

Transformations of Labour through the Lens of Sex Work

Navigating Digitalization, Precarity
and Resistance

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Introduction

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Introduction

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Why rethink labour through the lens of sex work?

In the context of late capitalism, labour is undergoing profound and far-reaching transformations. At the heart of these changes lie the digitalization, platformization, and precarization of labour, which have redistributed opportunities and risks in ways that increasingly expose workers to insecurity. This would not have been possible without neoliberal governance, which has introduced and continues to reinforce the progressive erosion of labour protections, dismantling the systemic securities once associated with employment (Standing 2011). Moreover, neoliberal rule orchestrates the marketization of all spheres of life, projecting the logic of economic competition onto domains traditionally governed by solidarity and public provision – such as housing, healthcare, education, and access to culture – thereby transforming essential social goods into objects of contested allocation (Wacquant 2009b). In this competitive and often contradictory environment, workers must constantly adapt, not only in how they generate income and perform labour but also in how they manage personal aspirations, navigate economic precarity, and construct their identities. Collective struggles for labour rights must also adapt, as they now face significant obstacles due to the growing individualization and atomization of workers, giving rise to new activist practices and alternative organizational strategies.

Digital infrastructures play a central role in shaping these emerging labour regimes, particularly platforms, which have accelerated the establishment of the gig economy as a form of labour organization. This model is characterized by short-term contracts, freelance work, and on-demand jobs (Srnicek 2017). Scholars such as Graham, Hjorth, and Lehdonvirta (2017) and Paasonen (2018) have shown how platform-based work is governed by mechanisms of algorithmic visibility, customer engagement metrics, and the imperative of self-branding. While digitalization and platformization may offer increased autonomy and flexible income generation for some, they also introduce new forms of surveillance, commodification, and exploitation. Crucially, platform operators systematically avoid the legal and ethical obligations traditionally associated with the role of an employer by shifting risks

2 *Transformations of Labour through the Lens of Sex Work*

and managerial responsibilities onto workers (Srnicek 2017). This not only generates substantial profits for capital owners but also deepens power and accountability asymmetries within the sphere of labour and in society more broadly.

One of the economic sectors most profoundly reshaped by the intersecting processes of digitalization, platformization, and precarization is sex work. Economic and technological developments have fundamentally altered how this work is performed, organized, and managed, while simultaneously transforming how services are marketed and accessed. Numerous studies show that these changes are not unambiguous, as digitalization has opened up new possibilities for self-representation, audience-building, and resistance to stigma and marginalization for sex workers; however, it has simultaneously enabled new forms of control, harassment, techno-stress, and intensified affective labour (Blunt and Stardust 2021; Cunningham and Kendall 2011; Easterbrook-Smith 2022a; Pajnik and Kuhar 2024). They also show that changes are unfolding rapidly, with the COVID-19 pandemic serving as a powerful catalyst that significantly reshaped the landscape of sex work. Although the technological infrastructure, such as subscription-based platforms, camming sites, and social media, was already in place, the pandemic accelerated the shift into digital spaces. Mobility restrictions and health-related anxieties disrupted in-person encounters and rendered physical sex work both unsafe and, in many cases, impossible. In response, many sex workers turned to digital platforms not only as a means of economic survival but also as a strategy for maintaining autonomy and control over their working conditions. This shift has further entrenched the role of platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017) in sex work, deepening dependencies on proprietary infrastructures that often extract significant fees, impose opaque algorithmic hierarchies, and shape the visibility and profitability of workers (Jones 2020).

As in other sectors of the economy, narratives surrounding platform-based sex work are often accompanied by promises of flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurial empowerment. Beneath these ideals, however, lie intensified and novel forms of exploitation. These are not always anchored in traditional hierarchies or institutional control but are embedded within the architectures of platforms themselves. In the context of digital sex work – such as camming, content creation, or sexting – platforms mediate exchanges of intimacy while simultaneously extracting value from the affective labour, attentiveness, responsiveness, and interactional effort performed by workers (Markelj and Hrženjak, 2025). What is commodified is not merely content but the carefully cultivated sense of relationality, rendered economically productive through processes of emotional and temporal investment (Bernstein 2007; Boris and Parreñas 2010; Paasonen 2018). This extractive logic operates by capturing and monetizing the very conditions of visibility, connection, and affective engagement that constitute the labour of platform-based sex work, while sidestepping obligations tied to standard employment protections. What has remained constant, despite the many transformations of

sex work in recent years, is the fact that workers continue to operate under conditions of legal ambiguity and stigmatization.

