

Invisible Feminists: An Autonomist Marxist Perspective of Digital Labour and Resistance Within the Online Sex Industry

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Abstract : This paper focuses on the conflicts and utility of Marxist Feminist frames for sex work research, drawing on findings uncovered through in-depth interviews with online sex workers, alongside critical discourse analysis of media and political commentary. It brings the critical perspective of women into digital workerism and gig economy dialogue who, despite their significant presence within online work, have been overlooked. The autonomist Marxist concept of class composition is adopted to unpack the social, technical and political composition of this often-invisible segment of the service sector. Autonomism makes visible the perspective of workers engaged in processes of mobilization and demobilization. This allows researchers to find everyday forms of resistance which occur within and outside trade unions. On the other hand, Marxist feminist arguments about invisibility politics can generate unhelpful allegories about sex work as domestic labour within the reproductive sphere. Nick Srnicek's development of Marx's notion of infrastructure rents helps theorize experiences of unpaid labour within online sex work. Moreover, debates about anti-work politics can cause conflict among sex workers fighting for the labour movement and those rejecting the capitalist work ethic. This illuminates tensions caused by white privilege and differing experiences of sex work. The monopolistic and competitive nature of sex work platforms within platform capitalism, and the vulnerable position of marginalised workers within stigmatized/criminalised markets, complicates anti-work politics further. This paper is situated within the feminist sex wars and the intensely divisive question of whether sex workers are victims of the patriarchy or symbols of feminist resistance. Camgirls are shown to engage in radical tactics of resistance against their technical composition on popular sex work platforms. They also engage in creative acts of resistance through performance art, in an attempt to draw attention to stigma and anti-criminalization politics. This sector offers a fascinating window onto grassroots class-action, alongside education about 'whorephobia.' A case study of resistance against Only Fans, and a small workers co-operative which emerged during the pandemic, showcases how workers engage in socialist and political acts without the aid of unions. Workers are victims of neoliberalism and simultaneous adopters of neoliberal strategies of survival. The complex dynamics within unions are explored, including tensions with grass-roots resistance, financial pressures and intersecting complications of class, gender and race.

Keywords : autonomist marxism, digital labor, feminism, neoliberalism, sex work, platform capitalism

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