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## **Constructions of Prostitution in Berlin, 1914-45: Lessons in Understanding Sex Work, Legalization, and Decriminalization**

Falen Wilkes

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**Constructions of Prostitution in Berlin, 1914–45:**  
Lessons in Understanding Sex Work, Legalization, and Decriminalization

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## I. Introduction

When Doris, the main character of Irmgard Keun's *The Artificial Silk Girl*, arrived in Berlin after World War I with little more than the stolen fur coat on her back, the city was undergoing a period of intense change.<sup>1</sup> Like many young women, rather than marrying in their hometowns, she moved to Berlin to find white-collar, or rather, pink-collar, jobs as secretaries or office workers and enjoy the modern city's thrills. These women became such a common sight on the Berlin streets by the 1920's that they earned the name "New Women," with their new-fangled shorter haircuts—influenced by the moral police's common punishment of chopping short the hair of prostitutes arrested beyond red-lined areas—and their stocking-showing hemlines.<sup>2</sup> With their own disposable income, these young women were buying more material goods than ever, and spending their money on drinks in cafés and late-night venues. The New Women were so popularly fascinating that novels published in the late 1920s and early 1930s, like Keun's *Artificial Silk Girl* and Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel*, which depicted New Women characters as protagonists and prostitutes as secondary characters, quickly became best-sellers.<sup>3</sup> However, as much as the New Woman fascinated the public, she infuriated some equally so. Along with the movement of populations into German cities, especially the cultural and governmental center of Berlin, came a post-WWI increase in prostitution. Promiscuity was having a bit of a field day in Berlin's red light districts—some city blocks were swarming with prostitutes, all with their own uniforms indicating the services they offer, like the leather-boot

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<sup>1</sup> Irmgard Keun, *The Artificial Silk Girl*, translated by Katharina Von Ankum (New York: Other Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin*, expanded ed. (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Vicki Baum, *Grand Hotel*, translated by Basil Creighton, Margot Bettauer Dembo, and Noah William Isenberg (New York: New York Review Books, 2016).

girls whose stitchwork and leather color all indicated various BDSM (bondage, dominance, sado-masochist) services.

Women like Doris were becoming more visible in cafes, performance and nightlife venues, either alone or with men they are not married to. Many people in Berlin criticize these changes as immoral, but others come from far and wide for a taste of this newfound sexual freedom. Doris dreams of becoming a film star and narrates the *Artificial Silk Girl* as more of a movie than a diary, observing the men in the café's, the women who live in her building, and those who walk the streets. She describes her new way of life in Berlin, getting meals and gifts from men in a number of brief love affairs, before finding a very rich man named Alexander whose romance leaves her richer than ever before with numerous gifts and elegant clothes. When Alexander's wife returns, Doris is left with no financial support, and finds herself once again waiting for men to invite her over in order to earn money. Though she never considers herself a prostitute, and looks at those women she understands to be prostitutes with a level of pity and disdain, she begins to reflect on her fatigue of giving her body to strange men for money. Though she has loved a number of the men she was with, she seems tired of such a lack of stability in her life. When she finally reunites with one of her lovers, Ernst, he wants to help her achieve one of the goals she has held ever since arriving in Berlin: finding a job. However, to the reader's surprise, despite looking for a job since she arrived in Berlin, she refused to work. Eventually, realizing how deeply Ernst loved his ex-wife, Doris leaves him. He reunites with his wife, and Doris returns to another one of her lovers, still dreaming of becoming a movie star, with her future left to the imaginations of the readers.

The *Artificial Silk Girl*, published in 1932, was initially a great commercial success, but was banned by the Nazis in 1933, and burned. However, if Doris had walked the streets of Berlin

beyond the pages of the novel, she would have faced a far worse fate with her future less open to imagination. It is possible that Doris, if a real woman and not a fictive construction, would have been arrested for "prostitution" as early as 1933, due to the lack of clear definition of "prostitution," and its association with general promiscuity and unchaste behavior. If she avoided the first rounds of arrests, it is likely she would have been arrested either in the series of arrests known colloquially as the "cleaning of the streets" before the 1936 Olympic Games, or after the official creation of the "asocial" category in 1937.

No matter the case, by late 1937, it is entirely likely that a real Doris would have been held in a concentration camp for her promiscuity and arguably later transferred to Ravensbruck, the all-women concentration camp that began construction in 1938. Had Nazi authorities labelled her as "asocial" or "prostitute," rather than the slightly less disdained terms of "hWg" or "Wg." These terms have complex meanings, but both connote promiscuity: "hWg" (*häufig wechselnder Geschlechtsverkehr*) means very often changing sexual partners, while "Wg" (*wechselnder Geschlechtsverkehr*), means sometimes changing sexual partner.<sup>4</sup> She could have been placed in the prostitute's block like the one that the real-life Nanda Herbermann, the camp prisoner in charge of prostitutes, described in her memoir, *The Blessed Abyss*.<sup>5</sup> It is unlikely that a real-life Doris, as a woman who avoided official forms of registration and observation when moving illegally to Berlin, ever would have been released, as Nanda was in 1943. Those arrested for prostitution were extremely unlikely to be released and she would probably have lived the rest of her life at Ravensbruck, whose poor conditions were incompatible with a long life.

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<sup>4</sup> Annette F. Timm, "Sex with a Purpose: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Militarized Masculinity in the Third Reich," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11: 1/2 (2002): 223–55

<sup>5</sup> Nanda Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss: Inmate #6582 in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for Women*, translated by Hester Baer and Elizabeth Roberts Baer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000).

At some point after 1942, a woman like Doris likely would have been approached by Nazi officials visiting Ravensbruck and recruiting women camp prisoners to work in the camp brothels established under the command of Heinrich Himmler. As a woman who valued material goods and always dreamed of better living conditions, she, like so many other women, might have taken the deal offered—work in the camp brothel, earn meager pay, have slightly better living conditions and slightly more material goods such as cigarettes and some clothes. Once transferred to a mixed sex camp, she would have spent almost all her time in the prison-like camp brothels. Allowed limited time outside, she would have limited relaxation time, with most of her days filled with back-to-back 15-minute appointments with higher-level camp prisoners who had been given brothel passes as motivation rewards. During the 15-minute sessions, despite the appearance of privacy given by individual “bedrooms,” Doris would have been continually observed through the eye-hole in the door, and would have been subjected to the cruel jokes and lewd comments of the Nazi officers watching through the door, whether the female Nazi matron or the male guards. Between each appointment, she would be forced to wash herself with lactic acid, which would cause painful burns. If she survived these intense conditions for the next few years, it is possible she could have lived to see freedom again.<sup>6</sup>

*The Artificial Silk Girl* was banned for its racy contents: namely, a young working woman named Doris who not only frankly discusses her sexual desire, but uses it to try to find a rich man to couple with. A few times in the novel, it seems as though she has succeeded, but her

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<sup>6</sup> Following the practices established in WWI by the German Army’s medically supervised brothels, the women working there would wash with lactic acid to help prevent the spread of venereal diseases. Along with regular medical check-ups, men visiting the camp and military brothels under the Third Reich would also undergo medical procedures: namely, penicillin injections in the urethra before and after brothel appointments. Timm, “Sex with a Purpose,” pp. 223–55.



various affairs eventually come apart, and at one particularly rough moment, she begins to identify herself with the “lowest” women—sex workers—and sees herself as almost forced into prostitution due to her desperate circumstances. Keun has been critiqued for failing to address the more political developments of the period, including the rise of Nazi power and anti-Semitism, save for one date where Doris is rejected when she pretends to be Jewish. However, I disagree. Keun, by avoiding direct discussions of the political developments of the period, a topic fairly well covered at this point, offers us a look at the visual and sexual politics that impacted the lives of the women so often forgotten; working women and sex workers. Her novel prompted my question: What was the social construction of “prostitution” formed during the Weimar Republic? We can see this construction from several vantage points that give us visual snippets of prostitution in action. First, through Doris’s eyes, we get both an idea of the social field of the sex trade and how the sex trade was viewed by a woman who, for most of the novel, views herself outside and above prostitution. Then, we see her through the eyes of Nazis who banned the book as immoral and promiscuous. Taken together, these vantage points give the novel a sense of the ambiguity of both the label of prostitute and the sex trade itself.

Of course, this novel is a work of fiction. However, it is important to note that many scholars have argued that Keun’s bestselling novel was meant to reflect something of her own experiences. Keun was born near Berlin in 1905, and lived in the city until she was eight years old, when her family then moved to Cologne. She attended acting school there for a few years, while working a white-collar job as a stenotypist, which bears some similarity to Doris’s brief stint as an actress in Cologne, and her own white-collar work throughout the first sections of the novel.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Tatar “Forward,” to Keun, *Artificial Silk Girl*, p. 3.

On the other hand, *The Blessed Abyss*, Nanda Herbermann's memories of her experience in Ravensbruck camp, is far from fiction. Published in 1946, the memoir reflects on her arrest in 1941 by the Gestapo in Munster for collaboration with the Catholic movement. In July of that same year, she was imprisoned at Ravensbruck, a concentration camp for women about 90 km north of Berlin. While there, Herbermann served as the leader of the "Prostitute's block," a barrack exclusively for women arrested for prostitution. In a unique turn of events, Herbermann was only held in the camp for a little less than two years; on March 19, 1943, she was released upon direct orders from Heinrich Himmler himself. Despite clear instructions from the Gestapo to not disclose any information about the camp or her experiences, she began shortly after her release to record memories of her time there, and *The Blessed Abyss* was first published after allied forces occupied Germany in 1946. Evidence of prisoner's experiences while in concentration camps are difficult to find, due to the lack of resources to record evidence available to prisoners while in the camps, and the low numbers of people released who lived to tell or record their stories, and wanted to share those stories. Though it has been nearly impossible to find primary sources from sex workers who were held in Ravensbruck, Herbermann's reflections can give us glimpses not only of some of the sex workers who were held in the Ravensbruck prostitute's block, but also the circumstances and conditions they found themselves in there. Though the evidence may be slightly marred by the lens of Herbermann's experiences, and her own biases towards prostitution, Hebermann's own emotional responses and opinions of prostitution in general, as well as her opinions of the women she was charged to lead, are absolutely fascinating and have much to tell us. She is clearly somewhat steeped in the social construction of Prostitution at the time was degeneracy and immoral, she has moments of real empathy for her companions, and others of disdain.