Sex work thus functions as a critical site for interrogating the contours of the wage-labour paradigm, and the contradictions of entrepreneurial subjectivity under platform capitalism – a process that is accompanied by the increasing political mobilization of sex workers. Rather than remaining on the margins, they are asserting their presence in broader struggles for economic and social justice – demanding not only legal recognition and labour rights but also challenging the carceral logics, moral regulations, and racialized governance that underpin sex work criminalization. Through grassroots organizing, mutual aid initiatives, and online advocacy, sex workers are forging alliances across movements, linking their struggles with those of queer and trans communities, migrant justice networks, and racial justice campaigns (Glick 2000; Janssen 2021; Mai et al. 2021). These solidarities are neither incidental nor symbolic; they reflect a shared experience of precarization and exclusion under intersecting regimes of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity. In this sense, sex worker activism actively participates in reimagining the terms of political belonging, labour value, and collective resistance in the digital age. As such, sex work offers a sharp example of digital, platform, and gig labour operating under harsh neoliberal conditions, while simultaneously standing at the forefront of resistance to capitalist exploitation and dominant work-related norms. Viewed through this lens, it becomes a powerful entry point for examining how workers navigate contemporary transformations of labour – a shared concern that has brought the authors of this volume together.¹

This volume brings nine chapters, each offering a distinct empirical study that engages with the central question: how is labour transforming under late capitalism, and what insights can the study of sex work offer into these transformations? The book specifically examines how processes such as digitalization, platformization, and the precarization of labour – alongside evolving forms of activism – are reshaping the economic relations, labour practices, and modes of activism. Sex work serves as an illustrative case study for exploring these transformations, with careful attention to its positioning as stigmatized, feminized, racialized, and criminalized labour.

The authors pursue this inquiry through two primary objectives. First, to situate sex work more firmly within broader theoretical debates on labour in late capitalism. Despite its analytical richness, sex work remains marginal to mainstream discourses on labour transformations. Yet it offers a crucial vantage point from which to interrogate shifting boundaries between formal and informal economies, online and offline labour, and precariousness and autonomy. Approaching labour through the lens of sex work opens up alternative conceptual and political spaces – ones that move beyond the liberal question of how sex workers can become better workers, more protected, professionalized, or integrated into normative labour markets. Instead, it invites us to ask: how can sex workers – as with all workers – reclaim time,

4 *Transformations of Labour through the Lens of Sex Work*

autonomy, and collective imagination in resistance to the compulsion to labour? This perspective aligns with the ethos of sex worker-led movements that foreground autonomy, informal economies, mutual aid, and experimental modes of living and organizing. In particular, the informal collectivism and shared infrastructures among sex workers often subvert the logic of market rationality, pointing towards more solidaristic, post-work imaginaries (Weeks 2011). Here, sex work is not simply a site of marginalization but a generative field of political and economic experimentation – one that unsettles dominant assumptions about value, productivity, and labour itself.

Second, this volume seeks to enrich academic debates with novel, empirically grounded insights drawn from diverse national contexts of the Global North. Although the Global South is equally entangled in the transformative processes of late capitalism, it is important to recognize that these processes unfold along distinct historical trajectories and within different political and economic constellations, which merit separate and contextually specific analytical treatment. The book features case studies from Canada, Greece, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, while also engaging broader transnational online frameworks. In addition to North America and Western Europe, particular emphasis is placed on East-Central and South Eastern Europe – regions that remain underrepresented in the existing literature. Despite this scholarly gap, these contexts provide critical insights into contemporary labour transformations, shaped by political and economic transitions, histories of shifting borders, ethnically heterogeneous populations, labour migration, and the complex entanglements of anti-trafficking discourses with sex work regulation (Dolinsek and Saryusz-Wolska 2023; Hrženjak et al. 2005; Šori and Pajnik 2019). By foregrounding these often-overlooked geographies, the volume contributes to a more differentiated understanding of how governance regimes and digitalization reconfigure sex work and labour more broadly.

