The Emergence and Uncertain Outcomes of Prostitutes' Social Movements

Lilian Mathieu

UNIVERSITÉ PARIS X-NANTERRE

ABSTRACT This article is a comparative study of five prostitutes' social movements. The emergence of these movements is one of the major developments in the politics of prostitution: for the first time, prostitutes are politically organizing and expressing their claims and grievances in the public debate about prostitution – a debate from which they are usually excluded. But, as is the case for most stigmatized populations, this pretension to enter into the public debate is faced with many difficulties. Some of these are inherent to the world of prostitution, which is an informal, competitive and violent world, in which leaders face constant challenges to establish and maintain their authority and legitimacy. The article also emphasizes the crucial, but ambiguous, role played by alliances between prostitutes and people from other parts of society (especially feminists). Prostitutes' dependence on these supporters leads the author to consider their social movements to be heteronomous mobilizations.

KEY WORDS abolitionism ◆ alliances ◆ feminism ◆ prostitution ◆ social movements ◆ stigmatization

INTRODUCTION

It is a striking fact that prostitutes themselves are usually excluded from the political debate about prostitution. Regulationists and abolitionists (Corbin, 1978; Walkovitz, 1980) traditionally share – though with some differences – a conception of prostitution that denies those who are involved in this activity the ability to express their opinion about the policies that directly concern and affect them. The representations of

The European Journal of Women's Studies Copyright © 2003 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 10(1): 29–50 [1350-5068(200302)10:1;29–50;030788]

prostitutes as potential delinquents supposedly guilty of spreading sexually transmitted diseases within society, or as passive victims of early psychological trauma that led them into the snares of machiavellian pimps, lead to the same derogatory opinion that prostitutes are unable to express their desires, claims and grievances, to have a voice of their own. Thought to be unaware of their own interests, prostitutes are supposed to have no other choice than to put their fate in the hands of others – others who do not belong to their social world.

For several years, this wretched representation has been seriously contested by social movements and organizations initiated and led by prostitutes determined to defend their own collective interests. The emergence of these movements is one of the major developments in the politics regarding prostitution. For the first time in recent history, prostitutes are trying to organize themselves politically and to express their demands and grievances in the public debate about prostitution – a debate from which they are usually excluded. As Gail Pheterson points out, 'never have prostitutes been legitimised as spokespersons or self-determining agents, not by those who defend them against male abuse and not by those who depend upon them for sexual service. It is a radical political stance to assume prostitute legitimacy' (Pheterson, 1989: 3). Prostitutes' social movements challenge ordinary representations not only because they are unexpected from such a stigmatized and deprived population, but also because they express opinions and claims that contradict regulationist as well as abolitionist policies. They contest regulationist policies by denying the state the right to control, regulate and restrict their activities. By considering themselves as 'sex workers' that demand the same rights and labour protection as all other workers, they challenge abolitionist positions that consider them as victims of modern slavery and psychological maladjustment who should have no choice but to give up prostitution. As Ronald Weitzer says, in relation to the American organization Coyote, 'public portrayal of prostitutes challenges common stereotypes: they are ordinary, psychologically well adjusted people, having normal needs and aspirations. Movement literature insists that these women have "integrity" and "dignity" and that prostitution is valid "work" ' (Weitzer, 1991: 26).

The coming out of prostitutes determined to publicly contest their marginalization and stigmatization is part of the big wave of social protest led since the 1970s by deviant populations (homosexuals, mental patients, prisoners, etc.) who are determined to 'challenge conventional conceptions and judgements of their conduct, to question "expert" assessements 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' (Kitsuse, 1980: 3). Since they refer to

feminist values or preoccupations such as women's rights to work and to economic independence, and women's sexuality or violence against women, and because they very often have direct links with feminist activists, prostitutes' movements are also sometimes connected to the women's movement. Nevertheless, this link is somewhat ambiguous, as feminist positions about prostitution are not homogeneous: whereas liberal feminist are close to prostitute activists as they consider it as a 'real job', permitting women to gain financial autonomy, radical feminists define it as a modern form of slavery, and as a paradigmatic form of violence exerted by men against women.[1] Consequently, evaluating the influence of the complex, and often ambiguous, relationships between prostitutes activists and their feminist allies over the emergence and development of prostitutes' movements is one of the major aims of this article.

