers account to consider questions about what role the state, market forces, or sexist and racist norms play in exploitation. Marx also points out a significant choice that workers face in our present society: work (for a capitalist) or face unemployment (and likely starve). Given some of these considerations, Nicholas Vrousalis' structural domination account appears as a likely alternative to the classic Marxian unpaid transfer account.

In this section, I outline an account of exploitation as structural domination. In subsection 2.1, I reconstruct Vrousalis' argument for exploitation as domination and his account of structural domination. In subsection 2.2, I explore the distinction Vrousalis establishes between *constituent* and *contingent* freedom.

2.1 Structural Domination Account of Exploitation

Vrousalis takes domination to be an unjust abuse of power that gives someone unilateral control over someone else's purposefulness.[54] Undominated actions are thought to be actions performed that represents an agent's own purposiveness through the independence of the ends of others.[55] Vrousalis is mainly concerned with domination in the work context. To place this in that context, he defines this as unilateral control over 'the productive purposiveness of others, that is, over their labour capacity.'[56] As I will explain, not all instances of domination

54. For his full account of exploitation as domination, see Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, Chapter 2.
55. Vrousalis, 3.
56. Vrousalis, 3.

are exploitative and it need not follow from this that exploitation occurs.[57] For Vrousalis, exploitation is taken to be a *dividend of servitude* and that exploitation as domination can be therefore be understood in terms of what he calls *unilateral labour flow*.[58] To understand this, Vrousalis offers the example of the exploitative appropriation of money. He explains that it is exploitative because it represents unilateral control over human labour capacity.[59]

Further to exploitation being a form of domination, Vrousalis is concerned with its structural character. I will be focusing on Vrousalis' account of structural domination first given in the paper 'The Capitalist Cage: Structural Domination and Collective Agency in the Market' and later elaborated upon in *Exploitation as Domination*.[60] Vrousalis defends a triadic account of structural domination. He argues that structural domination (e.g. patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism) is a three-place relation between dominator(s), dominated, and regulator(s).[61] Vrousalis is looking to provide a complete description of specifically structural power relations. He argues that these involve a triadic relationship between those who possess power (dominator(s)), those who are subject to power (dominated), and certain third parties (regulator(s)).[62] This account of structural domination is intended to be compatible with any theory of what makes domination wrongful or bad.[63]

In addition to domination being regulated, structural domination restricts the choice-sets of those dominated in important ways. In an earlier version of Vrousalis' argument, he draws this distinction as being between *constitutively* and *contingently*

57. See sections 3 and 4 below. See also the discussion of 'lucrative offers' in Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, Chapter 2.
58. Vrousalis, 3.
59. Vrousalis, 3–4.
60. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, Chapter 4; Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage.'
61. Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage,' 40.
62. Vrousalis, 42.
63. Vrousalis, 40.

free actions, meant in some relevant sense of 'free'.[64] I discuss this in more detail in the following subsection. For now, it suffices to say that a contingently free action is an action that obtains by the leave of another, but constitutively free actions are structurally upheld for the sake of independent values. This goes to say that constitutively free actions are undominated.[65]

To describe the social structures he is concerned with, Vrousalis offers an analogy with other kinds of physical structures in our world: cages, cathedrals, and molecules all have structures.[66] Recognising that a cathedral has a structure is to say there is a relation between its constituent parts — the walls, the roof, its tower. Vrousalis points out that there is a similar relationship in terms of structural power relations when we are concerned with the social relations between those who dominate and those who regulate. In terms of the cathedral analogy, regulators relate to dominators in this power relationship like how cathedral roofs relate to cathedral walls: without them, the walls are unstable and structurally incomplete.[67] Regulators enable the power relation between dominator and dominated whilst still somehow remaining external to it. They are external in the sense that they lack the power themselves (that is, to dominate) but they regulate the power relations between dominator(s).[68] Structural domination is therefore regulated domination, understood as 'domination co-constituted by agents, roles, or norms external to the constitutive power dyad'.[69]

It is worth asking, what/who are regulators? Vrousalis argues that a regulator

64. Vrousalis does not keep this exact distinction in the version of his argument in *Exploitation as Domination*. As I argue in subsection 2.3, he keeps the core of this argument with his use of the 'double-bind condition'. I have retained the use of 'constitutively' and 'contingently' free actions. See Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage'; Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*.
65. Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage,' 41.
66. Vrousalis, 41–42.
67. Vrousalis, 42.
68. Vrousalis, 43.
69. Vrousalis, 44.

is any agent, role or internalised norm that contributes *appropriately* to the creation, reproduction, or perpetuation of the power relation between dominator(s) and dominated.[70] As to what is meant by 'appropriately', Vrousalis argues that it is too weak to think of this relationship as merely causal. Suppose you trip over, accidentally knocking the leader of our upcoming worker's revolution into oncoming traffic and she's hit by a bus, so capitalism survives. You are not a regulator in this situation, as your tripping is not an expression of capitalist power dynamics.[71] Instead, Vrousalis points out that we might think of regulators instead in two other ways: either as contributing expressively to the dominator's domination, or if they are morally responsible or blameworthy for the dominator's domination.[72] In the first case, a regulator's behaviour might express the relevant power relationship, including expressively upholding it. On the latter case, a regulator would be thought of as also morally responsible for the domination causing consequences of their actions. Vrousalis remains non-committal between these two conditions, and for our purposes here I also follow this.[73]

2.2 Contingent and Constitutively Free Actions

In the above account of structural domination, Vrousalis offers an account of who is dominated under this structure(s). He argues that:

> Capital dominates Labour, even if Labour's production is contingently free (e.g. Labour performs meaningful work for a decent employer). The double bind of capital thus consists in either producing unfreely, such as cooking-for-money or producing freely, such as cooking-for-the-sake-of-its-value, but only by the leave of capital. This is how

70. Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage,' 45.
71. Vrousalis, 45.
72. Vrousalis, 45.
73. Vrousalis, 45.

> capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy are structurally homologous: all three restrict the choice sets of the subaltern to a dilemma between unfree action and merely contingently free action. *The worker with the decent job under capitalism, the woman with the feminist husband under patriarchy, and the non-white person with the anti-racist white companions under white supremacy are all dominated in that sense.*[74]

In his paper 'The Capitalist Cage,' Vrousalis makes a distinction between *constitutively* and *contingently* free actions. Contingently free actions are free actions only in that they obtain by the leave of another. Constitutively free actions, by contrast, are 'are upheld across possible worlds ... they are structurally upheld for the sake of independent values'.[75] This is why Vrousalis claims that workers with decent jobs under capitalism, women with feminist husbands under the patriarchy and non-white people with anti-racist allies under white supremacy are all still dominated in the sense that their actions are *contingently* free. They all are still acting by the leave of another, not for some other independent values that do not reflect the power facts of the situation.

In *Exploitation as Domination*, Vrousalis drops the distinction between contingently and constitutively free actions, however, the core of his argument remains much the same: free actions (meant in some meaningful way) are performed not by the leave of another and, conversely, unfree actions are performed by the leave of another. As he argues:

> women under the patriarchy are faced with a dilemma between performing an independently valuable activity *by the leave of men* and not performing it at all. Patriarchal norms, for example, make women

74. Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage,' 47-48, Emphasis mine.
75. Vrousalis, 11.

> unfree by making them either abstain from familial relations altogether or participate on men's terms. Similarly, when pornographic norms restrict access to empowering sexual possibilities for women, women have to choose between nonsex and sex in conformity with the model of male fantasy. Call this the *double-bind condition*.[76]

The double-bind condition, coupled with the regulation of domination, is central to what constitututes structural domination. Vrousalis argues that regulated domination, that is structural domination, is significant in that it restricts not only the actual choice sets of structurally dominated agents or groups. It also restricts their possible choice-sets, which is to say that they are dominated even if they do not interact with the dominator.[77]

3 Sex Work and Structural Domination

In what follows, I reconstruct Vrousalis' account of exploitation as structural domination and apply this to sex work. In subsection 3.1, I outline an understanding of sex workers as occupying the position as the dominated. In subsection 3.2, I present the case for clients as dominators. To clarify, I am interested here in the case of sex workers working *independently*. I am interested in this case because I believe it to be the harder case to explain regarding sex work and exploitation. Vrousalis' argument, and many other Marxian-inspired accounts of exploitation, would likely not struggle to offer an explanation for exploitation in the case where there is an involvement of third parties (for example, pimps or brothel keepers). The pimp who forces a worker to work and takes a cut from her earnings looks

76. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 99.

77. In some ways, this seems obvious. Political lesbians of the so-called 'second-wave' feminist movement realised long ago that their choice to not engage with men did not suddenly exempt them from existing within a patriarchal society. See Vrousalis, 99–100.

like a prime candidate for exploitation, and our existing theories are likely to easily map onto this example. However, sex workers working independently appear to be a more difficult case to explore. In subsection 3.3, I discuss the role of the capitalist state as the regulator under Vrousalis' account. I note that I am simplifying the sex work example, as there are other likely candidates for regulators such as sexist norms. However, if we want to consider sex work as a market exchange similar to other forms of work then the capitalist state seems a likely candidate under Vrousalis' structural domination account.

3.1 Sex Workers as Dominated

For Vrousalis, sex workers should be considered as *typically* dominated in commercial sex. However, it is not the case that sex workers are necessarily dominated in every interaction by virtue of just selling sex. This is an important divergence from other accounts of exploitation, such as is offered by many radical feminist accounts. Other accounts, like the radical feminist account, hold that sex work is a *de facto* example of exploitation by virtue of it being sex work.[78] Rather, Vrousalis argues that there must be some additional conditions to be met for us to consider sex workers to be dominated.

Vrousalis clarifies these conditions in his exploration of sex work in the case he terms *lecherous offer*. In this case he explores how even lucrative offers might be exploitative. He also clarifies the conditions under which he considers sex workers to be typically dominated. To summarise the problem:

> *Lecherous Offer* — A is a lecherous billionaire; B earns the median wage. A says to B: "If you sleep with me, I'll give you $1 million."

78. For example, see Catharine A MacKinnon, 'Prostitution and Civil Rights'; Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy.'

> B accepts the offer.[79]

Vrousalis is interested in whether A exploits B and what this might tell us about sex work in general too. For this specific example, it is unclear whether A does exploit B. For one, A does appear to have unilateral control over B's purposefulness, and this seems to violate Vrousalis' 'non-servitude proviso'. As it appears that A has unilateral control over the labour capacity of B, this would make it an instance of domination.[80] However, despite this, it seems unclear in the case of *lecherous offer* if A is exploiting B. Vrousalis argues that in this case, it seems that labour is flowing the wrong way — from rich to poor. B is receiving an unusually high price for a relatively short amount of labour. If this is the case, Vrousalis argues, then it seems that A is not exploiting B.[81]

However, despite this, the case of *lecherous offer* is argued to be an outlier when compared to sex work when more widely observed. In that instance, sex work is thought to generally involve exploitation. As Vrousalis argues:

> Sex workers provide sex in return for a market determined price. In general, these prices will be lower than $1 million — otherwise demand would be negligible — and tend to reflect a labour content lower than the median or average wage. This implies that sexual labour will, in general, tend to flow from poor to rich — sex worker to client. The domination account does dub these cases as exploitative.[82]

Of note here is the relevance of the labour flow to understanding whether, at least in these individualised accounts of sex work, the domination account will dub these to be exploitative or not. As I will return to in section 4 below, sex work is

79. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 78.
80. I will discuss this in more detail below in my discussion of the client as akin to the boss/capitalist in sex worker/client interactions, see also Vrousalis, 39–41, 79.
81. Vrousalis, 79.
82. Vrousalis, 80.

made analogous to other kinds of work.

When considering sex work in general, Vrousalis argues that discussions of such individualistic accounts might ultimately be socially irrelevant to judgements of exploitation as structure is ignored.[83] He makes the case whilst we might think it possible for A to not exploit B in *lecherous offer*, Vrousalis argues that there is no capitalist society in which this is actually realised. He argues that capitalism, by virtue of structural necessity, must confront workers with a dilemma: choose between no work or dominated work.[84]

3.2 Clients as Dominator

Recall again the example of *lecherous offer*. In this example, Vrousalis gives us some conditions for why the client might be the dominator in the paradigmatic cases of sex work we are concerned with. As above, this is in part due to the client's violation of the non-servitude proviso. It is argued that he has unjust unilateral control over the sex workers' labour capacity. Vrousalis argues that you possess unilateral control over someone's labour capacity if:

> [Y]ou possess control over the content, intensity, or duration of my labour process which I do not possess over yours. This means that there are things you can order or get me — 'bind' me — to do over which I have no say, and over which you are not (legally or conventionally) obligated to consider my judgements, interests, or goals.[85]

In the exchange between sex worker and client, Vrousalis argues that there are things the client can 'bind' a sex worker to do over which they have no say, and over which the client is not obligated to consider the sex workers' judgements,

83. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 79–80.
84. Vrousalis, 80.
85. Vrousalis, 41.

interests, or goals.[86]

It is worth mentioning here that identifying who the dominator is in the interaction might be made more complex when we consider other kinds of sex-working arrangements. As mentioned, my primary concern in this chapter is with sex workers who are working independently by selling their sexual labour directly to a client with no other third-party involvement. However, sex work occurs under a wide range of working arrangements, and there are alternative candidates for dominators under the structural domination account. For example, we might consider the brothel keeper or pimp who takes a cut of every transaction, or the manager of the strip club who takes a fee. These all might exercise significant control over a sex workers' labour capacity. Setting these other candidates aside, however, as I am primarily concerned here with independent sex workers working without third-party involvement. In this case, the client appears as the dominator in this instance for Vrousalis.[87]

3.3 Capitalist State as Regulator

For the exploitation between client and sex worker to be structural, this needs to be a regulated form of domination. Recall that Vrousalis takes a regulator to be any agent, role or internalised norm that contributes *appropriately* to the creation, reproduction, or perpetuation of the power relation between dominator and dominated.[88] In the case of sex work, there are a few likely candidates for regulator(s). For example, we might consider sexist norms to be a regulator of this interaction, particularly if we were to consider patriarchy as a relevant structure.

86. This is adapted from Vrousalis' definition of the non-servitude proviso and taken from his example of such in *lecherous offer* where he argues that in this case clients violate the non-servitude proviso, see Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 39–42, 78–80.

87. The client may be the dominator even if he does not exploit her, as in the case of *lecherous offer*. This is in part due to the claim that he violates the non-servitude proviso.

88. Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage,' 45; Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 94.

Many sex workers are women and many clients are men, and there has been a dearth of feminist analysis discussing the role that sexist norms play in this interaction.[89] In his discussion of *lecherous offer*, Vrousalis genders actor B (the sex worker) as female by using she/her pronouns and he genders actor A (the client) as male using he/him pronouns.[90] This suggests his analysis is sensitive to reflecting the gendered dynamic in the distribution of work in sex work. Though Vrousalis is primarily concerned with capitalist exploitation, which I will get on to shortly, he leaves open the potential for his understanding of structural domination to be compatible with patriarchal and white supremacist/racial domination. For instance, he says of his general triadic account of structural domination that, 'this definition fares well in many of the cases that exercise liberals, republicans, and feminists.'[91]

Vrousalis takes the capitalist state to be the regulator and an essential background condition to structural capitalist exploitation. This is to say that we are not simply looking at the interactions only between A and B, but when these interactions become structural, they require a regulator. In the case of capitalist exploitation, Vrousalis argues that the concept of capitalism presupposes the concept of the state.[92] To return to the *lecherous offer* example, this would be an interagential case. This is to say that agent A is argued to have unilateral control over B's purposiveness, but that this interaction lacks a regulator.[93] To make this case structural, we would need the addition of the (capitalist) state to impart structure to that relation, as the 'only coercive enforcer of property rights expressively and morally

89. To name only a few, see Nussbaum, *Sex & Social Justice*; Catharine A MacKinnon, 'Prostitution and Civil Rights'; Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy.'

90. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 78–80.

91. Vrousalis, 100.

92. Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage,' 104.

93. For a similar exploration of this with cookshops as an example and a further explanation of the capitalist state as the necessary regulator, see Vrousalis, 101–105.

implicated in the reproduction of that dyad.'[94]

4 Concerns About Structural Domination Account

This section discusses three central concerns with Vrousalis' structural domination account when applied to sex work. The first, discussed in subsection 4.1, is considering sex work identical in structure to other kinds of work and supplementing the boss/worker dynamic onto the client/sex worker dynamic. The second, discussed in subsection 4.2, is that identifying the capitalist state as the regulator may be problematic when sex work relations and the (capitalist) state are further interrogated. The third, discussed in subsection 4.3, is that identifying clients as the dominator in the interaction could also prove problematic, given that this is based on Vrousalis' non-servitude proviso.

4.1 The Structure of Sex Work

Vrousalis' account identifies sex workers as the dominated party, and in the process, he develops an account that treats sex work as comparable to other forms of (paid) work. As explained in section 3, Vrousalis' account of how sex workers are dominated and therefore exploited in many typical interactions replicates the typical worker/boss dynamic between client/sex worker. In this subsection, I discuss the problems with treating sex work as directly comparable to other kinds of (paid) work.

Identifying the client as a possible stand-in for a boss/capitalist in the worker/boss dynamic is common to many Marxian-inspired accounts of exploitation. A similar kind of move is made in the unequal transfer account discussed in section 1 that many Marxist feminist accounts subscribe to. What, then, is the problem with

94. Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage,' 105.

making the client analogous to a boss/capitalist in these accounts of exploitation? It does not necessarily appear like a problem that our accounts should want to avoid the pitfalls of a kind of sex work exceptionalism by pivoting towards treating sex work like any other kind of work.[95] At first glance, it appears to make sense to map onto sex work similar kinds of dynamics that are present in other kinds of work. There are also several added benefits to approaching sex work as not dissimilar to other kinds of work, as discussed in chapter three.

At least under current legal and political structures, however, sex work is not as easily comparable to, say, factory work. Its structure and the understanding of the exploitation of its workers are likely to be more complicated. Sex work is a kind of work that is criminalised to various extents in different places in the world, and this changes the nature of the work too. In subsection 4.3 I discuss in further detail the difficulty of identifying clients as analogous to bosses/capitalists. In the case of independent sex workers, there is a challenge in how the boss/worker dynamic is translated across to sex work.