Historians often study these two periods, the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, as distinct. But for the women who lived from 1914–45, there was no clear temporal break. They experienced both periods in interconnected ways. With the novels *The Artificial Silk Girl*, which reflects on and represents the complex experience of the “New Woman” in Weimar Berlin, insights from primary sources such as Siegfried Kracauer’s *Die Angestellten* (*The Salaried Masses*) and Nanda Herbermann’s *Blessed Abyss*, as well as extensive historical research on prostitution in Berlin, I seek to examine the experience of women living through the Weimar and Nazi periods through the lens of prostitution, chastity, and promiscuity. Doing so reveals not only how constructions of prostitution in Berlin from 1914–45 impacted real people’s lives, but also what these constructions can reveal about social and moral understandings of chastity, promiscuity, and prostitution as forces of power and social control. Prostitution in early twentieth-century Berlin, the center of power in Germany, has been a particularly talked-about topic, due both to the famous sexual liberality of Weimar Berlin 1919–33 whose red-districts attracted tourists from far and wide, and the more recent focus by historians on the previously ignored existence of state-run brothels, in cities and military and concentration camps, in the later years of the Third Reich from 1933–45. The distinct differences between the Weimar Republic and Third Reich are covered exceedingly well in historical research, especially regarding sexuality and morality. But the continuities of this period are left uncovered, or at least, generally uncommented upon. Though much changed between 1914 and 1945 in Berlin when it comes to constructions of prostitution, promiscuity, and chastity, a perhaps equal amount forms common threads through these years.

Because of the immense complexity of these periods, as well as prevalent hypocrisies and ambiguities, they form an ideal case study through which to examine the wider issues of

prostitution's, chastity's, and promiscuity's construction that still impact us today, particularly around the problem of sex work and the debate between its legalization or decriminalization.

## II. Feminist Theories of Sex Work

Prostitution is popularly called the "oldest profession" in the world, despite debates on its morality, visibility, and execution being central to cultural debates throughout the centuries. Feminist theoretical perspectives on prostitution range from the idea that it is oppressive and exploitative to the view that it empowers women because, as Cynthia Cole Robinson states it, "it allows [women] to charge men for what they expect for free."<sup>8</sup> In other words, in most theory, sex worker women are either seen as victims, or as sexually liberated but socially stigmatized. Those who believe it is exploitative often believe the commercial exchange of sex should be abolished, because it does nothing to improve, or even furthers, the inequitable status of women in society. On the other side of the argument, some feminists believe that despite a lack of inequity between women and men, sex work is still a legitimate profession, that has simply been stigmatized by a sexually repressive society.<sup>9</sup>

Robinson notes that domination-theory feminists argue that the root of women's oppression lies in their sexuality, and furthermore, make the exceedingly bold claim that prostitution is not an *industry*—rather, it is "the state in which all women find themselves." This belief rests on the understanding that the sexuality of women *essentially* is reliant on their objectification by men. Their sexuality is, according to Catherine MacKinnon, "socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others [those others being males] [. . .]

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<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Cole Robinson, "Chapter Two: Feminist Theory and Prostitution," *Counterpoints* 302 (2007): 21–36.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, "Chapter Two," pp. 27.

women never own or possess it.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in domination-theory, women are always constructed as the *victims* of male desire. And, because of this victimization, sex work is inherently oppressive and violent, and serves the purpose of asserting male dominance over women. But it is not just sex work that is violence in domination-theory—Andrea Dworkin argues that *all* acts of sexual intercourse are acts of violence in which women are victims:

There is never a real privacy of the body that can coexist with intercourse; with being entered. The vagina itself is a muscle and the muscles have to be pushed apart. The thrusting is persistent invasion. She is opened up, split down the center. She is occupied—physically, internally, in her privacy... Violation is a synonym for intercourse.<sup>11</sup>

Prostitution is still, however, seen as one of the highest forms of exploitation of women in domination-theory, because it is reliant upon men as the client and in many cases, the broker or pimp.<sup>12</sup> This belief is held so strongly that many domination-theorists refer to prostitution as “the female sex slave trade.” The conflation of sex work, trafficking, and sex slavery inherently present in the connotations of the term “prostitution,” will be addressed later in this paper.

However, I would like to address other well-debated problems domination-theory raises. But, domination-theory raises significant problems. First, its core tenet of women’s objectification by male desire is heteronormative. It ignores transgender people, men who are sex workers, and cases where women are not the objects of men’s desire. Second, I disagree with Dworkin’s assertion that “violation is a synonym for sex” because it denies the fulfillment or even *existence* of female desire and achievement of female pleasure. These things are not

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine MacKinnon, quoted in Robinson, “Chapter Two,” p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Dworkin, quoted in Robinson, “Chapter Two,” p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, “Chapter Two,” p. 27.

necessarily absent from sex, nor are they necessarily absent from sex work. Finally, stating prostitution as a condition that plagues all women is a generalization that overshadows the circumstances, issues, and social stigma that sex workers actually face.

Liberal-feminists create a fairly split camp when it comes to the issue of prostitution—but most liberal-feminists agree that sex work should be legalized or decriminalized. The tenet behind this common belief is that the criminalization of prostitution denies the rights of sex workers to make decisions about their bodies, a line of reasoning similar to that of *Roe v. Wade* (1973), and therefore denies women equal protection under the law.<sup>13</sup> Both camps also agree, that despite wanting prostitution legalized or decriminalized, it is *still rooted* in a lack of economic opportunities and resources for women, in a patriarchal society.

The liberal-feminists begin to splinter when it comes to the issue of degradation. Conservative-liberal feminists, as Robinson terms them, argue that sex work is degrading, particularly because women are selling their *bodies* for money, and therefore affirming the societal idea that women are commodified goods to be bought. More liberal liberal-feminists hold that it is the same as any other form of labor performed to earn a wage—they argue that “sex work is a social contract in which the sex worker contracts out a service for a certain amount of time and is a free worker just like any other wage laborer.”<sup>14</sup> They view sex work not as selling a body, but selling a service.

Current debates by activists often return to terminology, and the derogatory nature of the term “prostitute.” The Oxford English Dictionary record the earliest use of the word prostitute in English in the 1530s, and trace its meaning from the Latin verb *prostituere*, meaning “to expose

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<sup>13</sup> Robinson, “Chapter Two,” p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Robinson, “Chapter Two,” p. 28.

to public (shame), dishonor, put to unworthy use.” It emerges in the 1530s as a verb meaning to sexually dishonor oneself as in, “I perceived, as a comen woman dothe herself in a perceive house.” Its first recorded use as a noun is in Francis Beaumont’s “Woman Hater” (1607), as an insult, “My loue and dutie will not suffer mee/ to see you fauour such a prostitute,” and it appears again in John Dryden’s “Rival Ladies” (1664) as an insult to women, “She’s an Infamous, leud Prostitute; I loath her at my Soul.”<sup>15</sup> It is not until the 1700s that the term comes to mean not just a woman “who offers herself indiscriminately,” but rather a woman who sells sex for money. However, the association of the term with sexual dishonor remains: It is not a neutral term. Male sex workers have also been around as long as sex work, but are almost always referred to as specifically “male prostitutes”: the prostitute is clearly assumed to be a common woman, despite the fact that there are many sex workers who are *not women*. I would also like to note that not all sex workers in Berlin were women; however, for the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on women, the targets of prostitution policy, and those usually socially constructed as prostitutes.

Many people, not just scholars, are now using the term “sex work” instead of prostitution. In contemporary times, with the increase of advocates’ interest in the living conditions and exploitation of women that accompanied the rise of feminist methodologies, another association forms—the association of the term “prostitute” with “victim.” Modern anti-prostitution activists assert “that all or nearly all individuals in the sex industry are coerced or trafficked, therefore equating all prostitution with trafficking.” Due to this association of human trafficking with sex work, and therefore the perceived dominance of trafficking in the sex work industry as compared to other labor industries, criminal justice efforts are focused on fighting human trafficking

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<sup>15</sup> “Prostitute,” Oxford English Dictionary, date accessed 4/25/20.

concentrate on sex trafficking. This is despite 2015 estimates of the British International Labour Organization (ILO)—the most reliable source for global labor statistics—“that there are almost 21 million victims of forced labor and human trafficking worldwide, including an estimated 4.5 million victims of forced sexual exploitation.” While about 75%, the *majority*, of trafficking victims are involved in labor outside the sex industry, only 8% of trafficking convictions are found in these other areas. Though forced labor in the sex industry makes up only about a quarter of estimated trafficking victims, they constitute 92% of convictions for human trafficking.<sup>16</sup> These statistics indicate just how powerful our perception of sex work as inherently exploitative and coercive really is, and how sex work, usually named “prostitution” by those who are against it, is conflated with trafficking and forced sexual labor.

Many scholars have argued that “the sexual panic around ‘sex trafficking’ rebrands various social problems connected to poverty, migration and labor rights as *individual moral problems* (or national security concerns) and expands the criminal justice system to increase monitoring and control of marginalized populations.” It also feeds a “rescue industry” which “requires a steady supply of women and girls who are arrested and then forced into being labelled victims or face incarceration.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, our construction of prostitution as an individual moral problem in our society neatly feeds the carceral system.

Far too often in scholarship on prostitution, both feminist theory and historical studies, sex workers are delineated as either victims or villains. Research that tries to understand the *experience* of sex workers, rather than simply their political, economic, social or moral implication, frequently seek to discover *why* a woman became a prostitute—a similar question to

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<sup>16</sup> Kari Lerum and Barbara G Brents, “Sociological Perspectives on Sex Work and Human Trafficking,” *Sociological Perspectives* 59:1 (2016): 17–26, quotes on pp. 18–19.

<sup>17</sup> Lerum and Brents, “Sociological Perspectives,” p. 20.



asking *why* one became a criminal. They seek an explanation for delinquent behavior, and inherently place moral weight on sex work itself. Feminist theory work on 20th-century prostitution, rather than the morality of the woman themselves, has historically turned to the morality of the work, claiming it represents a materialization of wide-reaching male dominance and exploitation of women—it constructs women as the victims of the patriarchy. Prostitution is, despite being called the oldest profession, never really viewed as a *profession*, but rather a *situation* into which one throws themselves, or is thrown into. Whether villain or victim, in these constructions sex workers are held on social margins, untouchable as individual instruments of their own agency.

