

## Review

# What makes sex workers strike: A comparative analysis of France (1975) and the UK (1982)

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This paper aims to identify the reasons why sex workers strike/occupy churches comparing the sex workers strikes/church occupations in France (1975) and the UK (1982). In order to understand why “sex workers” strike, the paper briefly introduces the available literature on why workers strike. Noting the differences between workers’ and sex workers’ strikes, the former usually being unionised and the latter being nonunionised, and with the latter’s emphasis on non-material rather than material interests, the paper also explores theories on new social movements, collective action and contentious politics. With these theoretical discussions in mind, the events leading to the sex workers’ strikes/church occupations in France and the UK are briefly described. After this description, the paper presents a comparative analysis of the reasons underlying the two cases of strike/church occupation. The research question is answered in this paper. The basic argument is that despite the fact that France has a more closed, and the UK has a more open political input structure, the reasons underlying sex workers’ strikes/church occupations are similar and that sex workers’ strikes were part of the general strike wave in Europe. In both cases, the available repertoire of action was exhausted before going on strike. The basic actors in both cases were the police, the law, politicians, organised crime, pimps and sex workers themselves. In both cases, the choice of church occupation as a form of action was inherited from other social movements and was a strategic rather than a symbolic choice. The main difference between the two cases is that the sex workers that struck in the UK was more organised than their French counterparts. While the strikers in France had the Nid as their ally while those in the UK had Black Women for wages for housework and women against rape. The basic argument is that sex workers in these two cases struck due to an amalgamation of material and non-material interests. It calls for the amalgamation of Marxist, feminist, new social movements, social movements and collective action theories to set up an analytical framework to study sex workers’ strikes. In order to refrain from eclecticism while doing so, the paper suggests going to the field. In conclusion, the paper also touches upon the factors that should be taken into account before continuing strikes as a form of action for the state’s recognition of sex work as work, and the extension of social, economic and political rights to sex workers.

**Key words:** Sex workers, France, UK, strike.

## INTRODUCTION

*“Me llaman calle / My name is the street,  
Me llaman puta / They call me whore,  
También princesa / Princess as well”.* (Manu Chao, 2005)

Charles Tilly begins his study, *Social Movements and National Politics* (1979) referring to the Narbonne’s women, who protested the then new *cosse* tax in France in 1682: “The local authorities called it not only a “petit”

movement, but also an *emotion populaire* and a *désordre* ... What should we call it? (Tilly, 1979: 2-3)”.

Unfortunately, the academia in Turkey in the 21<sup>st</sup> century tends to maintain the 17<sup>th</sup> century French local authorities’ approach when it comes to sex work and sex workers’ movements. Just as sex work is stigmatised and marginalised in society and by nation-states, studying sex work is still considered “insignificant” and the movement

itself is considered “petit” in academia. Though studies on sex work and sex workers’ organisations all over the world are increasing, one aspect of sex work remains rather unexamined: sex workers’ strikes.

Although strike as a form of action is not frequently used by sex workers, analysing sex workers’ strikes may have important theoretical, as well as political contributions. The wide range of theories on strikes is largely based on the assumption that strikers are unionised workers (Ashenfelter and Johnson, 1969; Reder and Neumann, 1980; Cramton and Tracy, 1992). However, sex workers that have gone on strike are mostly nonunionised<sup>1</sup>. In fact the deprivation of sex workers from the right to unionise – the non-recognition of their work as work, hence the deprivation from all workers’ rights- may be one of the reasons why sex workers seldom go on strike. Hence, analysing the reasons of sex workers’ strikes may contribute to the formation of a theory on nonunionised worker strikes in general. In addition, by analysing sex workers’ strikes in history, we may come up with policy suggestions for the political organisation of sex workers, hopefully for the recognition of their work “as work” by the state and society<sup>2</sup>. Whether strikes are useful forms of action for this aim remains an important question.

Realising that sex workers from all over the world, from Ecuador (1988) to the UK (1982) (2000), from Bolivia (2007) to France (1975), have at one or many points in time struck to earn their rights, this paper tries to identify the reasons that made sex workers (prostitutes)<sup>3</sup> strike/occupy churches, comparing two cases: France (1975) and the UK (1982).

The selection of the cases from the First World is more practical than methodological and actually points out to another difficulty of studying sex work. Most of the available literature on sex workers’ struggles is on that in the First World. One of the less apparent and modest aims of this paper is to build an analytical framework to examine sex workers’ strikes in order to facilitate an analysis on Third World sex workers’ strikes.

Acknowledging the fact that the cases have to be from the First World, the selection of France (1982) and the UK (1985) has its own reasons. First of all, the strike/church occupation in France is accepted as the first sex workers’ strike in the world (though it is not). As in the second case presented here, it has affected many other sex workers’ strikes in the world. Hence analysing the

French case is critical in answering the research question, what makes sex workers strike? The second case, the UK (1985) was not only selected because it was directly inspired by the French case, but also due to the similarities and differences between the two countries. While France has a protest culture, the UK promotes pluralism and lobbying. The fact that in spite of the differences in the political regimes, more accurately the political input structures of the two countries, sex workers in both cases resorted to the same form of action is worth examining (Kitschelt, 1986: 62-64). Following the logic Mill adopts in the method of difference as cited by Lijphart, comparing France and the UK may facilitate building causal relations between independent and dependent variables since it is a comparison in which a phenomenon occurs in both instances, instances that are in other aspects (aspects other than the political input structures) similar (Lijphart, 1971: 687). In addition, at the moment, sex workers are unionised in the UK. The relationship between strike action and unionisation, or strike action and recognition by the state is another research question. However, this preliminary effort might be useful in understanding further developments in the sex workers’ movement in general.

There is another methodological concern in this study, the well-known many variables, small N problem as put forth by Lijphart (Lijphart, 1971: 686). Since only two cases are analysed in this paper, external validity problem may appear while trying to make further generalisations. From time to time, the language used in this paper may be open to such criticism. I would like the reader to keep in mind this concern while interpreting the arguments.

As indicated above, although sex workers had struck before -as in the case of the strike by the women of the Hotel Street in Hawaii in 1942- the strike/church occupation in 1975 in France is usually noted as the starting point of the global sex workers’ movement (Bell, 1994: 104; Roberts, 1992: 347).

*“On the morning of Monday, June 2, 1975, (100 to 150) prostitutes moved into the church of Saint-Nizier, in the centre of Lyon... They remained inside the church for more than a week, quickly becoming a centre of local, then national, media attention”* (Mathieu, 2001: 107).

Following the resistance of the sex workers in France in 1975, many sex workers organisations were established in the West (Roberts, 1992: 347-351). The sex workers’ strike/church occupation in France was also taken as an example by their English counterparts in 1982:

*“Following [the French] example, on November 1982, we walked into the Holy Cross Church in King’s Cross, with the support of Black Women for Wages for Housework and Women against Rape... The occupation lasted twelve days”* (English Collective of Prostitutes, 1997: 87).

This resistance on the part of the sex workers’ in the UK,

<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the most legitimate sex workers union in the world today is The Scarlet Alliance, in Australia. Sex workers in England are organised under the sex workers’ branch of Britain’s General Union, GMB. French sex workers are organised under STRASS:

<sup>2</sup> Whether the state and society are mutually exclusive or ontologically separate is yet another debate that would extend the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The term “sex worker” had not yet been adopted by the prostitutes of France in 1975. In fact there are still many organisations in the world, which prefer to use the term “prostitute” rather than “sex work” (International Collective of Prostitutes, Prostitutes of New York...). However, in line with sex workers’ contemporary global demand for the recognition of their work and rights, from this point onwards, I will use the term “sex worker” rather than “prostitute”.

in the form of strike, would be here to stay. Sex workers in the UK have continued their struggle since then, and joined the international women's struggle in March 9 2000, underlining demands peculiar to sex workers.

In this paper, various theories are reviewed in order to set up a framework to analyse these two cases. After the introduction, theories on strikes, new social movements, collective action and contentious politics are presented together with the main criticisms directed towards each of them. The literature review on available theories on strikes action and social movements in general continues in the analysis section. Before beginning the analysis, the cases, France (1975) and the UK (1982) are shortly described. This description is followed an analysis on the post-war developments in the two countries that affected sex workers' lives and working conditions, and a comparative analysis of the cases in light of the theoretical framework that is presented. The research question is answered in this section. In conclusion, the paper shortly touches upon the extent to which continuing strikes might constitute a useful form of action for the state's recognition of sex work as work, and the extension of social, economic and political rights to sex workers.

Before beginning the analysis, however, I would like to acknowledge my limitations. First of all, I am an outsider. As a member of a semi-peripheral country, analysing two core countries brings with it its own problems. However, the reasons of the selection of the cases are mentioned above. Hence the reader should keep in mind the unequal availability of studies on sex work in the First and the Third Worlds, as well as my own limitations as an outsider while reading the paper. Secondly, this paper is gender, sexual orientation and gender identity blind; that is, the differences between heterosexual female, heterosexual and gay male, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and intersex sex workers could not be taken into account in this paper since it would extend the scope of the analysis. Yet extensive studies on sex workers definitely have to take into account the differences between sex workers, not only those arising due to the above mentioned identities, but also due to race, ethnicity and others.