Spoken word poet and activist Kay Kassirer explains the complexities of the dynamic between sex worker and client well in their poem 'Sex Work Client', published in the sex worker poetry collection *Hustling Verse*:

> sex work client does not understand / exactly how sex work / works / his sugar baby website profile says "no escorts" / i message him anyways[96]

Kassier explains that the work of sex work is often 'more acting than sex'. Mac and Smith's analysis of sex work in *Revolting Prostitutes* supports this. The

95. Berg, 'Working for Love, Loving for Work,' For a discussion of 'sex work exceptionalism', see.

96. Kay Kassirer, 'Sex Work Client,' in *Hustling Verse*, ed. Amber Dawn and Justin Ducharme (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019), 151.

authors note how sex workers often purposefully blur the lines between sex for money and sex for pleasure, if only so that they can get paid.[97] Sex workers' marketing of their services, in order to preserve the fantasy that they are as invested in the encounter for sexual reasons, must obscure their reasons for seeking this work.[98] Resulting from the blurring of the lines between paid sex and free sex, Kassirer points out that:

> sex work client does not know he is a client / prefers to think himself boss / prefers to think himself in charge[99]

But whilst the client 'prefers to think himself boss', Kassirer reminds us that we should not make the same mistake. They point out that it was them (the sex worker), that 'decide[d] how much money I will be paid for my labour here tonight'.[100] Kassirer's perhaps imagined, perhaps recounted, sex worker and client interaction serves to challenge our assumptions that he is 'in charge'. Rather, the sex worker set the rates of pay, and

> as if he did not just buy me steak dinner, roasted yukon potatoes, and three glasses / of 1995 view chateaux rouge / as if he did not just bring me a brand-new dress / and a pair of knock off jimmy choos[101]

Kassirer lists what the sex worker gains from the exchange: expensive wine, dinner, and a new dress, in addition to their own rates of pay. Mac and Smith introduce us to an empowered figure of a sex worker — they term her the 'Erotic Professional'. For Mac and Smith, the Erotic Professional is easily identifiable as a more vocal and visible figure of the sex workers' rights movement, position-

97. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 32–33.
98. Smith and Mac, 32.
99. Kassirer, 'Sex Work Client,' 151.
100. Kassirer, 151.
101. Kassirer, 151.

ing herself as answering a 'vocational calling' with the sex work she does.[102] The work she does appears to have little to do with being paid at all, as she emphasises the desire and pleasure she experiences in her work. Through

> downplaying economic coercion and instead emphasising her pleasure and desire, the Erotic Professional attempts to make commercial sex more closely resemble the sex life that society is more ready to endorse — that for which women receive no payment.[103]

The Erotic Professional and this kind of sex-positive politics push the economic aspect of sex work further from view. It is meant to appear as if she is as invested in the sexual encounter as the client, and not because she gains financially. As Mac and Smith argue, by having sex workers appear as interested in the sexual encounter for their own erotic pleasure, raising questions about working conditions, safety mechanisms, and negotiating power spoils the fantasy.[104]

Before embracing a reading of 'Sex Work Client' that supports an empowerment view of sex work, Kassirer subverts any such understanding. Foreshadowed in their mention of the 'knock off jimmy choos' to undermine the luxury of the exchange being constructed, the latter half of Kassirer's poem reminds readers of the power imbalances that prefigure in the sex work/client exchange. The client tells the sex worker narrator 'what it means / to be a woman' in an attempt to relate to the 'feminine struggle'. The client swiftly follows up his sage advice with: 'he says i should wear skirts / and stilettos more often'.[105] Even if, as Berg points out, it often feels 'out of time' with the feminist movement to speak of gendered binaries in sex work. There still remains a relevance to speak of masculinities

102. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 31.
103. Smith and Mac, 31.
104. Smith and Mac, 31–33.
105. Kassirer, 'Sex Work Client,' 152.

and femininities regarding sex work.[106] Kassirer reminds readers of the gendered dynamics of the exchange. This is perhaps even more important in the case of 'Sex Work Client'. Kassirer is a non-binary sex worker and their poetry has been described as autobiographical.[107] There is more to the lines 'sex work client isn't afraid / to tell me what it means / to be a woman'.[108] when understood in the context of the author as non-binary and femme presenting (possibly for work).

'Sex Work Client' ends with:

> sex work client pays for sex / because spending money is easier / than
> adding up everything / his toxic masculinity / has cost him[109]

Kassirer broadens out the exchange to speak to men who pay for sex more generally. Their analysis of the interaction points out the gendered dynamics at play, and that sex work is underpinned by patriarchal relations. As many radical feminists have often pointed out: men do not *need* to buy sex.[110] It is a luxury and not something essential for the men purchasing it. Vrousalis' analysis of sex work has also noted the presence of this asymmetry of need in the commercial sex industry as sex workers need to sell sex more than men need to buy it.[111] This is also the case when we think of work more broadly: Workers need to sell their labour more than capitalists necessarily need to buy it. This is where it is often mistakenly identified that men are not actually the *demand* for commercial sex but that they represent the *supply* in the equation. Mac and Smith argue that: 'for sex workers, clients represent the supply of resources into our lives.'[112]

As Kassirer points out, the sex work client is not the boss, he 'prefers to think

106. Berg, 'Free Sex,' 507–508.
107. *Kay Kassirer*, https://kaykassirer.com/.
108. Kassirer, 'Sex Work Client,' 151.
109. Kassirer, 152.
110. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 53.
111. Mac and Smith discuss the asymmetry of need in the sex trades, see Smith and Mac, 53.
112. Smith and Mac, 53–54.

himself in charge'.[113] For the sex worker, it is more about what she gains financially from the exchange. However, we should not forget the unequal relations that foreground the transaction.[114]

4.2 The Role of The State as Regulator

I do not disagree with Vrousalis in identifying the capitalist state as the regulator for most kinds of work. My objection here is not about the claim that capitalist exploitation as a form of structural domination entails the concept of the state, as Vrousalis has elaborated on it.[115] Rather, I want to problematise the role of the capitalist state narrowly conceived as a regulator in sex worker/client interactions specifically.

Sex work is, of course, a capitalist enterprise. As Vrousalis says, sex workers sell sex for a 'market determined' price and that this 'tend[s] to reflect a labour content lower than the median or average wage'.[116] This leads him to argue that sexual labour will tend to flow from poor to rich, from sex worker to client. Considered *structurally*, Vrousalis argues that:

> as a matter of structural necessity, capitalism confronts workers with a dilemma: choose between no work — unemployment — and dominated work. Sex workers, like most workers under capitalism, grasp the second horn of this dilemma.[117]

The capitalist state figures here in the background as the regulator of this kind of structural domination. I take no issue with the 'double-bind condition' that

113. Kassirer, 'Sex Work Client,' 151.
114. The analysis presented in this subsection was adapted from my MPhil research, see Westwood, *Overcoming the Impasse*.
115. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 101–105.
116. Vrousalis, 79.
117. Vrousalis, 80.

Vrousalis elaborates upon here, as I discuss in more detail in subsection 5.2. However, I am interested in asking: Does the capitalist state act strictly as a regulator in sex work interactions?

Though sex work is a capitalist enterprise, the (capitalist) state does not have as simple a relationship with this kind of work as it may have with other 'straight' work. Although I lack the space here to elaborate fully on the complex relationship between sex work and the capitalist state, it suffices to say that this relationship is not one simply of 'regulator' as it may be for other kinds of 'straight' work. This is to suggest that the capitalist state may be better considered to have a potential 'push/pull' effect in sex worker/client interactions rather than strictly serving as a regulator.

That sex work is a capitalist enterprise does mean that this will be facilitated by market forces. The capitalist state might even adopt policies that enable sex work as a heavily regulated industry, as in the case of legalised jurisdictions. The capitalist state could also adopt policies leading to the full decriminalisation of sex work, which might come closest to the understanding of its place simply as a regulator meant in the way Vrousalis terms it.[118] Sex work also faces considerable 'pull' forces from the capitalist state that serve to frustrate the client/sex worker interaction, such as through its criminalisation to varying extents. The criminalisation of sex work, such as through laws targeting sex workers or their clients, has forced sex work further underground.[119] Rather than stopping sex work, criminalisation has served to obstruct sex worker/client interactions though not stop them entirely. Obviously, this is a rough sketch of the relationship that the capitalist

118. Decriminalisation does ostensibly remove all criminal laws pertaining to sex work, shifting its regulation into labour and civil law like other work. However, for many undocumented migrant sex workers, the threat of criminalisation often remains.

119. For some examples discussing the criminalising state and sex work, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Grant, *Playing the Whore*; Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'

state may have with sex work, and further elaboration is required. However, the point is that the role of the capitalist state is not static with respect to sex work. To understand this work better as an instance of structural domination, it is necessary to generate a more complex picture of the capitalist state, particularly as it relates to the criminalisation of this work.

4.3 The Role of Clients as Dominators

In this subsection, I problematise identifying clients as the dominators in the structural domination account and I identify some implications this may have. Before proceeding, a clarificatory note is needed. In problematising clients as dominators, and therefore exploiting sex workers in the structural domination account, I am not saying that clients never dominate sex workers nor do they never fulfil some criteria of exploiting them. My aim here is not to let clients 'off the hook' as it were for the potential harms they cause in sex work interactions. Instead, I want to invite us to interrogate more closely the sex worker/client relationship, how this compares to other work relations, and how concepts of exploitation and domination are translated to this specific kind of work.

Vrousalis notes in his *lecherous offer* example that labour flows in sex work from poor to rich in most cases. This is to say that labour flows from sex worker to client. As I noted in section 3, this is important for Vrousalis in identifying whether exploitation is occurring in this interaction. He argues that domination is present in sex worker/client interactions as it violates the non-servitude proviso. For Vrousalis, what distinguishes whether this interaction meets the criteria for exploitation is the labour flow, and he argues that in most typical cases it follows what we would see of most work — from poor to rich, from sex worker to client.

This begs an interesting line of inquiry: Who are the clients? As I have identified,

Vrousalis compares clients to bosses/capitalists. Certainly, that might be the case in *lecherous offer*, as the client is a billionaire. But when it comes to other kinds of sex worker/client interactions, are clients typically rich? Of course, this is a difficult question to answer and the nature of sex work itself makes it difficult to get reliable data on who clients are and their demographic make-up. However, there have been some studies showing that the demographic make-up of men who purchase sex is not necessarily 'rich' in all cases.[120] Vrousalis supplies no empirical studies to support the idea that labour typically flows from poor to rich in sex work, suggesting that clients are significantly better off than sex workers and whether this translates to every cultural context, for example. My suggestion here is not, again, to defend clients. It is instead to indicate the problem of essentialism in analysing sex work this way.[121] Without analysing sex work in a greater variety of contexts, we are unlikely to be able to claim how it 'typically' operates as Vrousalis has done.

Clients are also argued to violate the non-servitude proviso which is what makes this interaction an instance of domination, even if it is exploitative. As with other forms of work, Vrousalis establishes this as a relationship of servitude. Vrousalis does clarify that such relations can be entered into willingly, and they may even make you better off.[122] Clients are again made analogous to bosses, and I want to press on here the idea that this relationship means that:

120. For example, Shrage cites White's 1990 study that shows proletarian men purchasing sex from proletarian women. Shrage also further discusses the different cultural contexts and class differences that occur in sex work. Bernstein's study of class-privileged women and men working in sex work may also be of interest to challenge constructions of sex workers only as economically and socially disadvantaged. See Laurie Shrage, 'Comment on Overall's "What's Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work",' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (1994): 566–67; Elizabeth Bernstein, 'Sex Work for the Middle Classes,' *Sexualities* 10, no. 4 (2007).

121. For more on the problems of this kind of approach to sex work and its problems, see Shrage, 'Comment on Overall's "What's Wrong with Prostitution?",' 567.

122. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, Chapter 3.

> [T]here are things you can order or get me — 'bind' me — to do over which I have no say, and over which you are not (legally or conventionally) obligated to consider my judgements, interests, or goals.[123]

Is the relationship between client and sex worker one of unilateral control? This interpretation of the service exchange between sex worker and client appears similar to another idea that permeates discourse over sex work: the idea of *purchased consent*.[124] This is to say that, with the exchange of money, the client has gained control over the sex worker for an allotted period of time. As Mac and Smith argue, this appears easy enough to agree with and is an idea supported by even alleged defenders of sex workers, however, it has several harmful implications. It reinforces the idea that those who sell sex give up all bodily boundaries when they sell sex.[125] This idea risks discounting the potential for believing a sex worker could be raped during the interaction, and it misunderstands how sex work operates. Within sex work, there is a shared expectation of negotiation. Mac and Smith argue that this shared expectation is evidenced by sex workers' advertising that they provide different services and the presence of industry-specific acronyms to reflect this. For example, the appearance of OWO (oral without i.e. oral sex without a condom) on advertisements speaks to a shared expectation between sex worker and client that she offers that specific service for a specified cost.[126] Understood this way, a client could not pay her and do anything he wanted. Rather, there is a shared expectation between both the sex worker and client that they will negotiate what services are offered.[127]

123. Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*, 41.
124. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 43–44.
125. Smith and Mac, 44.
126. Smith and Mac, 44.
127. Smith and Mac, 43–44.

5 Sex Work as Anti-Work

A nuanced interpretation of sex work as a kind of work presents problems for understanding exploitation. In exploring the complexities of the work of sex work, it is revealed how sex work can also be a site of resistance to exploitation.[128] In particular, it may offer a site of resistance to exploitation experienced in other kinds of 'straight' work.[129] 'Straight' work is used here to refer to jobs outside of the sex industry. In her book *Porn Work*, Berg reflects on her interviews with porn workers. She notes that many emphasised that they had sought out this work specifically above other 'straight' work.[130] Several interview participants explained that they pursued porn not because they could not find another way of making a living, but because they were unhappy with the 'straight' jobs they had been doing before.[131] Berg notes that, for some of them, the hope of sex work delivered.[132]

This brings me back to the point from Berg in how she theorises porn work that I discussed in the introduction to this chapter:

> Dialectical thinking understands contradiction as the meat of our story rather than as a wrinkle to be smoothed over. Porn work can be better than straight work and also just as extractive. Both things are true, and that is the point.[133]

To understand sex work and exploitation, contradictions are not to be swept aside. As Berg points out, they are precisely 'the meat of our story'. Making sense of how sex work can be extractive and exploitative, whilst also providing a space for

128. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 584.
129. Carlisle, 584.
130. Berg, *Porn Work*.
131. Berg, 25.
132. Berg, 25.
133. Berg, 5.

workers' to have 'freedom' in their job is the crux of what this section explores.

The critical perspective on work contained within some declarations of the work of sex work are amongst the most appealing and fruitful for those of us who want to construct a critique of work more generally. This perspective, often termed the 'anti-work account', is useful for developing a critique of work relations under capitalism. As I outlined in the previous chapter, sex work has been conceptualised as work from a range of positions. For example, the liberal 'erotic professional' to queer accounts all emphasise that there is work involved in the sex trades. Many such accounts have emphasised that sex work is just like other forms of work, and can therefore fit neatly into existing paradigms. Instead, some accounts have sought to identify that though 'sex work is work', the 'work' here is something to be troubled.

In this final section, I propose three considerations for thinking about sex work and exploitation. The first, outlined in subsection 5.1, is about reading sex work as a form of 'anti-work'. This develops insights from anti-work writings by sex workers and attempts to capture sex work as a potential site of creativity and resistance to the work ethic. The second, outlined in subsection 5.2, is to emphasise the space for human agency in changing and shaping work. I draw on a framework proposed by legal scholar Katie Cruz for conceptualising how work constrains our freedom and what space we have for agency.[134] The third, outlined in subsection 5.3, proposes that accounts of exploitation in sex work should focus on ongoing worker struggle. Drawing on Berg's work, I discuss how the language of 'struggle' can be used to focus attention on the ways in which workers occupy a space that is limited and constrained whilst also being a site of creativity and potential.[135]

134. Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism.'
135. Berg uses the term 'struggle', one that I adopt and explain my usage of in subsection 5.3.

5.1 Reading Sex Work as Anti-Work

If we are to understand harms such as exploitation or precarity in sex work, there is the preceding challenge of making sense of what sort of work sex work is. As Carlisle argues, this is a foundational question for those of us hoping to destigmatise, decarcerate, and decriminalise the sex trades.[136] There are many attempts to make sense of sex work within one paradigm or another, when the work itself resists easy definition.[137] Carlisle argues in her paper 'Sex Work is Star Shaped: Antiwork Politics and the Value of Embodied Knowledge', that the question of what sort of work is sex work is one that cannot really be answered. She takes Ray Filar's Marxist feminist account as an example of this difficulty and uses this to explore the limits of our approaches to sex work.[138] Filar assumes racial capitalism to be the background conditions in which prostitution appears to Marxist feminists as reproductive labour. With this, they demonstrate how sex work's complexity necessitates an account sensitive to its specific working conditions. This leads Filar to locate prostitution within the nexus of precarity, criminalisation, low wages, and variable agency.[139] Filar's project is an important piece, and one I have drawn on to discuss problems with the social reproduction account. As Carlisle notes, Filar's account contributes to the conversation about protecting sex workers' lives. Despite this, Carlisle argues that where Filar's account fails is that it does not look to understand sex work as a potential site of creativity, as well as a site of robust anti-work politics.[140]

As Berg indicates, this kind of thinking about politics and the kinds of action it entails has also been referred to as a kind of 'infrapolitics' which is elaborated upon by Scott, see James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), Chapter 7; Berg, *Porn Work*, 3–11.

136. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 584.
137. For example, see the previous chapter that explored the difficulties with defining sex work.
138. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 584.
139. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped'; Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?,' 584.
140. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 584.

Recall the discussion from chapter two on the slogan used by the ECP: 'all work is prostitution'.[141] This was used to highlight that work, even in its best forms, is not something benign. Sex work, and all work, should be thought of as forced upon us by the conditions of contemporary capitalism because we have to work to make ends meet. This challenges ideas that sex workers are uniquely exploited or that their work should be exceptionalised. Considering that 'all work is prostitution' is a position intended to reveal not only that sex work occurs under bad conditions, but that work in general shares these conditions. Contained within this critical view is the refusal of work and the rejection of work under capitalism. As Selma James argues regarding the Occupation of Holy Cross church: 'returning to work ... is never a victory'.[142] The WFH and ECP sought to construct a critique of work under capitalism. In addition to demanding wages (and the abolition of the prostitution laws), their aims were to also *refuse work*.[143] More recently, this position has been taken up by several sex worker theorists looking to construct anti-work accounts of sex work.[144] What these perspectives have offered, as Helen Hester and Zahra Stardust argue, this is an analysis that

> insist[s] that labour itself be perpetually interrogated, resisted, and problematised; it is work in general (and not sex work in particular) that deserves to be abolished.[145]

Here I want to discuss how this perspective offers critical resources for understanding sex work, exploitation, and what it may offer for constructing a critique

141. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'For prostitutes and against prostitution' [by the Power of Women Collective in London], catalogue ref. ECP/18*.
142. James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord*, Section: Winning.
143. See Weeks' discussion on the WFH campaign and their demand for the refusal of work, K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, Chapter 3.
144. For some examples, see Merteuil, 'Sex Work Against Work'; Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World'; Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped'; Hester and Stardust, 'Sex Work in a Postwork Imaginary'; Babylon and Berg, 'Erotic Labor Within and Without Work: An Interview With femi babylon.'
145. Hester and Stardust, 'Sex Work in a Postwork Imaginary,' 69.

of work in general.

Sex work appears as a rational choice to economic circumstances, as mundane as that can seem.[146] This is to say that people may choose sex work because they need money or other resources, just as they might 'choose' any other job.[147] However, considering sex work as a possible site of resistance to other forms of exploitation recognises that whilst this work may contain precarity, people are also frequently seeking 'freedom' from other forms of work and are making pragmatic decisions about their own lives.[148] This may be through gaining more control over their work, working hours, and working conditions.

Many sex workers' own experiences speak to understanding their work this way. For example, when considering the choice between cleaning toilets for a living or sex work, some would always opt for the latter. As sex worker Nickie Roberts argued in the 1980s:

> Working in crummy factories for disgusting pay was the most degrading and exploitative work I ever did in my life ... I think there should be another word for the kind of work working class people do people; something to differentiate it from the work middle class people do; the ones who have careers. All I can think of is *drudgery* ... why should I have to put up with a middle class feminist asking me why I didn't "do anything — scrub toilets even?" than become a stripper? What's so liberating about cleaning up other people's shit?[149]

As Hester and Stardust point out, choosing sex work and refusing to submit to more 'respectable' forms of labour — like scrubbing toilets, it would seem — is

146. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 49.
147. I have used quote marks here around 'choose' to indicate that under systems of capitalism we are forced to work, for many of the reasons outlined in this chapter.
148. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped'; Berg, 'Reading Gigs Dialectically.'
149. Nickie Roberts cited in Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 49.

a defiant act that expresses these anti-work tendencies.[150] By identifying that sex workers might seek out this work to gain more control over their working lives is not to make this kind of work a form of 'empowerment' (sexual or otherwise). Narratives of (particularly sexual) empowerment in sex work equally fail in representing the varied experiences of sex workers. As sex workers' and survivors of sexual abuse have written in the zine 'Mine to Define':

> Our lives are complex and often hard to put in to words due to the stigma, shame and guilt associated to both sex work and (sexual) abuse. And what sometimes makes it even harder are these un-nuanced discourses and debates on sex work and prostitution: Happy hooker or victim. Empowered or abused. Always one or the other. Never both, never neither.[151]

It is possible to recognise that some sex workers certainly do see their work as 'sacred' and enjoy the sex, indeed they may even present it as 'empowering'.[152] However, understanding sex work only through a dichotomy of either empowered or abused/exploited is unhelpful and lacks nuance.