These beliefs continue despite recent theorists arguing that “all working conditions—including those for sex workers—[are] a complicated and contextualized continuum which may contain various aspects of privilege, agency, coercion and structural constraint.” Even the language we use in our trafficking debates reflect anti-sex work bias. Lerum argues that the “terms ‘sex trafficking’ and ‘sex slavery’ are sensationalistic discursive tools that prioritize the product (sex) rather than the people (sex workers).” Hence, she argues for a change to “more humanizing and empirically descriptive terms such as ‘trafficking in the sex industry’ or ‘forced sex labor.’”<sup>18</sup> It is equally important to maintain a distinction between forced sex labor and sex work, which is *not* inherently forced. Because of these roots of the terms prostitute and prostitution as an insult and representative of dishonor, many sex work rights advocates now argue for the term “sex work” or “sex worker” to be used over prostitution or prostitute, because not only is it more descriptive, but also it focuses on sex work as an occupation rather than a dehumanized and dishonored state of being. Careful use of terms can help to push back against

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<sup>18</sup> Lerum and Brents, “Sociological Perspectives,” pp. 19–20.

the public perception of sex work as inherently exploitative, not real work, and something that no one would choose to do.

However, as a historian, I also recognize that the term used in primary sources from 1914–45, as well the majority of work done with these sources, uses the term prostitution. In this paper, I will use both terms—prostitution to reference both the sex work industry from 1914–45 in Berlin, and to reference the label assigned to women who participated, were assumed to have participated, or for other reasons had the label assigned to them. Of course, the degree to which the term “sex worker” can be placed on some of the women deemed prostitutes in the Weimar and Nazi periods is questionable. In addition, it is important to note the way the term prostitute was deployed by the Nazis to envelop all women they deemed unchaste and racially and medically impure, as bodies that incorporated both racial mixing and venereal disease.

### **III. Historical Controversies over Prostitution**

Prostitution controversies have been well documented as a subject of public and moral debate for over 4,000 years, with periods of increased challenges to prostitution often followed by “decades, or even centuries, of relative tolerance.” But despite these many years of fluxes between challenges and tolerance, no society or group had ever “succeeded in freeing” prostitution from controversy, and prostitution remains a subject of public debate today.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Annette Jolin, “On the Backs of Working Prostitutes: Feminist Theory and Prostitution Policy,” *Crime & Delinquency* 40:1 (1994): 69–83, quote on p. 71.

In ancient India, the practice of men buying sexual services from women outside the monogamous family became systemic in the later Vedic Ages (1500–500 BCE).<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that scholars of ancient Indian history have argued that neither

[t]he “voyeuristic” approach nor the approach based totally on exploitation can help us understand properly courtesanal traditions in ancient times, but “ways of moving beyond these sharply polarized perspectives must be found [. . .] Nonetheless, the patriarchal boundaries within such traditions cannot be flouted with impunity.”<sup>21</sup>

Historians, using sources like the legend of Ambapali in Buddhist literature, have shown that a “ganika” was chosen for her profession, not able to enter the sex work profession of her own will. However, they have also shown that women like Ambapali “may have paid state taxes for the protection of their profession [and] had some freedom of movement and could even acquire property that they could dispose of as donors.” Sex workers operating at lower levels of the society, like “rupajeevas” likely lived with worse conditions; so we can clearly see hierarchal levels of sex worker’s livings conditions and value. As far as conceptions of body ownership and autonomy, the “kumbhadasi” (a sex worker in the lower rungs of society) has been said in Buddhist literature to “belong to the wretched of the earth whose body as well as her labor power were completely at the disposal of her masters,”<sup>22</sup> which implies the existence of more exploitative sex labor, and the concept of a sex worker’s body as public property, or a sex worker as a public woman.

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<sup>20</sup> Malini Bhattacharya. “Neither ‘Free’ nor ‘Equal’ Work: A Marxist-Feminist Perspective on Prostitution,” *Indian Journal of Women and Social Change* (2016): 82–92.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Malini, “Neither ‘Free’ nor ‘Equal’ Work,” p. 85.

<sup>22</sup> Malini, “Neither ‘Free’ nor ‘Equal’ Work,” p. 85.

The ancient Greeks were perhaps some of the most socially accepting of prostitution in the western world—all forms of sex work flourished in their societies, and “upper-class prostitutes frequently attained prominence as highly cultured companions of powerful Greek citizens.” However, despite public admiration and social power, sex workers were unable to be married and gain the status of a wife, the “ultimate affirmation of legitimacy for women in Greek society.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, we can see in some of the most ancient constructions of prostitution the good/bad woman, or whore/mother dichotomy, which remains fairly intact in the construction of prostitution over the next 4,000 years.

With the establishment of Christianity in Europe, tolerance for prostitution took on a functionalist character—religious philosophers like St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) argued that though prostitution was a troubling phenomenon, it served a basic need. Aquinas even wrote “if the sewer was removed, the palace would be filled with pollution; similarly if prostitution was removed the world would be filled with sodomy and other crimes.” This quote highlights tendencies to place the weight of cultural purity on women’s shoulders, and to blame impurity on promiscuous women. This lesser-of-two-evils reasoning for the existence of prostitution is one that has remerged frequently, and taken on many forms. This tolerance of the “evil” of prostitution, as it tends to in the flux between tolerance and disdain; the prevailing of Lutheran thinking in 16th-century Europe led to a rise in movements to abolish prostitution on moral grounds. Lutheran sexual morality decreed chastity for all, and demonized promiscuity—Martin Luther viewed promiscuity as utterly reprehensive, and “depicted prostitutes as emissaries of the devil who were sent to destroy faith.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jolin, “On the Backs of Working Prostitutes,” p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> Jolin, “On the Backs of Working Prostitutes,” p. 71.

With these and many more examples of times of abundant or lacking tolerance examined together, Annette Jolin is able to identify an interesting pattern—both those who argue for tolerance and those who argue for abolition do so because of discomfort around the stability of marriage and female chastity. In times of tolerance, “prostitution engenders discomfort in society largely because it poses a threat to female chastity and marriage.” If we turn again to the ancient Greeks, we can see that while they freely tolerated prostitution, they also went to *great lengths* to protect the chastity of their wives and daughters, generally through the physical segregation of chaste women—which will serve as a template for social segregation throughout later histories—and the previously stated reservation of ascribing legitimacy to wives and chaste women. This physical segregation meant the keeping of chaste women and wives in the private sphere—“the respectable wives and wives-to-be of free Athenian citizens spent almost their entire lives under conditions that can only be described as house arrest.”<sup>25</sup>

In times when strict segregation of chaste and unchaste women no longer possible or as easy, the lesser-of-two-evils argument tends to emerge, painting prostitution as not a threat to married life, but a safeguard to it, because it is a monetary rather than emotional exchange. Scholars like Georg Simmel who argue this point state that “money serves most matter-of-factly and completely for venal pleasure which rejects any continuation of the relationship beyond sexual satisfaction: money is completely detached from the person and puts an end to any further ramifications.”<sup>26</sup> In this argument, we can see perhaps most clearly how the promiscuity of men is taken for granted, and the existence of unchaste women to bear the burden of male promiscuity and protect the chastity of wives.

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<sup>25</sup> Jolin, “On the Backs of Working Prostitutes,” p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> Georg Simmel quoted in Jolin, “On the Backs of Working Prostitutes,” p. 71.

In times of condemnation, we can see how prostitution is seen as such a large social and moral issue because it is seen to embody moral degeneracy, and in these periods moral outrage against promiscuity becomes the most powerful tool to efforts to abolish prostitution. The fear of promiscuity was initially a religiously informed morality, but in more contemporary periods has also taken the form of a public health issue, with promiscuity being blamed for the spread of disease. However, these public health arguments remain, in the background, “religiously informed, moral condemnations of promiscuity.” It is not until the increase of feminist literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that we see the problem of prostitution beginning to be framed as linked to either inequality, or chastity as a norm for female sexuality.<sup>27</sup>

#### **IV. Scholarship on Prostitution in Modern Germany**

Up until the 1970s, most scholarship on German prostitution focused on the period before the First World War. In 1976, Richard J. Evans explored the development of urban prostitution and the effects of policies to manage vice post the industrial revolution, and Lynn Abrams’s piece a decade later. Though Evans did take a cautious step towards analyzing where the sex workers came from, Abrams managed to develop a clearer picture of the backgrounds of sex workers and their experiences up to 1918. Neither papers significantly discussed the social, political, and economic changes faced by women from 1914 onwards, or the implications of these shifts on the sex trade, though Evans does note that many sex workers in the Imperial period were artisan’s daughters, and alludes to the effects of urbanization and industrialization on sex worker’s socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>28</sup> In these papers, the question is asked of *why*

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<sup>27</sup> Jolin, “On the Backs of Working Prostitutes,” p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> Victoria Harris, *Selling Sex in the Reich: Prostitutes in German Society, 1914–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 12.

women became sex workers, and they seem to maintain the attitude of prostitution as a fall into degeneracy.

In the early 1990s scholarship on German prostitution into the Weimar period began to emerge, jumpstarted by earlier trendsetters like Gaby Zurn's 1988 investigations of the categorization of individuals as "prostitutes" in Hamburg in the Weimar and early Nazi periods. Influences of the rise of feminist history is certainly clear: in 1993, Andrea Jenders and Andreas Muller published a piece investigating shifts in prostitution policy in Dortmund up until the passing of the 1927 VD Law, which made wider social comments, and like Bruggeman included the effectiveness of female campaigning. The theme of state-regulated prostitution as a marker of the Nazi's attempts to exert total social control, especially over women, becomes more prominent, in work such as Sabine Haustein's 1997 article on sex workers in Leipzig, and Christa Paul's 1994 investigations into forced prostitution in concentration camps, which drew the somewhat buried history of concentration camp brothels more attention.<sup>29</sup>

Annette Timm continues this theme, using changes in Nazi policies towards prostitution and particularly venereal disease to explore the development of eugenic theory and medical testing, and bodily control.<sup>30</sup> She looked closely not only at both at prostitution and main health office venereal disease policy, and brings to attention to the medicalization of sexual deviancy in the Reich, and its affect not only on not just sex workers, but various individuals labeled "prostitute" or otherwise viewed as sexually promiscuous. Analyzing Gaby Zurn's research on the categorization of people in Hamburg as "hwG," "asocial" and "prostitute," Timm looks at the actual execution of the policies, how they were used as convenient justifications certain types of

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<sup>29</sup> Harris, *Selling Sex in the Reich*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>30</sup> Timm, "Sex with a Purpose."

punishment for various circumstances, and perhaps most importantly, how the policies were used to make female sexuality and the sex trade to function for the needs of the state. Turning to elements of feminist history, she examines the rules of acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior for women not captured in traditional histories of women's lives in the Third Reich, like Claudia Koonz's well-known *Mothers in the Fatherland*, which upholds the traditional investigations of Nazi's policies and social expectations dedicated to their conservative, "moral family values," the narrative that so contrasts with the Nazi's later policies establishing state-sanctioned and state-controlled brothels.

