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Comment on Overall's "What's Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work"

Laurie Shrage

IN PREPARING the groundwork for the moral and political analysis of prostitution, feminist theorists have tried to develop a single account of the origins and social evolution of prostitution—that is, a general account of how prostitution arises in any society. Presumably, if the social forces that give rise to prostitution are morally problematic, then so too is the resulting social practice itself. Alternatively, if prostitution has morally unproblematic origins, then its moral character needs to be reevaluated accordingly.

Two origin stories have predominated in the feminist literature regarding prostitution. One has been offered by socialist feminists who argue that prostitution is caused by capitalism and patriarchy. The other has been offered by libertarian feminists who argue that prostitution is caused by “natural” sexual desires for abundant and diverse sex.¹ Yet these social evolutionary tales, and the moral analyses they support, suffer from a lack of cultural and historical contextualization.

In a recent issue of *Signs*, Christine Overall offers a new version of the socialist feminist origin story. According to Overall, “sex work is an inherently unequal practice defined by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy” (1992, 724). One problem with earlier narrations of this general theoretical approach is that many forms of labor can be traced to the rise of patriarchal capitalist societies and the social inequalities they engender. Thus, we must either object to all of these labor forms or show that prostitution is more morally objectionable than other apparently similar kinds of work.

¹ For example, the socialist feminist position is articulated in or derived from the following writings: Rubin 1975; Jaggar 1980; Goldman 1983; Engels 1985; and Lerner 1986. The libertarian feminist view has been advanced by spokespersons for various prostitute civil rights groups (such as Margo St. James of COYOTE) and has been taken up and defended in the following essays: Richards 1979 and Ericsson 1980.

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Overall recognizes this weakness in previous accounts and attempts to bolster them by drawing a contrast between prostitution and other occupations that appear to derive from the economic and social inequalities of capitalism and patriarchy. She looks especially at low-status work where the laborers are primarily female and the customers or bosses are primarily male: for example, housework, clerical work, nursing, and child care.

Comparing prostitution with other jobs that particularly place women in subordinate roles, Overall states, "sex work differs in a crucial way from other forms of women's labor. . . . While cooking, nursing, and child care need not necessarily be commoditized, sex work is by definition the commoditization of sex. What is essential to prostitution is not sexual activity itself but the buying of sexual activity" (716–17). Presumably cooking, nursing, and child care, even when conceived as work, can be performed in ongoing social relationships where they are exchanged in kind, on a reciprocal basis. Yet sex, when conceived as work, according to Overall, cannot be exchanged on a nonmonetary or noncommoditized basis. For when sex is exchanged on a nonmonetary or noncommoditized basis, Overall claims it is not "sex work" but "a sexual event or relationship that does not involve service for the sake of material gain" (717). By contrast, when cooking, nursing, and child care are exchanged on a nonmonetary or noncommoditized basis they are still work—they do not become a "cooking event" or "cooking relationship," or a "nursing event," and so on. Thus, unlike "housework" or "child work," to treat sex as work is to treat it as a commodity—something that is exchanged outside ongoing social relationships in order to maximize material gain.

Furthermore, Overall argues that sex work not only involves the commoditization of sex but also requires pernicious forms of social inequality: "Prostitution is a classist, ageist, racist, and sexist industry, in which the disadvantaged sell services to those who are more privileged" (717). With sex work, the sex buyer is always more socially privileged by class, age, race, and gender than the sex seller, according to Overall. For this reason she claims that prostitution is not "reversible": it has no "value independent of the conditions of sexual and economic inequality under which it is performed" (718). That is, sex *qua* work has value only when it is performed by socially defined inferiors for their socially defined superiors. It has no value or purpose when it is performed by men for women, whites for blacks, middle-class people for working-class people, adults for children, or even women for women, men for men, and so on.

By contrast, Overall argues that other forms of nurturing and domestic work, which currently place women in subordinate roles vis-à-vis men,

are “reversible”: “That is, there is nothing in the nature of the work itself, insofar as we can separate it from its working conditions, that would prevent it from being performed by men for men, by women for women, or, most significantly, by men for women. Moreover, the labor of office workers, sales clerks, cooks, cleaners, and child care workers has a value independent of the conditions of sexual and economic inequality under which it is done, and much of it would still be socially necessary in a postcapitalist, postpatriarchal world” (717–18). But sex work would be socially unnecessary “in a postcapitalist, postpatriarchal world,” for it has little or no value when it is not part of a commoditized transaction between a member of a socially privileged class and a member of a socially underprivileged class.