Identifying work in the sex industry with the label 'sex work' also potentialy trades in a kind of respectability politics.[153] Pluma Sumaq, a sex worker and writer, poses an alternative viewpoint for us to consider in her essay 'A Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes'. She writes that

> Creat[ing] a language around and an image of a "Sex Worker" that is

150. Hester and Stardust, 'Sex Work in a Postwork Imaginary,' 76–77.
151. Sex Worker Open University, 'Mine to Define Zine,' 3, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58cea5cf197aea5216413671/t/58ceb4ffff7c501ac42c5ddc/1489941812006/mine-to-define-web-edition.pdf.
152. For example, Mac and Smith's 'Erotic Professional'. For a full discussion of the associated problems with this approach, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 31–39.
153. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 575; Babylon and Berg, 'Erotic Labor Within and Without Work: An Interview With femi babylon.'

> normalized and free of stigma did not seem very revolutionary to me. To me it said, "accept us because we are just like you." *Well, what if we're not like you? What then will you do to us?*[154]

The emphasis placed on empowerment narratives in sex work are intended to resist identifying it as a site of exploitation and a location of a range of other harms. Sometimes purposefully and sometimes by omission, this suggests that work must be something enjoyable and good.[155] Work is therefore portrayed as something aspirational, without a full recognition of its problems. Again, we are left with either happy hooker or victim.

In the article 'Whores at the End of the World,' Sonya Aragon asks: 'What would it look like to move on from the project of demanding that sex work is work?'[156] This prompts us to consider a different line of inquiry: What would it look like for us to think of sex work beyond the paradigm of work, as it currently exists and has been made? As Aragon argues, the focus on the decriminalisation of sex work by the sex workers' rights movement has necessitated that we position the work as a job like any other, requiring a struggle for workers' rights as bequeathed by a legislative body.[157] The fight to decriminalise sex work has also been a question about making people safer in the here and now too, as it represents a harm reduction approach to sex work. However, as an approach, this has largely been dependent upon an acceptance that sex work is work, just like any other kind of work.

Some sex worker theorists have pushed us to consider whether we might 'look beyond' decriminalisation (as dependent on sex work viewed like other kinds of

154. Sumaq, 'A Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes: Complicity & The Beloved Community,' 17.
155. Weeks notes how these 'productivist' tendencies are sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit in feminist and Marxian theorising, see K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 5.
156. Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World.'
157. Aragon.

work) and beyond a work lens. As Aragon argues, 'It's not that I don't stand with the working class — of course I do — but that I don't view assimilation into state-sanctioned professionalism as our end goal.'[158] Aragon muses on what another possible end goal could be. She asks us to consider the possibility of moving away from demanding 'sex work is work', towards a politics of crime. She argues that she does not want sex workers to

> relinquish our criminal potential. I want underworld bonds, and co-conspirators, and money hidden in shoeboxes, to be redistributed to enemies of the state — the ones who will never receive a stimulus check, because they've got nothing on the books to begin with.[159]

Though she notes she is not sure if this criminal kind of class traitorship is possible or whether it is valuable, her approach asks us to consider sex work beyond the work paradigm. Aragon cites M. E. O'Brien's essay 'Junkie Communism', which makes the case for a communism based on the unconditional value of our lives not on the dignity of work.[160]

In their book *Revolting Prostitutes*, Juno Mac and Molly Smith follow a similar line of argument, stating that political recognition of sex work *as work* and providing sex workers with legal protections is the first step towards the *refusal of that work*.[161] Here they are drawing on the feminists of the Wages for Housework movement. As I outlined in chapter two, the Wages for Housework movement was an internationalist, anti-capitalist, and feminist movement founded on the principle of rejecting an economic order that relies upon women's un-recognised domestic labour.[162] Mac and Smith, in their understanding of the WFH movement,

158. Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World.'
159. Aragon.
160. Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World'; M.E. O'Brien, 'Junkie Communism,' Commune Mag, July 2019, https://communemag.com/junkie-communism/.
161. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 54–55.
162. For a comprehensive history of the Wages for Housework movement, see Toupin, *Wages for*

are invoking the Marxist feminist Silvia Federici — who wrote of campaign saying, 'To say that we want wages for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it'.[163] For Federici and others in the wages for housework campaign, they did not dream of having their work only recognised 'as work' for this to be accepted within existing frameworks. Naming domestic labour as work, and having it recognised as such, was an integral first step to refusing this work. For both the Wages for Housework movement and sex worker organising around the refusal of work, this way of rethinking work is part of a project trying to make under-recognised labour visible as part of a longer-term project to resist it.[164]

To consider sex work as a form of 'anti-work', or that it may embody a kind of anti-work politics, is to leave open the possibility that sex work can be a site of creativity and describes exiting the coercion of a work ethic that 'renders subjects supremely functional for capitalist purposes.'[165] As Carlisle points out, this is not to say that productive activity or putting in labour are not valuable pursuits that people use to sustain their lives or environment (although often it is mandatory that they must engage with them for these reasons). An anti-work politics presumes that, in non-exploitative environments, meaningful work would still get done.[166] It is in this way it is not 'against work' per se. Rather, Carlisle argues that anti-work politics includes struggling against overworking to meet basic needs and against a coercive culture that assigns moral value based on people's ability to conform to a strict and often ableist work ethic.[167]

Housework.

163. Federici, 'Wages Against Housework,' 19; See also the discussion of Mac and Smith's position and the discussion of the refusal of work by Srinivasan Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, Chapter 2; Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 156–59.

164. Federici, 'Wages Against Housework'; K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, Chapter 3.

165. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 12; Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 584.

166. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 584.

167. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 584–85; K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

5.2 Making Space for Agency

It is worth pointing out that I do not disagree with the distinction between *constitutively* and *contingently* free actions made by Vrousalis. I do not disagree, at a fundamental level, with the 'double-bind condition' that he makes the case for. As I noted in a footnote earlier, some of these insights border on the blindingly obvious to many feminists. If I choose not to wear makeup, shave my legs, or whatever other decision I might make in an attempt to 'break free' from patriarchal shackles, I am still aware that I have not escaped patriarchal domination.

Rather, I want to press on this distinction between only constitutively and contingently free actions as to what might matter to us when thinking about exploitation, relevant forms of freedom, and precarious work. Some people might be more or less dominated in a relevant sense by social systems. This is not to entirely remove the distinction made between constitutively and contingently free actions. Rather, it is to recognise that though there may be a 'ceiling' on the kinds of actions that could be achieved, there are a range of actions in between that actors could choose which might be more or less dominated. This acknowledges there may be a greater spectrum of how 'free' these unfree actions are which is relevant to us, particularly when we are concerned with social systems of domination and the choices available to marginalised peoples. For example, the woman with the feminist husband does not destroy the patriarchy with this action. However, the rich, white, able-bodied, cisgender, woman with a feminist husband under patriarchy is less dominated and in a less meaningful way than some of her non-white, poor, trans, queer, and disabled counterparts. Many of the insights from intersectionality and black feminist theorising have been about how our social position makes a significant difference to the ways in which we are dominated at different

times.[168]

In applying this to work, one way to conceptualise the ability to control one's own labour in work is to imagine this existing on a spectrum. In drawing on Marxist feminist insights about work, Katie Cruz presents a spectrum from 'freedom' to unfreedom in work. She understands unfreedom at one end broadly as a total loss of control in work.[169] This might be characterised by forced labour, slavery, or trafficking for example. At the other end of the spectrum, is 'freedom' in work. The quotation marks surrounding 'freedom' indicate that work in conditions of capitalist (re)production mean we cannot be in full control of our work. In keeping with Vrousalis' account, this would be to recognise the existence of the double-bind condition. However, Cruz recognises that there are relative 'freedoms' to be won within this system. In this case, this would be achieving maximum control over working conditions within our existing paradigm. The spectrum between 'freedom' and unfreedom allows for us to represent a range of experiences from a total loss of control in work to those who have gained the maximum amount of control permitted within current conditions.[170]

Conceptualising control in work as a spectrum between 'freedom' and unfreedom offers a way to critique the existing structures of work, as well as a way to conceive of the limits to what freedoms we can gain within existing paradigms. It provides a wide scope for critiquing a range of experiences in work under current conditions, not only those at the extreme end of unfreedom. This framework also implicitly recognises the problem where, to gain full freedom in work, we would

168. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Second Edition (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014).
169. Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism,' 66–67.
170. Cruz, 66–67.

have to transform all existing structures surrounding work.[171] However, through conceptualising work this way, it offers recognition of a 'ceiling' to the number of freedoms that can be gained under current structures whilst still proposing to improve work in the 'here and now', as we can consider some work under current conditions more 'free' than others. In this way, this framing allows for the recognition of human agency in how social and power relations shape work.

5.3 Struggle

The title of this chapter refers to 'struggle', a word deliberately chosen over other words like 'resistance'. In the introduction to *Porn Work*, Berg notes that the language of 'struggle' rather than 'resistance' is preferable. Resistance implies reactivity.[172] Instead, workers are often one step ahead as they occupy a position as both agents and victims of economic transformation.[173] She argues:

> Management sets work rules, and workers find ways to flout them. Workers make demands, and managers, when pressed, respond to them. Sometimes, on all sides, this has unintended consequences.[174]

Workers might organise in formal ways, say by forming a union, or they might be agents of struggle in more individual ways. To take an example of this, Berg refers to the ways in which porn workers often are caught in a cat-and-mouse type game as they look to find loopholes in their employment contracts before their employers can overhaul them.[175] As Berg argues, many of the individual actions of workers like flouting managerial rules at work or just taking more time back for

171. I am not saying that we should not transform all systems around work. I am identifying that this is a spectacularly high bar before we recognise that there are concrete wins to be had in the present.
172. Berg, *Porn Work*, 6.
173. Berg, 5–6.
174. Berg, 5.
175. Berg, 6.

themselves are not necessarily militant confrontations with patriarchal capitalism. But, they can take aim at some of the foundational assumptions it rests upon, like in the case of sex work that sex should be private and free.[176]

Marxist feminist theorist Mariarosa Dalla Costa does well to remind us when thinking of struggle that, 'Every opportunity is a good one.'[177] This approach re-orients our thinking towards a different kind of politics and how 'resistance' is viewed. This widens up the scope of where to look for examples of struggle. As Nancy Fraser argues, orienting ourselves towards this kind of approach can enable us to focus on what she terms 'boundary struggles'.[178] These are examples of struggles outside the sphere of direct production which might include organising around housework, childcare, and eldercare.[179] The 'crafty strategies' used by sex workers offer another example of such 'boundary struggles'.[180] The alternative to focusing on ongoing struggle risks meaning that only militant confrontations with patriarchal capitalism or more formal organisations of labour be taken seriously for analysis or viewed as successful. However, such strategies are seldom available to those most marginalised, and this may be shortsighted in thinking about what 'resistance' to capitalism looks like.[181]

What does a focus on ongoing struggle mean when we think of workers coming into confrontation with the 'capitalist cage'? In the case of sex workers, whose work is often criminalised and traditional forms of organising can be difficult to access, what can 'struggle' mean for these workers? Survival for many can be thought of as a form of resistance especially when they exist in a system that seeks

176. Berg, *Porn Work*, 6.
177. Mariarosa Dalla Costa cited in Berg, 6.
178. Nancy Fraser, 'Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism,' *New Left Review* 86, no. 86 (2014): 68–70.
179. See Fraser, 'Behind Marx's Hidden Abode'; Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*.
180. Berg, *Porn Work*, 6–7.
181. This point is discussed in depth in the following chapter.

to destroy them. However, survival alone should not be automatically considered radical or revolutionary. In her article on militant care and radical care practices, this is a point that Berg picks up. Sex workers refusing their dehumanisation can be an act of revolt. Although, care that keeps us alive is not always radical on its own terms.[182] Berg argues that sex worker community care is at its most militant, and has the potential for revolutionary change, when it 'aims for keeping each other alive as a world building, rather than status quo sustaining project'.[183] Those on the margins, like sex workers or other criminalised workers, often showcase the creativity of what being an agent of struggle can look like. Through necessity, they have to adopt inventive strategies.[184] The language of struggle focuses our attention on the ways in which workers occupy a space that is at once limited and constrained but also can be thought of as a site of creativity and potential.

To offer up one example, Vanessa Carlisle discusses the founding of the Hookers Army of Los Angeles.[185] This is a group that 'offer[s] each other peer support and exchange self-defense skills'.[186] The group is founded on the principle that they are committed to enjoying their sex working lives, whilst recognising the trauma they have endured and may continue to experience at the hands of the state or clients. Though not offering a formal mobilisation of sex workers — the group is intentionally kept small to protect its members — the founding of such groups based on 'open kinship building and mutual aid'[187] serves as an example of the

182. Berg, "Today Solidarity Means, Fight Back",' 30–32.
183. Berg, 30.
184. Scott notes that these strategies may be because agents cannot yet risk all-out struggle. They may also be a part of a process of boundary testing to see what it is possible to get away with and what ground can be won. See Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.
185. Berg also offers a discussion of the Hookers Army of Los Angeles in her article addressing forms of militant care, see Vanessa Carlisle, 'How to Build a Hookers Army,' in *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival*, ed. Natalie West and Tina Horn (New York City: The Feminist Press, 2021); Berg, "Today Solidarity Means, Fight Back".'
186. Carlisle, 'How to Build a Hookers Army,' 299.
187. Carlisle, 299.

ways sex workers continue to organise around their labour in creative ways.

6 Chapter Summary

Despite the unequal transfer account being commonly cited in several work-oriented accounts of sex work, such as the Marxist feminist account, I have argued that it is unable to fully explain exploitation in sex work. I summarised that it is unable to account for whether exploitation necessarily must involve the forced transfer of surplus value and whether all forced transfers are exploitative. Additionally, in the case of sex work, its focus on the appropriation of surplus value by capitalists might limit its explanatory power in this specific work organisation.

In light of these criticisms, and a desire to explore the structural relationship of exploitation, Vrousalis' exploitation as domination account appears as a likely alternative explanation. In section 2, I reconstructed Vrousalis' structural domination account, and in section 3, I applied this to the specific case of sex work. In section 4, I discussed three key problems I found with this account when applied to sex work. In considering sex work exactly akin to other kinds of work and making the boss/worker dynamic analogous to the client/sex worker dynamic, I argue that this is liable to misrepresent the actual work structure. Further to this, I argue that identifying the capitalist state as the regulator may prove problematic when the role of the (capitalist) state is interrogated further in sex worker/client interactions. For example, sex work is often criminalised by the capitalist state which may further frustrate this interaction than foster it. Finally, I argue that identifying clients as the dominator in the interaction could also prove problematic, given that this is based on Vrousalis' non-servitude proviso. This understanding of the client/sex worker dynamic and presenting it as being a relationship of unilateral control risks further entrenching ideas of *purchased consent*.

In section 5, I proposed three considerations for thinking about sex work and exploitation. First, I outlined a reading of sex work as a form of 'anti-work'. I argued that it is important to take the insights from sex workers themselves seriously about their experiences of exploitation in the work itself. In doing so, it can reveal that sex work itself may have a more complicated relationship with the concept of 'exploitation' as some sex workers may find some 'freedom' in sex work from other forms of exploitation found in 'straight' work. Second, I drew on Katie Cruz's work to propose instead that we consider a framework that conceives of exploitation as a spectrum from 'freedom' to unfreedom. This is to recognise the 'ceiling' for what we might achieve under current conditions, as Vrousalis' structural domination account makes clear. However, this framework proposes a way for us to critique the existing structures of work whilst also seeking the 'freedoms' that can be gained within existing paradigms.

Third, and finally, I argue for the importance of a focus on struggle in theorising exploitation and sex work. Sex workers often occupy the position of either 'happy hooker' or victim. They are thought of either as (sexually) empowered or as victims of exploitation. An analysis that orients itself towards a focus on ongoing struggle and sex workers as agents of struggle, whilst recognising that they also occupy a position as victims of economic transformation is essential. As Natalie West argues, any analysis of sex work must leave room for:

> narratives for the unhappy hooker: the sex worker who chooses to work in the sex industries — compelled by the same economic necessity to work as any other type of worker — but who wants to improve the material conditions of their labor. If we cannot discuss the material conditions of our work, we cannot decrease violence in our industries. If we want to address the problems that sex workers face, we have to stop thinking of sex workers simply as self-directed individu-

> als choosing sex work as a joyful project of selfhood (the sex-positive liberal model), or as victim-criminals in need of carceral reform.[188]

An analysis oriented towards ongoing struggle is, of course, not to deny that workers are constrained under current conditions. Instead, it is to propose a way of looking at the problem of exploitation and work that centres a focus on ongoing struggle. This is to avoid a potentially totalising account that would mean the 'capitalist cage' is all-consuming. Similarly, it is also to avoid offering an account that romanticises this struggle. Workers are constrained in their actions in various ways. Berg points out that a focus on ongoing struggle aids our analysis in helping us to avoid the trappings of over-romanticising resistance on the one hand and overestimating managerial or capitalist state power on the other.[189] Although there is a potential for the 'capitalist cage' (and other relevant social structures) to be all-encompassing, we must consider the ways that sex workers are making pragmatic decisions about their own lives and struggling against these structures.

188. Natalie West, 'Introduction,' in *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival*, ed. Natalie West and Tina Horn (New York City: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2021), 12.
189. Berg, *Porn Work*, 4–5.

5 | Dis-Organising Sex Workers

In the introduction to her influential work on sex worker organising, Melinda Chateauvert notes that:

> Sex workers have been fighting for their right to work, for respect and justice, for a very long time. It would be extraordinary if members of the oldest profession had never complained, had never organised, or had never fought back.[1]

Mac and Smith remark something similar in *Revolting Prostitutes*, dubbing sex workers as the 'original feminists'.[2] They offer an example as far back as medieval Europe, where brothel workers formed guilds and engaged in occasional strikes and street protests in response to crackdowns and unacceptable working conditions.[3] Jill Nagle, editor of *Whores and Other Feminists*, argues that the connections between commercial sex and feminism are deep, complex, and transformative.[4] Sex workers' have had a long history of fighting for their rights and shaping social movements around the globe. For as long as there have been sex workers, there are examples of them coming together to organise.

In the previous chapter, I argued that it is necessary to consider how the language of struggle focuses our attention on how workers' occupy a space that is simultaneously limited and constrained by structural forces and also a site of creativity and potential. This focus on struggle means we are attuned to the individual actions of workers as well as the potential for collective action. This might mean understanding further how workers look to gain more control over their working

1. Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk*, 1.
2. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 5.
3. Smith and Mac, 5.
4. Nagle, 'Introduction,' 1.

day, such as by flouting certain managerial rules or engaging in 'shirking off'.[5] These acts of resistance are seldom large confrontations with patriarchal capitalism, but they are not to be dismissed.[6] Examples of struggle, such as those listed above, can be all-important for considering how workers might resist (capitalist) exploitation and seek more autonomy in their working lives. Particularly in the absence or availability of more collective responses, being attuned to how (sex) workers resist the work ethic and seek to live lives that do not render them only as 'subjects supremely functional for capitalist purposes.'[7]

For marginalised and criminalised communities like sex workers, collective action is often borne out of necessity. This means that taking care of one another can itself be an act of resistance. For example, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, sex workers were amongst the first to respond with large-scale mutual aid efforts.[8] These fundraising efforts and organising mutual support sit outside of the official government response and institutionalised sources of support.[9] Molly Simmons, a sex worker and founder of the Brooklyn Sex Workers Outreach Project, points out that 'Marginalized communities have always taken care of each other because the state explicitly excludes us.'[10]

This chapter explores the utility of the concept of 'dis-organising' for discussions about organising around marginalised and criminalised forms of work. The concept and practice was first explicated by incarcerated queer abolitionist Stephen Wilson in his essay 'Dis-Organising Prisons'.[11] The concept was later elaborated

5. For further discussions of this kind of worker resistance, see Paulsen, *Empty Labor: Idleness and Workplace Resistance*; Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson, *Organizational Misbehaviour* (London: Sage Publications, 1999); Berg, *Porn Work*.

