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SOCIAL MOVEMENT PROSTITUTION: A CASE STUDY IN NONHUMAN ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND VEGAN PIMPING

DR COREY LEE WRENN*

This article explores the sexual objectification of female-identified volunteers in social movements as a form of tactical prostitution, arguing that tactical prostitution constitutes a violation of the dignity of women in social movement spaces, while posing a threat to the wellbeing of women and children in the larger public. This article investigates the Nonhuman Animal Rights movement, particularly suggesting that tactical prostitution is particularly counterintuitive in this context as it asks the public to stop objectifying Nonhuman Animals with the same oppressive logic that it wields by objectifying female activists. This critique is placed within a systemic analysis of neoliberalism as it impacts social movements through the formation of a non-profit industrial complex. This system encourages the commodification of marginalised groups for institutional gain.

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I INTRODUCTION

Naked protest has a long history in social justice activism.¹ While women's participation in this protest need not be sexualised,² in today's hyper-sexualised culture and "pornified" media realms, it frequently is.³ Media attention is a social movement's best asset. It earns the organisation public recognition, attracts volunteers, and, most importantly, it stimulates fundraising.⁴ To attract media attention in a digitised, high-speed media landscape that is laden with trillions of competing images, some social movement organisations attempt to stand out by using prostitution and free soft-core pornography. Free sampling is a technique heavily utilised by pornographers in the highly competitive online sex industry.⁵ Web sites and performers provide the consumer a small taste of the product with the expectation that the consumer, thus excited, will seek to purchase more. This article will suggest that utilising the sales script of pornography to sell social justice by exploiting the bodies of female-presenting activists is ethically problematic and tactically counterintuitive. It will further argue that this process is a result of larger economic structures that encourage social movements to adopt a corporate model that necessitates exploitation to achieve growth.

II PROSTITUTION IN NONHUMAN ANIMAL RIGHTS

Although sexualisation is manifest in a number of social movements with the intention of promoting a particular cause,⁶ the Nonhuman Animal rights movement is an especially poignant case study in this regard, as it relies heavily on the tactic of naked protest. This is done so within the context of its stark gender disparity. This movement, in particular, engages in naked protest for at least two reasons. First, as Alaimo argues, disrobing allows protestors to 'momentarily cast off the boundaries of the human' and embody the natural

¹ Stacy Alaimo, 'The naked word: the trans-corporeal ethics of the protesting body' (2010) 20(1) *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 15.

² Barbara Sutton, 'Naked protest: memories of bodies and resistance at the World Social Forum' (2007) 8(3) *Journal of International Women's Studies* 139, 140.

³ Women have also utilized naked protest to resist patriarchal sexual violence. See Deepti Misri, 'Are You a Man? Performing Naked Protest in India' (2011) 36(3) *Signs* 604.

⁴ William Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld, 'Movements and media as interacting systems' (1993) 528 *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 114.

⁵ Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Beacon Press, 2010).

⁶ Corey Wrenn and Megan Lutz, 'White women wanted? An analysis of gender diversity in social justice magazines' (2016) 6(2) *Societies* 1.

world (a world where Nonhuman Animals are frequently positioned).⁷ Naked protest, in this regard, could theoretically encourage the audience to empathise with other animals with nudity acting a reminder of human-nonhuman connectedness. Secondly, the Nonhuman Animal rights movement is predominantly female-identified (to the tune of 80%) but male-led,⁸ suggesting that it's feminised participant base is particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Naked protest, in other words, might be less a consequence of a desire to evoke empathy with trans-species sameness and more so a result of its feminised ranks, male leadership, and masculinised operational style.

Indeed, going naked "for the animals" appears to be the Nonhuman Animal rights movement's modus operandi. Although many supporters of Nonhuman Animal rights organisations that utilise sexualisation as a tactic may claim that men's naked bodies are used in this way as well, the overwhelming majority of sexualised bodies presented to the public are that of young, thin, white women. Volunteers and activists offer to organisations a wealth of physical assets. When these participants are predominantly female-identified, women's body parts are frequently sexualised and politicised to the exclusion of their potentially more beneficial intelligence, skills, creativity, dedication, or leadership ability. Organisations such as the movement's largest, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals ("PETA"), recruit female volunteers and position them sexualised on street corners, posters and film as objects of solicitation. For all intents and purposes, these mostly unpaid girls and women are prostituted to extract funding, media attention, or other resources.⁹ Female activists "sell" their bodies for the benefit of the movement, but little (if any) of the profit goes to the sex workers themselves. Instead, the money raised is redirected to the organisations they represent. In sum, women's bodies are used in protest and most of those utilised are thin, white women. Because their bodies are sexualised and this is done to mobilise resources, these female activists are engaging in what amounts to sex work. They are selling their sexualised bodies for profit.