Where many scholars have looked at the shifts in prostitution policy through various periods like the Weimar Republic or Third Reich, others have, looking at the periods as a continuous whole, argued there was little positive change for women and the existence of a systemic misogyny using prostitution. Ute Daniel's 1997 book argues, that despite the disruptions of the First World War, urbanization and industrialization, no significant changes occurred in the lives of German women. Feminist historian Koonz has famously argued the "fraudulence of their supposed emancipation."<sup>31</sup> In many of the works that take this perspective, sex workers are constructed not as degenerates, but victims of a misogynistic system. Sex worker's own opinions on their situation are all but absent; and the primary sources are still incredibly hard to find, if they exist.

## **V. Disembodied versus Embodied Labor**

Issues of class, economics, and labor clearly seen as intimately tied to prostitution. Many theorists have commented on economic and financial status as key to the "decision" to engage in

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<sup>31</sup> Harris, *Selling Sex in the Reich*, p. 13.



sex work, as well as the lifestyle of those in the industry. Marxist-feminist theorists, who focus on these issues of labor, economics, and class, examines capitalism as the root of prostitution, despite the historical evidence of prostitution existing far before the advent of capitalism noted above. However, prostitution under capitalism does shift in many ways. In a society where class structure exists, there will be a ruling class and a laboring class, and hence the ruling class is in a position to economically exploit the laboring class. In Marxian theory, those at the bottom of this class structure are those who exchange their labor for a wage—as a result, the worker is dehumanized, alienated from the products of their labor which are given to the ruling class. Marxian feminists who apply this theory to prostitution; the sex worker's labor is sex work—her body becomes commodified, sex becomes the commodity, and this leads to her exploitation, as Jaggar argues,

[j]ust as the capacity to labor becomes a commodity under capitalism, so does sexuality, especially the sexuality of women. Thus prostitutes, like waging laborers, have an essential human capacity alienated. Like wage laborers, they become dehumanized and their value as persons is measured by their market price. And like wage laborers, they are compelled to work by economic pressure; prostitution, if not marriage, may well be the best option available to them.<sup>32</sup>

Many Marxian-feminists therefore see the exploitation of sex workers as twofold; sex workers are exploited by the ruling class generally in capitalism, and more specifically and directly is exploited by men: the pimp receiving direct profits of her labor and the client she relies on. In this way, Marxist-feminists seem to both see prostitution as an extreme case of exploitation under capitalism, as at the same time see it as a metaphor for the general exploitation of the worker

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Robinson, "Chapter Two," p. 26.

under capitalism. Marx himself proclaimed "Prostitution is only the specific expression of the universal prostitution of the worker"—here again we see "prostitution" acting as a metaphor for general and universal exploitation, like in the Domination-theory argument that prostitution is simply "a condition of all women." Prostitution seems to act as a synonym culturally for exploitation.

Radical sexual-pluralist theory, was developed by Gayle Rubin—a feminist theorist who like many, has clearly read her Foucault—as an "opposition to binaries and grand theories on sexuality." This theory posits that sexuality *should not* be divided in categories of good/bad or normal/deviant, because these distinctions are based on one groups' notion of acceptability they marginalize those who fall outside of the binary boundaries. Her theory appeals to the notion of "otherness," in a similar way to Black feminists—a system of acceptability and knowledge where dominate thinking is heralded while "others" who are considered deviant are "condemned."<sup>33</sup> Rubin argues that marginalization is the biggest problem; that sex workers must "speak out against their marginalization" and "theorists [must] begin to take sex workers' experiences into account and [ . . . ] make space for their voices to be heard." The desired result of this would be the image of sex workers as simply victims, of exploitation and oppression, being reworked to portray them as "political *and* sexual figures."<sup>34</sup> Rubin's theory also resounds with the writings on sex work *by* sex workers, who overwhelmingly advocate for debates on the "problem of prostitution" to be centered on their voices. Nagle posits the importance of this, noting that, "theorizing is usually done by non-prostitutes," adding that,

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<sup>33</sup> Robinson, "Chapter Two," p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Robinson, "Chapter Two," p. 29.

to momentarily don Marxist headgear, one could argue that the production of feminist discourse around prostitution by non-prostitutes alienates the laborer herself from the process of her own representation. While this is not to automatically discredit non-sex worker feminist arguments against sex work, it is to say it is high time to stop excluding the perspectives of sex worker feminists, time to stop assuming that traditional feminist analysis of sexual oppression alone exhausts all possible interpretations of commercial sex, and time to stop reproducing the whore stigma to the larger culture.<sup>35</sup>

In this overview of feminist perspectives on prostitution, it becomes clear that the problem of prostitution is intimately related to a number of general categories and hierarchies of social power, namely class, socioeconomic status, race, and gender. Many of the variations in perspectives rest on different beliefs about the degree to which these different factors and forces influence and oppress the sex worker woman, but to me it is clear that they are *all* influential. I therefore find myself primarily asking the question: Is the exploitation of the sex worker embedded in social forces any different from the exploitation of a worker with a different profession? If so, how? Is there *really* an essential difference between sex work as wage-labor and other work as wage-labor?

Freedom and slavery appear as oppositional categories in liberal thought; the subjects of modern liberal democracies are imagined as free and equal—as abstract, universal, and disembodied individuals—whereas slavery is imagined as reducing a human being to nothing but a body used as the instrument to another's will. Reconciling the idea of free and equal subjects with modern, capitalist democracies within this dichotomized thinking has led to a "fiction of disembodied actors with the capacity to sell labor away from the person (the body) of the

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<sup>35</sup> Nagle quoted in Robinson, "Chapter Two," p. 29.

laborer." In theory, bodies are constructed as unimportant in the wage labor exchange—workers sell their *fully alienable* labor to employers or customers, not their embodied selves.

Continuously, "the traditional model of worker citizenship achieved through the class struggle assumes the disembodied, thing-like nature of commodified labor, even as it insists on state and employers' duty to protect the human worth of the workers who sell it."<sup>36</sup>

As seen in the feminist perspectives on prostitution explored above, bodies are seen as intimately important to the exchange between sex worker and client, and therefore sex work is difficult to reconcile with this liberal fiction of disembodied wage labor. Debates on whether sex work is embodied or disembodied labor are a theme in much feminist theory, though it may not use such terms; we've seen how those feminists who argue for the abolition of prostitution associate sex work with a violation or sale of the body, whereas those who advocate for an increase in sex workers rights, de-marginalization, legalization or decriminalization often argue that sex work is similar to other forms of wage labor. These are coded descriptions of embodied or disembodied labor—disagreements over what is being commodified and exchanged in the sex work contract.<sup>37</sup>

Prostitution is seen as something *done to* women's bodies, just as embodied labor is associated with slavery and being an instrument to another's will, whereas disembodied labor is something *done by* the body. Much literature has come out in recent decades affirming that sex work, can in some conditions but does not *necessarily* entail "violence or coercion or cause any physical or psychological harm," it can be "actively chosen in preference to other forms of employment," and "agency and choice can be exercised within prostitution as much as any other

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<sup>36</sup> Julia O'Connell Davidson. "Let's Go Outside: Bodies, Prostitutes, Slaves and Worker Citizens," *Citizenship Studies* 18:5 (2014): 516–32, esp. p. 516.

<sup>37</sup> Davidson, "Let's Go Outside," pp. 518–19.

job.” Essentially, research has shown that sex work *is not* sex slavery, if slavery is an absence of autonomy, agency, and choice, and that cases of sex slavery are a case held distinct from general sex work—and yet, sex work is still widely seen as sex slavery—a conflation that the language surrounding the debate, such as the term prostitution, reifies. Now, many argue it naturally follows if sex work is autonomous and entails agency, then it is *fully alienable*, disembodied labor being sold in sex work. Yet, as Davidson poignantly points out, “demonstrating that individuals can make an active choice to enter prostitution contracts, and that creative, skillful effort is required to win custom and execute contracts is *not the same* as demonstrating that what is commodified in prostitution is something separable from the body and person of the sex worker.”<sup>38</sup>

So, is it separable? Well, not really. Research on clients who buy sex shows “they almost invariably discriminate not merely on grounds of the type or quality of service provided, but also in terms of the social identity and bodily characteristics of the individual who provides that service.” When presented with the “menu,” they have preferences—generally, they want a man, a woman, or someone who is transgender—as shown above, women are not the only “objects of desire.” Age is also important. A 2002 study of 185 men who has paid for sex in five countries (India, Thailand, Sweden, Japan, and Italy), more than half stated they preferred workers perceived to be between 19–25. Specific body characteristics, such as large breasts or a large penis. These preferences over time have created “categories” workers are labelled under on sex work sites, like “busty, [. . .] blonde, brunette, young, mature,” and so on.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Davidson, “Let’s Go Outside,” p. 519.

<sup>39</sup> Davidson, “Let’s Go Outside,” pp. 519–20.

Race is also important to the clients of sex workers. Ample research on sex tourism indicates this, but domestic sex work markets are racially stratified as well, in a way that aligns with our societal racial hierarchies and stereotypes. For example, in the US white women are able to command the highest hourly rates, and African American women the lowest—countries with less racial diversity often find the lightest-skinned women earning the most and darker-skinned women the least. Research has showed this isn't necessarily a just a racist sex preference based skin color, but also the establishment of these race and skin color hierarchies in the sex trade markets has led to an association of darker-skinned sex-workers with "street-walking" rather than higher-class, more expensive indoor sex work. One 40-year-old white, Spanish man in Barcelona said, "If I had to choose, the dark ones would be bottom of my list. I'm not racist, but with black women, you see them on the lowest scale of prostitution. I have nothing against them."<sup>40</sup> And where these negative stereotypes can help us explain why some clients do not seek them out, the same stereotypes also explain why some people *do*. Another man in Spain, a 29-year-old white British man, who had shown a preference for hiring African street workers when he paid for sex, described them to be more liable to be drug addicted, mercenary, unclean, and uneducated, that:

I think for me, because I've got very nice middle-class parents and been brought up in a very nice middle-class way, sleeping with a prostitute isn't just about sleeping with a prostitute. It's about like damnation towards society, you see what I mean? Its sort of like a damnation towards everything you feel about yourself as well. So it's almost like wanting to damn yourself. So it doesn't even matter what the prostitute is like.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Davidson, "Let's Go Outside," p. 520.