## THEORETICAL CONCERNS

### Theories on strikes

There are basically two lines of thought in strike theories: qualitative and quantitative approaches. In this paper, these two lines of thought are briefly introduced. The basic argument is that although neither stream offers an extensive framework to analyse sex workers' strikes due to their emphasis on unionisation as a key factor in explaining strike activity, both might have partial contributions in setting up an alternative framework to investigate sex workers' strikes.

One of the most important contributions to the qualitative literature on strike action is Rosa Luxemburg's

The Mass Strike (1906)<sup>4</sup>. Based on her observations from the history of strike activity in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Luxemburg claims that contrary to the anarchist claim that the mass strike is an "artificially made, propagated" phenomenon, it is in fact "a historical phenomenon, which, at a given moment, results from social conditions with historical inevitability" (Luxemburg, 1906: 117). Luxemburg adopts an historical materialist approach in analysing the causes of general strikes and points out the immediate economic causes of general strikes in Russia, such as working hours, wages, and work conditions (Luxemburg, 1906: 119-140)<sup>5</sup>.

Luxemburg also makes suggestions regarding the relationship between unionisation and strike. The first general strike in 1896 in Russia, Luxemburg writes "was entered upon without a trace of organisation or of strike funds" (Luxemburg, 1906: 122). Later on, the authors calls for the cooperation of organised and unorganised workers in political mass struggles (Luxemburg, 1906: 159).

In addition to Luxemburg, an important qualitative contribution to strike literature was made by Fox. In his 1975 dated article, Fox introduces the arguments of two classics in industrial relations literature in Britain: Webbs' Industrial Democracy (first published in 1897) and Flanders' Fawley Productivity Agreements (1964). In fact the author mainly promotes Webbs' argument against Flanders' criticism of Webbs' with regard to the reasons of strike activity. According to Fox, Flanders misinterprets the classical view of strike that:

*"...Sees the collective refusal of a body of workers to continue working on their existing terms and conditions of employment as a collective equivalent of an individual worker's refusal to accept or continue in a job unless the employer improves on his offer... [He argues] that 'the assumption behind every strike is not that the workers will seek employment elsewhere if the employer fails to meet their demands. It is the reverse: that sooner or later their present employer will be compelled to reinstate them.' ... Flanders seeks to sustain his argument with the observation that 'the event of [the employer] being able to replace the strikers by an alternative labour supply, the strike ceases to be an effective sanction and turns into a futile gesture.' It is not, however, part of the definition of a strike that it be effective. Such considerations as these strengthen the Webbs' rather than the Flanders' perspective"* (Fox, 1975: 157-158).

Another school of thought that attempts to theorise strike activity is neo-classical economics. Neo-classical theories on strikes adhere to quantitative methodology and generally neglect even referring to qualitative studies on

<sup>4</sup> Luxemburg's arguments that will be presented in this paper are cited from the 2008 dated book, *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg*, which is edited by Scott. The book consists of Luxemburg's two famous studies, *Reform or Revolution (1900)* and *The Mass Strike (1906)* (Scott, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of the interaction between the political and the economic struggle, see Luxemburg, 2008: 140- 150.

strike, despite the fact that some of those qualitative studies, which were discussed above, predate neo-classical theories. Despite this gap in the neo-classical approach and although authors such as Cohn and Eaton (1989) and Kramer and Hyclak (2002) have pointed out the limitations of neo-classical theories on strikes, they still constitute the mainstream of the field. The most frequently cited neo-classical strike theoretician, Hicks, argues that strike activity is a result of faulty negotiations between the trade union and the management (Ashenfelter and Johnson, 1969: 35, 36). While Ashenfelter and Johnson point out incomplete information between the three parties involved in negotiations, the management, the union leadership and the union rank and file (Mumford, 1993: 285; Ashenfelter and Johnson, 1969: 35, 36), Booth and Cressy underline asymmetric information (Booth and Cressy, 1990: 270). As Reder and Neumann explain strike activity with associated costs (Reder and Neumann, 1980: 867), Kennan and Wilson argue that strikes are screening devices allowing workers to extract higher pay from more profitable employers (Ingram et al., 1993: 707).

Franzosi identifies a different line of thought in quantitative studies that tries to analyse strike activity: organisational/political models of strikes. According to Franzosi, while economists have mostly been concerned with the question "why strikes occur", sociologists tried to understand "how strikes occur" (Franzosi, 1989: 354). The answer is, according to Franzosi, "it is organisation that makes strikes possible; without organization there is no collective action (Franzosi, 1989: 354).

Last but not the least, there is a tendency in both qualitative and quantitative strike literatures to analyse strike activity in relation to long cycles of capitalist development; that is, Kondratieff cycles. As cited by Franzosi, authors such as Screpanti and Mandel have found out that major upheavals, including strike action tend to increase during upswings, long cycles of prosperity (Franzosi, 1989: 359). Structural changes through technological innovation then alter the organisation of production such that employers displace the strikers of the previous period, thus conflict is reduced (Franzosi, 1989: 359-360).

In short, a significant proportion of the literature on strike activity tends to focus on unionised workers' strikes. Despite the fact that the historicity and strength of the quantitative, mainly neo-classical economist approach is more questionable, it still constitutes the mainstream in strike literature. While available strike theories have little practical value for sex workers' strikes, both qualitative and quantitative streams in strike literature might have partial contributions to setting up a framework to investigate the reasons underlying sex workers' strikes.

### Theories on new social movements

Given the limitations of theories on strikes, theories on

New Social Movements (NSMs) might be useful for providing an analytical framework to analyse sex workers' strikes. The NSM theories were developed in the late 1960s due to the insufficiency of social movement theories that put an emphasis on class-struggle in explaining the rise of movements like "peace movements, student movements, the anti-nuclear energy protests, minority nationalisms, gay rights, women's rights, animal rights, alternative medicine, fundamentalist religious movements, and New Age and ecology movements" (Laraña et al., 1994: 3), particularly to address to movements struggling for non-material interests. The class and economic reductionism of previous Marxist explanations of collective action privileged proletarian revolution that is rooted in the sphere of production and marginalised all other social identities (Buechler, 1995: 442). Buechler suggests that while "old" social movement theories defined class as the basis of collective action, new social movement theories pointed out:

*"Other logics of action based in politics, ideology, and culture as the root of much collective action, and they have looked to other sources of identity such as ethnicity, gender and sexuality as the definers of collective identity"* (Buechler, 1995: 442).

Why such a transformation in the logics of action took place is mainly described referring to the transformations that took place in Western societies after World War II. According to Mouffe, these transformations led to new forms of subordination and inequality, which in turn produced the NSMs (Mouffe uses the term "new democratic struggles") (Mouffe, 2000: 301). As summarised by Slater, these new forms of subordination that led to the rise of the NSMs according to Mouffe is as follows:

- (i) The commodification of social life, whereby the expansion and penetration of capitalist relations of production into an ever-widening sphere of social life has created a situation in which culture, leisure, death and sexuality have all become a field of profit for capital.
- (ii) The increasing bureaucratisation of society, or a further penetration of civil society by the state.
- (iii) A marked tendency towards a more standardized, homogenous way of life, or a so-called "massification" of social life, resulting from the growing power of mass media (Slater, 1991: 34-35).

Subjected to the new forms of subordination, Mouffe argues that a subject might identify him/herself in a variety of positions since:

*"Within every society, each social agent is inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations – not only social relations of production but also the social relations, among others, of sex, race, nationality, and vicinity. All these social relations determine... subject positions..."* (Mouffe, 2000: 296).

In each individual, Mouffe explains, there are “multiple subject positions corresponding both to the different social relations in which the individual is inserted and to the discourses that constitute these relations (Mouffe, 2000: 296)”. Mouffe implies that the NSM activists were constructed as subjects in a democratic tradition brought about by the working class struggle. “Democratic discourse questions all forms of inequality and subordination (Mouffe, 2000: 303)”. Thus, Mouffe states that since the NSMs, or as she calls “new democratic struggles” are resistances to the new forms of subordination brought about by the post war transformation, and since these resistances were carried on by subjects of multiple positions, the NSMs revolve around identities other than class. Yet it is the availability of democratic discourses that revolve around class that opened a gate for subjects of “other” positions to pursue these “new democratic struggles”.

Another discussion in the NSM literature is on the participants of the NSMs. There are basically two lines of thoughts in the NSM theories about the participants of the NSMs. One is that if we neglect certain differences, the main participants of these movements are members of the new middle class, “persons who may come from the public service, educational, and artistic sectors of the economy” (Williams, 2008: 341 and Pichardo, 1997: 416-417). These activist professionals are highly educated and are not dependent on corporate profit making ideology. The second view is that the main participants of the NSMs are not necessarily members of a specific social class but individuals with common social concerns.

