



Reply to Shrage

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Christine Overall

We need to take care that a 'theoretic of heterogeneity' not lapse into a purely particularistic mapping of culture. . . . Some item of 'difference' can always be produced which will shatter any proposed coherencies. If generalization is only permitted in the absence of multiple inflections or interpretive possibilities, then cultural generalizations of any sort—about race, about class, about historical eras—are ruled out. What remains is a universe composed entirely of counterexamples, in which the way men and women 'see' the world is purely as particular individuals, shaped by the unique configurations that form that particularity. At this juncture, social critique self-destructs, and the dualistic, hierarchical nature of the actualities of power in Western culture is obscured. [BORDO 1988, 629]

THE DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN Laurie Shrage and me is of particular interest because it is in large part a debate about feminist philosophical method, and I am grateful to her challenging critique for providing the opportunity for me to think further about this debate. The critical charge of essentialism used against certain feminist theorists reflects a new orthodoxy; it is the postmodernist arrow aimed at the heart of many radical feminist claims. But it is not enough just to use the essentialist label; the critic must show that the theorist charged with essentialism has genuinely made an error.

Shrage implies that I claim, unjustifiably, to see into the essence of prostitution. She attributes to me a belief in "the essence of sexual activity" and argues that I cannot justifiably claim that prostitution is "inherently or essentially anything."

In my article I use, deliberately and provocatively, the phrase "essentialist question" to refer to "whether there is anything inherent in sex work [a term I use interchangeably with 'prostitution'] as practiced today that renders it inevitably morally problematic in a way that other forms of work are not" (710).

But there are at least two varieties of essentialism, one that I repudiate and one that I adopt. The questionable variety of essentialism (call it *Essentialism*), which I reject, claims that we can know the inner qualities of things, institutions, and practices through intuition or some other

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special form of consciousness. The other variety of essentialism (call it *essentialism*) claims that we can learn about a human activity in part by looking at how the language referring to it is typically used and what the conditions are under which that language is created and employed. Thus, my approach to the topic of prostitution is based, not on an a priori hypothesizing of its historical origins, as Shrage claims, but on examining the concept of prostitution and the conditions that make prostitution possible. I am not claiming to intuit the inner essence of prostitution but, rather, to be considering, in the fashion of the analytic philosopher, what the criteria are for use of the term *prostitution* and what conditions make possible the kinds of activities that, generally speaking, are so referred to.

The term *prostitution* is used to refer to a variety of activities, but these activities are manifestations of a more general practice with identifiable features by virtue of which it is so called. The practice called *prostitution* has two main features: first, it involves the actual activities of buying and selling sex services, using money or money equivalents; and second, it assumes and depends upon the socially constructed definition of women's sexual activities as one type of buyable service or commodity for the benefit of men. Far from being a pernicious manifestation of Essentialism, this approach is entirely compatible with social constructivism, insofar as it recognizes that prostitution is a particular kind of cultural creation made possible through the intersection of patriarchy and the commoditization of human services. In an earlier article, "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution?" Shrage envisages the possibility that commercial sex could, contrary to present conditions, be sought as "a professional service" (1989, 358). This scenario presumes the desirability of buying sex from women, presumes that it could be analogous to the purchase of other clearly valuable services such as medical care and legal advice. But understanding prostitution requires interrogating what Shrage calls "the commercial availability of sexuality" (349) rather than taking it as a given—that is, investigating what makes possible the social definition of women's sexuality as a desirable commodity.

In her commentary on my article Shrage does not explain what she means by *prostitution*. Nor does she offer any criticism of the features that I suggest characterize prostitution. In her 1989 article, however, while warning against explanations of prostitution that use "cross-cultural and trans-historical causal mechanisms," Shrage defines prostitution as "commercial sex" and "the purchase of sexual services from women by men" (348). This definition, while brief, seems accurate, and I submit that a practice that was not "commercial sex" would not be prostitution. To use the term *prostitution* for practices lacking the two features I identify would be to significantly change the meaning of the term. There may be fringe cases and ambiguous cases, but if a practice lacks one or both of the features described above then it is not prostitution; that is, it is not what standard

and prevailing usage would call “prostitution.” Indeed, it might be so different that what I say in the article would probably not apply to it. So, in one way, I want to generalize about prostitution by claiming that whatever gets called *prostitution* has, by definition, these two general characteristics; in another way, there are limitations on my generalizations, insofar as there may be practices similar in some ways to prostitution but lacking these features to which my comments therefore do not apply.

Shrage claims that “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.” Indeed, I argue that the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy is the condition that makes prostitution possible and that without this condition there would be no prostitution. By contrast, Shrage claims that in a postcapitalist, postpatriarchal world, sex work might exist, but its meaning, definition, and justification would be very different. She provides no evidence for this claim, and at this point it is no longer at all clear what she means by the term *sex work*.

Notice that my approach does not necessarily assume that activities denoted by the term *prostitution* are everywhere the same; of course they can be and are variable. Shrage claims that I see “all patriarchal capitalist contexts as essentially alike with respect to sex work,” but she provides no evidence for this generalization about my argument. In fact, I consider a number of possible aspects of prostitution that might vary. I deliberately examine different contexts for the activities referred to as *prostitution* and imagine how they might be different: for example, such significant factors as disease, violence, poverty, coercion, and lack of control over one’s working conditions may be present in varying degrees within prostitutes’ lives and in some cases may be absent altogether.

