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Reading #1

"Origins and Development
of Sexual Work in the
United States and Britain"

- chapter eight of
*Beyond the
Periphery of the Skin*

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EIGHT

Origins and Development of Sexual Work in the United States and Britain

From the beginning of capitalist society, sexual work has performed two fundamental functions in the context of capitalist production and the capitalist division of labor. On one side, it has ensured the procreation of new workers. On the other, it has been a key aspect of their daily reproduction, as sexual release has been, for men at least, the safety valve for the tensions accumulated during the workday, all the more indispensable as for a long time sex was one of the few pleasures conceded to them. The very concept of the “proletariat” signified a working class that reproduced itself prolifically not only because one more child meant another factory hand and another pay but also because sex was the only pleasure of the poor.

Despite its importance, during the first phase of industrialization, the sexual activity of the working class was not subjected to much state regulation. In this phase, which lasted until the second half of the nineteenth century, the main concern of the capitalist class was the quantity rather than the quality of the labor power to be produced. That the English workers, male and female, died on average at about thirty-five years of age did not matter to the British factory owners, as long as those years were all spent in a factory, from sunup to sundown, from the first years of life until death, and as long as new labor power was abundantly procreated to replace those continually eliminated.¹ English workers, male and female,

were only expected to produce an abundant prole, and little consideration was given to their “moral conduct.” Indeed, it was expected that promiscuousness would be a norm in the slum dormitories where, in Glasgow as in New York, workers spent the few hours they had away from the factory. It was also expected that English and American female workers would alternate or integrate factory work with prostitution, which exploded in these countries in conjunction with the takeoff of the industrialization process.²

It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that things started to change, as, under the pressure of working-class struggle, a restructuring of production took place that demanded a different type of worker and, accordingly, a change in the process of its reproduction. It was the shift from light industry to heavy industry, from the mechanical frame to the steam engine, from the production of cloth to that of coal and steel, that created the need for a worker less emaciated, less prone to disease, more capable of sustaining the intense rhythms of work that the shift to heavy industry required. It is in this context that the capitalist class, generally indifferent to the high mortality rates of the industrial workers, crafted a new reproduction strategy, increasing the male wage, returning proletarian women to the home and, at the same time, increasing the intensity of factory work, which the better-reproduced waged worker would now be capable to perform.

Thus, hand in hand with introduction of Taylorism and a new regimentation of the work process, in the second part of the nineteenth century, we have a reform of the working-class family centered on the construction of a new domestic role for the woman that would make of her the guarantor of the production of a more qualified workforce. This meant enticing women to not only procreate to fill the ranks of the workforce but to guarantee the daily reproduction of the laborers, through the provision of the physical, emotional, and sexual services necessary to reintegrate their capacity to work.

As mentioned, the reorganization of work that took place in England between 1850 and 1880 was dictated by the need to secure a healthier, more disciplined, and more productive labor force and, above all, break the surge of working-class organization. A further consideration, however, was the realization that the recruitment of women into the factories had destroyed their acceptance of and capacity for reproductive work to such an extent that if remedies were not found, the reproduction of the English working class would be severely jeopardized. Suffice to read the reports periodically drafted by government appointed factory inspectors in England, between 1840 and 1880, on the conduct of the female factory hands to realize that more was at stake, in the advocated change of reproductive regime, than concern for the health and combativeness of the male part of the working class.

Undisciplined, indifferent to housework, family, and morality, determined to have a good time in the few hours free from work available to them, ready to leave the home for the street, the bar, where they would drink and smoke like men, alienated from their children, married or unmarried female factory hands, in the bourgeois imagination, were a threat to the production of a stable labor force and had to be domesticated. It was in this context that the “domestication” of the working-class family and the creation the full-time working-class housewife became a state policy, also inaugurating a new form of capital accumulation.

As if suddenly awakened to the reality of factory life, by the 1850s a host of reformers began to thunder against the long hours women spent away from the home, and by means of “protective legislation” first eliminated female night shifts and later ousted married women from the factories, so that they could be reeducated to function like the “angels of the hearth,” cognizant of the arts of patience and subordination, especially since the work to which they were destined was not to be paid.