<sup>41</sup> Davidson, "Let's Go Outside," p. 520.

So, the body, whether its shape, color, or perceived age or socioeconomic status, *is* important to sex work—the body of the sex worker is just as socially marked and effected by that marking as we can expect in this society of socially marked bodies. But, the service and the way in which it is delivered are also important. Research also shows that the way the qualities of the worker are perceived—“sense of humor, nice smile, ‘bubbly’ personality, warm manner and so on”—influence who a client patronizes. Similarly, research on “regular” relationships between clients and sex workers indicate “there are some clients who treat sexual/intimate relations with sex workers as a commodity only in the sense of something being exchanged for money and not in the sense that the services provided by one prostitute are equivalent to or interchangeable with services provided by another.” In other words, what some clients value, especially those in “regular” relationships, is the service *as provided* by a particular sex worker, not in just the service or the body itself. As Davidson puts it, “the social markings of the worker’s body are not a sufficient condition for the buying of [their] services [...] but they remain a necessary condition.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the body is just as important to the service as the service is to the body; they cannot be disentangled from one another. With her analysis Davidson is able to show that what is really being commodified, or what the clients are seeking, is a “complex blend of labor power, socially marked bodies and individual attributes”—furthermore, she points out that “this does *not actually distinguish* prostitution from all other forms of employment.”<sup>43</sup>

In fact, scholars have argued the “particularities of worker’s embodiment can matter as much to employers as the particularities of prostitutes” embodiment matters to clients.” Many employers in the modelling or entertainment industries have transparent interest in the socially

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<sup>42</sup> Davidson, “Let’s Go Outside,” pp. 520–21.

<sup>43</sup> Davidson, “Let’s Go Outside,” pp. 520–21.

marked bodies of workers, and research on interactive service work in industries like tourism, hospitality, and catering demonstrates that employers have interest in particular bodies. This is not just because some employers want to hire workers with bodies socially marked as sexual in order to add value to a service with sexualization—even when “the interactive service work is not overtly sexualized [. . .] the “thing” to which the customer attaches value still frequently derives from the customer’s perception of the worker as deferent, servile, and/or caring in some way.” Some socially marked bodies are read as “naturally” caring or subordinate are of interest to employers because they are assumed to have “a more authentic capacity to perform deference, servility and care.” Employers can also value exceptionally unmarked bodies—Puwar’s research indicates that the perceived “rational” and “impersonal” character of modern business enterprises is undermined by historical tendencies to segregate forms of work by gender, age and race, “even when there are no efficiency gains to be made by treating certain jobs as the preserve of male and/or white and/or younger or older workers.”<sup>44</sup> So, if the fact that bodies matter in sex work does not differentiate it from other forms of wage labor, does this mean there is nothing *especially* wrong, exploitative, or oppressive about it? Is the only real problem that differentiates what sex workers face social stigma and marginalization, and Rubin argues?

What is exceedingly clear from these perspectives is we see the circumstances of the sex worker as intimately related to a number of general categories and hierarchies of social power: class, socioeconomic status, race, gender, and so on. Many of the variations in perspectives rest on different beliefs about the degree to which these different factors and forces influence and oppress the sex worker, as well as somewhat mythic beliefs of the victim, “prostitute” woman, and/or the conflation of sex work with sex slavery. But to me it is clear that beyond these myths,

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<sup>44</sup> Davidson, “Let’s Go Outside,” p. 521.



*all* these hierarchies of power are influential to each sex worker, in various and sometimes mitigating ways. Beloso agrees, stating that:

Parsing sex work as the metamorphosis of the commodity through an intersectional second skin, we see that the plight of the prostitute—when, in fact, there is a plight—often lies not in her womanliness, *per se*, but rather in the degree to which her impoverishment, her gender, her race, her age, her religion, her legal status, her looks, or her ability (mental and physical) can be used against her in the extraction of surplus value from her labor. And the question of whether these can be used against the sex worker has little to do with the presence or absence of formal freedom [. . .] Rather, the exploitation of the sex worker hinges upon any number of structural second skins of oppression (such as patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, ageism, religious chauvinism, nationalism, looksism, ableism, and so on.<sup>45</sup>

This allows the setting of a particular wage and working conditions not in accordance with the Marxian principle “from each according to his ability; to each according to his need.”<sup>46</sup> I therefore find myself primarily asking the question, Is, and if so, how is, the exploitation of the sex worker embedded in social forces any difference from the exploitation of a worker with a different profession, when it is seen as such a special case? Is there *really* an essential difference between sex work as wage-labor and other work as wage-labor? In other words, if we are *all*, with our second-skins and capitalist society, embedded in various forms of oppression and privilege, and it has been shown that sex work is not naturally any *more* oppressive than other forms of labor, is it possible that sex work is naturally, or simply as it has been constructed, *more*

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<sup>45</sup> Brooke Beloso, “Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class,” *Signs* 38: 1 (2012): 47–70, esp. p. 61.

<sup>46</sup> Karl Marx, quoted in Beloso, “Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class,” p. 62.

*liberatory* in some way? That is somehow provides *more* or *better* choices and opportunities? Is it more productive to read for liberation rather than oppression in sex work?

Beloso points out that “much like Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s Western feminist who misses the veil as a marker of agency when she only wears her imperialist, oppression-seeking glasses [. . .], the feminist who sees only victims everywhere [they] look at prostitution and miss entirely the ingenuity and agency of the human being who chooses to work in the sex industry rather than, say, the sweatshop industry [. . .], because the wages and working conditions are, in [their] mind, better.”<sup>47</sup> When we understand class as a theory of oppression and privilege, two sides of the same coin, as well as the way these myriad of oppressive forces are constitutive of intersectionality and complex second skins, we also begin to see that privilege along one axis can mitigate oppression along another, *even within sex work*.

Though sex work is not always criminalized, it has nowhere ever been *fully* incorporated “into the formal, capitalist economy in the same way as other entertainment or hospitality services are generally recognized as employment sectors.”<sup>48</sup> The lack of extensive regulatory regimes, or a lack of compliance to these regimes where they exist, lends itself to some particular features of sex work. For example, regardless of prostitution’s framing as a sex worker or prostitute woman at the beck and call of a pimp or brothel manager, “self-employment remains the norm in the sex sector, and most sex work takes place in the informal economy beyond any reach of any form of employment or labor protection.” This has its pros and cons for sex workers—on the one hand, this can benefit those third parties who do own or manage informal sex sector businesses, as they “have no obligations to workers in terms of assuring continuity of

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<sup>47</sup> Beloso, “Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class,” pp. 62–3.

<sup>48</sup> Davidson, “Let’s Go Outside,” p. 526.

employment, sickness, and maternity benefits, etc.”—but on the other, unlike workers who are “unable to realize the value that attaches to their embodied labor without access to capital,” sex workers hold the means of producing an exchange value in their socially marked bodies. In other words, the investment of capital is *not* a precondition for making money in the sex work industry, and it is therefore possible in sex work to sell sex as an “independent commodity producer,” rather than entering into a employment relationship where a third party appropriates part of the sex worker’s earnings. Additionally, even in cases where a sex worker is employed by a third party, they hold rights other employed workers do not have because it *is sex*. For example, the International Committee of Sex Workers in Europe (ICOSW), who demand that sex work be recognized as gainful employment and sex workers have access to employment benefits available to other wage-workers, also state their absolute right to “have control over who we have sex with or the sexual service we provide or the condition under which we provide those services. We demand the right to say no to any client or any service requested.” The state that managers must not be allowed to determine services provided or the condition under which those services are provided, a right that say, a waiter, would never enjoy—a waiter “may have the right to refuse to perform tasks outside [their] job description and refuse to serve drunk or abusive clients,” but if that job description entails serving food and drinks to clients, “[they] cannot reserve the right to decide which meals to serve to which customers.”<sup>49</sup> As Davison puts it:

For sex workers who have the economic and social capital to engage in a form of entrepreneurial prostitution that allows them to make good money and exercise a high degree of control over the contracts they enter into with clients, the economic self-determination this implies can be experienced as empowering. Though successful,

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<sup>49</sup> Davidson, “Let’s Go Outside,” pp. 526–27.

entrepreneurial sex workers have an interest in challenging the stigma that attaches to prostitution and legal frameworks that criminalize or otherwise inhibit prostitution contracts, they have nothing to gain by giving up their independence and entering into a standard employment relation with an employer.<sup>50</sup>

There are various life stories indicating that woman who is a laborer today, selling sex, may be tomorrow's "woman-as-capitalist," buying and selling sex as "the particular products of other individual's labor." Examples like Danni Ashe, the "billion download woman," a former nude model and stripper who is now an Internet entrepreneur, "overseeing a "stable" of more than one hundred women and reportedly grossing more than \$300,000 monthly revenue," or former stripper and "Queen of Porn" Jenna Jameson, who sold a profitably Internet pornography company to Playboy Enterprises.<sup>51</sup> These examples make clear how sex work provides a sometimes perhaps more opportunity-filled route to financial privilege and success than other accessible industries. In the case of the workers in the Rhode Island massage parlors who were deported or detained, it also becomes clear that when it comes to the limited access to labor industries and wages that undocumented people face, the sex work industry is sometimes the most accessible and best-paying form of wage-labor available. For those who are denied access to the labor market for various reasons, such as "people in receipt of certain welfare benefits, undocumented migrants and migrants whose immigration status denies them the right to enter paid work, runaway children, people who are dependent on certain drugs, etc." access to the sex work industry is a "means to avoid absolute destitution, and standard employment forms are equally unappealing," albeit for different reasons than those in different circumstances. The

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<sup>50</sup> Davidson, "Let's Go Outside," p. 526.

<sup>51</sup> Beloso, "Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class," p. 63.

ability of the sex worker to be less visible, as much formal employment implies visibility, is very appealing to people who, depending on their immigration status, are at risk of detention and deportation, or to “poor citizens” to whom visibility can mean “risk of prosecution and loss of paltry but necessary welfare payments.”<sup>52</sup> In this way, the sex work industry can be seen as sometimes providing more economic opportunity to workers than other industries and therefore has the power in some cases to mitigate the economic oppression informed by other aspects of our “second skins,” though these second skins influence the degree to which it is mitigated.