The main criticism against most of the NSM theoreticians is that they fail to envisage the continuity between the “old” and the “new” social movements (D’Anieri, Ernst and Kier, 1990). This is partly due to the fact that most NSM theorists refer to the working class movement as an “old” social movement. The working class movement has by no means come to an end with what is called “the post-industrial era”. Although the left wing in the world has gone through a transformation after the collapse of the USSR, neoliberal policies all around the world are raising huge oppositions from working classes, students, peasants and others.

Recognising the limitations of the NSM theories, reviewing the literature on collective action and contentious politics might be useful in understanding the two cases to be elaborated in this paper.

### **Theories on collective action and contentious politics**

As suggested by Mathieu, theories on collective action may be useful in analysing what the necessary conditions for the mobilisation of a group as unorganised and lacking in protest tradition and means for action as sex workers are (Mathieu, 2001: 108). Certain arguments in the collective action literature might be instrumental in understanding the reasons of the sex workers’ strikes/

church occupations in France and the UK. In this paper, these arguments, mainly the collective behaviour, resource mobilisation, cultures of contention and polity model/ political opportunity structure approaches, are briefly introduced together with basic relevant arguments in contentious politics literature.

In the 1950s and 1960s, collective behaviour theorists began to try to answer the question what makes social groups protest. Since then collective behaviour theorists have argued that grievances and generalised beliefs about how to minimise such grievances are important preconditions of collective behaviour (McCarthy and Zald, 1987: 150). However, according to Della, these theoreticians have placed much attention on unexpected dynamics rather than deliberate organisational strategies adopted by actors in answering the question (Della, 2006: 11-12).

Since then, collective behaviour theories have been tested, and consequently, have been criticised. McCarthy and Zald argue that empirical studies show little support for the close link between pre-existing discontent and the outbreak of social movements (McCarthy and Zald, 1987: 150). Collective behaviouralism has also been criticised for not having much to say about the political. Tarrow argues that focusing on grievances as responsible for mobilisation, collective behaviour theorists saw collective behaviour as outside the routines of everyday life, hence overlooked the relationship between collective action and the political sphere (Tarrow, 1998: 14).

Hence another line of thought has evolved partially in response to theories of collective behaviour: rational choice theory. The well-known rational choice theorist, Olson, draws an analogy between economic organisations such as trade unions and the market mechanism and argues that one of the reasons why individuals get organised is to strive for the same things that they get with their individual efforts (Olson, 2002: 128); that is, since social movements deliver collective goods (McCarthy and Zald, 1987: 151). Similar to Webbs, Olson seems to argue that individual and collective gains are not mutually exclusive. However, his theory starts and finishes with the individual (Tarrow, 1998: 15).

Resource mobilisation literature maintains Olson’s argument and takes it one step further. This literature “examines the variety of resources that must be mobilised, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for success, and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements (McCarthy and Zald, 1987: 150)”. Resource mobilisation theorists underline that the availability of resources and organisation determines people’s abilities to act on grievances, to mobilise to struggle for their interests. In this line of thought, Franzosi argues, “without organisation there is no collective action, at least no successful and sustained collective action (Franzosi, 1989: 354)”.

Following the resource mobilisation approach, it may be argued that those who possess the least resources

are those who have the least to lose, hence are the most likely to engage in contention (Tarrow, 1998: 86). Since the early 1990s, however, scholars of the cultures of contention literature have begun to criticise this logic and to put emphasis on framing. According to Tarrow, these scholars have begun “to focus on how movements embed concrete grievances within emotion-laden ‘packages’, or in ‘frames’ capable of convincing participants that their cause is just and important (Tarrow, 1998: 15-18)”. Some researchers have even criticised the rationalist, individualist view of the role of culture in explaining collective action and they have reemphasised the role of emotions in the production and reproduction of social movements (Della, 2006: 13).

A general criticism directed towards both individualistic and group based models of social movements came from Charles Tilly in the late 1970s (Tilly, 1979: 25-26). Like Luxemburg, Tilly has called for the recognition of the historical specificity of the forms of collective action (Tilly, 1979: 12), which ties social movements to the nation-state (Tilly, 1979: 23). Different from Luxemburg, Tilly’s emphasis is on the political rather than the economic<sup>6</sup>. Although Tilly recognises the importance of social groups as “fairly determinate set[s] of people sharing a common interest who mobilise and then demobilise around that interest (Tilly, 1979: 21)”, he underlines that social movements should be analysed as interactions rather than performances, and as political products rather than group behaviours (Tilly, 1979: 23). Tilly’s main emphasis is on the nation-state. He argues that social movements “grew up with national politics as modes of interaction between citizens and authorities”(Tilly, 1979: 24)” but even if the movement is international and the “characteristics in the standard paths of social movements appear from one country or era to another, then, they are more likely to due to differences in political contexts than to differences in the character of the people who join social movements (Tilly, 1979: 22, 23)”.

In fact it was Tilly’s polity model built in 1978 that has been the milestone of the last approach that is presented in this literature review: the political opportunity structure approach (Tarrow, 1998: 18). According to Kitschelt:

*“Political opportunity structures are comprised of specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilisation, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others... Comparison can show that political opportunity structures influence the choice of protest strategies”* (Kitschelt, 1986: 58).

Political opportunity structures may either constitute opportunities for or constraints against contentious

politics. Tarrow defines political opportunities as “consistent...dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics” and political constraints as “factors...that discourage contention (Tarrow, 1998: 19, 20)”. Kitschelt, on the other hand, argues that political opportunity structures may further or restrain the capacity of social movements to engage in protest activity via providing resources to extract in a setting and to employ in process, through the access of the movement to the public sphere and political decision-making as governed by institutional rules (such as the interaction between government and interest groups, electoral laws), and the appearance and disappearance of other social movements (Kitschelt, 1986: 61-62). Similarly, the dimensions of opportunities for collective action as summarised by Tarrow are increasing access to pre-existing avenues of participation (such as elections), shifting alignments and political instability as signals and sources of contention, divided elites, influential allies, and repression and facilitation (Tarrow, 1998: 76- 80).

Details of this approach, which may contribute to understanding why sex workers strike is presented in more detail in the analysis of the cases. However, one last point needs to be mentioned with regard to contentious politics: cycles of contention. Tarrow explains that there are such periods in history that opportunities created by the early challengers reveal the weak points of the authorities, such that new movement organisations are provided incentives to take action. The process of the diffusion of contention results in cycles of contention, which in their extreme and peculiar forms, may give rise to revolution (Tarrow, 1998: 24).

In short, just like theories on strike and the NSMs, theories on collective action and contentious politics have their limitations in explaining the two cases analysed in this paper. However, each of them may contribute to setting up an analytical framework for sex workers’ strikes/church occupations.

### **Cases: France (1975) and the UK (1982)**

Having discussed some theoretical concerns on strike action, the NSM theories, and theories on collective action and contentious politics, this paper, briefly describes the events leading to the sex workers’ strike in France in 1975 and in the UK in 1982.

#### **France (1975): Saint-Nizier**

Nos Enfants ne Veulent Pas Leur Mere en Prison (Our children do not want their mothers in prison) (Sex workers of Saint-Nizier, 1975).

On June 2, 1975, between 100 to 150 sex workers, with the leadership of Ulla, walked into the Church of Saint-Nizier, in the centre of Lyon, and proclaimed that they

<sup>6</sup> At this point we shall recall that Luxemburg also analyses the interaction between the political and the economic struggle (Luxemburg, 2008: 140- 150) yet in the beginning of her analysis, she underlines the economic conditions underlying strike activity.

would not leave the church and they would not work unless their demands were fulfilled. Supported by the *Nid*<sup>7</sup>, they immediately demanded the prison sentences that about ten of them received for the repeated offense of active soliciting; that is, "bearing and behaviour of the sort that provoke debauchery" (Article 34 of the French penal code) be lifted (Mathieu, 2001: 107). They hung a banner on the front wall: Our children don't want their mothers in prison (Roberts, 1992: 344).

