Organise!
Anarchism and sex
2002

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And when people are really being sexually honest, some weird shit can start to happen. And that, in its own way, can be quite revolutionary.

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in articles such as this). And people do all sorts of inexplicable, weird and wacky things when they're in their purely sexual mode. This may involve things like playing out sexual power exchange fantasies, fetishism, transgendered activities, etc. Often, the reasons we like doing the things that we do cannot actually be explained, nor would we necessarily want to explain them either (just in case it makes something we find really exciting, suddenly seem mundane). Nor does that mean it's unhealthy sexual tastes or activities we are indulging in (or want to indulge in).

Unfortunately, psychiatry has traditionally offered medication and the asylum for any wayward and 'bizarre' sexual tendencies in people (particularly in working class people), and bourgeois society at large and its media likes to label such divergent people as 'perverts'.

It's important that we never fall into this line of thinking. If revolutionary anarchists were ever to start denouncing anyone with a 'nonmainstream' sexual orientation or preference, it would be a total disaster not only for anarchism as a philosophy, but also for our class and for future humanity. For me, the revolutionary anarchist attitude to sex and sexuality has to encompass the belief that sexual activities and relations should be *safe, free, diverse and consensual*; acknowledging that people are queer, bi or hetero, ranging from the monogamous to the polyamourous, from the disinterested asexual to the rampant polysexual, and from the softest vanilla to the hardest edge playing SM-er. At the end of the day, if it's a safe and mutually consensual activity (however weird it may seem) and all parties involved enjoy themselves, then what's the big deal?

Hopefully anarchism is about sexual freedom, openness, honesty and equality. And when I say this, I'm not talking about everyone devising rota systems to see whose turn it is to go on top. The honesty is when people are truly and non-judgementally in a position to sexually express themselves without fear of being labelled a pervert, a deviant or a poof.

are vigorously repressed not only by the family, church, state, the education system, peer group pressure, the mass media and of course capitalism in general, but also by some of those who adhere to apparently more progressive ideologies; rebels, radicals, leftists, anarchists and communists.

Consequently, although not exactly starving, I'd guess that much of the world's adult population is at least sexually malnourished or undernourished (which can lead to problems such as lack of self confidence, depression and other mental illnesses, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide). So I'd say this situation is something definitely worth addressing by revolutionaries.

Deviancy

There's also the problematic view which I mentioned earlier, that any sexual waywardness (usually labelled 'deviance', 'depravity' or 'perversion') is in some way a product of capitalism, a bourgeois trait. If this is the case, will sex in an anarchist society only be the kind which is firmly rooted in anarcho-communist social reality? Or more bluntly, does this mean that any possible future anarchist communist society would be relatively 'kink free'? I, for one, sincerely hope not. A sexual future like that, sort of reminds me of the childhood view of the Christian 'Heaven', where you have to sit on a cloud all day playing a harp. And, quite rightly, Hell always seemed much more appealing to me. Hmmm… unless you're into sexual fantasies based on the socially just and egalitarian cummings and goings between the workers' assembly member and the mandated local delegate… or maybe a little 'mass action' would appeal?

Sex, of course, can often reflect social realities, but it doesn't have to and can be totally unrelated to anything we know or have experienced. Anyway, let's face it, sex doesn't always work too well on the rational and philosophical level (except

Anarchist views on sex can range from the idea that 'anything goes' between consenting adults, to the more traditional approaches of what constitutes free love between individuals. One thing these diverse opinions do have in common, however, is the idea of sexual freedom and the opposition to sexual exploitation. Nevertheless, being pro sexual freedom and anti sexual exploitation is open to wide interpretation and can encompass diverse, and sometimes conflicting, analyses from one anarchist to the next.

Within certain historic anarchist traditions (as well as within the left), there has often been a significant strand of 'puritanism' towards sex and any activities deemed generally frivolous.

We all know the story about Emma Goldman dancing all night with the blokes at an anarchist social event, then being chastised for behaviour not befitting a revolutionary (we know about her subsequent outrage too). We also know that some sections of the anarchist movement in the Spanish revolution have been accused of similar puritanism, and the idea that anarchist and communist revolutionaries should somehow live their lives like ascetic monks or nuns still, in some quarters, continues to this day.

The novels of 19th century anarchist writers like Octave Mirbeau were classed as pornography by the literary establishment of the time. The *Diary of a Chambermaid* portrayed the sexual habits of the bourgeoisie in such a way that Jean Grave commented, "What filth and decay there is under the pretty surface of our society". To be fair, Mirbeau's proletarian antiheroine, Celestine, was certainly no sexual saint either, but the emphasis on the so called sexual 'perversity' and 'depravity' of the rich at play clearly implies the notion that sexual waywardness is in some way bourgeois. This is really not that dissimilar from the old Militant Tendency (now the Socialist Party) telling us a few years back that homosexuality was nothing but a bourgeois disease.