In a series of interviews conducted in 1998 of both incarcerated and non-incarcerated current and former sex workers, all stated that they viewed the work in nuanced, complex ways, but none spoke in purely negative terms. While the most socially privileged with certain traits preferred by clients were the most likely to “love” their work, none said it was entirely unproblematic. However, they also had interesting positive statements; one self-proclaimed “women’s libber” said that she had “never been in a position where [she] felt like she didn’t have a choice.” One erotic dancer, who was raised in a sexually liberated home and attended a private women’s college argued that “objectification is not confined to sex work, but a normal part of life: I think that we all objectify people constantly in our life. The bellboy, the grocery clerk, the receptionist.”<sup>53</sup> Another said that her work felt like a change to finally catch up economically—

For me [. . .] as a dancer I have always struggled to place my work in a feminist context. I made on the average \$25 an hour [. . .] and sex work in the only work I could get paid that amount of money for. I just felt like I was playing a very fair game of catch-up. I had

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<sup>52</sup> Davidson, “Let’s Go Outside,” p. 526.

<sup>53</sup> Kari Lerum. “12-Step Feminism Makes Sex Workers Sick: How the State and the Recovery Movement Turn Radical Women into ‘Useless Citizens,’” *Sexuality & Culture* 2 (1998): 7–36, esp. p. 29.

a theater company for four years—my rent was \$150 a month and in a good night I could make \$150. So I would work a few days a month and the rest of the time I could do what I wanted [. . .] theater, travel [. . .] and I really resent the fact that people tell me I'm a victim of the patriarchy. I mean, I'm a vegetarian—and if I hadn't danced, I probably would've been working in a burger joint or something. To me that would have been worse.<sup>54</sup>

One phone-sex worker, with brief experiences in pornography and exotic dancing who declared she was *not* a feminist, argued for her profession as an exercising of her freedom:

I don't think that we're buying into anything. I think that we see our power, see what we have, and that we should damn well use it whichever way we fuckin' want to. And that's the bottom line. I think that no one, as a group or individually, should tell any woman what she should do or how she should feel about her own body, or with her own body, or with her own talent, or expertise. In any area whatsoever. I think that freedom is the thing I'm after, the thing that I stand up for even more than anything else. I can't think of anything else. Personal freedoms, I think need to be upheld.<sup>55</sup>

The entire history of prostitution discourse is rife with the containment, scrutinization, analysis, criminalization, and overall marginalization and disrespect of sex workers. How can we break these cycles of discourse that have *never really gone anywhere*, and actually make progress in our theory? What if, instead of reading for oppression, we read for liberation and degrees of freedom?

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<sup>54</sup> Lerum. "12-Step Feminism Makes Sex Workers Sick," pp. 29–30.

<sup>55</sup> Lerum, "12-Step Feminism Makes Sex Workers Sick," p. 30.

Many theorists and sex workers have argued for the libertatory capacity of sex work. Even Davis has observed that “intimate labor of all sorts throughout history has served for many women as an exploitative means to a libertatory end.”<sup>56</sup> Some have argued sex work has the ability to radically disrupt patriarchy and traditional gender roles, but for this paper I focused on the ways in which sex work disrupts traditional exchanges of capital under capitalist markets and the oppressive forces at work in wage labor. While it could be argued that demands for special or particular limits to the commodification of sex workers’ labor power, like the absolute right to say no indicated in the ICOSW’s statements, undermine efforts to assert a universal political subjectivity for all workers, sex or otherwise, since they seem to be based on sexual labor power on specific, and therefore construct the sex worker as a specific subject. However, as the parallels between sex work and other forms of wage labor have been exemplified above, I wish to articulate a conclusion closer to Davidson’s—that these parallels provide a basis for instead establishing “a common political subjectivity for all those who are compelled to commodify what is integral to selfhood.”<sup>57</sup> Perhaps, instead of trying to fit the work of sex workers, which has been functioning outside normal controls, into our typical understandings of wage-labor and worker’s rights under capitalism, we can instead *learn* from sex work something about liberating ourselves, at least to some degree, from the oppressive circumstances of “selling themselves piecemeal” under capitalism that Marx so reviled.

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<sup>56</sup> Beloso, “Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class,” p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> Davidson, “Let’s Go Outside,” p. 528.

## VI. State Body

Under Nazi Power, the sex trade transitions to being under state control, and female sexuality is constructed to serve the needs of the state. The agency of women in general to exercise sexual freedom, and the agency of the sex worker, is damaged by the social construction of prostitution, and female sexuality, as a tool of state control. In reality, the social construction of prostitution through both the Weimar period and the Third Reich, and the policies that aided that construction, impacted far more than just sex workers. The intensely visual culture of the Weimar Republic—due to the prevalence of photography, magazines, and film that celebrated new, modern fashions and trends—encouraged what the Nazis regarded as an immoral underbelly. These media eroticized the public consumption of female beauty. Even prostitution in the Weimar Republic was intensely focused on the visual; due to laws regarding public solicitation, one could not hold a conversation about sexual services on the street. Hence, the development of visual codes for the wide variety of sexual services available being embedded in the clothing of Weimar sex workers—such as the Leather-Boot-Girls colors and stitching styles, which indicated specific BDSM specialties. The language and the underlying social and cultural assumptions of this media affected working women and sex workers in tightly interconnected, similar ways. Female sexuality and appearance were intimately tied with a women's job, her livelihood and contribution to society—and in the Third Reich, this connection was cemented—and expanded. Female sexuality was controlled and implemented as a tool of the Nazi state. These inter-period and inter-social status connections have not been fully explored, especially as they directly impacted the actual lives of individuals.

Up until 1927, prostitution was generally illegal in Germany; however, cities with *Reglementierung* (Regulation) had tolerated state-regulated prostitution. Such regulation not only



subjected sex workers to compulsory medical exams for venereal diseases, but also banned them from major public areas, required them to live in police-approved lodgings, and made them obtain permission to travel. These restrictions were enforced by a special section of police, called *Sittenpolizei*, or morals police, and due process of law did not apply to prostitution.<sup>58</sup> During WWI, a spike in venereal diseases among soldiers attracted the attention of the German government, and the blame was assigned to prostitution. The army began to give coupons to every frontline soldier, carefully calculated by rank, for appointments at brothels under the supervision of military physicians.<sup>59</sup> Post-WWI Germany saw an increase in prostitution, and during the Weimar Republic, "prostitution became a central vehicle through which social activists, artists, and cultural critics negotiated gender and labor divisions in the modern metropolis."<sup>60</sup> Activists and reformers successfully challenged state-regulated prostitution, and in 1927 the Law for Combating Venereal Diseases abolished it. This reform did not have a wide positive response, but the decriminalization of prostitution gave sex workers newfound access to legal protections and began to challenge the repressive measures of the police. In Leipzig, they founded an association that hired them legal counsel. Despite decriminalization and the abolishing of state-regulation, the topology of the sex trade remained complex, with plenty of opportunities for run-ins with police, especially for "street-walkers."<sup>61</sup>

The development of Nazi-era prostitution policy is commonly articulated using Timm's three stages—the rhetorical and legal marginalization of prostitutes, the growing acceptance of

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<sup>58</sup> Julia Roos, "Weimar's Crisis Through the Lens of Gender: The Case of Prostitution." Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize Presentation, Princeton University, November 15, 2002.

<sup>59</sup> Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin*, expanded ed. (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2008), p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Jill Suzanne Smith, *Berlin Coquette: Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890–1933*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Smith, *Berlin Coquette*, p. 77.

prostitution in practice; and the subordination of prostitution policy to the war effort.<sup>62</sup> But I see these phases differently. In the first phase of policy, immediately upon Hitler's rise to power, the rhetorical and legal marginalization of prostitutes was initiated. Katherine Crooks argues this is "the only stage that can legitimately be read as sexually repressive and punitive of sexual deviants, a 'regression' from Weimar moves toward liberality," the only period where the Nazi state backed the Party officials' railing against the "degradation of the German state and race brought about by the immorality of the Weimar period." In short, she views this as the only period where Hitler's insistence in *Mein Kampf* that "the fight against venereal diseases and their pacemaker, prostitution, is not one, but the due of the nation!" was truly backed by policy and action.<sup>63</sup> In 1933, Hermann Goring issued a decree against "public immorality," and promised to reverse the 1927 Venereal Disease law, which abolished state-regulated prostitution in the Weimar republic and was "permissive" in nature. Later that year, street soliciting was once-more made illegal, which provided the legal authority for massive roundups of sex workers by the police in earlier years. According to Julia Roos, "it has been estimated that "thousands, even more likely tens of thousands" of prostitutes were arrested during the spring and summer of 1933."<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the Nuremburg Laws passed in 1935, which prohibited sexual contact between Aryans and non-Aryan individuals, acutely effected sex workers, and was perhaps even target towards, as the group most frequently and public engaged in indiscriminate sex.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Annette F. Timm, "The Ambivalent Outsider: Prostitution, Promiscuity, and VD Control in Nazi Berlin," in *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, edited by Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 192.

<sup>63</sup> Julia Roos, "Backlash against Prostitutes Rights," in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, edited by Dagmar Herzog (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), p. 79.

<sup>64</sup> Roos, "Backlash against Prostitutes Rights," pp. 81–82.

<sup>65</sup> Timm, "Sex with a Purpose," p. 234.