6. Berg, *Porn Work*, 6.

7. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 12; See also Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 584.

8. Jack Herrera, 'How Sex Workers Are Using Mutual Aid to Respond to the Coronavirus,' The Nation, April 2020, https://www.thenation.com/article/society/sex-workers-coronavirus/.

9. Herrera.

10. Herrera.

11. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.

upon by sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling in their toolkit.[12] Put briefly, 'dis-organising' can be understood as how organisers generate techniques to creatively work both within and against the system they are looking to disrupt. At the same time, organisers and groups must also work to protect themselves from becoming disorganised by the same structures.[13] This chapter explores how the concept of 'dis-organising' can illuminate further the kind of 'non-reformist reforms' sex worker radicals are aiming towards and their assessment of sex work. In particular, my discussion focuses on attempts by sex worker radicals to reform sex work whilst simultaneously looking to deconstruct this work under existing systems of racialised capitalism.

Two brief points of clarification are needed before continuing. By 'non-reformist reforms', I am referring to reforms that seek to undermine and shrink a harmful system rather than strengthen it.[14] Non-reformist reforms attempt to move power away from oppressive systems.[15] As Sarah Lamble puts it in the context of prison abolition, although the changes non-reformist reforms implement are incremental, 'their ultimate goal is not improvement of the system, but its abolition'.[16] In this chapter, I adopt the term 'sex worker radicals'. I have borrowed the the term from Berg's use in her article 'Free Sex'.[17] Broadly the term 'sex worker radicals' refers to sex worker thinkers and activists who are engaged in projects that are explicitly anti-carceral, anti-capitalist, and anti-work. Berg discusses how many

12. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*.
13. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*; Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*, 4–5.
14. See André Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution,' *Socialist register* 5 (1968).
15. Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution'; Sarah Lamble, *Bridging The Gap Between Reformists And Abolitionists: Can Non-Reformist Reforms Guide The Work Of Prison Inspectorates?*, March 2022, https://www.icpr.org.uk/news-events/2022/bridging-gap-between-reformists-and-abolitionists-can-non-reformist-reforms-guide; Aviah Sarah Day and Shanice Octavia McBean, *Abolition Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2022), 10–14; See also the discussion from Srinivasan on the 'reform or revolution' debate, see Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 154–159.
16. Lamble, *Bridging The Gap Between Reformists And Abolitionists*.
17. Berg, 'Free Sex.'

sex worker radicals are 'look[ing] backward (but at a slant) because contemporary alternatives leave their questions unanswered' and so they are turning towards the 'older feminisms' of the 1970s and 1980s.[18] As Berg notes, sex worker radicals are explicitly engaged in projects that

> put questions of economy front and center. And where queer thought freely assigns radical potential to nonnormative sex, it departs from sex worker radicals' interest (one for which some find recognition in feminist anachronisms) in the ambivalences of sex that is within as much as it is against the systems that structure it.[19]

They may, however, have a range of political identifications and opinions even within this identification. The use of the term 'sex worker radicals' is helpful in as much as it can distinguish sex worker thinkers, activists, and feminists from others who are engaged in projects that legitimise sex work under existing forms of capitalism.

Those involved in the sex workers' rights movement have called for sex work's decriminalisation, which would seemingly result in this work's legitimation.[20] Many sex worker radicals support this proposal, although many simultaneously support the refusal of work and advocate for a re-imagining of work in its entirety.[21] Where this chapter is looking to intervene is in how these seemingly contradictory views can be held together. Moreover, I investigate how it is that the decriminalisation of sex work can form a legitimate part of a post-work/anti-work project. The concept of 'dis-organising' further expands upon the 'and/or' kinds of thinking necessary for abolitionist thinking. This is to say that it offers

18. Berg, 'Free Sex,' 510.
19. Berg, 510.
20. Srinivasan's final chapter discusses debates over decriminalisation and its potential to 'legitimate' this work, Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*.
21. I discuss further the refusal of work and a reading of sex work as anti-work in chapter four.

a practical toolkit for how we can hold together contradictions.[22] Further to this, 'Dis-organising' helps to practically explain how organisers who are doing this work must also protect themselves from becoming disorganised by these same systems they are looking to disrupt.[23]

This chapter adds to the body of analysis of how sex workers organise around their labour and in response to their criminalisation.[24] In particular, this chapter is focused on sex workers' organising outside of 'traditional' routes such as through labour unionisation. In keeping with my methodological commitment to value the 'embodied knowledge' sex workers have around their profession and how these insights might be of use to non-sex working people, this chapter explores what sex worker organising tells us about organising outside of the sex workplace.[25] In the final section, I offer three central insights that a focus on sex worker organising provides when thinking about labour organising outside of the sex workplace. These are particularly relevant for other kinds of marginalised or atypical forms of work such in the gig economy or the service sector. The first is regarding the production of solidarity amongst its participants. Here I draw attention to how these alternative forms of organising offer a 'space for political and personal connection [and] are a measure of survival that is also transformative'.[26] The second concerns the widening of the scope and area(s) of concern for organising away from the work alone. I discuss some comparisons with 'common good unionism' that can be drawn. Drawing on my discussion of Wilson's concept of dis-organising, the

22. See Angela Y. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2022), Introduction.

23. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*.

24. For some examples, see Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk*; Butler, 'Aligned: Sex Workers' Lessons for the Gig Economy'; Jackson, "Sex Workers Unite!"'; Merteuil, 'Sex Work Against Work'; Majic, *Sex Work Politics*; Hardy and Cruz, 'Affective Organizing'; Moraes, Santos, and Assis, "We Are in Quarantine but Caring Does Not Stop"'; Gall, *Sex Worker Unionization*.

25. For more on 'embodied knowledge' and sex work, see Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped.'

26. Moraes, Santos, and Assis, "We Are in Quarantine but Caring Does Not Stop",' 652.

third relates to the potential for the (re)production of communities.

This chapter proceeds as follows.

In section 1, I provide an overview of Stephen Wilson's concept and method of 'dis-organising'. I locate the idea of 'dis-organising' within wider abolitionist discourse and literature. In this section, I discuss the toolkit 'Dis/Organizing: How We Build Collectives Beyond Institutions' created by Hacking//Hustling as one way to instrumentalise this concept. In section 2, I discuss how dis-organising as an orientation towards resistance relates to non-reformist reforms and the refusal of work put forward by sex worker radicals. In section 3, I provide an overview of some of the extant literature on organising and unionising by sex workers. My focus in this section is to draw attention to the role of alternative forms of organising. This section identifies some of the common problems faced by sex workers when trying to organise along traditional routes. In section 4, I discuss how sex worker organising offers rich resources for other kinds of work organising outside of the sex workplace. This section discusses three insights that sex worker organising offers when thinking about labour organising. These are particularly relevant for other kinds of marginalised or atypical forms of work such as in the gig economy or the service sector. I conclude with a summary of the main arguments presented.

1 Wilson's 'Dis-Organising Prisons'

In 2019, Stephen Wilson, an incarcerated activist and abolitionist, published the essay 'Dis-Organising Prisons' on the blog 'Dreaming Freedom, Practicing Abolition'.[27] The essay would be published later again in 2020 in *Making Abolitionist Worlds: Proposals for a World on Fire*, a collection focused on exploring various aspects of abolitionist thought, with a short addendum entitled 'Building Together,

27. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.

Inside/Outside'.[28] The addendum was also based on another short blog post of the same name.[29] The 'Dis-Organising Prisons' essay is short, totalling only a mere 670 words in the original 2019 version. However, Wilson's piece is thought-provoking about what it means to disrupt the prison industrial complex. He offers a brief insight into the kind of tools and perspectives that are necessary for organising when faced with structures that will disrupt the actions of those who fight against them.

In this section, I discuss the essay and its key insights. In subsection 2.1, I discuss what it means to 'dis-organise', drawing on Wilson and other abolitionist thinkers to reconstruct an account of what this kind of resistance looks like. In subsection 2.2, I discuss the value of political education that Wilson puts forward in his account. Finally, in subsection 2.3, I discuss how the sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling has utilised these ideas in creating their own toolkit for 'dis-organising'.

1.1 What It Means To 'Dis-Organise'

Wilson begins his intervention by looking to define what it means to organise against and within the prison. As an incarcerated abolitionist, Wilson explains that prison organising actually looks a lot more like prison dis-organising. Though adopting this term is not intended to suggest that the movement is disorganised, as in it lacks goals and objectives.[30] As Wilson explains:

> my goal has always been to disorganize the prison, to make it less

28. Stevie Wilson, 'Dis-Organizing Prisons, Building Together Inside/Outside,' in *Making Abolitionist worlds: proposals for a world on fire*, ed. Abolition Collective (Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions, 2020).

29. Stevie Wilson, *Building Together, Inside/Outside*, December 2019, https://abolitioniststudy.wordpress.com/2019/12/05/building-together-inside-outside/.

30. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*, 4.

> effective, to deny it what it needs to continue: people, money and an uninformed and misinformed public.[31]

Wilson offers the provocation of dis-organising as a way to reframe prison organising. He suggests it is necessary to creatively work within and against the institutions and systems you are fighting against.[32] The work of dis-organising is to find the fault lines within the system and work to resist systems like the prison and policing. It is looking for ways to 'deny it what it needs to continue' and how to 'make it less effective'.[33]

These actions are fundamentally non-reformist reforms. They do not aim at improving the system, such as the prison, but they aim at its abolition. In thinking about what this means in practice, Truthout created a short guide of prison 'reforms' that abolitionists should oppose and support.[34] In this, they give examples of 'reformist reforms', which are reforms that would strengthen the powers of the police and prisons. One example they give is reforms that are advocating for *more* policing, often under the guise of 'community' policing. Alternatively, they provide a list of guidelines for non-reformist reforms that should be supported instead.[35]As the authors explain:

> Ultimately, the only way we will address oppressive policing is to abolish the police ... all of the "reforms" that focus on strengthening the police or "morphing" the police into something more invisible but still as deadly should be opposed.[36]

31. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.
32. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*; Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*.
33. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.
34. Truthout, 'Police "Reforms" You Should Always Oppose,' in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, ed. Naomi Murakawa (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2021).
35. Truthout, 70–71.
36. Truthout, 71.

For Wilson and his comrades in Pennsylvania the work of dis-organising has taken the form of organising study groups and educating people on the prison industrial complex.[37] Their work has focused on making the violence of the prison system more visible, especially to those on the outside, and on educating those inside so that they can begin to resist.

Solidarity, between incarcerated peoples and with those on the outside, is essential to dis-organising.[38] As Wilson writes in Building Together, Inside/Outside:

> Inside and outside activists need each other. One without the other leads to failure. Inside activists need outside activists to listen, to provide material support, to be study partners/sponsors, to be accomplices: involve themselves in actions. Inside activists need outside activists to remember that we are not one type: many not us are not able-bodied, neurotypical, cis-het males. Our different social positions affects our incarceration experiences. Inside activists need outside activists to make room for us at the table: invite us to participate in workshops and conferences. And formerly incarceration is not a substitute for currently incarcerated. We are tired of being the topic but not a participant in the conversation.[39]

When one of the members of their study group was victim to a brutal assault by two officers and placed in solitary confinement, they ran a campaign with people on the outside to gain visibility of what happened and help him get transferred.[40]

Organisers of the phone zap campaigns — where people outside are asked to repeatedly contact the prison about an incarcerated person — argue that:

37. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.
38. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*; Wilson, *Building Together, Inside/Outside*.
39. Wilson, *Building Together, Inside/Outside*.
40. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.

> prisons do their worst under the assumption, based on years of practice, that no one outside finds out, or no one outside cares what happens inside.[41]

Wilson and his comrades have used this tactic several times, including for his own experiences of violence and harassment by officers.[42] In the final chapter of the book *Abolition Revolution Now*, authors Aviah Sarah Day and Shanice Octavia McBean argue that the carceral state does its worst work because of a culture of compliance to carry out violence without challenge.[43] They argue that public compliance *is* police power. One way that we can practice solidarity, and dis-organise these systems, is to intervene.[44] Phone zap campaigns that make the violence inside of the prison visible is one example. As Day and McBean argue, interventions into this violence can produce quick wins in disrupting carceral systems, helping to sustain and grow movements.[45]

Simultaneously, for organisers, it is important to also not become dis-organised by the system itself. This is the other side of what it means to dis-organise. Kuo and Lee explain in their dis-organising handbook, which takes up Wilson's concept further, movements themselves are commonly disrupted and subsumed into bureaucratic structures.[46] How quickly do the calls for 'abolish the police!' become 'defund the police!', and then sadly just 'reform the police!'? Day and McBean point out that those in power have 'a deftness for absorbing radical movements into their systems of control and power'.[47] Successful dis-organising is to protect

41. Abolitionist Study, *Phone Zap To Exonerate Stevie Wilson From False Misconduct Charge*, March 2023, https://abolitionistst udy.wordpress.com/2023/03/31/phone-zap-to-exonerate-stevie-wilson-from-false-misconduct-charge/.
42. Study.
43. Day and McBean, *Abolition Revolution*, 199.
44. Day and McBean, 199–200.
45. Day and McBean, 200.
46. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*, 4.
47. Day and McBean, *Abolition Revolution*, 9.

against the non-reformist reforms from being absorbed back into the system in a way that is 'acceptable'. It is also to prevent organising collectives from being disrupted by these systems. As Wilson says of the process:

> The cycle doesn't end. We study. We cooperate/care. We practice solidarity. This is how you disorganize.[48]

Dis-organising is to continue to ground organising in a revolutionary vision — as Day and McBean put it, it is a vision that requires we change nothing short of everything in the process.[49]

1.2 Political Education

In this subsection I want to draw attention to another aspect of Wilson's essay relevant for thinking about what it means to dis-organise and to understand the work of collectives like Hacking//Hustling. Wilson emphasises the need for political education as a key component for how we build the world we wish to see.[50] He points out that it is an essential starting point for action. As they argue:

> Political education helped me see who was the real enemy, who was responsible for my pain. When you're hurting and you don't know who is responsible, you tend to lash out against those closest to you. Many of us are behind the walls because of long-suffering pain and misdirected anger. Through study, I gained awareness and knew that other prisoners are not the cause of my pain. I began to see others with new eyes. My education made me more compassionate towards others.[51]

48. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.
49. Day and McBean, *Abolition Revolution*, 15.
50. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.
51. Wilson.

What comes through in Wilson's intervention is how political education forms an integral part of the toolkit of dis-organising.

Drawing on Malcolm X, Wilson quotes:

> The greatest mistake of the civil rights movement has been trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to wake people up first, then you'll get action.[52]

In addition to citing Malcolm X directly, Wilson is making reference to a long history in the Black Radical tradition that shares a deep concern for education. Thinkers such as Malcolm X and groups like The Black Panthers all recognised and knew the value of education.[53] Their political philosophy had a fundamental basis in education and its value in 'wak[ing] people first'.[54] Wilson's studying 'opened my eyes and healed my spirit', enabling them to acquire the language to identify the problems he was facing.[55] Wilson explains that

> The prison teaches us that all our problems are in our heads. That all we need is cognitive behavioral therapy and our lives will be better. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, capitalism and class have nothing to do with how our lives turned out.

Acquiring the language to name what was happening was transformational. In

52. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*; This quote by Malcolm X is from his 1965 *Village Voice* interview with Marlene Nadle, shortly before he was assassinated. Marlene Nadle, 'Malcolm X: The Complexity Of a Man in the Jungle [1965],' Village Voice, March 21, 2023, https://www.villagevoice.com/malcolm-x-the-complexity-of-a-man-in-the-jungle/.

53. Rickford offers an intellectual history of subaltern education in the Black radical tradition. His discussion of the tradition's founding of independent black insitutitions in the 1970s focuses on the movement by activist-intellectuals rethought schools and pedagogy as 'a way to redeem the process of formal learning and as a way to pursue, indeed *prefigure*, black cultural and political sovereignty.' Russell Rickford, *We are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.

54. Wilson, *Building Together, Inside/Outside*.

55. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.

other areas of philosophy, this has been termed resolving a form of 'epistemic injustice' of sorts. For feminists, the frequently cited example is the coining of the term 'sexual harassment' to describe the specific forms of workplace harassment experienced by women.[56] Other examples are the coining of the term 'misogynoir' to describe the racialised sexism faced by black women, or the term 'microaggression' to capture the more subtle and everyday forms of discrimination faced by people of colour and women of colour.[57] It is not that these ideas are 'new', rather these conceptual resources were made available by marginalised communities to describe what was already happening.[58] The language we use to describe the world around us and what happens to us can be powerful.[59] As Wilson points out, the shift to understanding that racism, homophobia, sexism, and other structural injustices had a vast amount to do with how his life turned out and the others he shared the prison with changed the narrative from understanding that the 'problems are in our heads'.[60]

This is not an individualist pursuit where only Wilson received the comfort that 'I wasn't crazy. It wasn't all in my head'.[61] Acquiring this knowledge meant it could be shared with other prisoners. The project of dis-organising the prison is a collective one and Wilson found that others were 'just as hungry for an answer'.[62] Wilson shares the experience of how 'I didn't want to keep this good thing, this knowledge of what was really going on, to myself. I started to share materials

56. See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Briana Toole, 'From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,' *Hypatia* 34, no. 4 (2019): 598–618.

57. For a discussion of this, see Toole, 'From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,' 606.

58. Toole, 606.

59. For more on epistemic injustice, see Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice Power and the Ethics of Knowing*; Toole, 'From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression'; Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

60. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.

61. Wilson.

62. Wilson.

with others.'[63] For marginalised people like prisoners, sharing knowledge of their situation is a dangerous thing. They have to carefully cooperate with one another, another fundamental aspect of what it means to dis-organise the prison. To share this knowledge is not easy, meaning that they had to be 'creative and be vigilant' if they were to study together.[64] In Wilson's case, he held rap sessions on the prison industrial complex on the yard, and began to study with others. Wilson and his comrades created and maintained four study groups. These were started under the guise of topics considered to be more acceptable to the prison administration, such as Life Changes: A Grief Support Group, which they turned into a transformative justice/healing circle called 'Circle Up'.[65] When one of their members was assaulted by an officer and put into solitary confinement, they were able to 'put what we learned into action' by using strategies like a phone zap campaign to make sure their comrade was safe.[66] Wilson indicates that their action was only made possible through the work of political education done with others.

1.3 Hacking//Hustling's Toolkit

Hacking//Hustling are a technology-focused sex worker collective that is working towards the vision of redefining technologies to 'uplift survival strategies that build safety without prisons or policing.'[67] In their article exploring shadowbanning on platforms, Kelly Cotter termed Hacking//Hustling a 'scholar-activist collective'.[68] This appears to be an apt description as their work brings together sex

63. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.
64. Wilson.
65. Wilson.
66. Wilson.
67. Hacking//Hustling, *About Hacking//Hustling*, https://hackinghustling.org/.
68. Kelley Cotter, '"Shadowbanning is not a thing": Black box gaslighting and the power to independently know and credibly critique algorithms,' *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 6 (April 2023): 1230.

workers, academics, designers, and other stakeholders.[69] Their work focuses on producing original community-based research and developing tools for sex workers and survivors to mitigate state, workplace, and interpersonal violence.[70] They also fund mutual aid efforts and work with other sex worker collectives to platform relevant resources for sex workers. The collective was formed based on the belief that sex workers are experts on their own experience and that 'an internet that is safer for sex workers is an internet that is safer for everyone'.[71] Hacking//Hustling's approach to organising adopts a wide view of technology, which includes the internet as well as harm reduction models.[72] Their approach promotes shared leadership and collective decision-making.