DATA AND METHODS

This article is based on a comparative study of five prostitutes' social movements. The movements are: the occupation of Saint-Nizier church in Lyon initiated by French prostitutes in June 1975; the French Association nationale des prostituées (National Prostitutes' Association) set up in 1980 by the Parisian prostitute Merry; the well-known American organization Coyote, directed since 1973 by Margo St James; De Rode Draad (The Red Thread), which is a Dutch prostitutes' organization founded in Amsterdam in 1985; and the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR), which is a federation of prostitutes' organizations (mainly from Western Europe and North America), set up in 1985.

Data sources include 24 interviews conducted between 1994 and 1997 with movement leaders, activists and sympathetic allies (11 interviews were conducted with prostitutes or former prostitutes, and 13 with allies); analyses of organizations' documents, literature (especially Jaget, 1975; Bell, 1987; Delacoste and Alexander, 1987; Pheterson, 1989; Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998) and archives, as well as a study of press coverage. The data I collected about Coyote and the ICPR have been helpfully completed by studies conducted by other sociologists (Jenness, 1990, 1993; Weitzer, 1991, 2000).

There are several differences between the many social movements that defend prostitutes' interests. First, whereas all the others are social movement organizations (McCarthy and Zald, 1987), the protest initiated by the prostitutes from Lyon in 1975 was an informal movement. Its inability to stabilize and to develop into a long-lasting formal organization is a major characteristic of this movement, revealing some of the difficulties prostitutes face in the long term when they try to mobilize themselves. Second, these movements have different goals, which depend

mainly upon the political context and the national legislation with which they are in conflict. The French prostitutes who occupied churches in 1975 were initially protesting against police harassment and repression. The first success of their mobilization then led them to demand the repeal of French legislation against pimping and soliciting, the recognition of their right to custody of their children, and access to health insurance. Those claims were taken up a few years later by the Association nationale des prostituées, but without success. In a country that prohibits prostitution, Coyote focuses its activism mainly on the legitimization of prostitution. Ths organization 'insists that prostitutes have basic *rights* to occupational choice and sexual self-determination: prostitution is legitimate work and women have the right to control their own bodies, including sale of sexual favors. Denial of these twin rights constitutes the central grievance of Coyote' (Weitzer, 1991: 24). The Red Thread faces a very different situation, as the Dutch government has recently legalized 'sex work' and intends to regulate it as a 'normal' business. The main aim of the Dutch organization is to lobby to ensure that the recent changes in the law will benefit the prostitutes and not mean a degradation of their working conditions. On a supranational level, the ICPR demands the recognition of prostitutes' human rights – rights that are denied in many countries in which laws against prostitution are in contravention of equal treatment of all citizens – and has developed a public discourse, presenting prostitutes as autonomous and responsible women and men, which contradicts the dominant abolitionist representation defining prostitution as deviant and incompatible with the dignity and value of humankind.

THE OBSTACLES TO MOBILIZATION

As stated earlier, social protest within the world of prostitution is not usual. Prostitutes are ordinarily considered as one of the most marginalized and stigmatized social groups, a population that lacks the necessary resources to initiate a collective protest. They are seen as people facing such difficulties (mainly economic, but also psychological) that the mere idea of resolving their problems by political means seems out of reach. These opinions are valid, but only partially: prostitutes' social movements are indeed very rare and generally short-lived, but the movements dealt with in this article prove that they are not an impossibility. Before analysing the movements themselves, it is important to consider the obstacles they must overcome in order to emerge and develop.

