

BOOK REVIEW

Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights, by Juno Mac and Molly Smith. London, New York: Verso Books, 2018. \$24.95 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978-1-78663-360-6. Pages: 1-278.

Reviewed by Jennifer McGibbon¹

Revolting Prostitutes is a well-argued, artfully-organized and accessible theoretical text that takes seriously, and meaningfully builds upon the knowledges produced within sex worker circles. Mac and Smith situate the experiences of those in the sex industry in the larger political and economic context without losing sight of the material implications of economy and policy. It is an excellent primer for anyone interested in social justice issues including harm reduction, sexual violence, sex trafficking, policing, and prison reform or abolition. *Revolting Prostitutes* is ideal for an undergraduate or layperson audience.

The book is organized into two parts. The first third of the book deals with theory in relation to three themes: sex, work, and borders. This first section functions as a broad theoretical foundation for the rest of the book. With impressive economy of language, Juno and Mac establish a pragmatic, materialist framework for understanding the sex industry. The second half of the book is theory-in-practice. Using specific countries as examples, Mac and Smith explore 5 different legal models for regulating the sex industry: partial criminalization, full criminalization, the Swedish model, regulationism and full decriminalization. In each chapter the authors explain the ideology and political history behind each legal model and then devote the bulk of the chapter to explaining how these laws actually impact real people in the sex industry.

In the first section of the book, the “Borders” chapter is exceptionally well-contextualized and argued. It opens with 12 ½ pages explaining what borders are, how they function and what “border” security looks like in practice, before finally introducing the figure of the migrant sex worker and addressing her unique position and concerns. Similarly, the “Work” chapter fundamentally reframes the question of paid sex by shifting the focus from the episodic and highly fetishized “moment of entry” into the industry to the larger context of work in a capitalist system. Mac and Smith stubbornly maintain focus on systems of oppression and explain how individualizing the problems of physical and sexual violence does a disservice to those who experience such violence whether at the hands of the state or predators masquerading as clients.

The themes that run throughout the text will sound familiar to anyone involved in the sex workers’ rights movement, but with the addition of a compassionate critique of the political and rhetorical blindspots within the movement. There are two closely related key interventions into the dominant narrative. First, the authors give clear voice to an emerging strain of sex worker activism: critique of the broadly conceived category of *work* in capitalism. Though the authors don’t identify

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themselves as materialist feminists, their analysis can be read as a refreshingly pragmatic materialist feminist engagement with the question of sex-as-work.

This theoretical framework is introduced in the first two chapters and paves the way for their second intervention: the outright refusal of a binary categorization of sex work as either good or bad, liberatory or devastating. By refusing a binary reading of sex work, and opening up the concept of “work” to critique, the authors are able to meaningfully center the experiences of survival sex workers throughout their ensuing analysis of competing legal models and policies.

This represents a significant departure from the literature which has been characterized by bitter battles between “radical” and “liberal” feminists over the nature of the sex industry and bodily autonomy. Historically, the survival sex worker has been inconvenient for each camp as she is neither the abject victim held up by the anti-trafficking movement, nor the enlightened and empowered whore the sex workers rights movement loves.) Neither fully victim nor fully empowered, the survival sex worker is in Mac and Smith’s account, first and foremost a person surviving in an unforgiving economy and despite misguided state interventions.

Mac and Smith are careful to remind us throughout the text that people in the sex industry are just like anyone else; people who make logical decisions within a limited set of options. They accomplish this in part by maintaining a distinction between the “everywoman” invoked by anti-prostitution feminists and the immediate material needs of people who trade sex. This will not be a revelation to anyone already interested in sex workers rights, but it is an important intervention into the literatures which treat sex workers as criminals, disease vectors or psychologically damaged individuals. In this same vein, they also refuse the voyeuristic liberal feminist fascination with the “moment of entry” into the industry, a key feature in many academic writings on the sex industry.

It is due in part to this insistence on prioritizing the material and immediate needs of their community that their writing is at times choppy and too topical for a book-length analysis. Mac and Smith build their arguments on a mix of peer-reviewed academic texts, informal think pieces and news stories. But as evidenced by the originality and rigor of their broad theoretical overview in the first several chapters, Mac and Smith are well-equipped to dive deeper into theory and rely more on research articles than news media. Though well-organized and thoughtfully reasoned, the second section of the book (on competing legal frameworks) at times reads more like a lengthy think piece than a book-length analysis. It is, however, in part owing to this approach that the authors manage to cover so as much ground as they do in under 300 pages.

As out sex workers, Mac and Smith have credence that stems not from their personal work experiences (this is little more than a footnote in the text) but from years of organizing and advocating on behalf of sex workers rights. There are occasional poignant reminders that their allegiance lies not with academic competition but with their sex industry peers. For example, in a very well-cited book there are a handful of instances in which the authors share that they have intentionally withheld a citation in the interest of protecting those in the sex industry. These strategic omissions are simply pragmatic, but they also serve as a powerful reminder of the

extraordinary courage and personal risk the authors have taken to write so frankly and openly about the sex industry.

Overall, despite a writing style that is at times desultory, *Revolting Prostitutes* succeeds as a well-reasoned, grounded and stubbornly materialist defense of sex workers rights in a literature characterized largely by sex panic, voyeurism, and extrapolation.