The idealization of “female virtue,” until the turn of the century reserved for the women of the middle and upper class, was thus extended to working-class women to hide the unpaid labor expected of them. Not surprisingly, we see in this period a new ideological campaign promoting among the working class the ideals of *maternity* and *love*, understood as the capacity for absolute self-sacrifice. Fantine, the prostitute mother of *Les Misérables*, who sells her hair and two of her teeth to support her infant child, was a proper embodiment of this ideal. “Conjugal love” and “motherly instinct” are themes that permeate the discourse of Victorian reformers, together with complaints about the pernicious effects of factory work on women’s morality and reproductive role.

Regulating housework would not be possible, however, without regulating sexual work. As with housework, what characterized the sexual politics of capital and the state in this phase was the extension to the proletarian woman of the principles already regulating the sexual conduct of women in the bourgeois family. First among them was the negation of female sexuality as a source of pleasure and monetary gain for women. For the transformation of the female factory-worker-prostitute—in both cases a paid worker—into an unpaid mother-wife ready to sacrifice her own interest and desire for the well-being of her family, an essential premise was the “purification” of the maternal role from any erotic element.

This meant that the wife-mother should only enjoy the pleasure of “love,” conceived as a sentiment free from any desire for sex and remuneration. In sexual work itself, the division of labor between “sex for procreation” and “sex for pleasure,” and, in the case of women, the association of sex with antisocial characteristics, was deepened. Both in the US and England, a new regulation of prostitution was introduced aiming to separate “honest women” from “prostitutes”—a distinction which the recruitment of women into factory work had dissipated. William Acton, one of the promoters of the

reform in England, noted how pernicious was the constant presence of prostitutes in public places. The reasons he offered speak volumes:

My chief interest lay in considering the effect produced upon married women by becoming accustomed at these *réunions* to witness the vicious and profligate sisterhood flaunting it gaily, or “first rate” in their language, accepting all the attentions of men, freely plied with liquor, sitting in the best places, dressed far above their station, with plenty of money to spend, denying themselves no amusements or enjoyment, encumbered with no domestic duties, and burdened with no children. Whatever the purport of the drama might have been, this actual superiority of a loose life could not have escaped the attention of the quick-witted sex. (Acton [1857] 1969, 54–55).

Acton’s initiative was also prompted by another concern: the spread of venereal diseases, syphilis in particular, among the proletariat:

The reader who is a conscientious parent must perforce support me; for, were the sanitary measures I advocate in operation, with what diminished anxiety would he not contemplate the progress of his boys from infancy to manhood? The statesman and the political economists are mine already, for are not armies and navies invalidated—is not labour enfeebled—is not even population deteriorated by the evils against which I propose we should contend? (Acton [1857] 1969, 27).

Regulating prostitution meant subjecting sex workers to medical control, according to the model adopted in France since the first half of the nineteenth century.

With this regulation, that made the state, through the police and the medical profession, the direct supervisor of

sex work, we have *the institutionalization of the prostitute and the mother as separate, mutually exclusive female figures and functions, that is, the institutionalization of a maternity without pleasure and a “pleasure” without maternity.* Social policy began to require that the prostitute must not become a mother.³ Her maternity had to be hidden, removed from the place of her work. In the literature of the time, the child of the prostitute lives in the countryside, consigned to charitable caretakers. By contrast, the mother, the spouse, the “honest woman” would be expected to look at sex only as a domestic service, a conjugal duty that she could not escape, but that would give her no pleasure. The only sex conceded to the mother would be the sex made clean by marriage and procreation—that is, by endless hours of unpaid labor, consumed with little joy, and always accompanied by the fear of impregnation. Hence, the classic image, handed down to us from nineteenth-century novels, of the woman suffering the advances of her husband, careful not to contradict the aura of sanctity by which society wanted to encircle her head.

The division of the labors of sex work and mothering, however, has been possible only because capital has used much psychological and physical violence to impose it. The destiny of the unwed mother, the “seduced and abandoned” that, together with the exaltation of motherly sacrifices, filled the pages of nineteenth-century literature, has been a constant warning to women that everything was preferable to “losing one’s honor” and being considered a “slut.” But the whip that most has served to keep women in place has been the condition in which the prostitute, at the proletarian level, has been forced to live, as she increasingly was isolated from other women and subjected to constant state control.