Some of these obstacles are linked to the legal context surrounding prostitution in the respective countries, as laws regulating or prohibiting prostitution can have a direct effect on the prostitutes' ability to organize. This is certainly the case in the United States, where prostitution per se is

prohibited (except in Nevada), and where laws against soliciting are employed by the police to prevent activists from contacting their potential mass base, as explained in an interview with a Coyote leading activist:

> In Los Angeles and in California, a law was passed recently which allows the police to arrest any person who the police says has the intent to commit prostitution. . . . If the police don't like us, and they don't like what we're doing because we're telling the women to empower themselves, they will arrest us and charge us with prostitution even if we're not doing anything except talking to the women. So that makes it very difficult for us to make any contact, it makes us vulnerable.

In 1975, the French police used existing laws to dissuade prostitutes from forming an official organization, as any collection of subscriptions among prostitutes could be regarded as pimping. Later, this difficulty was overcome by the Association nationale des prostituées by entrusting financial matters to a sympathetic feminist organization managed by non-prostitutes (Mouvement français pour le planning familial). The situation is quite different in the Netherlands, where the Red Thread received financial support from the Bureau of Emancipation Affairs within the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, which was in charge of feminist policy in the 1980s.

But the main obstacles to protest that prostitutes' must confront lie in the structure and organization (or rather the lack of structure and organization) of the world of prostitution itself. Some of the more difficult obstacles stem from the characteristics of the prostitute population, one which is generally marked by a very low level of pragmatic competence for collective action. This poor capacity to engage in social protest can be explained by the social origins of most prostitutes. Many sociologists have stressed the fact that most prostitutes originate from the lowest classes of society. Presenting the results of different Canadian studies, Lowman stresses that in the western part of that country most young prostitutes come from 'low socio-economic backgrounds' and that in Quebec '54% of 81 respondents considered that they were raised in modest circumstances, while 38% described their backgrounds as "very poor"' (Lowman, 1987: 103). A study conducted in various Parisian prostitution zones found that 41 percent of a sample of 241 prostitutes (both women and men) came from 'modest or very modest backgrounds, and sometimes marginal backgrounds' (Ingold, 1993: 54). Høigård and Finstad conclude in their Norwegian study that 'it is women from the working class and the lumpenproletariat that are recruited into prostitution' (Høigård and Finstad, 1992: 15). They also stress, as have many others before them, that 'their backgrounds are . . . marked by irregular home lives and adjustment difficulties in school and their working lives' (Høigård and Finstad, 1992: 15). It must be added that most prostitutes have very low academic or

professional qualifications, having given up school early (see Ingold, 1993: 54).

Most prostitutes also live in extremely precarious conditions. A survey conducted in five French cities found that of a sample of 348 prostitutes, only 39 percent had access to health insurance; approximately 50 percent of them lived in temporary accommodation (hotel or no fixed address); 37 percent were dependent upon one or several drugs (including alcohol); and 33 percent had been victims of physical assault during the five months preceding the study (Serre et al., 1996). The stigmatization of prostitutes adds to the precariousness of their living conditions by forcing them to constantly disguise their activities (they must hide from their parents, their children, the police and, sometimes, social workers). Therefore, many of them have to live in secrecy. This is very often the case for illegal immigrant women and men who risk expulsion, and for transsexuals and transvestites whose feminine appearance contradicts their official male identity. The indignity and secrecy that affect prostitution are among the major factors that prevent prostitutes from protesting publicly against their unhappy endemic condition.

Due to the stigma, poor social background, low levels of education and precarious living conditions, most prostitutes appear to be a group incapable of defining their condition in political terms, and consequently of seeing any potential to change things by political means. What usually prevents prostitutes from fighting for better living conditions or a destigmatization of their activities is, mainly, their low level of political competence, which is directly linked to their feeling that they have no legitimate right to exert this competence and enter the public debate (Bourdieu, 1980). For most of them, collective action would be unimaginable.