⁷ Alaimo, above n 1, 32.

⁸ Emily Gaarder, *Women and the Animal Rights Movement* (Rutgers University Press, 2011).

⁹ PETA does appear to pay for the services of some models hired to stage protests.

The parallels between social movement prostitution and conventional prostitution are distinct. If a john buys a prostituted woman for sex acts in the sex industry, when he pays her, most of the money (or *all* of the money) will usually be forfeited to her pimp. In the non-profit industry, if a john purchases organisational membership or becomes a donor because of his interest in the sexualised bodies of women who are working or volunteering for the organisation, again, that which she earns is turned and forfeited. In this case, it is the social movement organisation that becomes the pimp, having industrialised social movement sex work and framing it as an act of charity for institutional gain.

This process, I argue, is likely a result of neoliberalism in cultural and political spaces. Neoliberalism has created social movement austerity, forcing organisations to rationalise and bureaucratise to amass wealth. To protect themselves, organisations gradually professionalise and increasingly treat protest as an opportunity for profit. As fewer and fewer coalitions in the movement remain grassroots, the non-profit model (one that transforms contentious activism into a growth-oriented business) is positioned to aggravate this industrialised sex exploitation. The sex industry, too, has industrialised following the impacts of neoliberalism (globalisation, privatisation, and reduced legal restrictions on industry).¹⁰ As a result, it has become increasingly embedded across a number of social institutions, the social movement industry included. Indeed, the growth of naked protest in Nonhuman Animal rights correlates with the rise of non-profitism in the movement,¹¹ suggesting that the corporatization of anti-speciesism may have spawned this systemic objectifying sales tactic. While PETA may be the most infamous such organisation, it is certainly not the only one engaging this tactic.¹² PETA's relative success in the social movement arena allows it to shape the political imagination. Other organisations respond by replicating what they see as a resonating framework based on PETA's relative power. Exploiting women's bodies becomes common sense to Nonhuman Animal liberation.

¹⁰ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina* (Routledge, 2008).

¹¹ Corey Wrenn, *Professionalization, Factionalism, and Social Movement Success: A Case Study on Nonhuman Animal Rights Mobilization* (Doctoral Dissertation, Colorado State University, 2016).

¹² Corey Wrenn, 'The role of professionalization regarding female exploitation in the Nonhuman Animal rights movement' (2013) 24(2) *Journal of Gender Studies* 131.

This repertoire is defended in ways similar to that of conventional prostitution: the women involved are said to “choose” their participation, or they’re presumed to be personally benefiting from it (sometimes this is framed as attention-seeking or empowerment).¹³ These justifications, however, bank on the existence of free choice. The illusion of “free choice” is a construct foundational to sociological studies, one that easily individualises what is, instead, a *structural* phenomenon. “Free choice” invisibilises inequality by insinuating that each person is responsible for their own behaviour, although statistical analysis demonstrates patterns across race, gender, ability, and other identities to the discredit of individual choices. Free choice and agency thus become red herrings.¹⁴ The ideology of agency is especially problematic, as women have historically not had available to them the same choices (or ability to choose) that men have. This line of thinking obscures the larger movement structure that funnels girls and women into the “choice” of stripping for the male gaze in public spaces (this “choice” is much less visible or plausible for men). The ability to choose is linked to one’s privilege. As a class, women’s choices are circumscribed in a patriarchal society. These choices are even further restricted by race, class, age, nationality and ability.