In 2021, Hacking//Hustling produced a toolkit on Dis/Organizing: How We Build Collectives Beyond Institutions.[73] The toolkit uses the term (dis)organise, which draws directly from Wilson's 'Dis-Organizing Prisons' essay.[74] The toolkit was in part borne out of the collective learning from the earlier conference series held online by Hacking//Hustling on 'Informal, Criminalized, Precarious: Sex Worker Organizing Against Barriers'. Hacking//Hustling's toolkit looks to offer ways for workers in the informal economies to organise. Hacking//Hustling point out that in doing this work, organisers must also protect themselves from becoming disorganised by these same systems they are looking to disrupt.[75] The Dis/Organizing toolkit is intended to offer key organising lessons and strategies from migrant worker and sex worker-led organising, those whom they note are 'workers who are forcibly excluded from the economy or working in the shadows of formalized

69. Hacking//Hustling, *About Hacking//Hustling*.
70. Hacking//Hustling.
71. Blunt and Wolf, *Erased: The Impact of FOSTA-SESTA and the Removal of Backpage*, 3.
72. Hacking//Hustling, *About Hacking//Hustling*.
73. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*.
74. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.
75. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*.

economies.'[76]

For sex workers' the sharing of knowledge has been immeasurably important to their survival and resistance against their criminalisation. Groups like Hacking//Hustling focus their work on political education through a variety of means. Their work educates sex workers on a range of online and technology-focused harms, such as doxxing, algorithmic management, or deplatformisation. Hacking//Hustling's work is specifically for sex workers and centres their sex workers, including ensuring their voices and needs are reflected. The Collective produces a range of informative materials, such as infographics on online harms at work, training sessions for sex workers on financial information, as well as policy reports on a variety of online and technology-focused harms.[77] Policy reports are also accompanied by a shorter form easy-to-read introduction and literature review, including giving definitions of any jargon used, making them more accessible. Further to this, Hacking//Hustling's work has also focused on running online conferences in collaboration with other sex worker collectives. These centre the voices of sex workers, particularly those multiply marginalised such as disabled sex workers.[78] Through all these means, Hacking//Hustling platforms the voices of people in the sex trades and centres them as producers of knowledge and experts in the movement.[79]

The authors of the toolkit put together a practical programme of what dis-organizing can look like for groups that come together, often in times of crisis. The authors note that:

> When groups come together in moments of heightened urgency and

76. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*.
77. Hacking//Hustling, *Research*, https://hackinghustling.org/research-2/.
78. For example, their most recent conference in 2021 was facillitated by the Disabled Sex Workers' Coalition, Hacking//Hustling, *Informal, Criminalized, Precarious*.
79. Hacking//Hustling, *About Hacking//Hustling*.

> necessity, infrastructures may come together quickly. Internal infrastructures and processes, such as decision-making, communication, and leadership development, can be left less clear.[80]

Groups that are organising against institutional systems of injustice face several not-insignificant pressures. Kuo and Lee point out that the pace and scale of the work organisers and collectives do can become unsustainable, individual organisers can take on too much and experience burnout, and groups often face the pressure to incorporate themselves into the systems they are often trying to resist. This may in part be because they may need to maintain their access to funding or other resources.[81] The practical advice offered in the handbook covers a wide area, from discussing funding outside existing institutions, conflict resolution processes, access to technology, and a discussion of anti-work and abolitionist visions. The toolkit proposes some ways to help organisers build and sustain political collectives, organisations, and formations beyond existing institutions.[82]

2 Abolish Work (At Least As We Know It)

A unifying demand of sex workers' rights activists and academics has been to decriminalise consenting adult sex work.[83] This is posited as the removal of the regulation of sex work by criminal laws and into civil and labour law.[84] This approach has often been understood as a form of a 'harm reduction' approach to sex work, as it looks to mitigate certain harms in sex work, namely those resulting from its criminalisation such as arrest and incarceration. In this section, I explore

80. Hacking//Hustling, *Dis/Organizing Toolkit: How We Build Collectives Beyond Institutions*, https://hackinghustling.org/research-2/disorganizing-toolkit/.
81. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*, 11.
82. Kuo and Lee.
83. Cruz, 'The Work of Sex Work: Prostitution, Unfreedom, and Criminality at Work,' 192.
84. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 193.

further the demand for decriminalisation, whether this should be viewed as an 'end-state' ideal for mitigating the harms of sex work, or whether we might 'look beyond' this. As I explore, the relationship between criminality and work is often more complicated.[85]

This section addresses the non-reformist reforms sex worker radicals are looking to make when they argue to reform sex work through its decriminalisation whilst simultaneously aiming at the deconstruction of work under existing systems of racialised capitalism. In subsection 3.1, I discuss the concerns about institutionalising sex work's position should it be decriminalised. In section 3.2, I discuss what abolition demands of us. Here I draw on Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie's writings in *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* to discuss the kinds of 'and/or' thinking that are necessary for abolitionist reforms.[86] This is to address the following: How can we coherently hold together an argument for decriminalising sex work, when it risks making this work more institutionalised under capitalism? How does the decriminalisation of sex work speak to arguments for post-work futures?

2.1 Institutionalising Sex Work's Position

In her essay 'Whores at the End of the World', Sonia Aragon expresses concern over the productivist tendencies in organising around sex work as 'work'.[87] By this she is indicating the sometimes explicit and sometimes implied pro-work suppositions and commitments involved in declaring that sex work is 'work'.[88] She points out that there is a problem in that to organise around 'work' also potentially cuts

85. See Cruz, 'The Work of Sex Work: Prostitution, Unfreedom, and Criminality at Work.'
86. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, 1–6.
87. Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World.'
88. Weeks offers a brief description of what is meant by 'productivist' tendencies in much of feminist and Marxian theorising, see K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 5.

off imagining other possible futures.[89] Of course, organising around the concept of 'work', even with its productivist tendencies, has done a lot of good. This kind of organising has perhaps even been necessary as it has helped in the movement to decriminalise and destigmatise those who work in the sex trades. This is a point I have returned to several times throughout this thesis, as the 'work' of sex work also sits uncomfortably with those of us who share post-work aspirations.

In the final chapter of her book *The Right to Sex*, Amia Srinivasan references Aragon's anxieties around organising around 'work'. Srinivasan notes the potential for reforms around the decriminalisation of sex work leading to the work becoming legitimated which could vitiate rather than strengthen sex workers' insurrectionary potential.[90] To a certain extent, this seems potentially true. There remains a risk that the sex worker left could be dis-organised by the very institutions it seeks to dismantle. Reforms always face the possibility of being co-opted.

If sex work gets decriminalised, as it has done in some jurisdictions, what then? For many advocating for decriminalisation, the answer is often that sex workers should be granted 'worker's rights', or some form thereof. However, the relationship between criminality and work, and what decriminalisation means for sex workers, is more complex. Cruz points out that in jurisdictions where sex work is decriminalised to varying extents, it is not the case that labour rights are automatically granted to those workers, or that criminal law ceases to be involved in the regulation of the sex workplace.[91] Additionally, from those calling to decriminalise consenting adult sex work, criminal laws are sometimes advocated for in order to protect 'vulnerable' sex workers, as in cases of assault, rape, and labour abuses including trafficking and forced labour.[92] There exists an uneasy tension

89. Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World.'
90. See Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 217-218 n.25.
91. Cruz, 'The Work of Sex Work: Prostitution, Unfreedom, and Criminality at Work,' 198–199.
92. Cruz, 199–200.

here, as Cruz notes that many advocating for this position are simultaneously highly critical of 'carceral feminism' or utilising 'feminism-as-crime-control.'[93] That is, the wielding of the power of the criminalising state in the name of supposedly feminist aims and the adoption of a 'law and order' style approach to the 'problem of prostitution'.[94]

In her final chapter, Srinivasan discusses who gets to really call themselves an 'abolitionist' regarding sex work.[95] She asks us whether the title of sex work 'abolitionist' belongs to those engaged with the radical feminist project attempting to curtail sex work through legal reforms or sex worker radicals seeking to decriminalise this work. In her discussion, Srinivasan aks us to consider a thought experiment: We could either choose to decriminalise sex work now therefore sex workers in the present would be made safer, or if we make the choice to not decriminalise and we might stand a chance of ending it, however we recognise that some women will be harmed in the process. She utilises this example to show how, as feminists, we must still support the movement to decriminalise even if it might not end sex work. She argues it is the right choice because it will not 'mess over' other marginalised women in the process.[96] Srinivasan draws on the Combahee River Collective here to conclude that we should endorse a feminist politics that does not 'mess over' people, especially women, in the process of pursuing our aims.[97] As the Collective writes:

> In the practice of our politics we do not believe that the end always

93. Cruz, 'The Work of Sex Work: Prostitution, Unfreedom, and Criminality at Work,' 199–200.

94. See the following for discussions of carceral feminism, Cruz, 'The Work of Sex Work: Prostitution, Unfreedom, and Criminality at Work'; Bernstein, 'Carceral Politics as Gender Justice?'; Bernstein, 'Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism'; Duff, 'Feminism Against Crime Control.'

95. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 154–159.

96. Srinivasan, 154–159.

97. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 158–159; For the full statement from the Collective, see The Combahee River Collective, 'The Combahee River Collective Statement [1977],' November 2012, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/.

> justifies the means. Many reactionary and destructive acts have been done in the name of achieving "correct" political goals. As feminists we do not want to mess over people in the name of politics.[98]

Srinivasan argues that even if decriminalising this work means that sex work might be deepened under capitalism and become more institutionalised, it is the better choice because it reduces harm to women in the here and now.[99]

This imagined choice offered to us by Srinivasan, however, sets up a false dichotomy. Even if we decriminalise and sex work does becomes more institutionalised, why would we assume the struggle against it (and against work) would end? We don't assume this of other kinds of work — capital tightening its grip has been a motivator for many struggles against work. Sex worker radicals are engaged in a forward-looking project in their organisation around their work. The project extends beyond simply decriminalising sex work and having the work accepted as some form of 'state-sanctioned professionalism'.[100] Sex workers have struggled under a criminalised form of work and we do not have much by way to suggest they would stop struggling if it became decriminalised and even 'accepted' as a form of work, other workers certainly have not. Recognising this opens up the possibilities for thinking of revolutionary reforms of work and there being other horizons beyond decriminalising.

A perspective shift that recognises sex workers fully *as workers*, thought of like any other worker, is required. Sex workers' concerns have primarily been focused on decriminalisation and the recognition of their work, including its legitimacy. However, the discussion over sex work cuts across far more than this. It has also been about limiting the powers of the police, caring for people on the margins,

98. The Combahee River Collective, 'The Combahee River Collective Statement [1977].'
99. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 158–159.
100. Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World.'

and about providing mutual aid and support. For some, if their work was to be legitimated tomorrow and destigmatised, they would put down their banners.[101] However, these workers are more likely to be whiter, richer, straighter, better educated, and more privileged. For the vast majority of sex workers, their organising would continue. Sex workers would continue to campaign around their work, but also around what their work intersects with, such as poverty, benefits cuts, violence against sex workers, policing, and punitive immigration regimes.[102] Organising over sex work *as work* has seldom ever been about 'just' work. Although preventing some of these harms, as might be done through decriminalisation or removing other legal restrictions, this only provides one partial answer, it does not provide an answer to the problems facing sex workers. Mac and Smith argue in *Revolting Prostitutes* that there is no 'silver bullet' to the harms of sex work.[103] This means that sex workers, particularly those that are most marginalised, will continue organising around their work, for they have little choice.

2.2 'Both/And' Thinking

Abolishing is not merely the absence of.[104] In her book *Abolish the Family*, Sophie Lewis makes clear the project of abolition is one that is world-building and a

101. Consider Mac and Smith's 'Erotic Professional', she may well cease her campaigns around sex work were it to be decriminalised and more accepted. She is, though, used as an example of the most privileged of sex workers organising around their labour. See Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 31–39.

102. For example, the recent Hookers Against Hardship campaign in the UK that focuses on the impact of benefits cuts, the rising cost of living, and financial hardship faced by sex workers. See Decrim Now, 'Hookers Against Hardship,' October 2022, https://decrimnow.org.uk/hookers-against-hardship/.

103. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, Chapter 8.

104. This subsection has been adapted from my commentary on Sophie Lewis' book, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*. This was first given as a roundtable discussion on Monday 10 October 2022 in All Souls College for the Oxford Political Thought seminar. The commentary was later published. See Kushti Westwood, 'Contradiction and Making the World Anew,' *Oxford New Books* 1, no. 1 (2024).

collective act of creativity without an end.[105] She positions the book and project as 'critically utopian', pushing us to imagine something better than the family for how we organise social reproduction.[106] The family, she argues, is really what's utopian here, meant in the pejorative sense of the word.[107] For many of us the family can seldom live up to the myth that surrounds it, and it leaves us wanting. Lewis could easily talk about the shocking domestic violence statistics and the violence that surrounds the family as an institution, which she gestures towards at points.[108] However, even absent this, Lewis recognises that the family is often a site of discomfort and begrudging obligation. As she remarks, it is uncomfortable and often met with anger to suggest that we all deserve better than what we got growing up.[109] Recall what Federici said of this situation regarding housework, where our care work is shut away from the world and routinely undervalued and under-supported: 'They say it is love, we say it is unwaged work'.[110]

That you love your family and you would see it wither away might seem like two contradictory ideas for us to hold together. But why are we so often allergic to seeming contradiction? Can the analysis of contradiction, as Marx showed, not be revelatory? Throughout the book, Lewis introduces us to a different way of thinking necessary for much abolitionist thought, including the abolitionist perspective presented by sex worker radicals. What abolition requires of us is that we often hold in tension seemingly contradictory ideas, as well as that we are motivated by reducing harm in the moment and maintaining a commitment to dismantling unjust systems.[111] In the book, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, Angela Davis, Gina

105. Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, Salvage editions (London: Verso, 2022), 81.
106. Lewis, 23.
107. Lewis, 17.
108. Lewis, 3.
109. Lewis, 3–4.
110. Federici, 'Wages Against Housework,' 15.
111. Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 88.

Dent, Erica Meiners and Beth Richie introduce this as 'both/and' thinking, rather than binary 'either/or' thinking.[112] This is to say that abolition often requires that we do multiple things at once. Abolition is also a framework that does not shy away from contradictions. As the authors argue, rather than being a limitation, these contradictions themselves might be a spark for change and generate necessary sites of analysis.[113]

Consider the campaign for sex work to be decriminalised and destigmatised. Simultaneously, many sex work radicals also endorse the project(s) looking to imagine the end of work as we know it. On the surface, these ideas might seem contradictory. As Srnivasan discusses in her chapter in *The Right to Sex*, there is a potential that decriminalising and destigmatising sex work could legitimise this work as it currently exists under capitalism.[114] Calling for an end to the work ethic and for us to reimagine what it means to work appears to sit in tension with sex work being legitimated as a form of work. From the position of abolitionist thought, this is a perfect example of the kinds of thinking required when practising such politics. 'Both/and' thinking is required, in which we have to do multiple things at once. There can be a utopian vision and exercise in 'imagining otherwise' in calling for the refusal of work and engaging in post-work imaginaries.[115] This can act as a guiding vision for the kinds of action necessary for deconstructing and reimagining work. Simultaneously, it is necessary to maintain a commitment to reducing harm in the here and now. Sex workers are actively harmed by the laws that affect their work and the threat of criminalisation. Decriminalisation acts as a necessary 'first step', even if the work does appear to be more legitimated under

112. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, 3.
113. Davis et al., 3–6.
114. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 150–159.
115. For more on the idea of 'imagining otherwise', see Lola Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (Maidstone: Hajar Press C.I.C., 2021).

capitalist structures.[116]

If the task for feminism is, as Srnivasan puts it, to transform the world beyond recognition, this might yet seem like something we're not able to fully grasp.[117] Although what is important is that there is a kernel of this future to be found in our present. How might we bridge this gap between the near and the far-off? In reflecting on this tension, I am reminded of a quote from *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* that expresses the difficult task we have in making the world anew:

> The productive tension of holding onto a radical, real and deep vision while engaging in the messy daily practice is the feminist praxis: the work of everyday people to try, to build, to make. And this requires collectivity. Always.[118]

When I first read the ending of Lewis's book, I was struck with a sense of melancholy. Perhaps it is true we cannot yet desire a world without the family, where we can be together as people and we end the separation of peoples. It even feels uncomfortable to recognise the radical hope Lewis expresses in her vision of a 'glorious and abundant nothing' that may come after the family.[119] For many of us invested in projects of abolition, including the abolition of the family, work, and prisons, in our lifetimes we likely won't see or reap the benefits of our collective struggle. Despite this, our work is in tearing down and building something better for a future that is not ours but that we have to hope and imagine for.

116. For a discussion on decriminalisation and how it forms only a part of a response to sex work, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, Chapter 8.
117. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, xi.
118. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, 16.
119. Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 88.

3 Organising In and Out of Unions

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that there is a relationship between sex work and other kinds of work under conditions of contemporary capitalism. Often in accounts of work, sex work is treated as an outlier, what Berg has termed as 'sex work exceptionalism'.[120] Although I have sought to trouble how 'work' can be understood and that this conceptual lens has its limitations, I have argued that sex work has more in common with other kinds of work under present conditions despite differences in what the job practically entails. With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter assesses what the conditions of the sex workplace itself and the resistance by sex workers can tell us about other kinds of work that are similarly characterised by precarity, alienation, technological changes, and regulations. Analysing the sex workplace prompts several questions: What can organising in the sex workplace tell us about appropriate modes of organising? Is union organising always the most suitable? What resources does sex worker organising offer us when thinking about organising beyond the sex workplace? How might these aspects of sex workers' embodied knowledge be useful for those in and out of sex work? The final two sections of this chapter discuss how sex worker organising offers resources for other kinds of work organising that are similarly characterised by a dispersed, diverse, and criminalised workforce.

In the below two subsections, I provide a brief outline of some of the issues surrounding unionising and organising by sex workers. In subsection 1.1, I discuss sex workers' attempts to unionise within existing trade union structures including the problems arising from this. In subsection 1.2, I outline some of the alternative mode of organising used by sex workers and reasons why these have been engaged with.

120. Berg, 'Working for Love, Loving for Work,' 694.

3.1 Trade Union Organising

Sex workers are regarded as a 'difficult to organise' group within traditional unions, given that their work operates outside of 'typical' spheres of employment. As Kate Hardy and Katie Cruz note, sex worker organising faces a considerable challenges as many of its workers are self-employed and its employment relations do not easily align with traditional forms of labour organising.[121] Sex workers frequently face the threat of criminalisation, like undocumented migrants in other forms of work, meaning that alternative forms of worker organising are necessary.[122] For this reason, criminalised workers are often underrepresented within the ranks of organised labour.[123] Chateauvert notes that sex worker organising may well serve as a guide for other similarly marginalised workers in the gig economy.[124] For instance, the struggle of strippers to be recognised as workers set the precedent for reclassifying Uber drivers as employees in California.[125] There is much to be gained from not externally imposing organising tactics onto sex workers, such as with claims that their interests might only be best served through existing trade unions. Rather there is a great deal to be learnt from the ways that sex workers have created their own forms of collectivity that empower themselves as workers.[126]

Many of the successes of sex workers organising within traditional labour unions

121. Hardy and Cruz, 'Affective Organizing,' 247.
122. Jackson, "Sex Workers Unite!",' 172–173; Jackson draws on Janice Fine's study of Worker Centers and organising on the margins, see Janice Fine, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at The Edge of The Dream* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).
123. See Janice Fine cited in Jackson, "Sex Workers Unite!",' 173.
124. Melinda Chateauvert, 'Sex Worker Unionization: Global Developments, Challenges, and Possibilities by Gregor Gall,' *Labor* 15, no. 2 (2018): 125.
125. Chateauvert, 125.
126. See also Butler's article for what sex workers' organising can offer those organising in the gig economy Chateauvert, 'Sex Worker Unionization'; Butler, 'Aligned: Sex Workers' Lessons for the Gig Economy.'