The book adopts an interdisciplinary approach that spans sociology, law, media, gender, and labour studies. Rather than offering a unified research agenda, it presents a constellation of independent but thematically linked research projects. These draw on a diverse array of theoretical frameworks, including various strands of feminism and Marxism, and theories of digitality, platform capitalism, and critical post-feminism. Methodologically, the volume is equally pluralistic, incorporating surveys, interviews, focus groups, critical oral histories, legal and textual analyses, ethnographic observation, and autophotography. Through its interdisciplinary and multi-sited approach, this volume seeks to deepen the understanding of contemporary transformations of labour, both within the sex industry and across the wider terrain of late capitalist economies. The following pages outline the book's core themes, theoretical frameworks, and chapter structure.

The digital reconfiguration of sex work

The first set of contributions explores how digitalization and platformization are reshaping sex work, processes that unfold within an economic and

technological landscape deeply influenced by neoliberalism. Rooted in a premise that neoliberal ideals – such as deregulation, flexibilization, individualism, and entrepreneurialism – have profoundly shaped the conditions of labour in late capitalism, this volume offers a critical lens on these ongoing transformations. These conditions have enabled the expansion of sexual industries, particularly through their integration into platform economies, and partial inclusion within mainstream markets (Berg and Penley 2016; Brents 2016; Sanders, Brents and Wakefield 2020). Deregulation and minimal state oversight have contributed to the dominance of a few powerful technology corporations across many sectors, including parts of the sex industry. Even where sex work does not occur directly online, digital technologies have become essential tools – for client communication, advertising, organizational tasks, information-seeking, and professional networking (Sanders, Brents and Wakefield 2020). As digital technologies increasingly underpin the execution, organization, and monetization of labour, they have become defining features of our contemporary era: digital capitalism (Srnicek 2017).

One of the core drivers of digital capitalism is digital platforms. No longer neutral tools, they function as proprietary infrastructures that govern markets, regulate labour, and shape user behaviour (Srnicek 2017). These developments mark the latest stage of digital capitalism – platform capitalism – in which labour is mediated not by human managers but by algorithms and data-driven systems (2017). Algorithmic management – relying on granular metadata, automation, and machine learning – reconfigures how work is supervised, evaluated, and rewarded (Ponce Del Castillo and Naranjo 2022, 2). Platform capitalism supports on-demand, contract-free work with minimal rights or protections, rendering the platform worker a paradigmatic figure of the contemporary precariat (Blunt and Stardust 2021).

Chapters 1–4 examine the transformations of labour in late capitalism through case studies of digital sex work, with a specific focus on webcamming, content creation, and porn platforms. They show that in digital capitalism, sex work operates within deregulated, corporate-controlled digital economies that offload risks onto workers while promoting neoliberal ideals of autonomy and self-management, often masking deep-seated precarity and exploitation. At the same time, they demonstrate how legal ambiguity and enduring stigma continue to shape both the realities of sex work and the ways in which it is perceived. The authors thus reveal how value, vulnerability, and resistance are fundamentally shaped by the material and ideological structures of digital capitalism.

In her UK-based study of webcamming, Rachel Stuart conceptualizes sex work as embedded within a corporate-owned commercial environment. Drawing on the notion of smooth capital (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), she refers to a refined form of capitalism that operates in unregulated, deterritorialized spaces – both physical and digital – where transnational corporations evade the constraints of national and international legal frameworks. This environment enables the creation of new markets, services, and subjectivities

6 *Transformations of Labour through the Lens of Sex Work*

outside the purview of state regulation (1988). Through this lens, Stuart illustrates how the webcamming industry exemplifies such dynamics, having successfully commodified dimensions of human sexuality typically excluded from mainstream economic circuits, including taboo and criminalized sexual practices. She also shows that the profitability of this industry is largely sustained by shifting the risks and costs of production onto the workers themselves. Stuart concludes that webcamming replicates the precarity and insecurity inherent in other forms of sex work, while imposing an additional burden through a corporate structure that appropriates much of the income generated by performers.

This structural critique of platform labour leads to a second concern: the ideological reframing of platform labour through a neoliberal discourse that promotes autonomy, self-realization, and entrepreneurialism. Contributing to the still scarce body of research on auxiliary industries – those secondary markets and services that scaffold and monetize digital sex work – Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith examines self-help literature aimed at OnlyFans creators. Previous scholarship has critiqued self-help literature designed to guide individuals through professional environments, particularly in how such texts facilitate the “problematization of the self” – encouraging individuals to continuously self-assess and self-improve in alignment with the norms of capitalism (du Plessis 2021, 33; Riley et al. 2019, 4). The self-help books examined by Easterbrook-Smith align with broader trends in this genre, emphasizing themes such as authenticity, mindset, and self-management, which are underpinned by individualistic neoliberal and post-feminist ideologies. Importantly, many of the authors exhibit a limited understanding of crucial challenges faced by sex workers, most notably, the precarious consequences of social media deplatforming. Easterbrook-Smith thus argues that treating sex work analogously to other forms of labour – without acknowledging its specific structural and social dimensions – yields few tangible benefits for those engaged in this form of labour.