To that end, some participants will feel they have benefited from participation, but these benefits are unevenly experienced. It is particularly white, upper and middle-class women who have historically been best positioned to reap the positive repercussions of sexual agency and empowerment. As an example, aspiring models and actresses may work with organisations like PETA to gain exposure. Indeed, nudity itself is certainly not to be criticised, as women have for so long been discouraged from connecting with their bodies and their sexuality. This should not negate, however, the clear pattern of women’s bodies being sexually exploited in cultures where power is mostly reserved for men. It is not women’s sexuality in question here, but rather the powerful male-dominated institutions that exploit it to the detriment of women as a class. Women may predominate in the ranks, but leadership is disproportionately male. This situation does not see *all* women acting for the benefit of *all*

¹³ *Popaganda: Liberal Problems* (Created by Sarah Mirk, Bitch Media, 26 March 2015) <<https://bitchmedia.org/post/popaganda-episode-liberal-problems>>.

¹⁴ Steven Loyal, ‘Agency as a Red Herring in Social Theory’ (2001) 31(4) *Philosophy of the Sciences* 507.

women. That is, for female activists privileged enough to make the “choice” to be sexually objectified for the movement, they frequently describe it as “empowerment” or “women’s liberation.” To the contrary, it is *some* very privileged women acting under the restrictions of sexism in the interest of the movement’s neoliberal agenda with little to no consideration to the potential harms promulgated for less privileged women who must also occupy sexist social spaces. That most sexualised bodies used by the movement are that of thin, white women, this indicates a structural influence, not simply a happenstance. It is not an individual choice, experience, or influence.

III THE PERILS OF SEX WORK AS ADVOCACY

Agency and empowerment are prominent ideologies in support of a sexist movement structure. I have argued thus far that this rhetoric acts as a red herring that diverts attention from the sexist underpinnings of social movement sex work. When a movement literally frames women’s bodies as though they are meat for sale,¹⁵ in the same way as are the bodies of Nonhuman Animals for whom the movement purports to represent, it is difficult to maintain that such a tactic maintains women’s dignity or “empowers” them or the women they supposedly represent.

For instance, one anti-fishing PETA campaign sees female activists holding signs which read ‘Don’t let your kids become hookers,’ thus banking on the stigmatisation of sex workers and prostituted girls and women.¹⁶ Likewise, a vegan strip club in Portland, Oregon known as Casa Diablo hires women to strip and tease mostly male customers for “the cause”. More likely, the combination seeks to attract new clientele in a city famous both for its vegan community and its claim to the most strip clubs per capita in the country. Selling strippers and vegan food is a sales tactic in a highly competitive space and is not necessarily a tactic for undermining speciesism. The male club owner insists that “throwing boobs out there” is the only way to get people to visit his restaurant and try his vegan menu, but it is difficult to accept that this tactic is one with advocacy, and not profits, in mind. He claims he wants to

¹⁵ A popular form of naked protest in the Nonhuman Animal rights movement is to paint meat cuts (ie. “flank,” “loin,” “ribs”) onto women’s bodies.

¹⁶ Jeff Mackey, *Don’t let your kids become hookers* (21 September 2011) PETA <<http://www.peta.org/blog/don-t-let-kids-become-hookers/>>.

“end the suffering of all creatures,” but it seems less important that the women in use are “creatures,” too. Certainly, “throwing penises out there” would draw some attention as well, but patriarchy ensures that it is the sexualised exposure of women’s bodies that will be expected.

Prostitution, stripping, and pornography are all forms of sex work, which often prey on vulnerable populations of girls and women. Of course, not all prostitutes are in the industry out of desperation or trafficking, but many are, and to prioritise the experiences of the privileged few invisibilises the reality of the majority who suffer in the system. Indeed, many feminists and survivors regard “sex work” as a euphemism,¹⁷ and for the children and women who are trafficked, their condition can be acknowledged *only* as sex slavery. It is “work” insofar as the physical toll exacted on the bodies of prostituted persons is considerable and money is sometimes exchanged. The sex industry entails extremely high rates of sexual assault, rape, and other forms of violence. When it pays, it pays sporadically and poorly for most girls and women, especially for marginalised workers such as women of colour, trans women, and indigenous women. This marginalisation, however, positions sex work as a vital means of survival for somewhere other viable means of employment are unavailable. Those surviving in the system, of course, should not be stigmatised. Sex work can be an attempt to reclaim power in a world that has generally disempowered them.¹⁸ Furthermore, the most marginalised of women who are dependent on the industry are certainly not the relatively privileged ones that non-profits are recruiting for protest. Yet, the system itself, a system of domination and colonisation, is worthy of criticism given its disproportionate impact on marginalised women and its implications for women as a class.