But despite the criminalization of prostitution, efforts to create a respectable working-class family were for a long time frustrated. For only a small part of the male working class could benefit from the kind of wages that would enable a family

to survive purely on “his job,” and sex work was always for proletarian women the most readily available form of income, and the one to which they were forced by the volatility of sexual affairs, that often left them with children to support alone. It was a sobering discovery, in the 1970s, to learn that in Italy, before World War I, most proletarian children at birth had been registered as fathered by “NN” (*nomen nescio*, name unknown). Employers took advantage of the poverty of women to force them into prostitution, to keep what jobs they may have or to prevent their husbands from being laid off.

As for the “honest” working-class women, they have always known that the dividing line between marriage and prostitution, between the whore and the respectable woman, has been very thin. Proletarian women have always known that for women marriage meant being “a servant by the day and a whore at night,”⁴ for every time they planned to abandon the conjugal bed, they had to reckon with their financial poverty. Still, the construction of female sexuality as a service, and its negation as pleasure, have for a long time kept alive the idea that female sexuality is sinful and redeemable only through marriage and procreation, and it has produced a situation where *every woman was considered a potential prostitute* to be constantly controlled. As a result, generations of women, before the rise of the feminist movement, have lived their sexuality as something shameful and have had to prove that they were not prostitutes. At the same time, prostitution, though an object of social condemnation to be controlled by the state, has been recognized as a necessary component of the reproduction of labor power, precisely because it has been assumed that the wife would not be able to completely satisfy her husband’s sexual needs.

This explains why *sexual work was the first aspect of housework that was socialized*. The state brothel, the “*casa chiusa*” (closed house) or “*maison des femmes*,” typical of the first phase of capital’s planning of sexual work, *has institutionalized*

the woman as a collective lover, working directly or indirectly at the service of the state as the collective husband and pimp. Besides ghettoizing women, who would be paid to perform what millions provided for free, the socialization of sexual work has responded to criteria of productive efficiency. The *Taylorization of coitus*, typical of the brothel, has greatly increased the productivity of sexual work. Low-cost, easily accessible, state-sponsored sex was the ideal for a worker who, after spending a day in a factory or an office, would not have the time and energy to look for amorous adventures or embark on the path of voluntary relations.

The Struggle against Sexual Work

With the rise of the nuclear family and marital sex a new phase in the history of women's struggle against housework and sexual work began. Evidence of this struggle is the rise of divorce, at the turn of the twentieth century, above all in the US and England, and in the middle class, where the nuclear family model was first adopted.

As O'Neill (1967) points out, "Until about the middle of the nineteenth century divorces were a rare events in the Western world; thereafter they occurred at such a steadily increasing rate that by the end of the century the legal dissolution of marriage was recognized as a major social phenomenon" (O'Neill 1). He continues: "If we consider the Victorian family as a new institution . . . we can see why divorce became a necessary part of the family system. When the family becomes the center of social organization, its intimacy becomes suffocating, its constraints unbearable and its expectations too high to be realized" (6).

O'Neill and his contemporaries were well aware that behind the family crisis and the rush to divorce there was the rebellion of women. In the US the bulk of the requests for divorce were presented by women. Divorce was not the only way in which women expressed their refusal of family

discipline. In this same period, both in the US and England, the fertility rate began to fall. From 1850 to 1900, the family in the US shrank by one member. Simultaneously, in both countries, a feminist movement developed, inspired by the slave abolitionist movement, that took “domestic slavery” as its target.

“Are Women to Blame?,” the title of a symposium on divorce, published by the *North American Review* in 1889, was a typical example of the attack launched against women in this period. Women were accused of being greedy or selfish, of expecting too much from marriage, of having a weak sense of responsibility, and of subordinating the common well-being to their narrow personal interest. Even when they did not divorce, women carried on a daily struggle against housework and sexual work, often taking the form of illness and desexualization. Already in 1854, Mary Nichols, an American doctor and promoter of family reform, would write:

Nine tenths of the children born are not desired by the mother. . . . A vast number of the women of civilization have neither the sexual nor maternal passion. All women want love and support. They do not want to bear children or to be harlots for this love or this support. In marriage as it at present exists the instinct against bearing children and against submitting to amative embrace, is almost as general as the love for children after they are born. The obliteration of the maternal and sexual instinct in woman is a terrible pathological fact (quoted in Cott 286).