The commercial logic of the world of prostitution contradicts collective action by making competition prevail upon solidarity. In a 'sex market' where clients tend to be rare and where 'sex workers' live in precarious conditions, relations between prostitutes are generally characterized by defiance, hostility and often violence. Rivalry and competition continually come between the different categories of prostitutes (women against transvestites, nationals against foreigners, drug addicts against non-users, prostitutes belonging to different prostitution networks and controlled by rival pimps, etc.), and leave very little room for solidarity or friendship. Thus the world of prostitution appears to be a social world with extremely weak cohesion. Prostitutes do not belong to a real 'goup' or 'community', but constitute an informal population united only by their common activities, common living conditions and common stigmatization. This endemic deficit of internal cohesion that affects the world of prostitution is one of the strongest obstacles to protest, as it makes free-riding strategies (i.e. staying aside selfishly and waiting for others to bear the cost of

mobilization, with the hope to benefit from the results of their efforts) (Olson, 1965) more attractive than collective action. Referring to Hirschman's (1995) concepts, it could be said that the characteristics of their group confront prostitutes with an impossible choice: it has been shown that the *voice* solution is difficult, impossible or, more often, unimaginable for them. What seems to be the easiest and most accessible alternative, *exit*, also meets with many obstacles, such as drug dependency, submission to a procurer, or lack of professional qualifications preventing them from finding normal jobs. Prostitutes seem, in most cases, to be restricted to a form of *loyalty* to the world of prostitution, a forced loyalty comprising resignation and fatalism.

Despite all these obstacles, protest movements have appeared in the world of prostitution in various countries over the last 25 years. Study of these movements helps us to understand what is required for the emergence of a social movement within such a deprived population.

MOBILIZATION AND LEADERSHIP WITHIN PROSTITUTES' MOVEMENTS

The Internal Organization of the World of Prostitution

Antony Oberschall (1973) pointed out some time ago the link between social groups' cohesion and their capacity to initiate a collective action, and the form taken by their protest. His model stresses that a group's mobilization depends on two major structural factors. One, referred to as vertical, is the link between the group and the other communities in the society, especially those higher up in the stratification system. According to the author, the more a dissatisfied group is separated from the higher classes, the less access it has to the power centres of society, and the more likely is its mobilization into a collective protest. This first statement is counterbalanced by a second factor, referred to as the horizontal, which is the group's internal organization. Oberschall points out that groups which are segmented but organized – along communal or associative links – are able to initiate and sustain a collective protest, whereas non- or weakly organized communities will emerge with more short-lived and more violent forms of protest. In other words, the more a community is organized prior to its mobilization, the easier it will be not only to initiate, but also to maintain a social protest likely to succeed.

This model can be helpful to understand prostitutes' social protests. As already discussed, prostitutes seem to face the worst situation: their lack of cohesion, solidarity and collective identity tends to class them within Oberschall's category of non- or weakly organized groups, those that present the lowest capacity to initiate and sustain a social movement. But

the effectiveness of collective protests within the world of prostitution allows for a more accurate analysis of the role played by these kinds of factors.

The church occupation movement in France is interesting because it shows both the negative and positive influence exerted by the internal organization of the world of prostitution at the time. In 1975, prostitution in Lyon was organized and controlled by different procuring networks that were engaged in (often violent) competition. Consequently, and despite being submitted to the same repression from the police and sharing the same feelings of exhaustion, it was difficult for prostitutes belonging to rival networks to join in a collective protest. The second problem caused by pimps was that a collective action would attract the media and put the spotlight on their illegal activities, which would then likely lead to the police identifying and arresting them. It was only after some prostitutes had convinced their procurers that the police repression was endangering their own economical interests (prostitutes had to pay frequent and expensive fines for soliciting) that they granted the women permission to start a protest. The prostitutes' refusal to evoke pimping in the media during the whole movement can be interpreted as an indication of the negotiation – i.e. an authorization to protest, but in no way that would endanger the existence or the interests of the pimps – of which the movement was a condition and a result.