One of the key factors behind the success of platforms is their strategic positioning as intermediaries rather than employers. Rebeca Rose Nocella examines this issue through the lens of pornographic platforms. Drawing on recent developments in labour law responses to gig economy work, as well as Marxist feminist approaches to sex work (Cruz 2018; Weeks 2011; Sloan and Wahab 2000; Zatz 1997), her chapter offers a critical examination of the application of agency work regulations within the pornography industry. Her argument is grounded in a doctrinal analysis of UK agency work law, through which she contests the prevailing assumption that pornography content creators (PCCs) could be appropriately categorized alongside agency workers – a classification that would necessitate the imposition of employer-like duties upon clients rather than platforms. Although PCCs are commonly classified as self-employed, Nocella’s research highlights the extensive control and influence exercised by online platforms over the organization, conditions, and outputs of their labour. On the basis of these findings,

she makes a compelling case for recognizing platforms as entities that, through their organizational power and economic control, effectively function as employers – and should thus bear corresponding legal responsibilities.

The rapid adoption of information and communication technologies by the sex industry has significantly broadened the concept of sex work, but not necessarily public perceptions about it. Today, sex work encompasses not only in-person activities but increasingly includes remote forms of work, such as phone sex, live webcam performances, and the exchange of pornographic images and videos for payment on various online platforms (Jones 2020). Isabelle Johansson and Michael A. Hansen analyse public perceptions of what constitutes sexual services in exchange for payment or sex work, drawing on data from a public opinion study conducted in the United States. The results show that the public is significantly less likely to recognize digitally mediated activities as forms of sexual services in exchange for payment compared to in-person activities. The authors discuss this lower recognition of digital sex work in the context of various forms of stigmatization – embedded in policy frameworks, media discourse, and community norms – which continue to reproduce widespread misconceptions about the sex industry. They conclude that, although the sector has undergone profound transformations in recent years, persistent stereotyping and stigmatization remain key obstacles to broader recognition and understanding of these changes.

Quality of work in the gig economy

The volume then turns to analyses of sex work in the context of labour market precarization in the gig economies. From the perspective of labour conditions, sex workers can be seen as archetypal neoliberal subjects – figures who embody the ideals of self-reliance, flexibility, and continuous self-optimization (Kong 2017; Rivers-Moore 2014). This framing reflects broader neoliberal discourses that valorize individual agency while simultaneously obscuring structural inequalities that affect workers' realities (Gill 2014; McRobbie 2015). Sex workers are exposed to intersecting structurally conditioned risks that are rarely encountered with the same intensity in other professions. These include repressive policing, stigmatization, racism, gender-based violence, and discrimination across multiple domains of social and economic life (Bowen 2021; Levitt 2021; Platt et al. 2018; Ross et al. 2011; Šori and Markelj 2022).

Criminalization policies, persisting in both offline and online contexts, further contribute to marginalization (Berg and Penley 2016; Jones 2020; Levitt 2021). At the time of writing, for example, the Swedish government is considering a ban on remote sex work. This starkly illustrates that rights and freedoms are threatened not only by the algorithmic authoritarianism of digital elites but also by repressive policies cloaked in liberal moralism. In both cases, the method is the same: destabilize the financial foundations of a marginalized population to render them socially invisible. Considering the

environment in which sex workers operate, it is therefore essential to include systemic analyses and structural conditions in the study of sex work (Easterbrook-Smith 2022b; Sanders, Brents and Wakefield 2020; Vuolajärvi 2019) – a guiding principle for the authors of this volume.

In the gig economy – as several scholars have noted – sex work no longer stands apart as a distinctly informal or marginalized economic activity; rather, it increasingly functions as a supplementary income stream that subsidizes low-paid or irregular employment within the formal economy (Berg 2021; Bowen 2021; Hardy and Sanders 2014; Levitt 2021). These authors emphasize the profound interdependence of formal and informal economies under late capitalism, highlighting the increasingly blurred boundaries between survival strategies and entrepreneurial pursuits. In response to fragmented and unstable job markets, marked by casualization, underemployment, and gig-based remuneration, many workers adopt similar tactics of income patching to sustain themselves. What was once specific to sex work – *hustling* as a survival strategy – has become increasingly emblematic of labour practices across a wide range of precarious sectors.