Women used the excuse of feebleness, fragility, and sudden illnesses (migraines, fainting, hysteria) to avoid conjugal duties and the danger of unwanted pregnancies. That these were not, properly speaking, “illnesses” but forms of resistance to housework and sexual work is demonstrated not only by the pervasive character of this phenomena, but

also by the complaints of the husbands and the sermons of the doctors. This is how an American doctor, Mrs. R.B. Gleason, described the dialectics of illness and refusal, viewed both from a woman's and a man's viewpoint in the turn-of-the-century middle-class family:

I ought never to have been married, for my life is one prolonged agony. I could endure it myself alone, but the thought that I am, from year to year, becoming the mother of those who are to partake of and perpetuate the misery that I endure, makes me so wretched that I am well-nigh distracted (Cott 274).

Says the doctor:

The prospective husband may take great care to protect the fair but frail one of his choice; he may . . . fondly cherish the wife of his youth when she aches constantly and ages prematurely; still he has no helpmate—no one to double life's joys or lighten life's labors for him. Some sick women grow selfish and forget that, in a partnership such as theirs, others suffer when they suffer. Every true husband has but half a life who has a sick wife (274).

Says the husband:

Can she ever be well? (275)

When they did not fall ill, women became frigid or, in Mary Nichols's words, they inherited "an apathetic state that does not impel them to any material union" (Cott 286). In the context of a sexual discipline that denied women, especially in the middle class, control over their sexual life, frigidity and the proliferation of bodily aches were effective forms of refusal that could be masked as an extension of the normal defense of chastity, that is, as an excess of virtue that allowed women to turn the tables to their advantage and present themselves as

the true defenders of sexual morality. In this way, middle-class Victorian women were often able to refuse their sexual duties more than their granddaughters would be able to do. For after decades of women's refusal of sexual work, psychologists, sociologists, and other "experts" have wised up and are now less ready to retreat. Today, in fact, a whole campaign is mounted that guilt-trips the "frigid woman," not least with the charge of not being liberated.

The blossoming of the social sciences in the nineteenth century must in part be connected to the crisis of the family and women's refusal of it. Psychoanalysis was born as the science of sexual control, charged with providing strategies for the reform of family relations. In both the US and England, plans for the reformation of sexuality emerge in the first decade of the twentieth century. Books, booklets, pamphlets, essays, and treatises were devoted to the family and the "divorce problem," revealing not only the depth of the crisis but also the growing awareness that a new sexual/family ethics would be needed. Thus, while in the US the more conservative circles founded the League for the Protection of the Family and radical women advocated free unions and argued that for this system to work "it would be necessary for the state to subsidize all mothers as a matter of right" (O'Neill 104), sociologists and psychologists joined the debate, proposing that the problem be scientifically resolved. It would be Freud's task to systematize the new sexual code, which is why Freud's work became so popular in both countries.

Freud and the Reform of Sexual Work

On the surface, Freud's theory seems to concern sexuality in general, but its real target was female sexuality. Freud's work was a response to women's refusals of housework, procreation, and sexual work. As his writings well indicate, he was deeply aware that the "family crisis" stemmed from the fact that women did not want to or could not do their job. He was

also concerned for the growth of male impotence, which had assumed such proportions as to be described by him as one of the main social phenomena of his time. Freud attributed the latter to the “extension of the demands made upon women onto the sexual life of the male, and the taboo on sexual intercourse except in monogamous marriage.” He wrote: “Civilized sexual morality . . . by glorifying monogamy . . . cripples virile selection—the sole influence by which an improvement of the race can be obtained” (Freud 1972, 11).

The struggle of women against sexual work not only jeopardized their role as domestic lovers and produced disaffected males; it also put at risk their role (perhaps more important at the time) as procreators. “I do not know,” he wrote, “if the anaesthetic type of women is also found outside of civilized education, but I consider it probable. In any case, these women who conceive without pleasure show later little willingness to endure frequent childbirths, accompanied as they are by pain, so that the training that precedes marriage directly frustrates the very aim of marriage” (25).