While Overall’s analysis of prostitution isolates many disturbing features of sex work in our society, it fails as an account of sex work in many other societies, even other patriarchal capitalist ones. Yet, Overall intends her analysis to apply to all patriarchal capitalist societies. In this regard, there is a fundamental contradiction in her account. For on the one hand, she claims to be looking at prostitution only within patriarchal capitalist contexts and to be isolating the attributes it has in those contexts—attributes that are likely to be contextually contingent. On the other hand, because she sees prostitution as caused by the transcultural forces of capitalism and patriarchy, she treats many aspects of prostitution within these contexts as essential attributes—applying to all contexts—rather than as contextually contingent attributes.

Moreover, because Overall sees capitalism and patriarchy as social systems that together create the necessary conditions for sex work, she sees all patriarchal capitalist contexts as essentially alike with respect to sex work. Yet, by considering sex work in a range of patriarchal capitalist societies (especially nonindustrial, non-Western ones), we see that the social contexts that shape its meaning are interestingly distinct.

For example, Overall rightly points out that much sex work in patriarchal capitalist societies involves customers privileged by gender, race, class, and age (e.g., adult, bourgeois and/or first world, white males) and prostitutes socially disadvantaged by all of the same factors (adolescent, working-class and/or third world, women of color). However, her analysis oversimplifies the dynamics of social privilege as it pertains to the reversibility of sex work across patriarchal capitalist contexts. For Overall overlooks the existence of patriarchal and capitalist postcolonial contexts where sex work involves customers who are disadvantaged by gender but socially privileged by race and class (first world, bourgeois white women) and prostitutes who are privileged by gender but disadvantaged by race and class (third world, proletarian men of color; see Karch and Dann 1981). If prostitution were an “inherently unequal practice defined

by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy," then this case would be impossible.

Similarly, Overall ignores patriarchal capitalist colonial contexts where sex work involves primarily men and women of the same economic, race, and age classes: for example, customers who belong to an indigenous, dislocated, and impoverished colonial adult male labor force and prostitutes who belong to the same indigenous and impoverished, colonized adult population (see White 1990). In the latter case, the economically disadvantaged are selling sexual services to the economically disadvantaged, which would be impossible if prostitution were inherently classist (in an economic sense). Moreover, in some instances in these contexts, the economically more advantaged are selling sexual services to the economically more disadvantaged. For example, in describing prostitution in colonial Nairobi, Luise White states, "prostitutes were not proletarians. Malaya prostitutes were petty-bourgeois women who actively controlled profit-generating enterprises—the sale of sexuality, the sale of domestic skills, the rental of rooms, or all three—for which they provided the labor" (1990, 175). Like small-scale capitalists, these prostitutes charged more for their wares than it cost to produce them. By contrast, their customers were proletarian men, whose only source of income was the exchange of their labor for wages.

One basic error in Overall's account, then, is that while commerce in sex in most industrial Western societies may be sexist, racist, classist, and ageist, it is not inherently or essentially sexist, racist, classist, and ageist in all cultural contexts. Indeed, without examining prostitution in a greater variety of cultural contexts than Overall has done, she has no grounds to claim it is inherently or essentially anything. Though Overall attempts to avoid essentialism by specifying the contextual parameters of her account, she treats these parameters as the universal causes of prostitution and not as principles for assessing its social meaning. Unfortunately, such causal accounts have an internal logic that begets "insights" into the essence or nature of an activity—one presumably given to it through and in the act of genesis. Furthermore, if capitalism and patriarchy are the causes of prostitution, then Overall's analysis implies that sex commerce should not occur in social contexts where capitalism and patriarchy are absent, and thus her analysis applies beyond the parameters she has specified.