A growing body of research (Agustín 2007; Berg 2021; Brennan 2004) highlights how many women enter sex work not necessarily as a vocational aspiration but as a response to limited and exploitative options within mainstream labour markets, that is, the feminized service economy. Compared to physically demanding cleaning jobs, emotionally taxing elder care, or long, unstable shifts in retail, sex work is often perceived as less exploitative, more autonomous, more financially rewarding, and also regarded as less degrading (Hamilton et al. 2023; Rivers-Moore 2016; Sanders, Brents and Wakefield 2020). This points to a dynamic relationship between autonomy and precarity in the gig economy. Many sex workers pursue what Wong and Au-Yeung (2019) term *precarious autonomy* – engaging in sex work as a means of asserting control over their time, bodies, and income, often valuing the flexibility and independence it affords despite the risks of legal insecurity, social stigma, and economic instability. Over time, however, or in response to changing conditions, some may transition into more regulated or formalized – yet still precarious – sectors that offer relative security but limit their freedom, resulting in what the authors describe as *autonomous precarity* (2019). These pathways foregrounding sex work as a form of labour shaped by constrained choices within an uneven political economy – choices that, though limited, nonetheless reflect agency and strategic engagement with precarious labour markets.

When examining motivations for entering sex work and its perceived benefits, it also becomes evident that, for some, the appeal lies precisely in operating outside traditional regulatory frameworks and workplace hierarchies (Garofalo and Maciotti 2016). Many sex workers actively resist classification within conventional labour categories (Berg 2021), embracing alternative forms of economic and personal autonomy. In some cases, their practices embody a lived expression of anti-work politics (Weeks 2011). Sex work,

therefore, is not merely another form of labour – it also constitutes a site of resistance that disrupts dominant power relations and challenges normative expectations surrounding labour in late capitalist societies. This resistance unfolds alongside the sex industry's rapid adoption of digitalization, platformization, and neoliberal logics. The coexistence of systemic integration and anti-systemic resistance has thus become a defining feature of how sex workers navigate contemporary precarious labour markets.

Two chapters in this volume examine sex work through the lens of precarization of the labour markets and structural inequalities, focusing on how policies, stigma, gender, and motherhood intersect with working conditions and aspirations. They show that in the gig economies, sex work is often a strategic response to failed labour markets. Thus, the lens on sex work not only exposes the exclusions and exploitations embedded in labour markets but also prompts us to rethink the contours of what constitutes decent work in the gig economies of late capitalism.

In a study conducted in Slovenia, Iztok Šori and Leja Markelj explore precarity in sex work using Vosko's (2011) framework for operationalization of precarious employment. They focus on three key dimensions: employment status, form of employment, and social context, aiming to determine which of these most significantly shapes sex workers' perceptions of quality of work. Their analysis reveals that precarity is not a unidimensional or exclusively negative condition; rather, it is an ambivalent experience that can simultaneously offer greater autonomy and heightened vulnerability. Notably, the ambivalence of precarity becomes evident when the absence of labour protections is contrasted with workers' own positive evaluations of their working conditions. The results of the study show that regulated and independent platform-based work can mitigate risks and improve working conditions, while stigma remains a significant factor diminishing the quality of work. The study concludes that the quality of work is shaped not only by labour policies and employment conditions but also by the broader social valuation of the profession. This insight points to the need for a holistic understanding of precarity – one that incorporates both its material and symbolic dimensions and recognizes the impact of stigma alongside economic insecurity.

Michelle Lesley Annett uses the comparison between conditions in the formal labour market and sex work as a starting point of her study carried out in Canada. She examines the lived experiences of sex-working mothers, focusing on how they navigate the tensions between waged labour, care work, and personal agency. Using narrative interviews and autophotography, she analyses sex work as a site of resistance to conventional expectations of motherhood and labour. Drawing on Weeks' (2011) critique of the work society and her vision of a post-work future, Annett shows how participants reflect anti-work sentiments in their occupational choices. Many view sex work as a way to reject rigid models of working motherhood while accessing more favourable working conditions. While they remain embedded

in systems that devalue sex work, their decisions reflect deliberate strategies to negotiate the contradictions of late capitalism. Annett argues that sex work functions not only as a survival strategy but also as a form of political and personal agency. Her chapter shows how sex-working mothers challenge dominant ideologies of productivity, gender, and care, reclaiming autonomy and dignity within – and against – the structures of neoliberal capitalism.