They had written a letter for the public, the "whore mothers" of the Saint-Nizier, and this letter makes it very clear why a worker, any worker, a sex worker would go on strike, would occupy a church:

*"We are mothers talking to you. Women trying to bring up their children alone as best they can, and who today are scared of losing them...None of us will go to prison. Or if we do, the police will have to massacre us to drag us there (Roberts, 1992: 344)".*

In fact the events leading to the strike/occupation had already started decades ago. Yet for the sake of simplicity, it is possible to trace the strike back to the beginning of the 1970s:

*"In August 1972, the (sex work) market in Lyon was rocked by a scandal involving several local policemen and politicians. Following a series of anonymous denunciations, the illicit activities of a number of police officers on the vice squad were publicly revealed and the accused speedily charged and jailed. (Some) French civil servants...were accused of receiving "envelopes" from managers of hotels used by (sex workers) in exchange for police "protection", and even, in some cases, of purchasing such establishments with the help of complicit real estate agents; others were revealed to be outright procurers collecting the earnings of [sex workers] working directly for them. The affair also touched a number of local political figures...who were suspected of ties to local organised crime (the "milieu") and ensuring "protection" for the operators of Lyon's brothels (Mathieu, 2001: 109, 110)".*

For the approximately four hundred sex workers working in the city, this meant the closure of the hotels that they had been working in (Mathieu, 2001: 110). To add injury to insult, on May 15, 1974, a twenty-five year old sex worker, Chantal River was found dead in the suburbs of Lyon. It was the fourth crime that had been committed against the sex workers in the region that year (Corbin, 1990: 360). On one hand, sex workers' immediate means of subsistence and lives were at stake. On the other

hand, police repression and violence on sex workers had been intensifying since 1973: "The police... called systematically on the *hôtels de passé* (short-time hotel, short-stop hotel, short-stay hotel, love hotel), stepped up questioning for passive soliciting, and treated the women themselves with increased brutality. The fines levied by the police became exorbitant (Corbin, 1990: 359)". Sex workers in Lyon were being fined as often as four times a day and the only way to avoid imprisonment was by going back to the streets to earn money (Roberts, 1992: 286); the self-fulfilling prophecy was that they would most probably be fined again. Discontent had already been escalating among sex workers of Lyon.

What made 1975 the critical juncture was that the preparation of a new law that would sharpen the battle against procuring was on the agenda. "At the same time, a new tax policy was adopted; (sex work), now regarded as a source of non-commercial income, came under Article 92 of the general code on taxation... (and several sex workers) found out that they were liable for tax arrears covering the four previous years (Corbin, 1990: 360)". All of these developments had their parts in resulting in the sex workers' strike/occupation in 1975 in Lyon.

Sex workers of Lyon did not work and remained in the church for more than one week. Sex workers from Montpellier, Saint-Etienne, Grenoble and Paris met at Saint-Nizier; sex workers in Toulouse, Caen, Nice and Saint-Etienne also struck (Corbin, 1990: 361). But at the dawn of June 10, the police burst into churches and sex workers were evicted by force (Mathieu, 2001: 108). The police resorted to excessive violence towards the strikers, especially in Saint-Nizier (Richards, 1992: 246).

Though this strike is interpreted as failed by Mathieu, it is accepted as the initiator of the sex workers' movement in the world and it inspired the next case, the sex workers' strike in King's Cross in the UK in 1982.

### **The UK (1982): King's Cross**

Mothers need money to end police illegality and racism in King's Cross (Sex workers in King's Cross .1982)

On November 17, 1982, sex workers of the English Collective of Prostitutes walked into the Holy Cross Church in King's Cross in London. Their banner outside the church was: "Mothers need money. End police illegality and racism in King's Cross (English Collective of Prostitutes, 1997: 87)". Demanding sex workers' legal and civil rights, sex workers of King's Cross were supported by Black Women for Wages for Housework and Women against Rape (English Collective of Prostitutes, 1997: 87).

The demands of the sex workers as stated in the press release were as follows:

- (1) An end to illegal arrests of (sex workers).

<sup>7</sup> "The *Nid* is the French proponent today of the philosophy of abolitionism, a Christianity-inspired movement that arose in England in the second half of the 19th century (Mathieu, 2007: 113)". The group documented the lack of a consistent French policy on the social integration of sex workers and police repression on sex workers (Mathieu, 2007: 113).

- (2) An end to police threats, blackmail, harassment and racism.
- (3) Hands off our children – we do not want our kids in care.
- (4) And end to arrests of boyfriends, husbands and sons.
- (5) Arrest rapists and pimps instead.
- (6) Immediate protection, welfare, housing for women who want to get off the game (Roberts, 1992: 348).

The events leading to the strike/church occupation in 1985 had already started decades ago, but at this stage, it may be useful to developments unfolding the strike from the end of the 1970s.

Since the 1950s, sex work remained legal in England but it was surrounded with conditions of illegality. By the end of the 1970s, the Street Offences and Sexual Offences Acts (1956) worked hand in hand to prevent sex workers' from plying their trade, living together, and associating with any other human being except for their clients. "A 72-year-old woman was imprisoned for six months in 1979 because she was frequently visited by a friend who was a (sex worker) (Roberts, 1992: 288, 289)". On the other hand, the law was implemented such that as real pimps, hand in hand with the police, were allowed to get away with their exploitation, sex workers' boyfriends, husbands, friends or any male acquaintances were being sentenced for pimping (Roberts, 1992: 300-301).

Established in 1975 within the International Wages for Housework Campaign, the English Collective of Prostitutes had already begun to struggle against the above mentioned legal framework in the beginning of the 1980s. In 1982, the Collective opened a Women's Centre in King's Cross (Roberts, 1992: 347) and initiated a legal service campaign, the Legal Action for Women (LAW), to provide legal support to sex workers (English Collective of Prostitutes, 1997: 83, 86). As women started winning cases in the court, the police increased its hostility towards sex workers, their acquaintances and families, but most importantly, towards their children (Roberts, 1992: 347-348).

In a survey in 1980, the English Collective of Prostitutes found out that over 70% of sex workers were single mothers (Roberts, 1992: 328). It was motherhood, single motherhood that made it possible to endure harsh working conditions and long working hours. Anita describes the working condition of the early 1980s, and how she felt when she earned money to take care of her child:

*"It was ten pounds a time, straight sex, eight minutes...Everything was always extra. You always had six or seven waiting to come in, the door never stopped, and it was a twelve-hours shift. The insides of my things used to kill... (The work was) horrible, horrible, horrible...the lowest form of prostitution. But then again, I had that money; I stuck it in the bank, and I felt great"*

(Roberts, 1992: 313, 328).

The police and the law on one hand, and their children on the other hand, enough was enough for the sex workers of King's Cross. And as if it was not enough, there was violence, harassment, rape and torture. Chloe and Yasmin shares the horror stories that they and their friends went through in London, and how reporting the events to the police meant going to the court, being fined and/or sentenced rather than finding justice (Roberts, 1992: 302-303).

Nothing was special about the year 1982. In fact, the critical juncture in the UK was 1985, when the kerb-crawling legislation was enacted. However, the Collective explains:

*"We had to do something to protect ourselves and our families. We knew that in 1975, [sex workers] in France went on strike and occupied churches all over the country to protest against police harassment. Following their example... we walked into the church"* (English Collective of Prostitutes, 1997: 87).

The strike/occupation lasted twelve days. Deputies and councils came to listen to the sex workers of King's Cross; some sex workers still working on the streets wore masks and badges in solidarity; the strikers/occupiers received telegrams from Italy, Germany, Canada and the United States (English Collective of Prostitutes, 1997: 88). Though the police was furious, the strikers were able to win a monitor to scrutinise police activities so they themselves left the church (English Collective of Prostitutes, 1997: 89). Their immediate demands were fulfilled: meetings with the police and deputies, the appointment of officials in the local council's housing and social services departments to help women who wanted to get out of prostitution (Roberts, 1992: 349).

In a couple of years, things would get worse again. But today, sex workers in the UK are unionised under a branch in the GMB. They may not be "emancipated", not yet, but sex workers of King's Cross, as well as Saint-Nizier, wrote history.

### **What makes sex workers strike/occupy churches?**

*"The State is the biggest pimp"*. (English Collective of Prostitutes, 1980)

This paper, tries to analyse the reasons underlying historiography. After tracing the reasons underlying the two strikes/church occupations to the post-war era, this paper, examines the two cases comparatively, by benefiting both from the theoretical frameworks presented up now and from arguments put forth other authors such as Polanyi, Engels and Bell. The research question is answered in this paper, This paper, also calls



for the amalgamation of various theoretical approaches in order to understand the sex workers' movement in general, and sex workers' strikes/church occupations in particular.

The reasons of the two strikes/church occupations might, to some extent, be explained in light of the collective behaviour, rational choice, resource mobilisation and cultures of contention theories presented in the section on theoretical concerns.

Della argues that "a social movement develops when a feeling of dissatisfaction spreads, and insufficiently flexible institutions are unable to respond (Della, 2006)". The feeling of dissatisfaction among sex workers, their accumulated grievances; that is, the murders and increased police fines, violence and repression in France and harassment, rape and police violence in the UK, and the state's, the law's inability to respond to such grievances might have triggered the sex workers' strikes/church occupations in these countries.

However, these grievances had been there for a long time. Sex workers had been subjected to violence, harassment and rape for decades. Collective behaviour theories that underline grievances as the primary sources of collective action thus can not explain why sex workers in France and the UK did not resort to strike as a form of action before.

