

Theodora Becker: *Dialektik der Hure. Von der 'Prostitution' zur 'Sex-Arbeit'*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2023, 592 pages.

Capitalism is so terribly boring and banal that in the course of its most recent development it has succeeded in making dull and insipid even the most exciting and colourful, the most ambiguous and intriguing, the most contemptible and the most adorable, the most rebellious and the most submissive, the most pitiful and the most fascinating, the most outspoken and the most deceitful, the most autonomous and the most objectified, the most infamous and the most felt sorry for, the most clandestine and the most flamboyant, the most blasphemous and the most sacred, perhaps the most beautiful of all its creations: the whore, who is today on the verge of extinction. This is the bitter conclusion – at the same time an alarm – of Becker's *Dialectic of the Whore*, the most in-depth and comprehensive philosophical investigation into prostitution published to date.

It is at least since the beginning of the 19th century that bourgeois society and its police have been trying to regulate the sex trade and integrate it into its economic and moral order. But only in the 21st prostitution has come to be reduced to sex work, provision of sexual services, i.e. to one of the many fundamentally and increasingly indistinguishable declinations of the one “mere congelation of homogeneous human labour” (Marx). Today's “customer” – a mere costumer, Becker stresses, no longer a whoremonger – “orders sexual services at home like pizza and can choose between various flavours, whether it should be girlfriend sex with getting to know each other over dinner, an SM session or just a quick fuck, what clothes the prostitute should wear, what fetish she should serve” (500).

In outlining the socio-economic context in which the transformation of the whoredom (*Hurerei*) into sex work takes place, the author follows a “prophetic” (502) indication by one of the sharpest and most perceptive thinkers and whoremongers of the modern age: Walter Benjamin. More than half a century ahead of Wolfgang Pohrt's analyses on the disappearance of the use-value and those of anthropologist David Graeber on the desubstantialisation of labour, Benjamin observed: “Prostitution can lay claim to being considered ‘work’ the moment work becomes prostitution” (Benjamin, 199: 348 [J67,5], see Graeber, 2013 and Pohrt, 1976).

While it is true that already in 1844 Karl Marx spoke of prostitution as “a specific expression of the general prostitution of the labourer” (Marx, 1967: 93), the prostitution character of the sale of human labour power has acquired, in the context of the neoliberal labour market competition, an unprecedented aptness and concreteness. The tools and techniques of advertising and courtship – charm,

graciousness, emotional intelligence, the ability to stage oneself and to promise much more than one has to offer, in short the so-called soft skills, once a prerogative of high-priced prostitutes – are today to be considered as minimum standards required from anyone who must hope to get a job.

Parallel to these historical transformations of productive labour is the process of legalisation of the sex trade and its acceptance as “work”. Among the conditions that made this possible is the liberalisation and detabooization of sexuality, which has become omnipresent as a commodity in the public sphere and the media. The struggles for the decriminalisation of prostitution conducted since the 1970s clearly contain elements of progress that the author neither wishes to deny nor belittle. In the demand for “recognition” of prostitution as honest work, however, she suspects “an opportunistic adaptation to the existing conditions” and labour relationships, as well as an ideological support for state and police regulation (517). Underlying these kind of claims would be a contractualist conception of sexuality, conveyed mostly by the bourgeois components of the women’s movement, whereby the ideal of the amorous encounter is resolved, under the dogma of explicit consent, in an absolutely safe, clean, in each of its moments calculable and predictable transaction, free of misunderstandings, asymmetries, risks and contingencies of all kinds. Feminism of the free exchange of equivalents.

Moreover, the author notes in a trade union spirit, “one of the undesirable effects of the legalisation, acceptance and normalisation of prostitution as work, is that the fees go down” (ibid.). With the vanishing of the taboos surrounding her commodity, of the clandestine and shameful element of her activity, the prostitute is no longer in the quasi-monopolistic position of promising a unique and proscribed pleasure, incomparable to other sorts of consumer goods. Her price therefore falls, and with her depreciation, with the devaluation of the sexual commodity, the attractiveness of prostitution as a possible way of escaping the social imperative of capitalist work and exploitation vanishes too. In the bourgeois society this professional career could offer the hope – albeit at the high price of the social stigma and the occupational hazards – of *another life*, of an existence different from the cramped and deprived one of all others. In the age of the demise of that social formation, this promise is no longer possible. Today, even the whore is forced into the general prostitution, just like everyone else. This, for Becker, is the real content of what sex work activists call “progress”.