Increasingly, sex work is glamorised or romanticised in the liberal imagination as something freely chosen by independent women who have full control over their work and lives.¹⁹ Some women with race, class, and nationality privilege are able to enjoy agency of this sort, but

¹⁷ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina* (Routledge, 2008); Rachel Moran, *Paid For: My Journey Through Prostitution* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2015).

¹⁸ Jennifer K. Wesley, ‘Growing up sexualized: Issues of power and violence in the lives of female exotic dancers.’ (2002) 8(10) *Violence against Women* 1182.

¹⁹ Emily Bazelon, ‘Should prostitution be a crime?’ *The New York Times* (online), 5 May 2016 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/should-prostitution-be-a-crime.html>>.

most of those who enter the industry do not. It is this analytical framework that should inform the decision-making of non-profit organisations considering capitalising on sex work. An institutional adoption of sex industry attributes may benefit society's more privileged (such as white women of a higher class background who work as escorts, the male johns who purchase sex, and the pimps and corporations who profit financially), but it will inevitably come at the expense of marginalised women who lack any ability to choose or consent, those who disproportionately staff the sex industry. For that matter, by perpetuating the notion that women's bodies are available to be purchased, controlled, and used by men (and industries), non-profit pro-prostitution frameworks negatively impact *all* girls and women by normalising gender-based domination.²⁰ The sexual exploitation of women is a systematic means of devaluing and disempowering women.²¹ It makes resources of women. They become objects, while their users remain subjects. The sexual exploitation of women is a logic of oppression.

IV COMMODIFYING BODIES UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

It is within this context — the wider realm of the sex industry as one that colonises the bodies of women, especially very vulnerable women — that social movement prostitution should be criticised. A system that exploits society's most marginalised to the benefit of society's most privileged is one that runs counter to social justice goals, as it represents a fundamental inequality. It thus becomes counterintuitive for the Nonhuman Animal rights movement to actively participate in the buying and selling of women's bodies given the serious ramifications that prostitution, as an institution, holds for the safety and well-being of girls and women. However, the vegan pimp model is more than an extension of the globalising sex industry and the rise of porn culture. It is instead a strategic response to the world's shift to a neoliberal economy.

Neoliberalism, in its effort to free markets, fans inequalities as access to and participation in markets is unevenly experienced.²² Inequalities created by an exploitative capitalist system

²⁰ Jeffreys, above n 12.

²¹ Jennifer K. Wesley, *Being Female: The Continuum of Sexualization* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2012).

²² Vicente Navarro, 'Neoliberalism, Globalization, Unemployment, Inequalities, and the Welfare State' (1998) 28(4) *International Journal of Health Services* 607.

are presumed solvable by “free” markets. The inevitable result in a system where corporations rule and states are relegated to serving business instead of the citizenry is the proliferation of suffering. More than this, by prioritising marketplace interactions, there is also an increase in commodification. That which was previously considered free, communal, or a guaranteed right thus becomes property that can be bought and sold. Even attempts to alleviate the inequality that arises from this system are packaged for consumption. Social justice, too, is for sale.

To be real and valuable under neoliberalism, a thing, action, or idea must have a market value. Non-profits thus place a value on social justice by prioritising fundraising and growth over grassroots mobilisation and radical structural change. For those in the game of social justice who adopt this strategy, this neoliberal marketplace ideology is the very same which normalises property ownership and systemic inequality. In such a system, it will always be the case that some will be able to participate fully (those who are privileged by gender, race, ability, age, nationality, and species, for instance), while others will participate less, if they are able to at all. Worse still, the longer that the marginalised are limited in their participation, the greater the market advantage of the privileged. Given this uneven access, it will also be the case that some will own property, and some will be *owned* as property. Women, Nonhuman Animals, indigenous persons, and some persons of colour have been so marginalised by the neoliberal system that they do indeed become property. Of course, these groups have been objectified, exploited and oppressed long before capitalism emerged, but recent economic shifts have exacerbated inequality considerably. It becomes questionable as to whether it is appropriate for non-profits to enter such an arena. They surely do so in hopes of amassing greater marketplace participation and ownership, but they do so at the expense of those less able to participate.