Procuring networks have exerted a positive influence on the development of the mobilization in other ways. Due to their authority (conferred by their pimps) over their colleagues belonging to the same network, some prostitutes leaders enjoined them into joining a protest in which they were at first reluctant to participate. Politically inexperienced, worried about the risks and the costs of the mobilization (and more precisely, the risk of being identified as prostitutes by their parents, children or friends), lacking confidence in their collective power and not trusting the ability of the movement to solve their problems, many prostitutes did not want to get involved in the protest, but were forced to join in in the church by leaders threatening them with dogs. This example shows the decisive role that can be played by what Olson (1965) calls negative selective incentives in movements that have to overcome the high costs of mobilization.

Another characteristic of the world of prostitution (at that time and in that particular city) that had a positive influence on the development of the mobilization was the central location of the prostitution district, which permitted, despite commercial competition, the development of a minimal collective cohesion and identity. Prostitutes in Lyon used to meet in the same bars, in which they socialized and got to know each other. More paradoxically, the police unwittingly contributed to the strengthening of the prostitutes' cohesion and solidarity by their frequent roundups, during which the women, locked up together for the rest of the night in the police station, could meet, play cards, share information and discuss

their situation and ways of changing it. These frequent meetings allowed prostitutes to get to know each other, and showed each of them that they were not the only ones facing repression. This confirms what Snow et al. (1980) have said about the decisive influence of face-to-face interactions, prior interpersonal ties with a recruitment agent, and of pre-existing networks, during the early mobilization phase of a social movement. These meetings also contributed to the development of a collective feeling of injustice that pushed some of the women to overcome their initial reluctance and to join the movement that their most determined colleagues were trying to set up.

The church occupation movement was made possible because the prostitution community in Lyon in 1975 was not completely disorganized. Pimping networks, authority relationships exerted by some prostitutes over their colleagues, common meeting places and interpersonal ties allowed the mobilization to develop despite police repression and harassment. It can be said that Lyon's prostitute community in 1975 corresponds to the communal organization pattern defined by Oberschall rather than to his disorganized pattern. As the author puts it, 'the more segmented a community is from the rest of the society, and the more viable and extensive the communal ties within it, the more rapid and easier it is to mobilize members of the community into an opposition movement' (Oberschall, 1973: 129). The other movements studied here do not share the communal organization of the world of prostitution, as they took place in more disorganized settings. Paradoxically, it also shows that the presence of pimps is not necessarily an obstacle to the mobilization of prostitutes.

As stated earlier, the church occupation movement is different from the other movements studied here as it was a short-lived and informal protest, not a formal social movement organization. This difference is linked to the particular mobilizational difficulties each of these movements had to face. The Association nationale des prostituées, Coyote, the Red Thread and the ICPR can be referred to as professional social movement organizations in the words of McCarthy and Zald, as they are characterized by:

> (1) a leadership that devotes full time to the movement, with a large proportion of resources originating outside the aggrieved group that the movement claims to represent; (2) a very small or non-existent membership base or a paper membership (membership implies little more than allowing [one's] name to be used upon membership rolls); (3) attempts to impart the image of 'speaking for a potential constituency'; and (4) attempts to influence policy towards that same constituency. (McCarthy and Zald, 1987: 375)

The most important characteristic here is the fact that these organizations cannot count on the mobilization of numerous members. They are

composed of a small number of leaders and activists, and face huge difficulties enrolling within their rank and file. In other words, it seems that founding a social movement organization is a way to overcome the difficulties inherent in the weak cohesion and inability to mobilize within the world of prostitution. A formal organization, even if composed of a very small number of activists or sometimes amounting to just the person of its leader, is one of the only ways to give a collective status to a cause that would appear ridiculous or illegitimate if it was defended by isolated individuals (Boltanski, 1990). The organizational status legitimizes the prostitutes' cause, whereas this cause would appear ridiculous if led by a few isolated individuals.

Leaders' Recruitment and Legitimacy

Some of the prostitutes had the status of leader conferred on them by the authority delegated to them by their pimps during the church occupation. Prior to the movement, these prostitutes were already recognized as leaders by their colleagues in the same network. This prior leadership, mostly based on coercion (or threat of coercion), bolstered the leadership of the movement. But pimping networks cannot explain all kinds of leadership – in part because pimps do not always play a role in prostitutes' social movements, and are not always influential in the world of prostitution – and coercion cannot always explain why some prostitutes are acknowledged as legitimate leaders by their mass base. The examination of the social characteristics of the leaders of the movements studied here shows that these prostitutes present two different kinds of legitimacy, one that can be called internal, and the other external.