Diametrically opposed to sex work activists and the progressive advocates of “recognition” are, in the contemporary political and cultural debate on prostitution, the abolitionists. For this party, which has existed since the dawn of the bourgeois era, the prostitute can only be thought of as a victim of social degradation and male violence, that is, as an immature subject in need of rescue. Becker’s criticism of them is no less severe: the conservative fringes of bourgeois feminism, Christian NGOs, and all other defenders of public morality and opponents of prostitution “are waging an ideological defence battle: they want to abolish prostitution in particular, while it has become universal: they want to prevent the transformation of prostitution into work, while they have no objection to the transformation of work into prostitution”. Just like the sex work party they oppose, these do-gooder eager to save the prostitutes’ souls from their cruel fate of sexual exploitation do nothing but promote their “integration into the low wage sector” (516). In general – and herein lies perhaps the gist of Becker’s criticism – “the bourgeois women’s movement never understood the attractiveness of whoredom” (538).

What exactly is, or was, the source of this misunderstood attraction? How does whoredom differ from ordinary wage labour, if it does? To what extent does, or did, it exceed the boredom, the banality, the misery of life under the rule of capital? This is the question that lies at the heart of the book: what is the specific difference of the whore, her very essence? Therefore, Becker’s work is not only an in-depth historical and sociological investigation of prostitution, nor only a critique of the ideology and sexual morality of bourgeois society. Rather, it is a true speculative project: a philosophy of the whore. A philosophy that is all the more urgent as the attractiveness, the specific difference, the essence of the whore is risking being lost forever (with Benjamin again: at the moment of danger).

The method of this philosophy is an immanent one. In opposition to both the denunciation of the moral scandal of the commercialisation of sex, and the liberal viewpoint, according to which prostitution is simply a job like any other, Becker reappropriates the “supposed prejudices” of bourgeois society about prostitutes, typically defamatory – “that they are lazy and work-shy, deceitful, manipulative, mendacious, that they sell themselves, that they are dissolute and undisciplined” (408) –, reaffirms them with ill-concealed pride and makes them, by means of a “reversal of the judgement and a strong intensification” (ibid.), the starting point for outlining her own utopia. That is not the utopia of the prostitute (a bourgeois concept), but of the whore (its truth content). An “immanent utopia” (ibid.), since

the whore is not beyond the commodity form, to which on the contrary she is essentially bound and which determines the internal logic of her activity. But within the context of the domination of the commodity form, the only one in which her existence is possible, the whore represents its extreme - "the ultimate commodity" (451) - as well as an anticipation of its overcoming.

In the framework of this "reversal of the judgment" there is also place for a critical reappraisal even of the Viennese philosopher Otto Weininger, one of the most brilliant misogynous and antisemitic authors in the history of bourgeois culture. Due to the fact that his work *Sex and Character* expresses a (albeit metaphysically misconceived) "deep insight into the bourgeois construction of gender characters", he is compared with undeniable and provocative audacity to a figure such as "Simone de Beauvoir" (155).

A materialist theorist, Becker is convinced that "whoredom can only be understood as an economic behaviour" (409). The ambiguous and problematic nature of this kind of trade lies in the fact that it is unclear what its actual object is supposed to be. What exactly does the whore sell? As a deceiver and offender of men and of the whole community, she hasn't really got anything to sell. As a victim of bourgeois and patriarchal society, the whore sells all of herself. The truth is not to be found by rejecting one or other of these two opposite and yet prevailing views of the prostitute, but at the very heart of their contradiction. The essence of the whore lies precisely in her being the seller, the commodity, and the advertising at once. In the person of the whore, "advertising, commodity and seller are inseparable. Everything about the whore is advertising, is herself, is commodity. The whore advertises herself for herself; the advertisement is the commodity and the commodity is the advertisement and both are herself" (425). Holy trinity.

The ultimate answer given by the *Dialektik der Hure* is that what the whore truly sells is nothing less than - "redemption" (*Erlösung*, 434). Her activity as a whore - not simply as a sex worker - has a secret and direct link with salvation, with "Humanity's happiness" (after a short drama by Max Brod, in which the whore is once again juxtaposed with the figure of the Jew in the character Hedwig Gabor, 434-450). Becker theologian and economist of the whoredom shows that "the commodity of the whore is in fact linked to an experience of the divine: a divine on which one may sin, which gives permission to sin and thus to self-knowledge; a divine that demands no obedience and imposes no punishment. What the whore demands in return is merely an appropriate financial sacrifice" (441).

The work concludes with a tasty review of biographical information on 25 mostly forgotten prostitutes, scholars of prostitution and other people, “to be understood as both a tribute and a cabinet of curiosities” (547).

REFERENCES

- BENJAMIN, Walter (1999): *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- GRAEBER, David (2013): “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs. A Work Rant”. *STRIKE!* 3 [<https://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs>].
- MARX, Karl (1967): *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- POHRT, Wolfgang (1976): *Theorie des Gebrauchswert. Über die Vergänglichkeit der historischen Bedingungen, unter denen allein das Kapital Gebrauchswert setzt*. Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat.

Manuel Disegni

manuel.disegni@unito.it