The government's behavior surrounding the 1936 Olympic Games indicates a shift in priorities "from sexual repression in the name of political expediency." In preparation for the influx of foreign visitors, German police temporarily concealed anti-Semitic propaganda in Berlin, and rounded up all the "work-shy" and "asocial" residents and sent them to the Dachau camp, so they would not offend sensibilities. Timm interprets this event as symbolic of an important aspect of the Nazi stance on issues of sexuality and prostitution: the *optics* of morality matter much more than actual moral behavior.<sup>66</sup>

A year later sex workers were defined as "asocials" with the 1937 Ordinance on Preventative Measures for Fighting Criminality, a label a step further towards immorality than the other term that had been used by the government and venereal disease agencies of the Weimar republic, "hWg," which referenced an individual who frequently had sex with multiple partners, but were not seen as "people whose perpetration of trivial but constantly repeated infringements of the law show their unwillingness to integrate themselves into a system of order that is intrinsic to a National Socialist state (e.g., beggars, tramps [Gypsies], whores, alcoholics, those with contagious, particularly venereal diseases, who remove themselves from the measures of health authorities." The line between "hWgs" and "asocials" was very blurry, and seemed to shift based on convenience—individuals previously labeled asocial, supposedly the "worst" label, could also "later earn the label "hWg" or "prostitute" as a convenient way of justifying certain types of punishment." Timm agrees with Gaby Zurn's research on women in Hamburg who has illegitimate children while their husbands were away fighting the war were frequently labeled "hWg" or "prostitute" by welfare authorities in the Youth Office and treated accordingly, even though these women may not have fit into the traditional definitions of this labels. Zurn

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<sup>66</sup> Timm, "Sex with a Purpose," p. 234–37.

therefore argues, astutely, that this displayed “the degree to which the designation “hWg-individual” and particularly “prostitute” were not simply job designations but were used by welfare workers to describe nonconforming social behavior.”<sup>67</sup> The introduction of the term “asocial” represented deviant individuals as enemies of the German *Volk*, and aligned promiscuous women and prostitutes, the “primary carriers of fertility-threatening disease thought the damage the future of the nation,” as this enemies, which further justified their incarceration.<sup>68</sup> In short, it appears in this period that the full force of Nazi eugenicist, racist, and nationalist policy was “levelled against the “problem” of prostitution.”<sup>69</sup>

The second phase of prostitution policy came into play as the Reich’s garnering of domestic favor and support with sexual conservative rhetoric began to conflict with the war effort’s practicalities: “by 1936, the Military Supreme Command declared the construction of military brothels *an urgent necessity* and insisted that health authorities should cooperate.” As the war accelerated, state-regulated prostitution was increasingly seen as the *solution* for VD control among soldiers (whose sexual promiscuity and rape of women was causing incredibly high rates of venereal disease)—Timm concludes that, in this second phase, “prostitutes transitioned from reviled asocials to critical figures in German Wartime culture [ . . . ] suddenly touted as socially necessary, if not exactly social insiders. At the very least, prostitutes began to occupy a more ambivalent position in German society than had ever been the case in the past.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Timm, “Sex with a Purpose,” p. 237.

<sup>68</sup> Annette F. Timm, “The Ambivalent Outsider: Prostitution, Promiscuity, and VD Control in Nazi Berlin,” in *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, edited by Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 192.

<sup>69</sup> Katherine Crooks, “The Most Emblematic of All Deviants,” *Afficio Undergraduate Journal*. Saint Mary’s University, 2013, np. <http://library2.smu.ca/handle/01/28193#.XsCS7mhKhPY>. Accessed 11/23/19.

<sup>70</sup> Timm, “Ambivalent Outsider,” pp. 197, 201.

Sex workers began to be enclosed not in a prison, but back in a brothel, in what Crooks calls a kind of "productive incarceration."<sup>71</sup>

Stage three marks an abandonment of any pretense of sexual conservatism in Nazi policy. On 9 September 1939, a secret directive called for the reconstruction of brothels for the service of soldiers. By 1942, Heinrich Himmler had ordered that brothels be established in concentration camps, in order "to provide productivity incentives for male inmates."<sup>72</sup> Access to brothels was also provided for foreign workers in Germany, in the hopes that the controlled satisfaction of the laborers' sexual appetites would "protect German women from sexual danger and defilement."<sup>73</sup> This shows further abandonment of sexual conservatism for the realities of the war effort, which was not going as well as had been hoped. In this way Himmler's order can be seen somewhat as a last-ditch effort to boost the Third Reich's military power, with the military brothels, and military production, with camp and foreign worker brothels. At the same time, this third stage also shows further extremes being taken in attempts to keep prostitution entirely state-controlled and for state-benefit. Stricter controls were put into place on prostitutes who worked outside the state-run brothel system: on 18 September 1939, the Ministry of the Interior circulated a missive instructing health and police authorities to "be particularly vigilant regarding "all women who frequent bars and similar facilities for the purpose of stimulating, entertaining, etc."<sup>74</sup> Significantly, these women were not necessarily *selling* sex, just behaving "promiscuously" in public, a somewhat hypocritical concealment of sexuality considering the government's buying-into state-run sex work. Timm summarizes this hypocrisy as such:

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<sup>71</sup> Crooks, "The Most Emblematic of All Deviants."

<sup>72</sup> Timm, "Ambivalent Outsider," p. 197.

<sup>73</sup> Crooks, "The Most Emblematic of All Deviants."

<sup>74</sup> Timm, "Ambivalent Outsider," p. 202.

“Prostitution stands as an example of the extreme ambiguity of the National Socialist’s moral purification project: the regime sought to shield German society from sexual deviancy, yet just past the boundaries of this “cleansed” public sphere lurked officially promoted sexual vice.”<sup>75</sup>

An examination of these three stages and the progression of Nazi prostitution policy indicates the inaccuracy of historian’s previous asserts, and common beliefs, that the Nazi period was a time of sexual repression and conservatism that decried and destroyed the Weimar’s “New Woman” and sexual liberality. Revisionist historians who have critiqued this view have argued that once the war began, the policing of promiscuity and prostitution were eclipsed by the state’s preoccupation with the war effort—however, it is clear when looking closer at the work of historians like Timm and Crooks that “codes of appropriate sexual and even racial conduct were ultimately abandoned, as sexual desire was *deliberately* harnessed and utilized by the Nazi state as a means of furthering wartime goals—a use not entirely different from the harnessing of the “ideal Nazi woman’s” fertility.

## VII. Economic Body

As in many countries, when many men were called away to fight in World War I, many young women stepped up to fill the jobs left behind. The newfound independence many of these young, middle class women experienced, as well as the death of many young men in the war influencing marriage opportunities in their home towns and the continuing industrialization of Germany creating more jobs in cities as well, led many of these women to move to Germany’s cities to seek white-collar, or rather, the pink-collar jobs, that were still open to women after the war. These young, single women, with their own independent income, wanted to make the most

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<sup>75</sup> Timm, “Sex with Purpose” p. 240.

of their life in the city, and began regularly occupying spaces seen as morally risky for unmarried women. They would drink in late night cafes and the many other nightlife venues Berlin had to offer. In these spaces, these New Women engaged with men—whether sharing a meal, more formally dating, or even going home with them—often in exchange for gifts. This behavior was seen as immoral, unchaste, and promiscuous, and therefore often conflated with prostitution.

But to what extent is this prostitution or sex work? We can see through the eyes of Doris in *Artificial Silk Girl* that some of her behavior is too fulfill her own sexual desire. She wants to spend time with these men, wants to sleep with them, and the gifts and free meals are simply an extra benefit to the deal. I do not want to underemphasize this point: in the coming conversation I do not want to lose the fact that much of the New Woman's behavior can be read as an exploration or fulfillment of female sexuality. But in other instances, we can see that Doris' motivation is driven by financial and material benefits, and their importance to her survival, rather than her own sexual desires. When she, at her self-proclaimed lowest point, expresses her fatigue of waiting for men to invite her to their homes to survive, we can see her behavior as much closer to what we would deem sex work, in an independent contractor construction.

We can most closely associate the behavior of Doris, or the New Woman, to sex work when we can clearly see sex being exchanged for gifts of monetary value. However, to what degree are these other behaviors sex work or prostitution? Along the feminist argument of sex work as "charging men for what they expect for free," we can see in Kracauer's writings explored above the extent to which these young women were sexualized and valued on their appearance. The manager's comments Kracauer notes indicates how even holding a pink-collar office job to some degree relied on a good appearance. We can see early in the novel that Doris consciously flirts with her boss in order to solidify her position—she is aware that appearing

sexually available to the men is intertwined with her success. I argue that most New Women, not just Doris, were aware of this fact, aware of their position as sexualized objects of men. This is not to agree with domination-feminism's understanding of the sexuality of women as essentially reliant on their objectification by men—rather, that these women understood that their sexuality was *socially* constructed as reliant on objectification. Where an essential construction denies female sexual pleasure, we can see that Doris and the New Women's behavior was at least somewhat motivated by sexual desire, fulfillment, and pleasure. With an understanding of this awareness, it seems logical they would use the power afforded by this sexualized status to benefit themselves—whether by dressing a particular way for their job, flirting with the boss, dating men simply for free food and drinks, or even sleeping with men for gifts. Where on this spectrum is the line between sex work and non-sex work? Where on this spectrum lies the line between chastity and promiscuity?

Taking the conflation of the New Woman's promiscuity and prostitution into account, and the moral fears she ignited, it seems clear that the Weimar public was just as unable to identify these boundaries as I am today. But by the Third Reich, the conflation becomes solidified in policy, and promiscuous women more than ever become prostitutes, whether or not they are engaged in our traditional definition of sex work as the exchange of sex for money (for example, the naming of women who became pregnant while their husbands were away as "asocial").<sup>76</sup> Under Nazi observation and incarceration, the independent contractor construction became mostly incompatible. Some sex workers, like those at the infamous Salon Kitty in Berlin, may have made more significant money, but for those who were incarcerated in camps, money was not really in the equation. Those who were asked to work in the camp brothels did not really

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<sup>76</sup> Timm, "Sex with Purpose," p. 244.



gain financially from this position, making on average a little over a Reichsmark a day—they namely chose to work in the camp brothels because of the better living conditions noted previously.<sup>77</sup>

This leads me to ask to what extent we can truly consider sex work in camp brothels sex work, rather than forced sex labor. Though visiting camps like Ravensbruck to recruit women for the camp brothels was formally considered voluntary—the incredibly limited choices available to incarcerated women much necessarily make us question *how* voluntary these decisions were, or rather, the reasons behind these womens' decisions. In military camps, the forced nature becomes more clear, as many military brothel positions were filled by the forced capture of young women in captured areas, especially Poland.<sup>78</sup> At the very least, the Nazi's constructions of prostitution can be read as much closer to wage-slavery—at their worst, they can be read as forced sex slavery. What remains consistent in the Nazi's constructions is that those benefitting from prostitution becomes the Nazi's, rather than the women, like in the Weimar's construction of independent contracting.

### VIII. Moral Body

Siegfried Kracauer's *Die Angestellten* (*The Salaried Masses*), which reflects on the working class in Germany after WWI and was published in 1930—contains extensive descriptions of the fascinating *Angestellten-Boheme*, or New Women—underscores both the gendered divisions of labor and sexuality in post-war Berlin, and the conflation of sex-workers with unchaste or promiscuous women, rooted in the emergence of the term prostitute as a

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<sup>77</sup> Timm, "Sex with Purpose," p. 231.