Internal legitimacy is shared by prostitutes who have the highest status in the hierarchy of their social world. These women are considered the best by other prostitutes because they meet the evaluation criteria peculiar to their social world: they have a long experience of 'sex work', pursue the most legitimate and best-paid practices (such as SM), have the most clients, are richer and enjoy the best living conditions, or, as already mentioned, have an authority conferred on them by pimps. They gain their authority and ascendancy over their colleagues not from extraordinary characteristics, but from the fact that they seem to better personify the stereotype of prostitution excellence. Well integrated into the world of prostitution, they are considered as exemplary personalities whose voice must be heard and whose advice or instructions must be followed. The main leader of the church occupation, a woman called Ulla, benefited from such a legitimacy: good-looking and 34 years old at the time of the movement, she was closely linked to one of the most powerful local procuring networks, was specialized in SM, and was regarded with a mixture of envy, admiration and respect by most of the other prostitutes.

Other leaders, such as some of the founder members of the French Association nationale des prostituées or the Dutch organization Red Thread, present similar examples of women belonging to dominant positions in the world of prostitution.

The second kind of legitimacy, the external one, is that seen in prostitutes whose influence and authority are based not according to criteria peculiar to the prostitution world but which are valid in the 'normal' world (Goffman, 1975), such as educational qualifications, high-class roots, or a short time in prostitution (or practising in the less stigmatized areas of prostitution, as was the case for pornography models and call-girls who are activists in the ICPR). It is the fact that they are different from the majority of their colleagues, and can aspire to a better social position that gives them their legitimacy: they seem better able to challenge and overcome the barriers between the world of prostitution and the rest of society. Because they are not like many of the other prostitutes, and are less subject to stigmatization than their colleagues, these women seem to be more able to publicly express their grievances. In choosing them as leaders, despite their affirmation that prostitution is 'valid work', prostitutes seem to admit to the higher legitimacy and power of evaluation criteria which are external to their social world and ironically upon which their stigmatization is based. The second leader of the church occupation, Barbara, had such a legitimacy, as she had relatively high qualifications (she was a teacher before entering into prostitution), did not belong to a procuring network (which was very rare in Lyon at that time), and had had little contact with other local prostitutes before the movement. Coyote leader Margo St James shares a similar kind of legitimacy, as she prostituted herself for a very short period of time and never really belonged to the world of prostitution. Her legitimacy as a leader is built mainly upon her organizational skills and her links with American feminism (Pheterson, 1989: xvii–xx). Most of the members of the ICPR present similar kinds of women, possessing legitimate social characteristics, distinguishing them from the majority of prostitutes. This is the case, for example, of Gabriela Silva Leite, who studied sociology before becoming a street prostitute and organizing the first Brazilian congress of prostitutes, and of Grisélidis Real, who is introduced as a Swiss prostitute, founder of an international documentation centre on prostitution, a member of the Swiss Association of Writers, and a 'guest lecturer on prostitution, sexuality and love at the University of Geneva' (Pheterson, 1989: xi–xii). For these women, it is the fact that they are *not completely*, or *not only*, prostitutes that gives them their legitimacy. In other words, it is the fact that their identity is not completely negated by their experience or practice of prostitution that allows them to be considered as leaders by other prostitutes.