— at least within the UK context — have been by exotic dancers.[127] For example, a minor movement of strippers and sex workers in the UK have had some success organising within the Sex Workers' Union (SWU) branch of the Bakers Food & Allied Workers Union.[128] They have had several successes in court, and have been running an ongoing campaign against the de-licensing of clubs in the UK. They have also been organising with the UK-based group Hookers Against Hardship, which looks to raise awareness of the experiences of sex workers during, and resulting from, the ongoing cost of living crisis.[129] SWU's work connects sex work and the fight for sex workers' rights to other relevant issues such as benefits cuts, housing issues, and ongoing criminalisation.[130]

One of the main challenges facing sex workers attempting to organise within labour unions is that this model of organising is not modelled on conditions of self-employment which characterises many sex workers' labour relations.[131] This not only presents a significant challenge in how sex workers come together to organise, but it is also further complicated by the fact that the mode of contestation is unclear for self-employed sex workers who have no 'real' employer.[132]

Trade unions also face considerable challenges organising workers in light of the changing landscapes of work and falling engagement rates. Organising workers in non-standard forms of work — such as sex work or gig economy workers — presents additional challenges.[133] Jelle Visser, author of a working paper for

127. Gall discusses the success of exotic dancers in Britain to organise within trade untion structures. Elsewhere in his study he does address the attempts by prostitutes and other sex workers elsewhere in the world to organise within unions (to varying degrees of success), see Gall, *Sex Worker Unionization*, Chapter 6.
128. Cruz, 'Unionising Sex Workers and Other Feminists.'
129. Now, 'Hookers Against Hardship,' For more information on Hookers Against Hardship, see.
130. Cruz, 'Unionising Sex Workers and Other Feminists.'
131. Hardy and Cruz, 'Affective Organizing,' 247.
132. Hardy and Cruz, 247.
133. Jelle Visser, *Trade Unions in the Balance: ILO ACTRAV Working Paper* (Published Online: International Labour Organization, 2019), 71.

the International Labour Organisation on the future of trade unions, points out that trade union's aims might remain the same but they have to change their tactics.[134] This is to say that the aim of trade unions to organise workers for the purposes of improving conditions and pay can remain the same, but that trade unions themselves have to adapt their tactics in light of these challenges.[135] Visser presents several different pictures of the potential future that trade unionism might face. One such future is what they call 'substitution', which is that trade unionism might be replaced with other alternative modes of organising.[136] Reflecting on the potential for these methods of organising workers to replace existing trade unionism, Visser highlights how these alternatives may fulfil different or complementary roles. Of particular relevance from Visser's discussion is that they highlight the relevance of the sector that trade unions are operating in and the difference this may make to the role that unions play depending on the challenges in that sector.[137] Considering the difficulties that traditional trade unions experience in mobilising workers across the sex industry — which is highly varied and encompasses a lot of different workers — alternative modes of organising might support such efforts.

In his 2016 study of sex worker unionising, Gregor Gall presents alternative modes of organising as offering a way that sex workers might 'transition' into labour unionism.[138] This suggests alternative modes of organising, such as through pressure groups, mutual aid, or other forms of activism, offers a pathway for sex workers to move towards trade unionism. Cruz and Hardy note that Gall's approach 'retains industrial unionism as the litmus against which to normatively judge or-

134. Visser, *Trade Unions in the Balance*, 71.
135. Visser, 71.
136. Visser, 66.
137. Visser, 66–68, 71.
138. Gall, *Sex Worker Unionization*, 22–23.

ganizing'.[139] In her review of Gall's study, Chateavert has pointed out that this narrow focus on trade unionism as the most 'legitimate' form of organising is myopic.[140] Although, Chateavert is not necessarily correct when she asserts that traditional union organising has proven 'irrelevant' to the aims of empowering and collectivising sex workers and other marginalised workers.[141] As briefly mentioned, there have been successes within trade union organising for sex workers, such as within the SWU in the UK.

Sex worker organising exists in a range of forms outside of trade unionism. It is important not to engage in what Maurizio Atzeni has termed 'trade union fetishism'. Atzeni borrows from Marx and uses this term as a call to broaden research in the field of labour studies in particular.[142] The problem is that:

> By continuing to focus on the trade union form as the central and undisputed object of analysis, we will offer increasingly partial and limited views of the organizations of the working class, obscuring and making invisible the real processes of struggle and organization that exist outside/in parallel/around the union form, which should be seen as a mean to an end rather than as a mean by itself.[143]

This is of relevance when thinking about what kinds of organising we should be concerned with. Through illuminating the range of alternative organising methods that sex worker organising exists within, we can begin to offer a fuller view of the organisation and struggle of the working class.

However, I am cautious to emphasise that the choice though between trade union-

139. Hardy and Cruz, 'Affective Organizing,' 248.
140. See Chateauvert, 'Sex Worker Unionization.'
141. Chateauvert, 125.
142. Maurizio Atzeni, 'Workers' Organizations and The Fetishism of The Trade Union Form: Toward new pathways for research on the labour movement?,' *Globalizations* 18, no. 8 (2021): 1354.
143. Atzeni, 1350.

ism and alternative forms of organising is not a binary one. Nor is it that alternative forms of organising can be viewed simply as a form of 'transitional' organisation towards trade unionism, held as the pinnacle form of class struggle. Rather, it appears to be the case that trade unionism might be appropriate in some contexts, and alternative worker organising better suited to others. There is also the potential for alternative worker organising to support trade unionism. Given the variety of work organisations that sex work occurs within — legal, illegal, self-employed, conditions of 'false' self-employment, and so on — the mode of contestation for workers is likely to look different in each of these contexts.

3.2 Alternative Modes of Organising

Sex workers, and other marginalised workers like undocumented migrants, often must adopt 'alternative' organising methods. By alternative methods, I am referring here to organising around (sex) worker labour that sits outside of traditional trade unions. This might look like organising peer-led workshops, know-your-rights trainings, or engaging with art as activism.[144] Skill and knowledge sharing, as well as the development of community safety tools such as bad client lists also provide further examples of what alternative organising might look like.[145] The use of mutual aid is valuable to highlight here. 'Mutual aid' has become a buzzword of sorts since the Covid-19 pandemic as there has been a mass proliferation of these organisations to support communities. As a form of organising, it can be understood as a kind of political participation in which people take responsibility

144. Jackson, "Sex Workers Unite!",' 173.

145. For more on how peer-communication tools like 'bad client lists' can serve to serve to prevent violence against sex workers and how they can be valuable as a form of justice that sex workers can access outside of legal redress, see Angelika Strohmayer, Jenn Clamen, and Mary Laing, 'Technologies for Social Justice: Lessons from Sex Workers on the Front Lines,' CHI '19 (ACM, 2019), 1–14.

for caring for each other and changing political conditions.[146]

Dean Spade notes that there's nothing new about mutual aid, people have had to work together to survive throughout all of human history.[147] More than this, however, mutual aid seeks to change the way communities interact with one another. As Spade notes:

> The framework of mutual aid is significant in the context of social movements resisting capitalist and colonial domination, in which wealth and resources are extracted and concentrated and most people can survive only by participating in various extractive relationships. Providing for one another through coordinated collective care is radical and generative.[148]

Mutual aid is a form of organising that many sex worker collectives employ. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many sex workers launched mutual aid funds for sex workers' who had their income impacted.[149] For marginalised communities like sex workers, mutual aid is a necessary lifeline when they are excluded from formalised forms of support from the state.

In reflecting on why sex workers organise outside of 'traditional' spheres, such as existing labour unions, one frequently cited factor is their criminalisation. For many criminalised workers, alternative forms of organising are a necessity.[150] However, even in contexts where sex work is not criminalised, as in decriminalised contexts, there is still less involvement of sex workers within traditional union structures.[151] This is particularly the case for full-service sex workers, in-

146. Dean Spade, 'Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival,' *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (2020): 136.
147. Spade, 136.
148. Spade, 136.
149. Herrera, 'How Sex Workers Are Using Mutual Aid to Respond to the Coronavirus.'
150. Jackson, "Sex Workers Unite!",' 172–173.
151. For example, consider in New Zealand the involvement of sex workers there in the New

cluding those who do street-based sex work.

There are additional reasons to consider beyond sex workers' criminalisation as to why sex worker organising has, for the most part, fallen into the category of 'alternative' modes of organising. Traditional labour unions have overlooked sex work as legitimate work, and the stigma against sex workers in these spheres can be a high barrier to entry.[152] Further to this, sex workers are often dispersed, and many have no fixed workplace. As Cruz and Hardy point out, there is no 'factory gate' at which one could begin to organise workers.[153] Finally, sex worker organising is typically concerned with multiple intersections of injustice such as policing, access to welfare provision, and ending systemic racism. It is in this way their organising often stretches beyond the bounds of the typical employment relationship. As I outline further in section 4, this kind of organising looks more like 'common good unionism' than it does traditional unionism.

Alternative modes of organising can offer a way for workers who are dispersed, diverse and often criminalised to have more of a say over their working conditions. To be clear, I am not dispensing with labour unions and their role. The efforts to unionise sex workers from porn workers to strippers to street-based sex workers in a variety of different cultural and legal contexts are commendable. In addition to and alongside these efforts, mutual aid networks and other alternative modes of organising offer insight into how sex worker organising can look different. Sex worker organising might have to look different by design as workers respond to punitive immigration regimes and the policing of their communities.[154]

Zealand Prostitutes Collective rather than traditional labour unions, see Gall, *Sex Worker Unionization*.

152. 'Whore stigma' is a central problem faced by sex workers when organising, see Hardy and Cruz, 'Affective Organizing.'

153. Hardy and Cruz, 250.

154. Chateavert discusses a similar point in her review of Gall's 2016 book on sex worker organising, see Chateauvert, 'Sex Worker Unionization.'

4 Organising in The Sex Workplace and Beyond

In this section, I propose three insights that sex worker organising can offer.[155] In subsection 4.1, I discuss the production of solidarity amongst the participants of (sex) worker organising. In subsection 4.2, I argue that from examining sex worker organising, there is an argument for widening the scope and area(s) of concern for organising away from the work alone. In subsection 4.3, I discuss the (re)production of the community, particularly through informal modes of support networks.

4.1 Solidarity

Alternative forms of work organising, such as through mutual aid and the development of support networks, can produce solidarity amongst workers. The formation of solidarity should be understood as the ways sex workers have been able to come together in their organising and create a space for transformative political and personal connection.[156] In this subsection, I discuss how through organising together sex workers have shifted their perspective of themselves and their work through consciousness-raising towards developing a 'standpoint' as workers.[157]

Though workers often believe they are in competition with one another, the formation of these networks can enable workers to begin to see one another as workers struggling together for a common goal. This is one way in which these forms of alternative organising can be 'transformative'.[158] In Kate Hardy and Katie Cruz's study of the organising methods used by AMMAR, a sex worker organisation in

155. I have selected three here, though there are undoubtedly more insights to be gleaned from sex worker organising

156. Moraes, Santos, and Assis, "We Are in Quarantine but Caring Does Not Stop",' 652.

157. I discuss 'standpoint' methodologies in the introduction to this thesis. See also Harding, 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology.'

158. Moraes, Santos, and Assis, "We Are in Quarantine but Caring Does Not Stop",' 652.

Argentina, they found that

> As informal self-employed workers, women working in street sex work were highly individualized, did not have a shared workplace, and were intensely competitive with one another. The isolated and dispersed nature of spaces of sex work meant that there was no "cohesive place-based community" or bounded spatial concentration of subjects often deemed necessary for organizing workers.[159]

Many workers, prior to engaging in organising with groups like AMMAR, did not have a shared sense of identity as (sex) workers. Through their organising, AMMAR was able to transform the highly individualised and competitive perspective of workers towards cooperation and solidarity with one another (though not in their totality).[160] For workers in the gig economy, a similar challenge exists. Alex Wood, Vili Lehdonvirta, and Mark Graham point out that many contingent workers are often separated from other workers in the workplace, and they exist in competition with one another.[161] This presents a barrier to collective organisation, as this may require a transformation of their perspective of themselves, their work, and of those that work around them.[162]

Gall, in his study on sex worker efforts to build trade unions, notes that the apparent failure of sex workers to build successful trade unions requires that workers be re-educated on their 'mistaken understanding of the role and purpose — and

159. Hardy and Cruz, 'Affective Organizing,' 250.
160. Hardy and Cruz, 256–257.
161. Alex J. Wood, Vili Lehdonvirta, and Mark Graham, 'Workers of the Internet Unite? Online freelancer organisation among remote gig economy workers in six Asian and African countries,' *New Technology, Work, and Employment* 33, no. 2 (2018): 98.
162. Although, it is not always the case that this fragmentation and competition is transposed into workers' subjectivities, as was the case in Wood, Lehdonvirta and Graham's study of online freelancers in six Asian and African countries. As they note, workers did have 'a collective identity ... one that was related to the theme of autonomy and often articulated in reference to entrepreneurial values and freelancer status.' As they note, this presents considerable challenges for unions looking to organise this sector, see Wood, Lehdonvirta, and Graham, 108.

thus attendant modus operandi — of labour unions.'[163] As Chateauvert rightly points out, calls to 'educate' sex workers about their own condition look like tired arguments about blaming the oppressed for their own condition, rather than honouring the ways they are resisting.[164] Consciousness-raising is an important aspect of sex worker organising, however, there is a difference here to attend to. Calls to 'educate' sex workers on their condition betray an understanding that they already have insight about their own condition. Raven Bowen, CEO of the charity National Ugly Mugs, outlines how it is important to meaningfully include sex workers in organisations, which also includes valuing their insights about their own position.[165] As Margo St James, founder of COYOTE, put it: 'it takes about two seconds to politicise a hooker'.[166] The resilience and bravery of sex workers in contributing to many liberation struggles should not be overlooked.[167] Sex workers are acutely aware of their situation and have valuable insights to give to how this might be rectified.

How, then, can consciousness raising be useful and how does it happen? As Hardy and Cruz's study pointed out, the achievement of a particular 'working class' consciousness happened when sex workers came into community with one another.[168] Further to this, they draw on Weeks' to point out that feminist activists develop various feminist standpoints in the process of making connections between our 'everyday lives and practice and the larger framework of social structures within

163. Gall, *Sex Worker Unionization*, 178; Chateauvert, 'Sex Worker Unionization,' 125.
164. Chateauvert, 'Sex Worker Unionization,' 125.
165. Bowen, *Work, Money and Duality*, 154–156.
166. Margo St James cited in Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 7.
167. Smith and Mac, 7.
168. Hardy and Cruz discuss how this happens through 'affective organising' for workers in AMMAR's intimate union, that is, they explore the role of the 'the invisible, the intangible, and the unnoticed emotional, corporeal, and affective engagements and entanglements in the labor activism of informal self-employed sex workers' in creating this standpoint, see Hardy and Cruz, 'Affective Organizing,' 5.

which they are organized'.[169]

Though, it is worth reflecting on the difficulties of organising a group under such a diverse banner as 'sex work'. Hacking//Hustling hosted a panel in 2021 on Sex Worker Activism: Barriers, Exclusion, and Organising. The panel was focused significantly on how sex workers navigate hostile technology policies like FOSTA/SESTA and continue to fight for their labour rights.[170] Naomi Lauren, speaking on the panel, reflected on the challenges that sex workers face when organising. Lauren is on the leadership of Whose Corner is it Anyway, a Western Massacheutes mutual aid, harm reduction, and political education group led by sex workers, and she is a research consultant for Hacking//Hustling.[171] Discussing what she terms the 'cultural reasons' that digital spaces are not accessible to low-income sex workers, Lauren notes that:

> I don't think we always need to share space. I'm just not a big tent-ist. I think people can come together in a coalition. Fundamentally sex work is not a monolith, we have different needs. There are cultural reasons that it is hard for street based sex workers to be in class diverse sex working spaces one of which is we have a certain culture around how we talk about illegal things which is that we don't.[172]

Lauren points here to a tension in sex work organising, and what the term 'sex work' itself might obfuscate. Sex work, when employed as an umbrella term, is a very large umbrella. Carlisle points out how it is used to refer to legal, illegal, and decriminalised work.[173] It encompasses kinds of work with bosses at specific

169. Kathi Weeks cited in Hardy and Cruz, 'Affective Organizing,' 256.
170. Hacking//Hustling, *Sex Worker Activism: Barriers, Exclusion, and Organizing*, https://hackinghustling.org/event-sex-worker-activism-barriers-exclusion-and-organising/.
171. Hacking//Hustling.
172. Hacking//Hustling.
173. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 574.

locations like stripping in clubs or working at brothels, as well as independent work at multiple locations such as escorting or by the-hour-full-service work.[174] The term 'sex work' works in part to obscure differences among workers and those who would not consider themselves workers as such. However, even though the term 'sex work' can erase or minimise the differences between sex workers, it serves to highlight how stigma affects anyone who has inhabited the hostile worlds of sex and money simultaneously.[175] Carlisle points out that as a tactic, this brings together diverse communities into conversations who may not have organised together before.[176]

4.2 Moving Beyond 'Work'

Organising around sex work necessitates that it becomes broader than client interactions or about negotiating with third parties like brothel owners or managers. Issues like policing, migration, and access to welfare support all become relevant issues when viewed through a sex work organising lens. For sex worker organisers, their work focuses not only on strengthening the bargaining power sex workers have in client interactions, but also addressing the wider context this work occurs in.

A comparable movement to labour organising that addresses wider social conditions can be found in what has been termed 'common good unionism'. This is a form of unionism that has developed out of labour unions seeking to recognise their member's intersectional identities and how they are impacted not just by economic inequality but also by systems of sexism, racism, and other structures of oppression.[177] Common good unionism is a form of 'union organizing

174. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 574.
175. Carlisle, 574.
176. Carlisle, 574.
177. Kimberly M Sánchez Ocasio and Leo Gertner, 'Fighting for the Common Good: How Low-

that addresses social conditions whether or not they are directly related to traditional terms and conditions of employment'.[178] Kimberly Ocasio and Leo Gertner note that traditional unions are having to pursue more innovative strategies, in part because of the need to address the more multifaceted and complex nature of inequality.[179] Common good unionism challenges traditional labour unionism, as it pushes worker movements to have an impact on not only their employment conditions but on housing, education, funding, and healthcare.[180]

For precarious workers like sex workers and gig economy workers, organising around work cannot just be bounded within the 'factory gates', so to speak. In her discussion of what sex worker organising has to offer organising in the gig economy, Yvette Butler provides an example to explain how the link between racial injustice and work becomes clear when listening to the words of activists like Rasheen Aldridge, a Black Lives Matter activist who fights to increase wages. As Aldridge argues:

> There's a system in place that continues to hold people back — and that's the case in the workplace as well ... One key thing that connects both movements is poverty. If we had jobs in our communities that actually paid people a liveable wage, not a minimum wage that isn't even survival, we would get rid of crime and violence in our communities. People wouldn't have to worry about the lights going off or about getting childcare.[181]

Similarly, when listening to sex workers, it becomes clear there are connections between criminalisation, economic inequality, stigma, and many other intersecting

Wage Workers' Identities Are Shaping Labor Law,' *Yale Law Journal Forum*, April 2017,
178. Ocasio and Gertner, 'Fighting for the Common Good.'
179. Ocasio and Gertner.
180. Ocasio and Gertner.
181. Butler, 'Aligned: Sex Workers' Lessons for the Gig Economy,' 367.

systems of oppression. As such, organising around sex work takes many different forms. For there to be one solution that sex workers could rally around, it would mean there would have to be a singular issue to address.[182] Rather, as Mac and Smith point out, sex workers (and many other precarious workers) are located within a matrix of oppressions working together.[183]

4.3 (Re)Producing The Community

Sex worker organising often focuses on community building and the value of support networks. This is all the more important when taken in the context of sex workers' position as 'outsiders'. Sex workers exist often outside of traditional institutions and are often not afforded protection by them. For this reason, sex workers must create community 'by themselves for themselves'.[184] Informal support networks should not be overlooked as a valuable part of sex worker organising. As I discussed at the end of chapter three, sex workers are reproducing their communities within and against hostile institutions. Sex workers come together to form communities, to meet together, to work, and to even play against their 'manufactured vulnerability to deprivation, violence, and early death'.[185] Peer socialising and other forms of social support are central to alternative modes of worker organising.[186] These networks enable sex workers to create a sense of togetherness and affinity, as well as affirm identity and experiences. For sex workers, Jackson argues that valuing the person challenges the stigma and stereotypes that often

182. Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 191.
183. Mac and Smith are drawing on Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the 'matrix of oppressions' to describe the interlinking nature of being multiply marginalised, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 191; Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.
184. Brit Schulte, 'Sex Workers: The Outside/r's Outsider,' *Excursions Journal* 13 (April 2023): 9.
185. Berg, "Today Solidarity Means, Fight Back",' 28.
186. Jackson, "Sex Workers Unite!",' 182.

accompany this work.[187]

Physical spaces are one of the more obvious examples for bringing individuals together to make such connections. For sex workers, such spaces can be hard to come by considering their precarious legal status and often lack of a fixed workplace. In the UK, National Ugly Mugs — a charity intended to work towards crime prevention and victim support for sex workers — set up NUMbrella lane in Glasgow to serve this function of bringing sex workers together in a physical space.[188] This is a space where sex workers can have their immediate needs met such as acquiring safe sex supplies or accessing a food bank. However, more than this, the space is intended to 'create a unity between sex workers where they interact and support each other'.[189] Online spaces can also serve to bring sex workers into community with one another. Online conference series' like those organised by Hacking//Hustling offer spaces for sex workers and other stakeholders like academics and policymakers to come into conversation with one another. For example, their most recent webinar series on organising against barriers was designed to centre the voices of sex workers, often from multiply marginalised backgrounds such as by centring disabled sex workers voices or sex workers from the global majority.[190]

In the Dis/Organizing toolkit created by Hacking//Hustling, they outline a variety of methods for organisers to come together so that they might protect their formations against being dis-organised by the institutions they are trying to dismantle.[191] As the toolkit makes clear, coming into community with one another is not necessarily an easy task. Collectives are often seeking to build solidarity

187. Jackson, "Sex Workers Unite!",' 183.
188. National Ugly Mugs, 'NUMBrella Lane – National Ugly Mugs,' https://nationaluglymugs.org/numbrella-lane/.
189. Mugs.
190. Hacking//Hustling, *Informal, Criminalized, Precarious*.
191. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*, 1.

across differences, which means crossing class, race, age and language divides.[192] Interpersonal conflict or managing access to resources to be distributed by groups all present significant problems to informal collectives. The toolkit offers a series of solutions and suggested practices, drawing on research from sex worker and migrant collectives.[193]

If, as activists like Dean Spade have argued in discussing the value of mutual aid and community, institutions themselves can offer little in the way of a reprieve, particularly for the most marginalised. The community itself becomes responsible for making and building a better world.[194] What toolkits like this can offer is a starting point for reflecting on how to build dis-organised communities. As the authors subtitle the piece, it offers a 'non-comprehensive' guide, and can perhaps be best seen as a conversation with sex worker movement organising than a definitive guide.[195]

5 Chapter Summary

Bob Black quips in his essay 'The Abolition of Work', the world of work is:

> a world of bureaucratic blundering, of sexual harassment and discrimination, of bonehead bosses exploiting and scapegoating their subordinates who — by any rational-technical criteria — should be calling the shots.[196]

Work, for many the world over, does not approach anything near 'meaningful' let alone perhaps even acceptable. Our concern for work comes from recognising that

192. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*, 5.
193. Kuo and Lee.
194. Spade, 'Solidarity Not Charity.'
195. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*.
196. Bob Black, 'The Abolition of Work,' in *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* (Port Townsend: Loompanics Unlimited, 1986), 19–20.

it is, to say the very least, sub par. Even if we might gain incremental increases in pay or better conditions in work, Black argues that the negatives of work far outweigh what we might gain. The problem of work is not something we can simply solve by our 'regulatory tinkering' to the conditions of work.[197]

The case for sex work's decriminalisation has most frequently been made by the sex workers' rights movement on the basis that such reforms would make concrete improvements to sex workers' lives and make it possible for them to access forms of legal redress.[198] The decriminalisation of sex work would see it regulated by labour and civil law, and criminal law would then become relevant in extreme cases, for example (attempted) murder, (attempted) rape, burglary, or robbery.[199] As the authors of 'Why Report?', a study on sex workers' reporting to the police, argue:

> Decriminalisation will offer a climate in which sex workers can have candid conversations about their needs and the protective potential of police services. In this kind of regulatory regime, at the very least, sex workers will be recognised as part of the labour force and as members of civil society who cannot be refused the public services that they help pay for.[200]

Reforms to policing and the regulation of sex work would make concrete improvements to sex workers' lives. It also makes it more likely for them to access forms of justice through policing, such as forms of legal redress. Decriminalisation has been thought to reduce the stigma sex workers receive and have them treated more as legitimate workers. This would place sex workers outside of a dichotomy between either abused/victims or criminals, shifting them into being

197. Black, 'The Abolition of Work,' 27.
198. Bowen et al., 'Why Report?,' 893.
199. Bowen et al., 893–894.
200. Bowen et al., 894.

viewed as workers comparable to those who work in other professions.

Despite the potential for reforms to the policing of sex work to be transformative, there remains the background of severe injustice and violence by the police, and the issues posed by carceral forms of justice. These proposed reforms might not be available to everyone equally such as people of colour who are disproportionately policed or 'illegal' migrants who face deportation. The criminal justice system itself presents severe limitations for considering 'justice' for sex workers, even if sex work is decriminalised. As one of the participants of the 'Why Report?' study remarked:

> Even under decriminalisation, I would need to see evidence of them [the police] being trustworthy and having mass training on how to deal with us [sex workers] before I ever considered going to them [the police] for anything, and even then I am not so sure.[201]

When it comes to sex work, policing, and navigating carceral forms of justice, many sex workers cite the police as a significant source of harm. Sex workers experience arrest, incarceration, detention for months on immigration charges, deportation, harassment, and sexual abuse at the hands of the police.[202] Sex workers also experience distrust in their interactions with the police and feel stigmatised. What is additionally at stake here is that the harms caused by the criminalising state, such as arrest, incarceration or sexual abuse experienced in the context of law enforcement, are not themselves typically considered part of the harms of sex work but may be incurred as additional harms should sex workers interact with

201. Bowen et al., 'Why Report?,' 893.

202. See the following for some examples where cases of violence from interactions with the criminalising state are cited, Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement, *No Silence to Violence: A report on violence against women in prostitution in the UK*; Smith, 'Feminists, you can't fight for women and support the Nordic model'; Hemery, 'Strippers Take Aim at Women's Equality Party Over 'Sting' Operation'; Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Grant, *Playing the Whore*; Ticktin, 'Sexual Violence as the Language of Border Control.'

police or the courts in seeking justice.

It begs the question of whether decriminalisation is just 'regulatory tinkering' to the conditions of sex work. Aragon has expressed similar anxieties about work, noting how sex workers achieving 'state-sanctioned professionalism' is not ultimately a win either. However, in spite of this, I have argued in this chapter, decriminalisation can form an integral part of a programme of non-reformist reforms that seek to transform work and its surrounding structures beyond recognition. Wilson's concept of 'dis-organising' helps to further expand upon the necessary 'and/or' kinds of thinking necessary for abolitionist thinking[203] As Hacking//Hustling have shown with their own dis-organising toolkit, the concept of dis-organising can offer a method of how to put into practice such non-reformist reforms.

Sex worker organising has a lot to offer when thinking about organising outside of the sex workplace. In section 4, I proposed three insights sex worker organising can offer when thinking about labour organising. The first was to draw attention to the way that these modes of organising can generate solidarity amongst participants. I discussed the role consciousness-raising can play in helping (sex) workers to develop a collective identity as workers. The second was that the scope and area(s) of concern for organising are broadened out from the work alone. For sex workers and many precarious workers, it is necessary to connect struggles around work to other issues around poverty, racism, and criminalisation. As noted, sex workers organising around their labour has seldom ever been about 'just' work. The third and final insight was the learnings from sex workers about the potential for the (dis)organisation of communities. Sex worker organising focuses on community building and the value of (often informal) support networks. This often includes organising across race, class, language, and age divides.

203. See Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*; Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*.

6 | Conclusion

'So, do you think that sex work can be considered 'just' work?', I ask the question in most of my undergraduate teaching on sex work in feminist theory. Sitting back, I will let the student reflect on our discussion and the readings they looked at when writing their essay. Usually they have read a mix written by sex workers, radical feminist thinkers from the 1970s and 80s, some sex radical accounts, and contemporary proponents and critics of the Nordic Model. If you have ever taught a 'Feminism 101' course, you will likely have asked a similar question of your own students.

Student's answers tend to range from emphasising sex work necessarily being work because it is paid; discussing how work in general under capitalist systems is problematic hence work is never 'just' work; or they might talk about how sex work should not be framed as work because it is exploitative (sexually or otherwise). I will typically follow up their answer with questions intended to probe at what it means to call sex work 'work' in the first place. Do they think it's a helpful framing? What kind of baggage comes with the word 'work'? Or to put it more on philosopher's terms: What sort of claims are we making when we call something like prostitution, stripping, or sugar babying 'work'? As Berg has remarked, and I engaged with at the beginning of chapter three's discussion, questions over what sort of work sex work is are probably of more interest to those of us outside of the sex trades than they are for those doing this work.[1]

Though Berg certainly has a point, throughout this thesis I have stressed that this does not preclude us from discussing the usefulness of the framing of 'sex work as work'. This slogan has become ubiquitous with the fight for sex workers' rights. What emerged out of the 1970s and 1980s, following Carol Leigh's coining of the

1. Berg, 'Reading Sex Work,' 490.

term ‘sex work’, has been termed the ‘sex work is work’ movement.[2] This position understands the sale of sexual services in exchange for money or other resources to be work.[3] Therefore employment law, rather than regulation through criminal law, is thought to be a better form of mitigation to the risks associated with this work, including exploitation, physical harm, and exclusion from social security.[4] Although, how we understand ‘work’ in this context varies considerably. The ‘sex work is work’ movement is as broad a church as any.[5] Organising under this banner are those who adopt a liberal perspective emphasising the value that the work of sex work could obtain were it decriminalised and destigmatised.[6] There are also scholars, activists, and campaigners who emphasise the work of sex work from Marxist, libertarian, trans, queer, and a range of other perspectives.[7]

The purpose of reiterating this is to say that how we understand the ‘work’ of sex work, its supposed value, and what we do about it is not clear-cut. One of the great benefits of adopting the position that ‘sex work is work’ is that a considerable range of political positions can organise together for the decriminalisation of sex work. It is in this way it has been politically effective as a slogan. However, how sex work can be understood as ‘work’ and what comes after decriminalisation is varied.

2. Leigh, ‘Inventing Sex Work.’

3. Emily van der Meulen, ‘When Sex is Work: Organizing for Labour Rights and Protections,’ *Labour: Journal of Canadian Labour Studies* 69 (2012): 147–168; Sylvie Armstrong, ‘Labour is Labour: What Surrogates Can Learn From The Sex Work Is Work movement,’ *Journal of Law and Society* 49, no. 1 (2022): 170–192.

4. Gall, *Sex Worker Unionization*; Armstrong, ‘Labour is Labour’; Cruz, ‘Unionising Sex Workers and Other Feminists.’

5. moon, ‘Symposium Introduction: Sex Workers’ Rights, Advocacy, and Organizing,’ n.37.

6. For example, see Nussbaum, *Sex & Social Justice*; Schwarzenbach, ‘Contractarians and Feminists Debate Prostitution.’

7. The following examples span a variety of political identifications, some of which I’ve engaged with in this thesis, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; Merteuil, ‘Sex Work Against Work’; Queen, ‘Sex Radical Politics, Sex-positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma’; Carlisle, ‘Sex Work Is Star Shaped’; Jones, “I Can’t Really Work Any ‘Normal’ Job”’; Sumaq, ‘A Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes: Complicity & The Beloved Community’; Aragon, ‘Whores at the End of the World.’

This thesis has been concerned with questions about why sex work was framed as work historically. What led sex worker feminists to opt for the framing of sex work *as work* as opposed to other framings? Lorelei Lee, sex worker and activist, asks a similar question of the present sex workers' rights movement in a recent 2021 conference. She asked participants whether they could envisage framing a different way of calling for the liberation of sex workers than 'work'.[8] In this thesis, I have sought to gain a greater understanding of what rhetorical, symbolic, and ultimately political moves were being made when sex work was framed as work by sex workers and feminists in the 1970s and through to the early 1990s.

For the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) and those campaigning in the Wages for Housework (WFH) movement, I showed that they presented three central claims for reconceptualising sex work as a kind of work. Their reconceptualisation of sex work was placed alongside the movement to redefine housework and other kinds of gendered unseen labour as work. First, sex work was understood as work because it was argued that all work and prostitution are similar in that we all 'sell our bodies' in selling our labour. Second, the ECP emphasised that all women, prostitutes or not, experience a dependence on men in a similar way. Third, their perspective focused on the conditions that structure and influence why people sell sex, revealing that prostitution fulfils a material need. My discussion of the ECP and other relevant organisations affiliated with the WFH campaign utilised archive materials accessed from the Bishopsgate Insitute in London, UK.[9] This included pamphlets, speeches, manifestos, newspaper articles, cartoons, and photographs. Due to the nature of the material surveyed, the claims for reconceptualising sex work are not always presented consistently so this thesis evaluated

8. Hacking//Hustling, *Work and Anti-Work*.

9. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*; Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign Archive 1970–2022, *Collection available at the Bishopsgate Institute London*.

them systemically and reconstructed these claims more clearly.

What the account of sex work in the ECP archive materials reveals is that sex work is seldom 'just' work. To say that sex work is work is not to make it benign and a question of 'personal choice'.[10] Shifting to thinking about sex work as a kind of work prompts us to consider who is doing this work and why. Who sex workers are *does* matter. Understanding sex work *as work* prompts questions about how people can do this work safely, improving living standards, reducing poverty, ensuring people are housed, and safe migration.

Before we are too quick to fully endorse the account given by the ECP and the WFH movement, I have stressed the need to bring a critical perspective to this work-oriented account of sex work. As sex workers receive payment and have monetised sexual relations, some WFH feminists use sex work as an example to place wages in their gendered context, intending to reveal the power relationships that structure them. It is in this sense that sex work is considered symbolically here. The payment received by sex workers is analysed for what it might represent. This is not to suggest that sex work offered WFH feminists a blueprint, many WFH feminists recognised that sex workers face unjust conditions. However, sex work was revealed to be feminised labour that had already been monetised.

This perspective is useful to the extent that it reveals the gendered dynamics at play in performing sexual work, monetised or not. However, as I have discussed in chapters two and three, this conceptualisation of sex work neglects several other factors. Sex workers often perform both paid and unpaid sexual and domestic labour. Many sex workers also experience high levels of violence while they work. In adopting this understanding of sex work, we obscure the specifics of who is doing this work, why, and the conditions in which it is happening. For

10. The Economist, 'A Personal Choice.'

those familiar with the domestic labour debates of the 1970s and the criticisms of the WFH analysis, this is much like the critique raised by Angela Davis. As she argues, it is maids and other women paid for domestic work who know more about 'wages for housework' than anyone else.[11] What this critique also reminds us is the need for an intersectional analysis of sex work.[12]

If we accept an understanding of sex work as work, how should this work be understood? Defining sex work, or any work, is political. When we develop a definition, we must ask what is included and excluded. Our definitions say something meaningful about what it means to work. This is at least part of what was at stake for WFH feminists and those in the ECP. In chapter three, I drew on the work of Haslanger and Horgan to argue that because definition is a political act, this prompts considerations for the kinds for understanding of work we should be endorsing.[13] As Horgan has argued, if we want our concepts of work to analyse some element of social injustice or what is wrong with work, then they need to track that element of injustice and include those meaningfully affected by it.[14]

When it comes then to understanding the work of sex work, the idea that sex work is not 'real' work is a pervasive one. Sex workers are often asked, even by those purchasing their services, 'What is it that you do for work?' Radical Vixen, a sex worker and activist, notes this of her own experiences having seen this asked of sex workers even after they have given a client a lap dance in a club and he is handing over rolls of twenty-dollar bills. In pointing this out, she argues that the implication is that what is done by sex workers is *not real work* and their jobs do

11. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 237.

12. See also for a further critique of the WFH perspective on sex work, Filar, 'What Kind of Work is Prostitution?'

13. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work"'; Haslanger, 'Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?'; Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions? Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds'; Haslanger, 'Social Meaning and Philosophical Method'; Haslanger, 'Theorizing With a Purpose.'

14. Horgan, 'Creeping and Ameliorative Accounts of "Work",' 1111.

not count.[15] For example, a Labour MP in the UK fought back at calls by the leadership of the Labour Party to move towards supporting the decriminalisation of sex work. She argued that, 'Prostitution is not productive. The only 'product' of the "sex trade" is an orgasm for a man. That's not productive, that's not "work".[16] Many sex workers find themselves affirming that their work is 'real' work in response to such attacks. In attempting to combat whorephobia, sex workers and the wider sex workers' rights movement find themselves reiterating that 'what I am doing is real work'.[17]

Saying that sex work 'is work' has real material effects. Invoking particular understandings of the word 'work' is influential for those selling and trading sexual labour, and it can help in the fight to win rights.[18] At times it is necessary to have a pragmatic engagement with the meaning of 'work', particularly where an emphasis might be placed on its usefulness or value. This can mean not only affirming that, yes, sex work is 'real' work, it can even be necessary to outline that sex workers pay taxes and help fund public services or that they 'contribute' in some meaningful way through their work. This strategy can be used to gain rights, combat societal stigma, and reaffirm that sex work is real work.

Though this pragmatic strategy is necessary, it is not the whole story. Nor is it our horizon. I have returned throughout this thesis to Sonia Aragon's point in her article 'Whores at the End of the World':

> The focus on decriminalization within the mainstream sex workers'

15. Radical Vixen, 'Introduction,' in *$pread: The Best of the Magazine that Illuminated the Sex Industry and Started a Media Revolution*, ed. Rachel Aimee, Eliyanna Kaiser, and Audacia Ray (New York: The Feminist Press, 2015), 89.

16. Paul Waugh, 'Women MPs Lambast Corbyn Over Prostitution,' HuffPost UK, March 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/03/07/jeremy-corbyn-tells-his-c_n_9402774.html.

17. Some of the material presented here on sex work and 'real' work is adapted from my MPhil thesis, see Westwood, *Overcoming the Impasse*.

18. For more on the potential to shape the world with concepts and words, see Srinivasan, 'Does feminist philosophy rest on a mistake?'