Victorian values

Added to this, is the enduring effect of certain elements within the women's liberation movement, which led many feminists and their male supporters to adopt 'puritanical' attitudes towards sex and sexuality, and to embrace censorship against pornography and all kinds of erotica.

Without doubt, many positive things came out of feminism and the women's movement in general, yet a major downside was the growth in the belief that men in general are inherently exploitative towards women (admittedly based on the very real fact that many men do actually behave in this way for much or at least some of the time), whereas women were always seen as victims of male domination and oppression. For some feminists there followed from this view a giant leap of faith, in which it was alleged that all men were either actual or at least potential sexual abusers of women, while women, on the other hand, were seen as fundamentally saintly and almost asexual beings open to corruption by men; and those women who, by doing things like actively going out, picking up and fucking blokes (or even entering into relationships with 'the enemy'), were in fact merely living as the dupes of men and their patriarchal system. Subsequently, this 'asexual exploitee' view of women holds much in common with the bog standard religious 'woman as Madonna or whore' mythology and contains more than a hint of good old 'Victorian values'. Sadly, even the occasional anarchist still clings to some of this patronising moral baggage.

Under capitalism, everything and everyone is a commodity, we all have our market price. And whether by selling our labour power as workers, or by buying things necessary (and some things not so necessary) as consumers, we all exist as part and parcel of the commodity system, of world capitalism.

Sex then, is no different and is something that is not only marketable but aggressively marketed under capitalism (as we

dered to by some of the most conservative of institutions. On the other hand, hard-core pornography is seen as dangerous, subversive and is usually a police matter to be dealt with under the Obscene Publications Act. While some of the material classed as hard-core can be decidedly dodgy, and even dangerous, it's also no surprise that some of the more interesting, non-mainstream, least stereotypical and sexually diverse erotic material finds itself put neatly under this heading.

Anarcho-sex with bread and butter!

Having said all this, pornography (good and bad) is of course just more spectacle; something to be used by the passive (usually) observer. Sex and sexuality, however, are not passive, but things we do, things we actively participate in. Which leads me to the question, can there be such a thing as an anarchist view of sex or even an anarchist sexuality?

The fact that certain readers may profoundly disagree with some of the points raised in this article means it's very tempting to answer no.

Also some comrades may argue that it's all just a diversion from the real struggles against capitalism and the bread and butter class issues.

Yet I don't think that an anarchist view of sex and sexuality is in any way a diversion.

Moreover, I believe it's not that far away from the so called 'bread and butter' class issues as some comrades might think.

Food, drink, a roof over our heads and sex are all basic human needs. OK, the lack of sex doesn't generally kill you (as is the case with starvation), but being sex-starved can seriously fuck you up mentally. Having said this, many adults do participate in fairly regular sexual activity and of course sometimes it's all very good, while at other times it's not at all enjoyable. Added to this, the fact that more open and diverse sexualities

Revolutionary skin flicks

Another disturbing thing about procensorship ideology is its (possibly wilful) ignorance of sexual openness as a liberating even revolutionary force. It's no coincidence that during many revolutionary episodes, pornography and erotica have played a significant role in popular revolutionary culture. Sexual images created for pleasure have of course been around for millennia but usually they were only accessible to the well-off, the educated, and the high clergy. But during the French revolution, greater free sexual expression and the distribution of pornography really came to the fore. In other words, it became freely available to us plebs as well. I remember reading about the early days of the Portuguese revolution of 1974, when the fascist dictatorship had just fallen and all the forbidden literature was suddenly becoming freely available, so one could find works by Bakunin, Kropotkin, Marx and Lenin sitting alongside an assortment of porno mags!

And historically, it's also no coincidence, that when the reaction begins to reassert itself, both Bakunin and the sex magazines are the first to go under the proverbial counter. Neither is it a coincidence, that pornography and so called 'illicit sex' is illegal and severely punished under some of the most repressive (and incidentally anti-women) regimes in the world.

That's not to say pornography is a wonderful liberating thing in itself. It isn't. The vast majority of pornography (particularly the soft-core variety produced by the big corporate media empires) is absolutely dreadful, reflecting very sexist capitalistic values and only seems geared to appeal to the dreariest most sexuallyrepressed conformist male. Hence, if pornography were the food of love, this would be a Big Mac.