Freud’s strategy was to (re)integrate sex into the domestic workday and discipline, in order to reconstruct on more solid bases, by means of a freer and satisfying sexual life, the woman’s traditional role of wife and mother. In other words, with Freud *sexuality is placed at the service of the consolidation of housework* and is turned into an element of work, soon to become itself a duty. Freud’s prescription is a freer sexuality for a healthier family life, for a family in which the woman would identify with her wifely function, instead of becoming hysterical, neurotic, and wrapping herself into a sheet of frigidity after the first months of marriage and perhaps being tempted to transgress through “degenerate” experiences such as lesbianism.

Beginning with Freud, sexual liberation for women has meant an intensification of domestic work. The model of the wife and mother cultivated by the psychology profession was

no longer that of the mother-procreator of an abundant offspring but that of the wife-lover who had to guarantee higher levels of pleasure to her husband than what was obtainable from the simple penetration of a passive or resistant body.

In the United States, the reintegration of sexuality into housework began to take hold in the proletarian family with the development of domesticity in the Progressive Era and it accelerated with the Fordist reorganization of work and wages. It came with the assembly line, the five-dollar-a-day wage and the work speed-up, which demanded that the men rest at night instead of prowling around in the saloons, so as to be fresh and restored for another day of hard work. The stiff work-discipline and speed-up that Taylorism and Fordism introduced in the American factory required a new hygiene, a new sexual regime, and therefore the reconversion of sexuality and family life. In other words, for the workers to be able to sustain the regimentation of factory life, the wage had to buy a more substantial sexuality than that provided by the casual encounters in the saloons. Making the home more attractive, through the reorganization of home-based sexual work, was also vital at a time of raising wages, which could otherwise be spent on merrymaking.

The shift was also prompted by political considerations. The attempt to win men over to the home and away from the saloon, which intensified after World War I, was prompted by the saloon having been a center for political organizing and debate as well as for prostitution.

For the housewife this reorganization meant that she would have to continue to make children and would have to worry that her hips might become too large, and here began the array of diets. She would continue washing dishes and floors but with polished nails and frills on her apron, and she would continue to slave from sunup to sundown but would have to spruce herself up to adequately greet her husband's return. At this point, saying no in bed became more difficult. In

fact, new canons, publicized by psychology books and women's journals, began to stress that the sexual union was crucial for a well-functioning marriage.

Starting in the in the 1950s there was also a change in the function of prostitution. As the century progressed, the average American male less and less resorted to prostitution for the satisfaction of his needs. What saved the family, however, more than anything else, was the limited access that women had to wages of their own. But all was not well within the American family, as seen in the high number of divorces in the postwar period (both in England and the United States). The more was asked of women and the family, the more women's refusal grew, which could not yet be a refusal of marriage, for obvious economic reasons, but was rather *a demand for higher mobility within marriage*—that is a demand for the possibility of moving from husband to husband (as from employer to employer) and exacting better conditions of housework. In this period, the struggle for the second job (and for welfare) became closely connected with the struggle against the family, as the factory or the office often represented for women the only alternative to unpaid housework, to their isolation within the family, and to subordination to their husbands' desires. Not accidentally, men for a long time saw women's second job as the antechamber to prostitution. Until the explosion of the welfare struggle, having an outside job was often the only way for women to get out of the house, to meet people, to escape an insufferable marriage.

But already at the beginning of the 1950s, the Kinsey Report rang an alarm bell, as it demonstrated women's resistance to expending adequate levels of sexual work. It was discovered that many American women were frigid, that they did not participate in their sex work but only went through the motions. It was also discovered that half of American males had or wanted to have homosexual relations. Similar conclusions were reached by an investigation on marriage in the

American working class conducted a few years later. Here too it was found that a quarter of married women made love only as a pure conjugal duty and an extremely high number of them did not derive any pleasure from it (Komarovskiy [1967], 83). It was at this point that capital in the US launched a massive campaign on the sexual front, determined to defeat with the arms of theory and practice the obstinate apathy of so many women toward sexuality. The dominant theme in this campaign was the quest for female orgasm, increasingly taken as the test of perfection in the conjugal union. Female orgasm, in the 1960s, became the motif of a whole series of psychological studies, culminating with Masters and Johnson's alleged epochal discovery that not only did female orgasm exist but also in a multiple form.