> rights movement necessitates positioning the work as a job like any other — necessitates a struggle for workers' rights, as bequeathed by a legislative body. Workers in this country are treated like shit, a reality that grows more starkly evident every day unemployment climbs and rent is not forgiven. It's not that I don't stand with the working class — of course I do — but that I don't view assimilation into state-sanctioned professionalism as our end goal.[19]

The focus of much of the mainstream sex workers' rights movement has been to position sex work 'as a job like any other'. This strategy has had to be pragmatically adopted, but it means that declaring 'sex work is work' could lead to assimilation into the kinds of 'state-sanctioned professionalism' that Aragon expresses anxiety over. As I discussed in chapter four, many other sex worker theorists express similar fears over what it means to say that 'sex work is work'. Sex worker theorist and writer Pluma Sumaq argues that this line of argument looks like saying: 'accept us because we are just like you.'[20] As she has pointed out, this comes with risks, because '*Well, what if we're not like you? What then will you do to us?*'[21]

In this thesis, I have argued and further unearthed that contained within some declarations that sex work 'is work' there are critical perspectives on work and work's refusal. These accounts, often termed 'anti-work accounts' and expanded upon here as an 'anti-work reading of sex work', are amongst the most fruitful for those of us who want to construct a critique not only of sex work but of work more generally. Anti-work politics describes practising a politics that allows for the exiting of a coercive work ethic that risks 'render[ing] subjects supremely functional

19. Aragon, 'Whores at the End of the World.'
20. Sumaq, 'A Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes: Complicity & The Beloved Community,' 17.
21. Sumaq, 17.

for capitalist purposes.'[22] Thinking along with M. E. O'Brien's essay on 'Junkie Communism', adopting this kind of politics asks: What would it mean to build a communism based not on the dignity of work, but on the unconditional value of our lives?[23] How can we build a politics that does not have to assume — or expect — the respectability of political subjects?[24] As Carlisle notes in her discussion of anti-work politics, this is not to do away with productive activity or to say that putting in labour are not valuable pursuits used by people to sustain themselves and their communities. An anti-work politics presumes that, in non-exploitative environments, meaningful work would still get done.[25] It is not 'against work', rather an anti-work politics would mean struggling against overworking to meet basic needs and against a coercive culture that assigns moral value based on people's ability to conform to a strict and often ableist work ethic.[26]

Considering sex work as a form of 'anti-work' is intended to leave open the potential that sex work can also be a site of creativity and potential.[27] Through engaging with testimonies and accounts from sex workers, it is revealed how someone might opt to work in sex work over other kinds of work. For some workers — particularly those that are disabled, neurodivergent, migrants, or those with caring responsibilities — sex work may offer a form of work that gives them more control over their working lives. My account looks further than this, however. On many readings, particularly those that are Marxian-inspired, sex work is simply the best economic choice for these workers. Whilst this may be true, I have also tried to explore how sex work can offer a space — at least for some workers —

22. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 12.
23. O'Brien offers a reflection on how we might build a communism not based on the dignity of work, and one that refuses the imposed disposability of junkie lives, as well as the lives of many who live on the margins. See O'Brien, 'Junkie Communism.'
24. O'Brien.
25. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 584.
26. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped'; K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 584–85.
27. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped.'

that may be more than this. Following Carlisle, I leave open the potential for sex work to also be a space of creativity and potential for workers, not simply that they are picking a job from 'the best of a bad bunch'.

In my discussion of exploitation and sex work in chapter four, I discussed how we are often faced with constructions of sex work as either only being exploitative or it representing (often sexual) empowerment for its participants. As I argue, it is also possible for it to be both: sex work is extractive *and* it can be a source of personal fulfilment, joy, and creativity.[28] In exploring the relationship between sex work and exploitation, I critique Vrousalis' structural domination account of capitalist exploitation.[29] This account of exploitation was chosen because it is a plausible alternative to the classical Marxian unpaid transfer account for understanding exploitation in work, which has been commonly cited in many work-oriented accounts of sex work. My discussion offered a reconstruction and exploration of how Vrousalis' account applies to the specific case of sex work. To be clear, my aim in chapter four and this thesis has not been to offer a 'grand theory' of exploitation in sex work, or in work more generally. I have argued in favour of a specific orientation towards approaching exploitation, particularly regarding sex work.[30] By incorporating insights from anti-work writings and testimonies on sex work, it is revealed that sex workers are frequently seeking freedom from other forms of 'straight' work and making pragmatic decisions about their own lives.[31] An account of exploitation that emphasises worker struggle is thus able to resist analysing sex work and exploitation as a story of workers only falling prey to

28. This is precisely the point that Berg is grappling with in discussion of 'porno dialectics', see Berg, *Porn Work*, 3–11.

29. For the main presentation of this account, see Vrousalis, *Exploitation as Domination*; Vrousalis, 'The Capitalist Cage.'

30. I leave open the question here of whether and to what extent my account is compatible with Vrousalis' account, or other Marxian-inspired accounts of exploitation.

31. For more on this perspective, see Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped.'

increasingly vicious forces.[32]

Suggesting that someone might 'choose' sex work, and it could be a better option for them, veers dangerously close to empowerment narratives. This is not what I am suggesting. Identifying that sex work might be sought out over other work in order to gain more control over one's working life is not to make this kind of work a form of 'empowerment' (sexual or otherwise). Instead, what I have argued is that it is integral to take the insights and testimonies from sex workers themselves seriously about their experiences of work, including experiences of exploitation. What this reveals is that sex work presents a more complicated relationship with the concept of 'exploitation' than many existing accounts present. Some sex workers may find more 'freedom' in sex work than they do in many other forms of 'straight' work. This presents a challenge for how we understand exploitation in many existing accounts, and what to do about it.

Workers occupy a space that is at once limited and constrained but also can be thought of as a site of creativity and potential. Following Berg's insights, I argue that in discussing exploitation it is necessary to adopt an orientation towards 'ongoing struggle'.[33] For sex workers, whose work is often criminalised and who may be unable to access traditional forms of organising, what does 'struggle' mean? Marginalised workers organise in ways that can showcase what being agents of struggle looks like. Berg has termed these the 'crafty strategies' used by sex workers.[34] These strategies of struggle are not necessarily militant confrontations with the 'capitalist cage'. Rather, they might look like shirking off, taking more time for themselves in their working day, or looking to find more autonomy in their working lives. These examples of struggle can be all-important for consider-

32. Berg, *Porn Work*, 4–6.
33. Berg, 5–6.
34. Berg, *Porn Work*, 6; Scott discusses a similar concept that Berg draws on in his idea of 'infrapolitics', see Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Chapter 7.

ing how workers might resist (capitalist) exploitation and seek more autonomy in their working lives.[35] In the absence or availability of more collective responses, understanding the value of these 'crafty strategies' allows us to see how sex workers resist the work ethic and live lives that do not render them only as 'subjects supremely functional for capitalist purposes'.[36]

However, all hope is not lost for collective responses. I have sought to add to the existing body of analysis of how sex workers collectively organise around their labour and in response to their criminalisation. The sex workplace prompts many questions and proposes some ways forward for transforming the world of work. This thesis has particularly focused on how sex workers organise outside of 'traditional' routes, such as labour unions. Throughout this thesis, I have returned to the point that there is a relationship between sex work and other kinds of work under conditions of contemporary capitalism. Therefore, I looked at what organising in the sex workplace offers other workers facing similiar challenges like precarity and threats of criminalisation.

My discussion proposed three central insights, although there are undoubtedly more. The first is the production of solidarity amongst the participants of (sex) worker organising. By beginning to organise together, sex workers shifted their perspective of themselves and each other. They were able to see themselves and other sex workers as 'workers' with a common interest in improving their conditions.[37] The second is that organising around sex work necessitates that it becomes broader than client interactions or negotiating with third parties. As I argued, precarious workers like sex workers, cannot limit their organising to within the 'factory gates'. Issues like policing, migration, and access to welfare support all

35. 6 Berg, *Porn Work*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 198–201.
36. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 12.
37. Hardy and Cruz discuss further sex workers beginning to achieve a particular 'standpoint' as workers, see Hardy and Cruz, 'Affective Organizing.'

become relevant issues when viewed through a sex work organising lens. This looks a lot like 'common good unionism' that workers outside of sex work have been practising.[38] Third and finally, I discussed the value of community building and support networks in sex worker organising. The formation of community support networks (formal and informal) is integral for marginalised workers like sex workers to create a sense of togetherness and affinity, as well as affirm identity and experiences.[39]

This thesis also presented a discussion of the utility of the concept of 'dis-organising' for discussions about organising around marginalised and criminalised forms of work, particularly sex work. The concept of 'dis-organising' was first put forward by incarcerated queer abolitionist Stephen Wilson in his essay 'Dis-Organising Prisons' in 2019.[40] The concept was later used by the sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling in their toolkit 'Dis/Organizing: How We Build Collectives Beyond Institutions'.[41] Dis-organising describes the ways that organisers generate techniques to work both within and against the system they are looking to disrupt. At the same time, organisers and groups must also protect themselves from becoming dis-organised by the same structures.[42] In my discussion of dis-organising in and around marginalising forms of work, I argue that the concept can help to understand the non-reformist reforms that sex worker radicals are aiming towards when they attempt to reform sex work whilst simultaneously looking to deconstruct this work under existing systems of racialised capitalism.

A unifying demand of sex workers' rights activists and academics has been to decriminalise consenting adult sex work. This is posited as the removal of the

38. See Ocasio and Gertner, 'Fighting for the Common Good.'
39. Jackson, "Sex Workers Unite!",' 182.
40. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.
41. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*.
42. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*; Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*, 4–5.

regulation of sex work by criminal laws and regulation by civil and labour law. The risk this comes with is that it can position sex work like any other kind of work. Calls for decriminalisation may come with assimilation into the kind of 'state-sanctioned professionalism' that Aragon worries about. For those of us concerned about developing an anti-capitalist and anti-work response to sex work, the problem becomes how we hold together arguments for decriminalising sex work when it is at risk of making this work more institutionalised under capitalism, and simultaneously argue for post-work futures.

The concept of 'dis-organising' and kinds of 'and/or' thinking this entails provides some inroads into this problem. Drawing on the work of Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie, I explored the relevance of 'both/and' thinking, rather than binary 'either/or' thinking. Abolition requires we must do multiple things at once. It is a framework that does not shy away from contradictions. Rather, such contradictions need to be thought of as generative for change or sites of analysis.[43] Lewis' discussion on family abolition reveals that abolishing is not merely the absence of. Rather, the project of abolition is one which is world-building and a collective act of creativity without an end.[44] To dis-organise effectively requires that organisers do multiple things at once. The work of dis-organising is to identify the fault lines within the system and resist them. As Wilson argues, it is looking for ways to 'deny it what it needs to continue' and to 'make it less effective'.[45] This is the work of non-reformist reforms. Rather than aiming at improving the system, they aim at its abolition. The discussion also revealed the importance of organisers not becoming dis-organised by the system itself. To dis-organise successfully is to ensure that the non-reformist reforms are not absorbed back into the system in a way that is 'acceptable'.

43. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, 5.
44. Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 81.
45. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.

The question still remains whether the decriminalisation of sex work is just 'regulatory tinkering' to the conditions of sex work.[46] The argument that decriminalisation makes sex workers safer in the here and now is clear. As Srinivasan points out in her discussion of sex work, what is left unclear is if this demand will end or transform sex work.[47] The decriminalisation of sex work can form an integral part of a programme of non-reformist reforms that seek to transform work and its surrounding structures beyond recognition. Wilson's concept of 'dis-organising' further expands upon the existing concepts such as 'and/or' thinking that are essential for abolitionist thinking. As the sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling have shown with their toolkit, the concept of dis-organising offers an effective method for putting into practice non-reformist reforms.

This thesis has laid the ground for future research into sex workers' subjective experiences of their labour, particularly focused on their experiences of exploitation and understandings of 'freedom' in their work. Further research would be beneficial to explore understandings of how sex workers experience their labour as a sex worker and within 'straight' jobs. There is a growing body of literature focused on the subjective experiences of sex workers and how they understand their labour, some of which I have drawn from in this thesis.[48] As this research affirms, there is much to be gained from valuing sex workers' embodied knowledge surrounding

46. Black, 'The Abolition of Work.'

47. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 158–159.

48. One example I have cited extensively is Berg's study into porn work and her focus on how porn workers understand their labour (and their resistance to it). See Berg, *Porn Work*; Another example is Rand and Stegeman's study into sex workers' understandings of their labour as digital labour and how online platforms shape their experiences of their work, see Helen M. Rand and Hanne M. Stegeman, 'Navigating and Resisting Platform Affordances: Online Sex Work as Digital Labor,' *Gender, Work & Organization* 30, no. 6 (2023): 2102–2118; Jones' study offers insights on the experiences of disabled sex workers', see Jones, "I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal' Job"'; See also an interview with femi babylon on their understandings of erotic labour, sex work, and its relationship to 'anti-work', Babylon and Berg, 'Erotic Labor Within and Without Work: An Interview With femi babylon.'

what it means to work, sex, experiences of their criminalisation, and beyond.[49]

Based on the theoretical ground developed in this thesis, research focused on further exploration of the experiences of sex workers who work in 'straight' jobs (understood as jobs outside of sex work) that overlap with their sex working profession would be of particular interest. For example, several online sex workers also work as cosplay performers or as online social media influencers. There has been some existing research conducted into sex workers who have both a sex working job and who work a different 'straight' job.[50] However, there has been minimal exploration thus far into sex workers who experience a significant cross-over in their work. That is to say, those workers who are not deliberately not keeping their sex work separate from their 'straight' job.[51] Some existing research has identified the overlap between sex work and 'straight' work, particularly of those working on online social media platforms and on platforms such as OnlyFans where they can sell adult content.[52] Literature has also focused on the deplatformisation and shadowbanning of sex workers on online platforms, particularly since the passage of FOSTA-SESTA in the US.[53] Deplatformisation is where an individual on a 'plat-

49. Carlisle, 'Sex Work Is Star Shaped,' 586–588.

50. For example, Bowen's 2021 book deals with the idea of 'duality' which looks at sex workers who trade sex as a 'side hustle' and is one of the most extensive on this topic, see Bowen, *Work, Money and Duality*.

51. As one example, Bowen's study predominantly identifies sex workers intending to keep their sex work deliberately separate from their 'straught' work, see Bowen.

52. For some examples of existing literature, see Lauren Rouse and Anastasia Salter, 'Cosplay on Demand? Instagram, OnlyFans, and the Gendered Fantrepreneur,' *Social Media & Society* 7, no. 3 (July 2021); Jenna Drenten, Lauren Gurrieri, and Meagan Tyler, 'Sexualized Labour in Digital Culture: Instagram influencers, porn chic and the monetization of attention,' *Gender, Work & Organization* 27, no. 1 (2020): 41–66.

53. The report by Hacking//Hustling provides details on the impact of Section 230, a piece of internet legislation reducing online platform's liability for moderating content. This report details sex workers' experiences of shadowbanning, see Shanell Mullin Danielle Blunt Emily Coombes and Ariel Wolf, *Posting Into The Void* (Published Online: Hacking//Hustling, 2020), https://hackinghustling.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Posting-Into-the-Void.pdf; See also the report on the impact of FOSTA-SESTA, which the report on S230 builds on, Blunt and Wolf, *Erased: The Impact of FOSTA-SESTA and the Removal of Backpage*.

form is no longer able to generate ad revenue, sell data to data brokerage firms, or provide data to Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT) companies'.[54] However, 'shadowbanning' individuals enables them to still post, but their content is deprioritised and hidden. With this, platforms are still able to generate ad revenue from their content.[55] There is space to explore sex workers' subjective experience of the 'blurriness' between 'straight' work and sex work, including how sex workers' are navigating the criminalisation and regulation of their work particularly in digital spaces. Many workers carry over elements of their 'straight' work into their sex working job, and vice versa, which is often camming or the production of content on websites like OnlyFans. For example, workers may create adult OnlyFans content as a particular character that they cosplay as at conventions. This is of particular interest for the theoretical account developed in this thesis because it would allow for further exploration of the boundaries between sex work and other kinds of work. Examples such as this offer an opportunity to explore how sex workers understand their labour, its boundaries, what different kinds of work they take on to sustain themselves, and what they understand as strictly 'work' or whether it exists in spaces beyond this.

Much of this thesis has been structured around the archives of the English Collective of Prostitutes and the Wages for Housework movement. In looking back at their 'half remembered hope' and 'failed dream[s]',[56] I have sought to revisit these 'older feminisms' to see what conceptual resources we might find to bring to bear on the present.[57] I looked to do this 'at a slant' rather than head on. Their analysis of questions about sex, work, social reproduction, and whether getting paid can be really revolutionary are insightful — however, they are still very much of their

54. Danielle Blunt and Ariel Wolf, *Posting Into The Void*, 15.
55. Danielle Blunt and Ariel Wolf, 15.
56. K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 114.
57. Berg discusses how sex radicals are looking at 'older feminisms' of the 1970s and 80s, in this case radical feminisms, 'at a slant' to uncover concepts and ideas, see Berg, 'Free Sex.'

time. What attracted me to these texts is their expansive political horizons. They offered ways to restructure and completely remake the world. This is a thread I have sought to pick up and integrate throughout this research. This thesis hopes to open up space for further examination around the intellectual history of sex worker movements. How do the ideas about what defines sex work as work explored here compare to those offered by other sex worker collectives? The account developed here has focused predominantly upon the UK and Northern European and US contexts. What relationships, if any, are forged with sex worker collectives in the global majority? How do ideas about work, sex, wages, and reproduction differ across these different contexts? The account elaborated upon here indicated that sex worker collectives like the ECP were shown support from a range of connected groups, such as from Black Women for Wages for Housework or Wages Due Lesbians. What, we might ask, does this kind of coalition building offer us for thinking about building solidarity within movements today? Although answering these questions is beyond the scope of this thesis, the research conducted for this thesis only begins to uncover some of the connections within the sex worker rights movement, feminist intellectual history, and the archive.

I began writing this thesis in 2020, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. When I proposed the topic, I could not have imagined what would come in the following years. Sex workers were amongst some of the hardest hit in the pandemic. Not only this, they have been some of the worst off in the financial aftermath as we face recessions in many countries around the world. Sex workers have also been at the forefront of the response to the pandemic. They have organised together, created mutual aid funds, cared for one another, and mourned losses. In the eyes of many institutions, sex worker lives are disposable lives.[58] Sex workers continue to

58. Thrasher presents a discussion of sex worker's manufactured vulnerability to viruses such as COVID-19 and their inclusion in what he terms the 'viral underclass'. Of particular interest is chapter 6 which discusses the lives of transgender immigrant women in the US, some of whom

care for one another against their own 'manufactured vulnerability'.[59] Sex worker resistance is not only in keeping one another alive, though this should not be overlooked. Sex workers dis-organising their communities engage in

> world building work, valueless as it is to the status quo, [it] can not be understood as reproductive (of labor, the social, and so on) in any simple way. As such, it sits uncomfortably with a dominant argument in feminist care politics — care must be valued because it produces value for the state.[60]

This understanding of reproductive labour stretches our understanding of work and its usefulness.[61] Thinking about sex worker community care — the ways that sex workers are (re)producing themselves and others within and against this hostile backdrop — offers up a way to think about caring and reproductive labour beyond any claims to its value to the social as the world currently exists.[62]

Sex workers dis-organising around their work are seeking ways to deny the state and other harmful institutions what they need to continue.[63] In doing this 'world building work', they are coming together and practicing solidarity.[64] More than this, sex workers are dreaming up what a world without work could like. Their analysis of work opens up critiques for other kinds of labour, particularly those that also involve forms of physical and emotional intimacy. As we find ourselves in a time when there are growing crises around the world — climate disaster, the rise of the far right, economic recessions, the erosion of women's and queer

work as sex workers, and their work to protect their communities. See Thrasher, *The Viral Underclass*.

59. Berg, "Today Solidarity Means, Fight Back",' 28.
60. Berg, 29.
61. Berg, 29.
62. Berg, 30.
63. Wilson, *Dis-Organizing Prisons*.
64. Berg, "Today Solidarity Means, Fight Back",' 29.

people's rights, and worker's rights being undermined at every turn — we can learn a significant amount from turning to those who continue to struggle against their imposed disposability. It should also serve to remind us that we are not free until all of us are free.[65] Perhaps the Black Women for Wages for Housework said it best when they asserted that: 'When prostitutes win, all women win'![66]

Figure 6.1: English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Black and white photograph of women wearing eye masks and cheering in Holy Cross Church, catalogue ref. ECP/13*, 1982

65. See Fannie Lou Hamer, '"Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free,": Speech Delivered at the Founding of the National Women's Political Caucus, Washington, D.C., July 10, 1971,' in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Published Online: Mississippi Scholarship Online, 2010).

66. English Collective of Prostitutes Archive 1975–2019, *Paper titled 'Money for prostitutes is money for black women' (by Black Women for Wages for Housework - U.S.A.', catalogue ref. ECP/19.*

List of Illustrations

7 | Acknowledgements

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8 | Bibliography

The bibliography contains all cited material from the thesis. Archival materials from the English Collective of Prostitutes and the Wages for Housework Collections have a reference given to the documents cited and a full citation to the archive collection is also listed. The materials have been listed under the following headings:

- Archive Materials
- Online Archives
- Books
- Works Cited in Collections
- Articles
- Reports
- Legislation
- Websites, Blogs, and Online Articles
- Newspaper Articles
- Theses
- Lectures

Archive Materials

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