Rational choice theories, on the other hand, may only have limited explanatory power in the second case, the UK. As indicated before, rational choice theories assume the existence of organisation for collective action (Franzosi, 1989: 354). However sex workers in France did not have a formal organisation prior to the strike. Sex workers in the UK, on the other hand, had already established the English Collective of Prostitutes in 1975, inspired by the strike in France. Hence it might be argued that the presence of an organisation may have triggered the strike/church occupation in the UK but then again, what made the sex workers in France, the example in front of the UK, strike? We can not answer this question in light of rational choice theories. Whether it was state repression in France<sup>8</sup> rather than the presence or existence of organisation that made sex workers strike in 1972, rational choice theories may only give limited answers to such questions.

The emphasis on framing and emotions, as suggested by the cultures of contention literature, may provide an important tool in analysing sex workers' identification of themselves primarily as mothers. In this paper, it is argued that in both cases, sex workers' identification of themselves as mothers was one of the most important

factors that made them adopt such a striking form of action as church occupation. Following Anita's quote, it may be argued that although sex workers' grievances had been there for a long time, embedding their concrete grievances within the emotion-laden "package" or "frame" of motherhood may have convinced participants that their cause is just and important.

Then again, motherhood was not the only identity that sex workers in these two cases underlined. The emphasis on motherhood might have been a strategic choice, the adoption of agitation in order to make the public empathise with sex workers and see their action as legitimate.

Resource mobilisation literature also offers possible explanations to the research question, what makes sex workers strike/occupy churches? According to Mathieu, for instance, sex workers in France struck in 1975 because they acquired and mobilised the necessary resources, both internal and external. Mathieu argues that the internal resources mobilised by the sex workers in France were the organisation of sex workers in several hierarchical networks and a minimal sense of solidarity and group identity (Mathieu, 2007: 118-119). The external resource in the French case, Mathieu suggests, was the Nid's alliance (Mathieu, 2007: 113-114).

The author explains that several hierarchically organised networks were internal resources for the sex workers in France because "certain women already exercised a form of delegated authority over the (sex workers) who belonged to the same procuring network that they were immediately recognized as leaders and were able to impose their decisions on their fellows (Mathieu, 2007: 118)". She also claims that the minimal solidarity and sense of group identity existed among sex workers based on common representations and similar experiences of police repression, and the fact that they already had their own meeting spaces was another internal resource that made it possible for striker/occupier sex workers in France to act collectively (Mathieu, 2007: 119).

However, Mathieu argues, these internal resources did not suffice the mobilisation possible. Without the Nid's alliance, without its provision of the means and skills to mobilise and without its accession to the media, sex workers in France on their own would not be able to go on strike/occupy the church, according to Mathieu (Mathieu, 2007: 113, 114, 121).

A similar analysis may be made for the UK. It might be argued that the internal resources that made it possible for the sex workers in the UK to strike/occupy the church were the presence of an organisation, the English Collective of Prostitutes (the internal solidarity, the relationship the collective has already built with the media and others) and the external resource was the alliance of the Black Women for Wages for Housework and Women against Rape. It may also be argued that the presence of an already established organisation was one of the most important differences between the two cases and that it

<sup>8</sup> Tarrow argues that the success in repression may sometimes produce the radicalisation of collective action rather than depressing it (Tarrow, 1998: 84-85). He states that "repression is a more likely fate for movements that demand fundamental changes and threaten elites than for groups that make modest demands... but there are aspects of repressive states that encourage some forms of contention (Tarrow, 1998: 80)".

was one of the reasons why the strike in France ended with forced police eviction while the case in the UK ended peacefully.

However, in this paper, it is argued that the explanations provided following the resource mobilisation theory is still limited. Although it may explain the short-run reasons underlying the strikes, it fails, for instance to capture the critical juncture in France, and longer-run factors that might have had an impact of the sex workers strikes in both cases.

In fact this view is shared by Corbin, who argues for the French case that the analysis of the case in 1975 needs to take into account the decades long history of sex work in France prior to the strike/church occupation. I agree with Corbin, and argue that in order to understand what made sex workers strike in 1975 and 1982, we have to trace the developments in these countries in the aftermath of the World War II. In fact, a detailed analysis of the reasons of sex workers strikes requires the researcher to investigate the nation-state building process and criminalisation of sex work in Western Europe, to underline historical continuities and analyse the impacts of structural changes on the working condition of sex workers. However, within the scope of this paper, I will mainly trace the post-war developments in sex industry in France and the UK.

The post-war conditions in Western Europe in general are explained by Roberts as follows:

*“The post-war economy offered work for women, then; but for the great majority it remained unskilled, low-paid, and often part-time work which did little to raise women’s self-esteem – or their standards of living, for that matter. The availability of jobs, especially in the boom years of the sixties, reduced the numbers of women entering the sex industry to some extent – although [sex work] still remained the only occupation in which women could earn more than a man’s wage and at the same time have some measure of control over their working hours and conditions”* (Roberts, 1992: 282).

It was, very briefly, such conditions that led to the sex workers’ movement to arise in Western Europe in the 1970s, and sex workers in France and the UK to strike/occupy churches respectively in 1975 and 1982. At this point, the post-war developments in both countries and their linkages to the two cases should be presented.

In France in 1946, Marthe Richard had already made the first move in the anti-sex worker cold war. Neo-regulationism was the main sex work policy in France during the interwar period, when *maisons de tolérance* (brothels) were unofficially tolerated by the police (Roberts, 1992: 285). The Richard law of 1946 put an end to this. While under Article 1 of the law, all *maisons de tolérance* were forbidden, Articles 334 and 335 of the penal code criminalised soliciting and procuring (Corbin, 1990: 349). Even though the law itself did not illegalise sex work *per se*, sex workers found themselves in

trouble: “French (sex workers could not) practise their trade without risking legal penalties” but due to the strict adherence to sanitary policy in France, the police still required sex workers to register and carry health cards (Roberts, 1992: 285).

According to Corbin, although the 1946 dated bill is prohibitionist if taken literally (Corbin, 1990: 349), the period between 1946 and 1960 is the golden age of surveillance (Corbin, 1990: 350). He explains that similar to the UK<sup>9</sup>, *hotels de passé* replaced *maisons de tolérance* in the aftermath of the new legislation, and that at first hotels de passé made substantial profits. There was another result, however, that the legislator had not foreseen:

*“The closing of the maisons de tolérance increased the role of the pimp, who now became and indispensable element in the smooth running of the system controlled by the owners of the hotels de passé... Real pimps... would teach the new code of practice of the “milieu” [organised crime] and who would guarantee that the women behaved as they should”* (Corbin, 1990: 351).

The legislator continued the sex work policy reforms in the end of the 1950s and in 1960. In 1958, notion of passive soliciting was introduced and criminalised and in 1960, the parliament authorised the government to ratify the 1949 dated United Nations (UN) convention which “envisaged the abandonment of any discriminatory measure against prostitutes and the abolition of procedures that tended to maintain such prostitutes in their way of life” (Corbin, 1990: 352). In line with the legislative reforms to ratify the convention, medical and social departments replaced medical and social files, special establishment were built for the moral protection of children (Corbin, 1990: 352-353). The law would be even harsher towards procurers from now on.

All of these reforms were on paper, though. “Although the ordinances of 1960 represented a major turning point in the area of legislation, those who exercised power over the prostitutes remained mired in backward-looking theories” (Corbin, 1990: 353). The discrepancy between the discursive and political/regulatory realms (Stewart, 1995: 155) resulted in increased suppression of sex workers; procuring in hotels intensified; the new legislation allowed an increase in police raids (Corbin, 1990: 353-354). Not only was a new form of coalition between the police and organised crime formed, but also a new form of pimping emerged:

*“A form of procuring that no longer profits directly from the (sex work) activity itself but which tends to control the places and means indispensable to its exercise; this new kind of procuring is succeeding in inserting the (sex worker) into a system in which she pays more and more for the services that are indispensable to her. This new*

<sup>9</sup> The UK is discussed in detail below.

*economy of bodies is probably the most profound revolution that [sex work] has undergone for a century*" (Corbin, 1990: 356).

In short the post-war system in France combined "the disadvantages of illegality with those of registration, in that it tends to fix the (sex worker) permanently in that role, even if she herself (wanted) to get of the life"<sup>10</sup> (Corbin, 1990: 285, 286).

The UK was also undergoing political, economic and legislative processes. As the British economy began to pick up in the 1950s, sex workers were beginning to be relatively more prosperous. According to Roberts, the government could not tolerate such prosperity (Roberts, 1992: 287). The Sexual Offences (1956) and Street Offences (1959) Acts were hence enacted in the 1950s. Similar to the French legislation, sex work remained legal in accordance with these acts but it was surrounded with conditions of illegality. While the Street Offences Act criminalised street prostitution, the Sexual Offences Act criminalised brothels and all houses and pimping (Roberts, 1992: 288). In fact soliciting and sex work were not illegal in the UK prior to the enactment of these acts neither, but the police could easily fine sex workers for "disorderly, riotous or indecent behaviour". So Roberts claims that the government's intolerance to sex workers' prosperity was the reason behind the enactment of these acts (Roberts, 1992: 287).