Another error in Overall's account pertains to her claim that sex work differs from other kinds of work in that to treat sex as work is to treat it as a commodity. Overall's claim assumes that sex cannot be constituted as work when it is exchanged on a noncommoditized basis, whereas cooking, for example, can be constituted as work even when it is exchanged on a personal basis. However, when services other than sex are

exchanged on a noncommoditized basis then, like sex, they may cease to be culturally regarded as “services” or work. For example, though cooking in the context of a noncommoditized exchange may not be treated as an “event” or a “relationship,” it may be conceived as a recreation, an entertainment, or an “interest” rather than “work.” Conversely, though sexual activity in the context of an ongoing social relationship may in most circumstances be culturally constituted as a social event or recreation, in some cases it may be culturally constituted as a service or as work without being commoditized. For example, White claims that in colonial Nairobi, “customers [of prostitutes] occasionally became boyfriends or even husbands” (1990, 57). Presumably in such cases sexual activity occurs in the context of ongoing social relationships whose purpose is not primarily individual material gain, and yet at the same time it is culturally constituted as “work” or a “service” from which each profits.

Therefore, the cultural constitution of sex as work, and thus prostitution as an occupation, need not depend on capitalist forms of exchange, as Overall’s account implies.² As White states, “prostitution is a capitalist social relationship not because capitalism causes prostitution by commoditizing sexual relations but because wage labor is a unique feature of capitalism: capitalism commoditized labor” (11). In part, this means that capitalism shapes sex work into commoditized forms of labor and exchange rather than causing sex to be constituted as a category of labor. Whether sexual activity is work in one context and a social event or recreation in another is not a function of universal forces that distort or preserve the essence of sexual activity. Instead it is a function of culturally specific principles that shape the social contexts in which sexual activity takes place.

In addition, Overall fails to distinguish a monetary exchange from a commoditized exchange. Yet an exchange can be a monetary one without necessarily being a commoditized one, as, for example, when money is exchanged as gift between family members or friends. When a prostitute’s client becomes a boyfriend or a husband, then sexual activity may still occur as part of a monetary exchange in this context but not as a commoditized exchange. Similarly, when a wife and husband participate in a system of exchange in which the wife receives money and her sexual activity is culturally construed as a service to her husband, the wife’s receipt of money is not part of a commodity exchange but a monetary gift exchange. This is a gift rather than a commodity exchange because the wife’s services are not traded impersonally with just any buyer to maximize profit (see Mauss 1954). Whether the wife in this context is a “sex

² Indeed it appears that sexual services were bought and sold in many precapitalist societies, e.g., ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia, Greece, India, and China.

worker” or a “prostitute” I will leave to the reader’s cultural imagination, but her labor is neither commoditized nor dependent upon capitalist social relations.

In seeking, like Overall, to improve the socialist feminist account of prostitution, we should develop a socially contextualized and comparative account. This account should not seek the universal causes of sex work, and it should not presuppose the universal meaning of sex. Instead, our account should seek to understand how the nature and meaning of particular sexual behaviors vary in relation to different cultural contexts. It should also acknowledge the fiction of treating prostitution as an isolable phenomenon possessing a single transcultural meaning. Moreover, our account should recognize that while the meaning of sex work in our society is determined by sexist, classist, and racist ideologies, in other contexts its meaning may be determined by dominant social ideologies that are not sexist, classist, and racist at all, or at least not in the same way as ours. Furthermore, it should not dismiss the possibility of sex work occurring in a “postcapitalist, postpatriarchal world” (or a prepatriarchal, precapitalist world), even though the social definition, justification, and significance of this labor form would be quite different from outwardly similar labor forms in our society. The upshot is that, with a socially contextualized and comparative account of prostitution and sex, a socialist feminist need not treat sex work as a special, and more egregious, case of capitalist exploitation—despite our own cultural sensibilities.

Overall speculates that because the topic of prostitution is so divisive for feminists, feminists have written little on it (compared with, e.g., the issues of pornography or rape; 706). Yet, while feminist moral and political theorists have given sexual commerce less attention than the topics of sexual representation and sexual assault, a number of feminist historians have recently completed some richly detailed histories of sexual commerce and the various laws enacted to control it.³ Thus the potential divisiveness of this issue has not stalled all feminist investigations of prostitution. Moreover, because of these new histories of prostitution, a socially contextualized and comparative moral analysis of prostitution is now feasible. Finally, while Overall has rightly attended to the voices of prostitute women in our society in formulating her analysis, by utilizing these new histories, we can open the debate on prostitution to prostitute women in other societies as well.

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³ See esp. Walkowitz 1980; Gronewold 1982; Otis 1985; Gibson 1986; Levine 1988; Hobson 1990; Truong 1990; White 1990; Guy 1991.

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