The rise of the non-profit system itself is a vital component to the neoliberal commodification process that manifests within social movement spaces. These institutions came to dominate the social movement arena in the latter half of the 20th century.²³ As grassroots organisations professionalised and incorporated into non-profits, they began to increase in size and wealth

²³ INCITE!, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (South End Press, 2007).

considerably. To achieve this, however, organisations must adopt a corporate approach, retooling social change efforts to be consistent with a cutthroat business design. A primary result of this organisation style is intense competition over vital funding and resources, as with growth comes greater financial responsibilities and available charity monies are limited (especially in a neoliberal “hands off” economy). Unfortunately, this extreme dependence on funding leaves once radical tactics vulnerable to compromise. Advocacy shifts away from liberatory visions to the goal of procuring wealth to sustain organisational inertia. Changing the world (the world that feeds the wealth of elite capitalist funders who sustain non-profits) becomes less of a priority.

Prostituting women consequently presents itself as a highly profitable tactic, especially when volunteers are not paid and come to the social movement arena “porn ready,” already groomed to believe that their tenuous participation in the public sphere must be sexualised. Ironically, even if the movement’s audience were to begin supporting Nonhuman Animal rights organisations as a result of being exposed to these sexualised tactics (and there is no evidence to support such a notion),²⁴ most of the money raised will not be used in support of anti-speciesism. Instead, most of it will be put toward keeping the lights on, paying staff members, and supporting ever more fundraising channels. Bureaucratisation comes with a number of opportunity costs.

Although naked protest is *not* shown to increase support for anti-speciesism, the protest continues in full force. When presented with this research, PETA insists that naked protest is crucial for garnering attention in mainstream media spaces.²⁵ This indicates that Nonhuman Animal rights organisations may be less interested in undermining speciesism than they are with overpowering competitors in the marketplace as they wrangle for greater control and ownership of resources. Prostituting women may not help Nonhuman Animals, but it can ensure that an organisation is visible and its brand image memorable and acute. From this perspective, any media attention is considered good attention, as it grows an organisation’s cultural capital. Unwittingly, female volunteers and employees who strip “for

²⁴ Renata Bongiorno, Paul G. Bain, Nick Haslam., ‘When sex doesn’t sell,’ (2013) 8 (12) *PLoS One*,1.

²⁵ Mary Elizabeth Williams, ‘Surprise, PETA! Sex doesn’t sell’ *Salon* (online), 21 December 2013 <http://www.salon.com/2013/12/20/surprise_peta_sex_doesnt_sell/>.

the animals” may actually be stripping for capitalist elites. The absent referent Nonhuman Animals (and the women representing them) simply become symbols to be bought and sold to amass wealth for the privileged few, much in the same way as Nike swooshes and Playboy bunnies do.

V CONCLUSION

The Nonhuman Animal rights movement squanders an important resource by degrading women’s participation to stripping and other manifestations of prostitution. Much more could be accomplished for the movement and its constituency by nurturing women’s personhood rather than objectifying their bodies. However, this presumes that the movement does indeed seek to undermine speciesism with effective advocacy while the evidence suggests otherwise. Beyond the predatory behaviour of social movement organisations that utilise prostitution as a tactic and target girls and women groomed by society (and the movement itself) to see sexualisation as an expectation, it is also important to take into account the impact that this type of activism has on women *as a class*. The socially-accepted degradation of women and their sexual objectification is directly linked with discrimination and violence against women. All women are vulnerable to the status debasement of sexual exploitation, but only a privileged few are positioned to reap the limited status afforded by patriarchy by adopting the sexualised feminine role. Women, therefore, experience the ill-effects of a sexist society in varying degrees based on their social position. All women, however, are, as a group, disenfranchised by institutionalised sexism and while some may exact some compensation with patriarchal bargaining, sexual exploitation is an act of systematised oppression. This is a consequence that social justice movements should take very seriously. For that matter, it is hardly clear how the systematic objectification of women can be used to counter the systematic oppression of other animals. Social movements make a patriarchal bargain of their own by prostituting female activists, and this bargain also upholds inequality.

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