The reasons underlying the strike/church occupation in 1982 in the UK is closely linked both with these acts (as quoted by the English Collective of Prostitutes in the previous section) and the developments in the 1960s in the UK. The Keeler-Profumo scandal that burst in 1963 was an indicator to the sex workers, but more importantly to the public the hypocrisy of the political establishment. The scandal involved the Minister of War of the conservative government, John Profumo, and a London show-girl Christine Keeler. Rumour said that Keeler was also sleeping with a KGB (Комитет государственной безопасности: Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti or State Committee for State Security) agent. It turned out that Stephen Ward had introduced the minister and the show-girl; that is, Ward was the pimp. Although Profumo resigned and Ward was convicted, the public reacted to the scandal and the Labour Party was in power the following year (Roberts, 1992: 283-284).

The key word that appears in this scandal, "hypocrisy", is common for both cases. The hypocrisy of the political establishment criminalising sex work and on hand and engaging in sexual relations with sex workers, as well as engaging directly in pimping on the other, the link between politicians, the police and organised crime, the incongruence between the law and its implementation were all common features in France and the UK. As will be discussed shortly, sex workers had already been

reacting against the developments following the World War II and the motive underlying the two strikes may be traced to all these developments and sex workers' reactions towards them.

One major event leading to the sex workers' strikes analysed in this paper is, with no doubt, the sexual revolution of the 1960s. "(Sex workers) have always been under the jurisdiction of the most repressive and reactionary sections of society (police, politicians, and the legal system)" (Roberts, 1992: 283) but the sexual revolution, the liberalisation of morals and the highly eroticised atmosphere of everyday life in the 1960s in the West (Corbin, 1990: 355) triggered the sex workers movement. In addition:

The coming out of (sex workers) determined to publicly contest their marginalisation and stigmatisation (was) part of the big wave of social protest led...by "deviant" populations (homosexuals, mental patients, prisoners, etc.) who (were) determined to challenge conventional conceptions and judgements of their conduct, to question "expert" assessments of their disabilities, "handicaps" and devaluation of their capabilities, to reject the diagnosis of their various conditions and the attendant prescriptions for corrective treatment, and to publicly demand their rights to equal access to institutional resources (Mathieu, 2003: 30).

According to Roberts, it was the fear among the authorities raised by the disintegration of the traditional middle-class moral universe, the threat they felt by the new sexual freedoms and with a militant moral backlash behind them, which kept up a running battle against the liberalisation of sex industry (Roberts, 1992: 283).

Not surprisingly, in both France and the UK, the main actors and institutions having a part in the game were the same: the police, politicians, the law, organised crime, pimps and sex workers. In both cases, sex workers had external resource; that is, allies, while acting collectively. While the Nid was the ally in the case of France, it was Black Women for Wages for Housework and Women against Rape in the UK.

Why Church occupation? Did sex workers try to escape from police intervention, or was there a symbolic meaning behind the choice of church occupation as a form of action? I argue that the only motive behind church occupation was that police has trouble acting in churches due to scrutiny by public opinion (Mathieu, 2007: 115). In fact in the French case, sex workers had decided upon another church to occupy put changed their minds and occupied Saint-Nizier instead since Father Béal in Saint-Nizier was cooperative. In the UK, I have not found any evidence that church occupation was a symbolic reaction against conservatives and/or the Christian civil society neither. Hence, the basic motive under church occupation in both cases was to evade police intervention. It was a strategic decision rather than a symbolic reaction.

Church occupation as a form of action was inherited in both cases. In France before 1875, there has been several occupations of religious buildings by immigrants

<sup>10</sup> At this point we may recall the citation in the previous section about fines. Prior to the strike in 1975, sex workers were fined as often as four times a day.

and these demonstrations received support from the Christian left (Mathieu, 2007: 115). The sex workers in UK, as I have mentioned before, had followed the French case as an example. Hence the choice of church occupation was a national imitation in the French case, and an international imitation in the case of the UK.

Why strike? Why not another form of action? Referring to Tilly, strike is “a means to act together”, “a form of action... available to a given set of people as (a part of) their repertoire of collective action” (Tilly, 1979: 14-15). According to Tilly, ordinary people have used a remarkable variety of means to act together over the last few hundred years, some of which were inter-village fights, mocking and retaliatory ceremonies, attacks on tax collectors, petitions, mutinies, solemn assemblies, electoral rallies, demonstrations, strikes, attempted revolutions and mass meetings (Tilly, 1979: 14). What then made sex workers, among all those “less disruptive” alternatives, go on strike when “the strike method of fixing wages<sup>11</sup> would be disastrous in any type of society” (Polanyi, 1957: 231)?

I have three basic answers to this question at this stage: Because “the late 1960s and 1970s was the long European strike wave” (Arrighi and Silver, 1984: 21), because “speech was rendered impossible/their tongues were cut off” and because “labour is a fictitious commodity”. This paper began with Luxemburg’s quote in 1906. Striker sex workers of 1975 and 1982, I argue, would make similar statements. Besides, following Polanyi’s analysis, sex workers might have struck due to the commodity fiction of labour.

First of all, the late 1960s and the early 1970s was the peak of a strike wave in Western Europe. “By the 1960s...the strike could be considered as an accepted part of collective bargaining practice (Tarrow, 1993: 289)”. The strike as a form of action began to take on in Europe with the French explosion of 1968 and with the sharp increase in the UK between 1968 and 1970 (Arrighi and Silver, 1984: 19). Among 13 Western industrial countries, Shorter and Tilly found out that for the period between 1946 and 1968, France was the second with a strike/100,000 workers rate of 12.8% and the UK was the third with 9.9% (Shorter and Tilly, 1974: 333). Although in France, the curve, man-days lost per 1000 workers, shows a downturn after the explosion in 1968, it continues to increase in the UK (Figure 1), indicating that the strike remained a popular form of action in the 1980s in the UK. “In the 1980s approximately one in forty bargaining groups in British manufacturing went on strike each year (Ingram et al., 1993: 704)”. Between 1979 and 1989 2.6% on average bargaining groups went on strike (Ingram et al., 1993: 706).

Thus it may be argued that the late 1960s and 1970s constituted a cycle of contention, whereby the sex

workers movement was both affected by the increased militancy of the working-class movement, and by the rising “new” social movements. In this framework, the sex workers strikes in the two cases presented in this paper appear as parts of a general wave of strikes, since sex workers are defined primarily as workers<sup>12</sup> in this analysis.

Secondly, “the disastrous method” was not the first form of action that sex workers of both Saint-Nizier and King’s Cross had decided to adopt. The first half of the 1970s witnessed many forms of action on the part of sex workers in Lyon: preparation of collective texts with the collaboration of several journalists and lawyers to be sent to the decision-makers, breaking the windows of police vans in which sex workers were being taken to a reception centre, establishing action committees together with lawyers, appearing on the TV and demanding audience with the *Garde des Sceaux* (Keeper of Seals, indicating the Minister of Justice in the case of France) (Corbin, 1990: 360-361), street demonstrations (Mathieu, 2007: 110)... The available repertoire had been exhausted in France before going on strike. The same applies to the UK case. Sex workers in the UK had already established a collective in 1975, held campaigns for the legal rights of sex workers, created national networks, published newsletters, won court cases (English Collective of Prostitutes, 1997: 83-87), established a women’s centre, made civil rights meetings (Roberts, 1992: 347) ... In short, sex workers, both in Saint-Nizier and King’s Cross had exhausted the available repertoire of action before going on strike. In both the short-run and the long-run logics of collective action, Tilly argues, organisers seek to display the numbers, commitment and internal discipline of the people behind a particular set of claims on some powerful body, in this case primarily the nation-state<sup>13</sup> (Tilly, 1979: 20). Keeping in mind Luxemburg’s words, one of the reasons why sex workers resorted to strike was the exhaustion of the “less disastrous” forms of action, such as speech, and display primarily to the state the numbers, commitment and internal discipline of sex workers in order to earn back their right to organise in “less disastrous” forms.