Given the key features of prostitution, that it depends upon the socially constructed definition of sexual activities as one type of buyable service by women for the benefit of men and that it involves the actual activities of buying and selling sex services with money or money equivalents, the practices that fulfill them are sexist, classist, racist, and ageist. This claim does not necessarily imply that every single sex work exchange involves gender, class, race, or age inequities—as Shrage suggests it does. Sometimes white women sell to men of color, sometimes men sell to other men, and sometimes middle-class women sell to working-class men. But these facts do not vitiate my argument. For I am interested in characteristics of the institution of prostitution (or, as I said in my article, the “industry”), in general, and the conditions that make the practice of selling sex both culturally imaginable and seemingly valuable.

Shrage attributes to me the view that “sex qua work . . . 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.” But this statement misrepresents my view. Of course individual instances of “sex qua work” may have a purpose, and those purposes probably vary, depending on the participants. But my suggestion was that prostitution as a socially defined practice only has value and meaning within a culture when its creation and definition involve crucial inequalities of sex, class, race, and age.

At the same time it is notable that Shrage does not—presumably because she cannot—offer examples of white, middle-class heterosexual men selling sexual services to gay black men or to working-class aboriginal women. I regard this as significant, though she may not. Even more significantly, Shrage offers no arguments in her commentary to show that sex work—under any circumstances or within any cultural context—is good for women, or even neutral as regards women’s welfare, that it is something that feminists should encourage or at least tolerate—even within an imaginable alternate society. She has given no arguments to show that as a practice, sex work is not inevitably sexist, classist, racist, and ageist.

In her commentary Shrage claims that I fail to distinguish, with respect to prostitution, among three concepts: the concept of work, the concept of a monetary exchange, and the concept of a commoditized exchange. Whereas I argue that any sexual event that involves the provision of sexual services for money or monetary equivalents is prostitution, Shrage claims that a sexual event could be work and could involve a monetary exchange, without being commoditized, that is, without being prostitution.

Nevertheless, Shrage’s own examples fail to establish the significance of these distinctions. First, she argues that sexual activity can be work without being commoditized. This is an interesting idea: sex as volunteer work. Shrage does not define what she means by *work*, nor does she speculate about why and how sexual activity could be or become an apparently noncommoditized form of work. But it is imaginable that a woman might engage in what seems to be a type of volunteer sexual activity in order to appease, placate, or calm her partner, in order to ensure a steady source of material support, or in order to fulfill her end of an implicit social bargain. She is, then, working for her partner, who provides something in exchange: perhaps what he provides is only not getting angry or violent, or perhaps it is the continuation of material benefits such as food and shelter.

Shrage offers an appropriate example: when a prostitute’s customer becomes a boyfriend or husband, Shrage suggests that the woman’s sexual activity “occurs in the context of ongoing social relationships whose purpose is not merely individual material gain, and yet at the same time it is culturally constituted as ‘work’ or a ‘service’ from which each individual benefits.” But in that case, what is morally and conceptually significant is the kind of benefit each individual receives: the woman

provides sex, the man provides recompense in some (not necessarily monetary) form. Assuming that buying sex is not inherently desirable to men (an Essentialist view if ever there was one), the individuals' exchange of sexual service for payment is dependent upon and constituted through the social definition of women's sexual activity as an exchangeable service for the benefit of men and is therefore an instance of prostitution.

Such a relationship is unequal. This is not an Essentialist point but a moral and conceptual one.

Second, Shrage argues that sexual activity can be rewarded with money without being commoditized. She describes a wife's receipt of money from her husband as a "monetary gift exchange" for her sexual activity "construed as a service." What makes it a gift is the fact that the wife does not trade her services "with just any buyer to maximize profit." Shrage says, casually, "whether the wife in this context is a 'sex worker' or a 'prostitute,' I will leave to the reader's cultural imagination."

Now, the term "monetary gift" might clearly apply when, for example, a grandparent gives two dollars to her grandchild. The grandchild does not necessarily or usually provide, and is not expected to provide, any service in return; the gift giving is not dependent upon any socially defined "grandchild services." By contrast, when a woman "gives" sexual services to a man throughout a relationship and in "exchange" he provides her with money, my "cultural imagination" concludes that the man is purchasing sex from the woman in a context in which sex is culturally constituted as a buyable service, part of the "patriarchal bargain" of marriage or a marriage equivalent. The fact that the wife sells only to one buyer rather than several does not make her services a gift. So, even when (or perhaps especially when) sex is rewarded with the "gift" of money within a marriage or a marriage-like arrangement, even when the monetary rates vary or are capricious, and even when sex is exchanged "in kind" for other forms of support or service, this arrangement is an instance of the practice of prostitution. And wherever sex work may occur, what Susan Bordo refers to as "the dualistic, hierarchical nature of the actualities of power in Western culture" (1988, 629) constructs it as an inherently unequal exchange.

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