The politics of resistance and infrastructures of solidarities

The third section of this volume focuses on how sex workers in late capitalism mobilize politically and build alliances in response to the changing conditions in labour markets and the economy. Despite facing persistent stigmatization and individualization, sex workers continue to organize collectively, forming communities, grassroots movements, NGOs, unions, and online networks, and engaging in spontaneous acts of resistance against exploitation and control. Activist strategies within the sex worker movement are diverse, ranging from liberal approaches that seek legitimacy through integration into labour frameworks to materialist frameworks that foreground protection from labour exploitation (Cruz 2013). Decriminalization has long stood at the core of activist demands; however, much like other strands of contemporary feminist activism, sex worker mobilization is increasingly trans-thematic – intersecting with struggles for social and digital justice, housing rights, public healthcare, migrant support, anti-racism, anti-transphobia, and resistance to exploitative capitalism (Blunt and Stardust 2021; Markelj and Pajnik 2025; Smith and Mac 2022). This expanding political agenda reflects a broader transformation in social movements – from hierarchical and centralized organizations to decentralized, networked, and intersectional forms of mobilization (Markelj and Pajnik 2025). Sex worker activism thus mirrors and contributes to wider shifts in progressive political organizing.

Sex workers are often excluded from formal labour protections and union structures, which is why they face significant barriers in voicing labour concerns, seeking justice, or accessing collective bargaining mechanisms (Dziuban 2016, 11). Yet, there are important precedents that illustrate the success of sex worker-led advocacy. A frequently cited example is the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective and its role in securing the Prostitution Reform Act (New Zealand 2003) – a landmark achievement in decriminalization, attained through coalition-building with political, health, and civil society allies (Aroney 2021). On the other hand, some strands of activism have turned to transformative justice frameworks, which seek responses to violence, criminalization, and marginalization beyond the carceral state, emphasizing community-based approaches to safety and accountability (Smith and Mac 2022).

Activism also unfolds in more informal settings, where acts of resistance are often spontaneous and unsystematic, as sex workers both adapt to and reject the rules imposed by digital capitalism (Berg 2021). Case studies from

the pornography industry, for example, illustrate how performers resist capitalist exploitation by forming peer trade networks, engaging in self-production, and asserting autonomy from platform and managerial control (Berg 2021, 112–125). Another example comes from adult content creators on OnlyFans, who use computer-mediated communication to share strategies, offer mutual support, and challenge platform constraints (Pajnik and Kuhar 2024; Uttarapong et al. 2022). However, activism in the digital age presents its own challenges. While digital tools offer essential infrastructure for mobilization and visibility, they also serve as instruments of marginalization. Activists – particularly those advocating for sex worker rights – often contend with practices like shadow banning, where content is suppressed due to its association with sex work activism (Blunt and Stardust 2021). As a result, resistance is frequently compelled to operate through the very infrastructures that facilitate exploitation and control (2021; Weeks 2011). This paradox highlights the ongoing tension between digital visibility and algorithmic repression that workers have to navigate.

In this volume, three chapters are dedicated to examining the political struggles of sex workers. The authors demonstrate how transformations in political mobilization are deeply intertwined with transformations in political and economic systems. As the meaning and conditions of labour continue to evolve, so too do the strategies, alliances, and imaginaries of sex worker activism.

Sex work activism has undergone significant transformations in post-socialist countries, such as Poland. Activism in such settings often navigates a complex landscape marked by moral conservatism, legal ambiguity, and socio-economic precarity – factors that both constrain and redefine the possibilities for collective action. Against this backdrop, Anna Ratecka examines how the transition from state socialism to neoliberalism has influenced sex work and the framing of sex workers. Drawing on Judith Butler’s argument that becoming a subject requires conformity to dominant gender and sexual norms that determine who is “legible” and who is not (Butler 2009, iii–iv), Ratecka introduces the concept of regimes of recognition – sets of beliefs and practices that construct sex workers as differently positioned rights subjects and political actors. Her discussion is built on three case studies: a harm reduction NGO, an anti-trafficking foundation, and an informal sex workers’ rights collective, focusing on how each frames sex workers – as marginalized women, trafficking victims, individuals doing “dirty work,” or as rights-claiming political subjects. Rather than presenting these as competing regimes of recognition, she shows how they are shaped by historical conditions, including post-socialist precarity, changing forms of labour, and transformations within civil society.