Thirdly, following Polanyi’s analysis of fictitious commodities, we may argue that if one accepts the commodity theory of labour, the logical inference will be as follows:

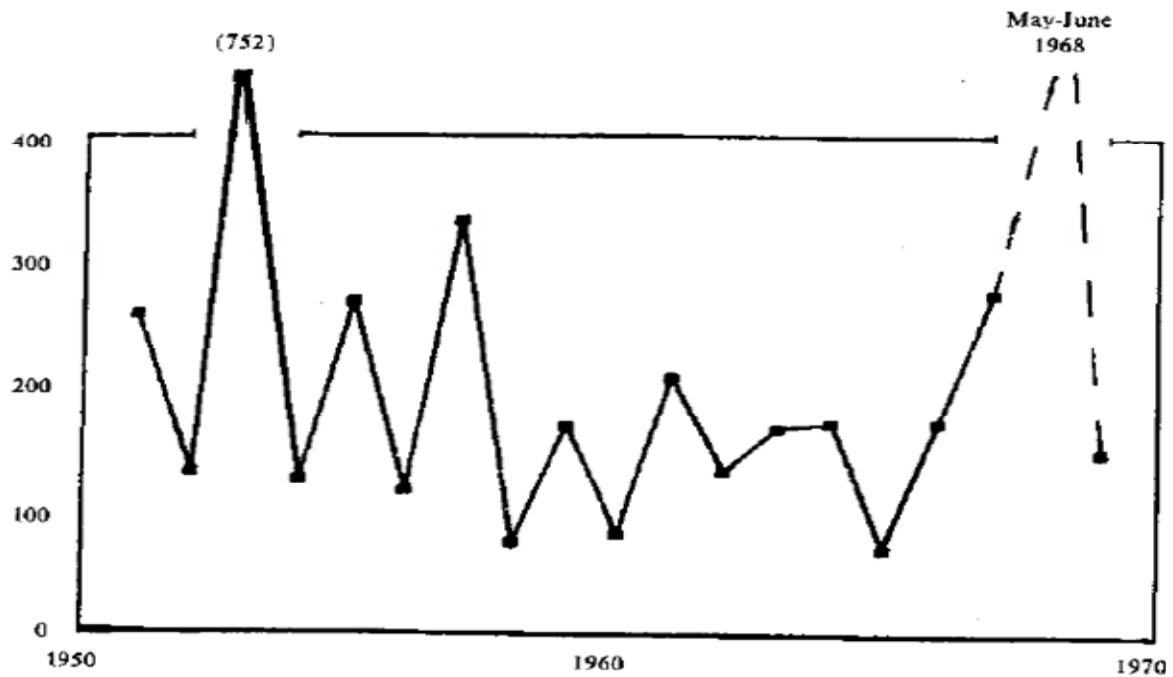
*“As long as labour lives up to [the responsibility of finding its price in the market], it will behave as an element in the supply of that which it is, the commodity “labour”, and will refuse to set below the price which the buyer can still afford to pay. Consistently followed up, this means that the chief obligation of labour is to be almost continually on strike”* (Polanyi, 1957: 230, 231).

<sup>11</sup> Polanyi focused on strike as a bargaining weapon of industrial action (Polanyi, 1957: 230-231). Yet his analysis is still useful in understanding why sex workers strike.

<sup>12</sup> The conceptualisation is further elaborated below.

<sup>13</sup> Sex workers’ demands from the society will be discussed later.

France



The UK

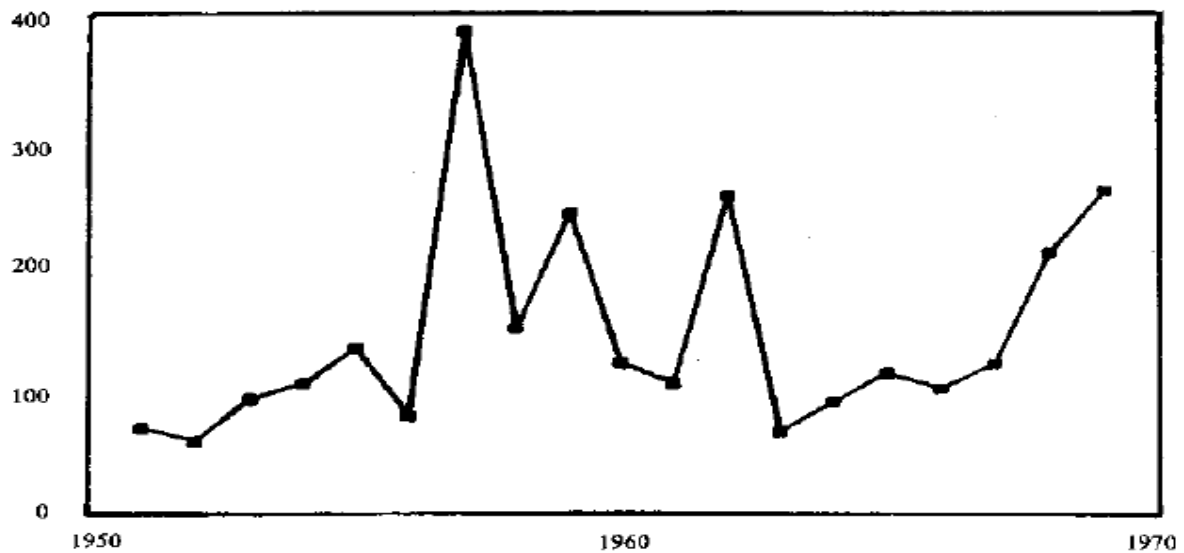


Figure 1. The y-axis indicates the man-days lost per 1000 workers and the x-axis indicates the years. The tables are from Hibbs' 1976 dated study (Hibbs, 1976: 1038, 1041).

However, Polanyi argues, labour is a fictitious commodity; labour is not a commodity. When it is treated as such, any form of action, which offers protection to working classes must obstruct the allegedly self-regulating market mechanism (Polanyi, 1957: 231),

hence strike becomes a legitimate form of action on the part of the working classes. Had sex work, sexual labour not been treated as a commodity, there would not be any basis upon which sex workers would act collectively in the form of strikes. Finding an exchange value in the

market, with pimps and organised crime on one hand and the biggest pimp on the other, we may trace the evidences of sexual labour being treated as a commodity in both cases. Remembering Anita's words in the case of UK about the working conditions, working hours and wages, keeping in mind the critical juncture in the French case, where sex workers found themselves as payers of further taxes despite the lack of civil rights and liberties on the part of the state, and in addition to the already impoverishing police fines, we may argue that sex workers struck because they were workers, labourers; because workers in general strike, there is nothing specific about sex workers; we may argue that due to the commodity fiction with regards to labour, the "disastrous" form becomes legitimate and its adoption appears as a rational choice.

The last argument may be confusing. What about the non-material interests involved? Harassment, violence, rape and (single) motherhood have been underlined as reasons of strike action. Do not the NSM theories have explanatory power in understanding what made sex workers strike in France in 1975 and in the UK in 1982?

The answer is given by Bell. She argues that Mouffe's (and Laclau's) theorisation of new democratic struggles might be useful in understanding the emergence of the sex workers' movement in the late 1970s, early 1980s in Western Europe. According to Bell, sex workers "began to engage in what Laclau and Mouffe term 'democratic struggle' in the 1970s when (sex workers) in various localities organised against police harassment and for the decriminalisation of (sex work)" (Bell, 1994: 104). Bell has a solid argument. I have underlined many times that two state institutions, the police and the law appears as the main institutions that sex workers, both in France and in the UK struggles to transform. The emphasis put the non-material demands of end to harassment, violence, rape and torture and on decriminalisation appear as non-materialistic demands. However, if we take a closer look especially to the latter demand, the material interest inherent in the decriminalisation of sex work may crystallise.

Had sex work not been defined as a crime, the relationship between the employer and the employee (pimp and sex worker) would significantly alter. If what one does to earn his/her living is not a crime, he/she does not need extensive protection by a third person, may it be an individual pimp, a street gang or organised crime. Hence the protection costs involved in the occupation decreases. In addition, self-employment would decrease the rate of exploitation (one would not need to give a particular percentage of the return of his/her labour to the employee). Hence, both intuitively and based on the statements of the sex workers, who have been cited up to now, we may suspect that the criminalisation of sex work brings damages the material interests of sex workers. On the other hand, as evident from the two cases presented in this paper, the criminalisation of closed working places push sex

workers to the streets, where they are more open to violence, harassment, rape, torture and murder. Hence, the criminalisation of sex work is also against the non-material interests of sex workers. So the criminalisation of sex work, one might argue, violates both material and non-material interests of sex workers.

If we compare the two cases separating for analytical reasons the non-material and material demands of the sex workers, we may argue that the material demands put forth by the strikers in the UK are more apparent. Especially the last demand of the English Collective of Prostitutes, immediate protection, welfare, housing for women who want to get off the game, seems to be as much a struggle against the disappearance of the welfare state and rising neo-liberal policies in the UK as against the conditions peculiar to sex workers in particular. The reasons of this difference, to the extent that it exists, are difficult to investigate. However, arguably, the timing of the strike in the UK, and the difference in the ideological position of the ally might have influenced such a difference. The 1980s was not only a period when neo-liberalism had begun to show its impacts, but also a period when the Marxist-feminist debate about the path towards the emancipation of women had already matured. Hence, under the impact of the Wages for Housework movement, the material interests of sex workers might have become more apparent to the striker sex workers in the UK.