<sup>78</sup> Timm, "Sex with Purpose," p. 241.

descriptor of promiscuous women discussed in the above sections. Born to a Jewish family in Frankfurt, and later a German writer, journalist, sociologist, cultural critic, and film theorist, Kracauer began working on *Die Angestellten* in 1921, basing the project on studies in architecture, sociology and philosophy. He even lived in Berlin from April to July 1929, and dived into the city to conduct his research:

Leaving statistics and learned studies behind [...] he embarks on an empirical inquiry into the spheres of existence, habits, patterns of thought and manners of speech of salaried employees. He talks to the employees themselves, to union representatives and employers; he visits offices and firms, labour exchanges and Labour courts, cinemas and places of entertainment.<sup>79</sup>

As well as walking the streets and venues of the city and speaking to its residents, Kracauer also ravenously consumed company newspapers, classified advertisements, and private correspondence. He seeks to explore this “newest Germany,” simultaneously evoking in his study the sensationalism of contemporary reportage and ironizing it.<sup>80</sup>

We can see in Kracauer’s *Die Angestellten* that he views the New Woman as simply a new form of the “fallen woman,” a woman who has lost her cultural and family value, her chastity. He describes them as “comets” whose path he wonders about and fears, because he sees only two options for these women: marriage, or “life on the streets,” code for prostitution.<sup>81</sup> His confidence that these are the only two fates awaiting the New Women highlights the long-standing wife mother/whore dichotomy we see established in the physical and social segregation

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<sup>79</sup> Inka Mulder-Bach, “Introduction,” to Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (New York: Verso Books, 1998). p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Mulder-Bach, “Introduction,” to Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, p. 71.

of unchaste and unchaste historically. He states that “what seems to matter is not these women’s orbits—their experimental exploration of the urban universe—but rather their catastrophic crash [...] [they are] like comets, paths determined by external forces; easily swayed.” It is clear from his description of these women as “easily swayed” and “determined by external forces,” that Kracauer does not understand the New Women as self-aware or autonomous, or indeed, women as autonomous, especially in terms of their sexuality, like Jill Suzanne Smith, a contemporary scholar on German gender and sexuality, notes.<sup>82</sup>

However, like the German public, who seems both utterly fascinated and thrilled by Berlin’s flowering visibility of sexuality and the New Woman, and at the same time, morally concerned, Kracauer’s eroticization of his descriptions of these women cannot be ignored. He focused nearly entirely on the erotic and “promiscuous” aspects of these white-collar working women’s lives, rather than their participation in the pink-collar industries. Smith writes that this perpetuates “stereotype of the working girl as an object of male desire.”<sup>83</sup> In one section Kracauer quotes a Berlin department-store manager who “describes the ‘pleasant appearance’ necessary for employment in his firm as a ‘morally pink complexion,’” highlighting the importance of both the young, pink-collar working woman’s appearance and moral standing—coded language for chastity. Kracauer’s “experimental exploration of the urban universe” is *only* revered as an erotic male fantasy—full of well-dressed, sexually available women working for male bosses and promiscuous women willing to participate in nightlife activities. Furthermore, once we move beyond their eroticization, they are seen as simply victims of “external forces,”

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<sup>82</sup> Smith, *Berlin Coquette*, p. 450.

<sup>83</sup> Smith, *Berlin Coquette*, p. 451.

playing once more into our historical construction of prostitutes, or promiscuous women in general, as victims of circumstance.

Kracauer's perspective is far from unique. Smith even goes so far as to call it "typical." For example, Erich Kastner's *Geschichte eines Moralisten* (*The Story of a Moralist*), published a year later in 1931, is similar in all but one way—his fear is not for the New Women, as fallen women or victims, but *of* the women, because unlike Kracauer, he draws on the historical construction of the prostitute as dangerous and pathological, ignoring the hypocrisy of constructed promiscuous women as both victims of *and* voracious for Weimar's new sexuality. They are simultaneously pitied and reviled. Smith argues that we can see in his work "the threat of female desire writ large [. . .] diffused through the evocation of clichéd definitions of the prostitute; the prostitute as victim renders female sexuality passive, while the prostitute as voracious whore defines it as pathological and ensures the reader's scorn."<sup>84</sup>

Smith notes in *Berlin Coquette: Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890–1933*, which examines *Artificial Silk Girl*, *Grand Hotel*, that the New Woman was heavily conflated with promiscuity and prostitution. Her social prevalence, and the passing of laws such as the 1927 CVD law, "provoked a powerful anti-democratic backlash in united state officials, religious conservatives, and right-wing populists," who united in their voicing of moral concerns.<sup>85</sup> They felt that the morality of the entire German people was being called into question—and this moral concern in return fed into not just the criticism of sex workers and prostitution in Berlin, but also in the conflation of the New Woman archetype *with* prostitution due to its association with promiscuity through the 1920s and early 1930s. Overall, the Weimar's public fear of the New

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<sup>84</sup> Smith, *Berlin Coquette*, pp. 450–51.

<sup>85</sup> Smith, *Berlin Coquette*, p. 450.

Woman and female sexual deviancy uncovers how the well-documented Nazi belief of German women bearing the cultural weight of “purity” can be seen in far before Nazi’s came to power. Once again, we see how Nazi ideology was constructed on common troupes, despite our tendency to consider them unique.

With the Third Reich’s rise to power, we see a shift in the placement of shame when it comes to prostitution. Whereas in the Weimar Republic, we can see moral concern being placed on the individual in the classic denotation of promiscuous women as fallen women or victims, the more collective understanding of prostitutes as pathological or voracious begins to dominate. The Nazi’s rhetoric of promiscuous women and prostitutes—which they lumped together as essentially the same—is evident in the 1937 Ordinance. This law describes unmarried women, regardless of their sexual practices, as the “primary carriers of fertility-threatening disease thought to damage the future of the nation.” illustrating the Nazi’s construction of promiscuous women as a dangerous race of others, just like the other categories to which the term “asocial” applied: homosexuals, tramps [Gypsies], and other socially deviant people. Promiscuous women became not victims, or individual fallen women, but a collective group that was an enemy to the German Volk because of the danger they posed to chaste, reproductive, German sexual activity. This justification ultimately led to their incarceration.

However, as the war progressed, the Third Reich shifted its rhetoric from one of demonization to utilization, like the medieval construction of prostitutes as a “sewer system.” Concerned about the motivation of soldiers and camp prisoners, as well as the spread of venereal diseases in military camps like had occurred in World War I, Himmler ordered the introduction of camp and military brothels, marking the almost complete subsuming of the sex work industry

to the control of the Reich. Prostitution is no longer just an evil, but a *necessary evil*, one that can be manipulated for ideal results by the state body.

Of course, the Nazi's distinct shift in prostitution policy in later years has caused scholars to call into question to what extent they actually *held* these conservative moral values. Some believe, as Annette Timm notes, that the "symbolic optics of morality" mattered much more to them than behavior.<sup>86</sup> The Nazi's round-up of asocials before the 1936 Olympic Games in order to better the image of Berlin, for example, indicates the importance of appearance to the Nazis. However, the importance of optics to the Third Reich does not change the actions taken, nor the fact that promiscuous women were targeted in the same manner as homosexuals. Sexual deviancy was not acceptable to the Nazi's—whether for moral reasons, or concerns over the essential nature of pure, German, reproductive sex to continue their vision of the German race. Though we can see the construction of morality and shame around the promiscuous woman shift between 1914 and 1945, we can also see continuity. Throughout the period, the separation of unchaste and chaste women remains constant, as well as the denial of women's general agency and sexual agency.

## IX. Conclusion

This project was full of grey areas; to what extent I could even understand the women deemed prostitutes as sex worker, rather than promiscuous, was constantly called into question throughout my research process. However, in the end, I think this confusion is actually the point. It is not that the delineation needs to be uncovered, but instead the meaning present in the conflation itself of "prostitution" as promiscuity, per its original definition, or "prostitution" as

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<sup>86</sup> Timm, "The Ambivalent Outsider," p. 206.

sex work, a more contemporary understanding of the term. Once I came to this understanding, it became clear to me that this conflation—one that, it is important to note, still exists today with different verbiage (such as ‘hoe’ meaning both sex worker and promiscuous woman)—does not just cause confusion, but is used as a weapon in itself to shame, control, or punish unchaste women. The term prostitute, to say it once again, *is not* neutral, and neither are the myriad of words we use to describe promiscuous women—whether it be slut, hoe, or T.H.O.T (“that hoe over there,” now a slang term unto itself)—the words we use evolve, but the shame remains. The shame in these terms feed into the long continuity of placing shame upon women’s sexuality.

Whether one views the prostitute or promiscuous woman as a victim or a dangerous deviant, they deny female sexual agency, and when it comes to sex work, their agency. We can particularly see this issue come into play in the constructions of prostitution under the Third Reich, where the independence and agency of these women was denied at every turn. This lack of choice and control over their bodies is *precisely* why the debate over decriminalization and legalization of sex work remains active to this day. However, even under these forced labor conditions and the state’s denial of these women’s agency, we can seek to discover and acknowledge the reasons behind the decisions these women did make, the degrees of agency they maintained despite their conditions. The subsuming of the sex work industry to state control that occurred in the Third Reich showcases the reasons sex-work advocates fear the consequences of legalization. Rights contemporary sex workers deem necessary, like the absolute right to say no, were not present in Third Reich brothels—only part of the reason Nazi brothels are more accurately considered forced sex labor rather than sex work. It is equally important to remember that the Nazi’s ideology is far from an anomaly—it is rooted in common

troupes that still affect us today, tropes that come up again and again in debates regarding sex work.

In this historical case study, we can also see why decriminalization is favored by so many. With the decriminalization of sex work in the Weimar Republic came a significant improvement in the lives of women who were previously being arrested for prostitution. The ability to act as independent contractors, setting their own price for their own time, benefitted them—whether that was sex work, or the more grey-area behaviors of the New Woman. Women had opportunities to engage public spaces and their own sexuality in new ways. However, in the moralist and conservative reaction to this change, we can also see, through both periods, the negative effects on these women of being shouldered with standards of purity and shame.

Standards, though shifted in some ways, that women still shoulder today.

In better understanding the construction of these forces, purity, promiscuity, and shame in their historical context—both the ways they hinder, and the ways they are subverted—we can better understand how these forces operate today. And once we see and understand these forces clearly, as fluid and malleable, not essential and permanent, they become easier to push back against, easier to deconstruct.



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