With the Masters and Johnson experiments, the productivity required of women's sexual work was fixed at very high quotas. Not only could women make love and reach orgasm, *they had to*. If we did not succeed, we were not real women; even worse, we were not "liberated." This message was communicated to us in the 1960s from movie screens, the pages of women's journals, and the "do-it-yourself" handbooks that taught us the positions enabling us to reach a satisfactory copulation. It was also preached by psychoanalysts who established that a "full" sexual relation is a condition for social and psychological balance. By the 1970s "sex clinics" and "sex shops" began to appear, and family life underwent a remarkable restructuring, with the legitimization of premarital and extramarital relations, "open marriage," group sex, and the acceptance of autoeroticism. Meanwhile, just to be safe, technological innovation produced the vibrator for those women who even the latest updating of the Kama Sutra could not put to work.

What Has This Meant for Women?

Let us state it in no uncertain terms. For the women of today no less than for our mothers and grandmothers, sexual liberation

can only mean liberation from “sex,” rather than intensification of sexual work.

“Liberation from sex” means liberation from the conditions in which we are forced to live our sexuality, which transform this activity into an arduous work, full of incognita and accidents, not least the danger of remaining pregnant, given that even the latest contraceptives are taken at a considerable health risk. Until these conditions prevail, any “progress” brings more work and anxieties. Undoubtedly, it is a great advantage not to be lynched by fathers, brothers, and husbands if it is discovered that we are not virgins or that we are “unfaithful” and “misbehave”—although, the number of women murdered by their partners because they wish to leave them is constantly growing. But sexuality continues to be for us a source of anxiety, for “sexual liberation” has been turned into a duty that we must accept if we do not want to be accused of being backward. Thus, while our grandmothers, after a day of hard work, could go to sleep in peace with the excuse of a migraine, we, their liberated granddaughters, feel guilty when refusing to have sex, not actively participating in it, or even when not enjoying it.

To come, to have an orgasm, has become such a categorical imperative, that we feel uneasy to admit that “nothing is happening,” and to men’s insistent questions we respond with a lie or force ourselves to make another effort, with the result that often our beds feel like a gym.

But the main difference is that our mothers and grandmothers looked at sexual services within a logic of exchange: you went to bed with the man you married, that is, the man who promised you a certain financial security. Today, instead, we work for free, in bed as in the kitchen, not only because sexual work is unpaid but because increasingly we provide sexual services without expecting anything in return. Indeed, the symbol of the liberated woman is the woman who is always available but in return does not ask anything any longer.

Notes

- 1 It is significant, for instance, that in the US, throughout the nineteenth century, the age of consent for females was set at about ten.
- 2 It is generally recognized that low female wages and the promiscuous mixing of the sexes in the slums were the main causes of the “explosion” of prostitution that took place in England in the first phase of the industrialization process. As William Acton wrote in his famous work on prostitution: “Many women . . . swell the ranks of prostitution through being by their position particularly exposed to temptation. The women to whom this remark applies are chiefly actresses, milliners, shop-girls, domestic servants and women employed in factories or working in agricultural gangs. . . . It is a shameful fact, but nonetheless true, that the lowness of the wage paid to the work-women in various trades is a fruitful source of prostitution” (Acton [1857] 1969, 129–30). Not surprisingly, for a long time, in the bourgeois family, the promiscuous or “immoral” conduct of women was punished as a form of *déclassement*. “To behave like one of those women” meant to behave like proletarian women, the women of the “lower classes.”
- 3 This, however, was not an easy task. Significantly, Acton lamented:

Prostitutes do not, as is generally supposed, die in harness . . . on the contrary, they, for the most part, become, sooner or later, with tarnished bodies and polluted minds, wives and mothers, while among some classes of the people the moral sentiment is so depraved that the woman who lives by the hire of her person is received on almost equal terms to social intercourse. It is clear, then, that though we may call these women outcasts and pariahs, they have a powerful influence for evil on all ranks of the community. The moral injury inflicted on society by prostitution is incalculable; the physical injury is at least as great. (Acton [1857] 1969, 84–85).
- 4 This is how the grandmother of a feminist friend described her life.