It's interesting to note that such soft-core trash is quite freely available in any newsagent or high street WH Smiths; it is actively promoted by mainstream media and distribution networks and is seen by the establishment as acceptable and pan-

all know, sex sells). However, when sex is bought and sold — whether via pornography, prostitution, etc. — the left, procensorship feminists and some anarchists have a tendency to see this trade as somehow worse than many other forms of capitalist exploitation.

Lapping it up

As an example, a lap-dancing club recently opened up in Nottingham and a campaign was promptly organised to shut it down. Now, I don't know whether anarchists were actually involved in this campaign, but I do know that some anarchists see such a campaign as a worthy cause.

I understand the arguments of the pro-censorship feminists. However, the view that pornography (and in this case lap-dancing) in some way incites men to commit violence or rape against women is very dubious. Also, the simplistic overview of pornography and the sex industry in general — which is seen as a place where the women involved are super-exploited victims — seems to me to be one built on a form of conservatism or liberalism, crypto-religious moralism, with a large helping of sensationalistic media mythology thrown in for good measure. But only a smattering of this view is based on the actual reality of sex work or the sex industry, which, in truth, is extremely broad and multifaceted. Yes, sections of it are horrendously exploitative, sometimes tantamount to real (non-wage) slavery, and being little more than a means for commercial interests big and small, legitimate and illegal, to coin it in.

But I'd say that (certainly in this country) many sections of the sex industry *are no more, no less exploitative* than any other capitalist concern and other sections still are about as unexploitative as you can get under capitalism.

So to generalise about the sex industry too much leads to a very limited and naive understanding of it and says nothing about actual conditions there.

Now I tend to think of lap-dancing clubs as, well… crap. But in the socio-economic scheme of things, within capitalism, I'd put them in the above 'no more, no less' category of the system's exploitative industries. In lap-dancing clubs, there are usually strict safety rules of 'no physical contact' between dancers and spectators and if you don't mind being gawped at by some bloke or blokes, then the money isn't that bad and pays a lot better than most other working class jobs. It's also the kind of job where you can come and go as you please and the hours can often be quite flexible. True, employers usually discriminate by only employing women deemed stereotypically 'attractive' or 'sexy' and by having an upper age limit — on the basis of that being what brings in the paying punters.

So as anarchist communists, our attitude to a lap-dancing club should be pretty much on a similar basis to our attitude to a cinema or a foundry or a supermarket — in other words, it's about business as usual. But, of course, it isn't that simple, is it? Why do people get so up in arms about these clubs that they want to campaign to shut them down more than they do the local rag trade sweat shop that pays 'illegal' workers a quid fifty an hour for a 12 hour day? Is it because in the former a woman has the audacity to dance naked or semi-naked for a few hours for a half-decent wage? Or is it because the campaigners don't want to have (admittedly not very) naughty goings on behind closed doors in their neighbourhood?

And why are people much less inclined to bother about campaigning against the local rag trade sweat shop? Is it because it's 'just a bunch of foreigners' working there and they actually don't give a shit about refugees working long hours, in awful conditions with little or no health and safety regulation, and getting paid piss poor money? Is it because working in the rag trade is at least 'honest toil' where no one has to get their kit

off? Or are people just OK about having those kinds of seedy things going on behind closed doors in their neighbourhood?

Now when talking about what I call this middle bracket of 'no more no less' exploitative sections of the sex industry (e.g. lap-dancing clubs), I get the sneaking suspicion that what it all comes down to is morality. What's really at issue here is that people use their bodies in a sexual manner for money. *"And only a really, really exploited person would do that, wouldn't they? Or someone psychologically damaged… sexually abused as a child… a helpless dupe… someone on the side of the enemy… Well, how can any self-respecting woman allow herself to be objectified in such a way?"*

Well I'm sorry to say this, but it's as if some of us haven't really moved on from Queen Victoria's day and sex is still the big taboo it always was. Sex for sale, sex as a commodity, sex in public, sex in print and on film, offbeat, bizarre, kinky, fetishistic, wayward sex, missionary style sex, in fact any kind of sex at all in a public arena is the issue.

People who choose to attack the local lap-dancing club but not their local petrol station do so because of personal morality/moralism about sex. Sex makes it a moral issue because if we were just talking about a simple economic relationship, then it really is as humdrum as the next industry. But we're not, are we? So, when certain anarchists single out the lap-dancing club or the adult bookshop, they're not basing their actions on a class analysis, but on what they think is morally good or bad for the rest of us (which actually brings into question their interpretation of anarchism). This elevation of their opposition to the sex industry is a personal moral choice, but it's got absolutely nothing to do with either a revolutionary class analysis or with anarchism itself.