The second aspect of the NSM theories, the attempt to identify the participants of the NMSs is again problematic when it comes to the sex workers movement in general and the cases of France and the UK in particular. Recall that there are basically two lines of thoughts in the NSM theories about the participants of the NSMs: one is that they are members of the new middle class; the other is that they are individuals with common social concerns. In the first glance, it seems that sex workers fall into the second category. However, it is possible to make class based generalisations, at least to a significant extent, regarding sex workers. First of all, sex workers are workers. Based on the definition of the proletariat as put forth by Engels in *The Principles of Communism*, workers are expropriated to the point that they are obliged to sell their labour to the bourgeoisie in order to get, in exchange, the means of subsistence for their support (Marx and Engels, 2005: 170). Following the same logic, sex workers may be defined as the class of people, who are expropriated to the point that they are obliged to sell their sexual labour to the pimp<sup>14</sup> in order to get, in exchange, the means of subsistence for their support<sup>15</sup>.

This approach would coincide to the argument that the

<sup>14</sup> The position of the client in this relation extends the scope of this analysis.

<sup>15</sup> In fact according to Roberts, "hounded and oppressed, criminalised and isolated, [sex workers] only have each other to turn to (Roberts, 1992: 337). This description resembles mine workers. In fact, strike is a common mode of action adopted by mine workers. In this respect, a comparative analysis of mine workers' and sex workers' working conditions might have further theoretical contributions to the literature.

sex workers' struggle is a working class struggle. Thus it might be argued Marxist theory, rather than the NSM theories might be more adequate in analysing the sex workers' struggle around the world. However, due to the fact that the emergence of the sex workers' struggle chronologically coincides with the rise of the NSMs, the above mentioned limitations of strike theories in setting an analytical framework for sex workers' strikes, and due to the peculiarities of the job; that is, its relation to sexuality and gender and the non-material interests involved, sex workers' struggles (strikes/church occupations in this case) might at best be analysed in light of a combination of various theoretical approaches.

As much as we need the amalgamation of Marxist theories and the NSM theories in order to establish a framework to study the sex workers movement, particularly sex workers' strikes, the cases, France and the UK also point out that we need to take into account feminist theories. As evident in the banners hung over the walls of the two churches, (single) motherhood was the most important reason that made sex workers act collectively in the form of strikes/church occupations. The interviews made with sex worker strikers point out the emergence of a feminist tone among organised sex workers:

Corbin argues that feminist propaganda had even reached sex workers in the 1970s in France (Corbin, 1990: 357). Similarly, hand in hand with a feminist group, Black Women for Wages for Housework and Women, the sex workers in London began to form a kind of unity what the radical feminists call sisterhood. Yasmin told "I think the main thing that we all give each other love and kindness. Little things like kindness, generosity, consideration, respect (Roberts, 1992: 337). Thus the analysis of the sex workers' movement and the sex workers' strikes analysed in this paper requires the integration of a feminist approach.

Such an extension of the theoretical framework would extend the scope of this paper. However, given the fact that there are various feminist schools of thought, I argue that the most appropriate feminist framework to analyse sex work in general may be socialist feminism since socialist feminism investigates both the material and non-material aspects of gender in order to overcome the biological reductionism of radical feminism and the economic reductionism of Marxist feminism, socialist feminists. Analysing the emphasis sex workers put on motherhood might also require a socialist feminist perspective since motherhood, especially single motherhood is related with both material and non-material interests.

Lastly, despite the differences in the political regimes of France and the UK, why sex workers in both cases resorted to strike/church occupation should be analysed. Kitschelt argues that the number of political parties, the capacity of the legislature to develop and control policies independently of the executive, the existence of pluralist and fluid links that tie interest groups to the executive

branch, and the existence of mechanisms to aggregate demands determine the openness/closeness of political input structures (Kitschelt, 1986: 63). In this respect, France has a closer political input structure than the UK. The author also argues that confrontational incidents are most common in the regimes categorised as closed (Kitschelt, 1986: 71). This line of thought may explain why the sex workers' strike that is accepted as the first in the literature occurred in France.

It could also be argued that sex workers in both cases chose to strike despite the differences in the political input structures is that the laws criminalising sex work, the working conditions of sex workers, police repression on sex workers, their immediate problems; that is, rape, violence, harassment and murder, as well as their immediate responsibilities, that is, motherhood, was similar in both cases. Yet there is another reason why sex workers in both cases resorted to strike, and that, as mentioned above, has to do with the strike wave in Europe in general, and in these two countries in particular.

In short, this analysis shows that the reasons that made sex workers in these two cases have both to do with material and non-material interests. The language used may at times create problems about external validity since it is a small N comparative case study. I would kindly ask the reader to keep in mind this problem while taking into account the arguments presented in this paper.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to answer the question why sex workers struck/occupied churches in the cases France (1975) and the UK (1982). The problems associated with the case selection and my personal limitations have been underlined in the introduction. Since a coherent theoretical framework to investigate sex work, sex workers' movements, and sex workers' strikes is lacking, the paper has reviewed existing literature on theories on strikes, new social movements, collective action and contentious politics. Further theoretical discussions have been presented in this paper.

Review of the available literature indicates that studying sex work in general and sex workers' strikes in particular requires the amalgamation of Marxist, feminist, social movements, the NSMs and collective action theories. Yet it is important to refrain from eclecticism in attempting to amalgamate these theoretical frameworks. The only way to do so, this paper argues, is to go to the field and speak to sex workers, as well as decision-makers and other social group activists.

The main argument in the paper regarding the cases, France and the UK, is that what makes sex workers strike, taking into account short-run considerations, is grievances, existence of internal and external resources, repression, sex workers' framing of their identities, and in the second case, the UK, the existence of political

organisation. We see that this argument itself is derived from an amalgamation of theories of collective action. Increased police repression, prohibitionist legislation that criminalises sex work without literally stating in the law, the hypocrisy of politicians in this sense, the alliance between the police, organised crime, politicians and pimps, and the emphasis sex workers put on (single) motherhood appear as the most important reasons of the strikes in both cases despite the differences between the political input structures of France and the UK; that is, the former having a more closed and the latter a more open political input structure. Apparently, sex workers in the two cases have major problems and confrontations with various state institutions, basically the law and the police. The identification of the reasons of sex workers' strikes has required tracing the post-war political economic developments in the two countries and in Western Europe in general. It also showed that the two cases are by no means deviant, but only parts of the strike waves in Europe in the late 1960s and 1970s in general. The wave, it has been argued, continued in the UK in the 1980s as well.

One of the more modest claims of this paper, however, has been that there are more structural factors underlying sex workers strikes. Historical continuities accumulating from the nation-state building process, the criminalisation of sex work onwards have to be closely examined in order to understand why sex workers strike. Keeping in mind that strike as a form of action is in the memories of the working-class in general, sex workers' strikes should be examined parallel to workers' strikes. Peculiarities of the occupation and the non-material interests involved do not undermine material interests of sex workers, and the fact that sex work is work; sex workers are workers.

There are basically two differences between the two cases. Sex workers had different allies in the two countries, and the sex workers in the UK had already organised under a collective. However, taking into account the time lag between the two cases, we may argue that the reasons why sex workers struck were significantly similar despite the differences in the political regimes of the two countries.

Further arguments such as the exhaustion of the available repertoire of collective action, the choice of the mode of action, church occupation, primarily to check for police action and as an inspiration from other movements will not be repeated in the conclusion. Rather, it may be possible to discuss the factors that should be taken into account before adopting strike as a mode of action for the recognition of sex workers' rights.

The two cases in this paper suggest that peculiarities of individual countries, exhaustion of other forms of action, the historical context and the political input/output structures of countries should be taken into account before going on strike. For instance, visibility enters into the picture as a problem facing sex workers deciding to go on strike. Many of the sex workers' families did not know their occupation in these two cases. In 2000, the striker sex

workers in the UK seemed to have solved this problem by wearing masks. However, in some countries like Turkey, wearing masks in demonstrations is illegal. Hence the peculiarities of individual countries are very important in deciding to strike.

Examining the two cases more closely, it may be argued that strike is a more useful mode of action for sex workers in countries with more open political structures. Kitschelt argues that while closed regimes tend to repress, open ones assimilate social movements (Kitschelt, 1986: 62). Had the strike in 2000 in the UK been included in the paper, this might have been the reason why sex workers are organised under a branch in the general union in the UK at the moment while those in France are organised in their own right; i.e. since the political input structure in the UK is more open compared to France, the movement might have been more assimilated in the UK by the state. However, we should be very careful in making such generalisations based on only two cases in order to escape from the problem of external validity.

The sex workers both in France and in the UK had one major accomplishment: at the moment, there is a sex workers' movement, not only in core countries but also in the semi-periphery and periphery. I hope this study has provided an insight for analysing sex workers' strikes, sex workers' movements and sex work in general. I also hope a secure work environment for sex workers' all over the world, the recognition of their work as work and extension of their rights, an exit from the occupation for those sex workers that want to, an end to ideologies stigmatising and marginalising sex workers and increase in studies in Third World sex workers' and their struggles. As the paper started with a quote, it ends with one, that of Selay from Ankara, Turkey: *Yaşasın seks işçilerine özgürlük mücadelemiz!* (Long live our struggle for sex workers' freedom!) (Selay, 2010: 24).

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