A striking example of the aggressive imposition of a neoliberal labour regime is found in Greece, where, under the pretext of austerity and amid intense international pressure following the 2008 financial crisis, the government was compelled to implement a series of measures detrimental to

12 *Transformations of Labour through the Lens of Sex Work*

workers. These included labour market deregulation, wage suppression, the dismantling of social protections, and the weakening of trade union power – transformations that profoundly reshaped labour–capital relations and exacerbated social inequalities. In this context, Athena Michalakea critically examines the contemporary sex workers’ movement in Greece, highlighting its demands, internal tensions, and relations with the broader labour movement. Building on the frameworks of penal-welfarism (Garland 2018; Wacquant 2009a, 2009b) and exceptionalism (Berg 2014), she highlights how mechanisms of social control work not only through repression but also in more productive ways. By embedding sex work within a political economy analysis, Michalakea challenges sex work exceptionalism, revealing the structural violence of neoliberal labour regimes and the limitations of legal reform. She argues that while legal recognition of sex work is important, it must be accompanied by a deeper critique of capitalist labour relations. A radical, anti-work approach to sex work governance should thus move beyond legal inclusion to confront the exploitative logics of capitalism itself.

Among the defining features of late capitalist economies are the financialization of essential life-sustaining domains, such as housing, and the systematic dispossession of rights, exemplified by restrictive European migration policies. Highlighting resistance to these trends, María Gómez Garrido and Paloma Martín Martín examine emergent forms of social unionism in Spain, conceptualized as alliances between trade unions and social movements, particularly those involving atypical or precarious workers (Carmona 2010; Waterman 1999). Their study highlights the increasing centrality of sex workers in these alliances. Through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and focus groups with sex workers’ associations, the authors demonstrate how sex workers engage in mutual aid practices to secure access to housing, and how their associations have forged strategic alliances with the housing rights movement and migrant justice activism. Utilizing both digital and physical spaces for collective support, sex workers not only navigate but also actively resist regimes of exclusion and dispossession. Contrary to dominant narratives that position sex workers at the periphery, Gómez Garrido and Martín Martín contend that they occupy a central role in contesting the logics of neoliberal capitalism.

Beyond rights and recognition

The authors of this volume demonstrate that sex work is not an outlier, but a powerful analytical lens for understanding the transformations of labour under late capitalism. Rather than framing sex work merely as a question of inclusion or exception, they centre it as a site of empirical inquiry, theoretical innovation, and political critique.

By situating sex work within the frameworks of neoliberal governance and digital and platform capitalism, the contributors demonstrate how the commodification of sexuality exemplifies various contradictions of contemporary

labour: autonomy entangled with precarity, visibility with surveillance, and agency with algorithmic control. While standardized and regulated forms of employment persist, sex work highlights the contours of an expanding labour regime in which affective, bodily, and digitally mediated practices converge, generating value under conditions of flexibilization, informality, and algorithmic governance. This regime capitalizes simultaneously on the exclusion of workers from formal labour protections and their desires for freedom, autonomy, and purposeful labour.

The perspective of sex work further reveals the agency and mobility of contemporary labouring subjectivities, and how workers' contestation often emerges through strategic entanglement with the very structures that neoliberalism has produced. On the one hand, sex workers adopt and perform the imperatives of platform capitalism – self-branding, entrepreneurial flexibility, and the monetization of affect and visibility. On the other hand, they organize and resist in ways that challenge the ideological and material foundations of capitalist value production, often aligning with anti-work and social justice movements. Understanding sex work in this dynamic – simultaneously integrated into and resistant to neoliberal labour regimes – offers critical insight into how workers navigate precarity, digitalization, and resistance in late capitalism.

While the contributions affirm that sex work is work and should be recognized and protected as such, they also argue that legal and institutional recognition, though necessary, is insufficient to disrupt the entrenched regimes of exclusion that shape labour conditions in this and other sectors of the economy. The volume thus invites readers to critically engage with the structures of the neoliberal political economy and to reconsider the place of sex work within contemporary labour struggles.

Note

- 1 The contributors met in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in June 2023 at the international conference Transformations of Work Through the Lens of Sex Work, which was convened as part of the preparatory process for this book.

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