It must be noted that these two kinds of legitimacy are not mutually

exclusive, and that the same person can build her authority upon both. Such was the case for Ulla, who was a leader not only because she occupied one of the highest positions in the prostitution hierarchy, but also because she had relatively high qualifications. It is also clear that, whatever kind of legitimacy they possess, prostitute leaders confirm a fact that has long been stressed by social movements analysts, that 'the explanation of resourceless populations' access to collective mobilization lies in the action of the "less deprived ones of these deprived people" ' (Siméant, 1998: 73). But most importantly, what can be learnt from the coexistence of these two forms of legitimacy is the *ambivalence* it expresses of prostitutes towards their condition – an ambivalence whose presence within stigmatized groups has already been stressed by Goffman (1975: 129). Prostitutes' tendency to choose as leaders people that either best conform to the stereotypes of prostitution or people who are most removed from their situation, reveals the strength of the effect of stigmatization. Despite all their affirmations that prostitution is valid work, equal in dignity with other professional activities, their attitude seems to show that they themselves are not completely convinced, and seem to constantly vacillate between implicitly recognizing or publicly contesting the indignity of their occupation.

This ambivalence has serious consequences on the attitude of leaders and, ultimately, the fate of their movements. It seems that for most of them, entering into social protest or founding a social movement organization (though without any previous conscious intention) can be a way to give up prostitution. The two main leaders of the church occupation, Ulla and Barbara, gave up prostitution and tried to become integrated into the 'normal world' immediately after the movement; and without them the other prostitutes were unable to sustain the movement. By becoming professional social activists, earning their living from their organization, leaders such as Margo St James or the founder members of the Red Thread found a way to stop prostitution without severing all their links with their former environment – but, as is often the case in deprived people's movements, they were no longer representative of the population whose interests they sought to defend. For all these people, *voice* seemed to be an opportunity to adopt the *exit* solution. One of the major causes of the failure of deprived or marginalized people's movements is that those within their ranks who can best lead a collective protest are also those who are the first to withdraw from it and to adopt individualist strategies (Hirschman, 1995: 80, 170).

THE AMBIGUITY OF ALLIES' INFLUENCE

It is commonly agreed among social movement analysts that 'one must realize that a negatively privileged minority is in a poor position to

initiate a social protest movement through its own efforts alone' (Oberschall, 1973: 214) and consequently that 'powerless groups . . . cannot call on existing resources, but . . . must find ways of bringing allies to their cause' (Gamson, 1990: 140). Prostitutes appear to be a good example of this, as they constitute a population without any protest tradition or experience. Deprived of some of the political resources that are needed to generate a collective action, they must find allies belonging to other, more privileged, social worlds, who are able to bring with them the resources the prostitutes lack. Even if, as had been stressed by Doug McAdam (1982: 29–32), powerless groups are not always completely lacking in resources of their own, they usually depend on the time, money, skills or experience that sympathetic allies – or 'conscience constituents' as McCarthy and Zald call them[2] – can provide in order to initiate and sustain their protest. But, as some analysts have also emphasized, the support from people that do not belong to the population seeking empowerment is very often ambiguous, as these two groups do not always share the same goals, or have different conceptions of the issues at the centre of the conflict.

Allies' Contribution to Protest

What appeared to be the main obstacle to prostitutes' desire to challenge police harassment in Lyon in 1975 was that they were totally lacking any tradition of protest. When the repression of prostitution had come down heavily in the town three years before, some women had tried to organize what in France is the most common way to express a collective complaint, a demonstration. But the demonstration was a complete failure, as only 30 prostitutes turned up at the meeting place. Most of their colleagues had decided that the risks and costs of a public appearance were too high; the weight of stigma dissuaded them from marching in the street, and they opted to stay at home rather than publicly expose their identity as prostitutes (Mathieu, 2001a, 2001b). Three years later, as the police repression got even heavier, the challenge that the prostitutes had to overcome was to find a way to publicly express their grievances, which could be adapted to the specific characteristics and constraints of their social group, and that, most importantly, would not threaten their anonymity.

For instance, what hindered prostitutes was the absence of any repertoire of collective action (Tilly, 1978). In most protest goups, such a repertoire is inherited from the past. It is elaborated on by learning from previous mobilizations (Dobry, 1990) and consists of a relatively stable, rigid and heterogeneous set of means to collectively express grievances or aspirations. Deprived of any protest tradition, and consequently of such a repertoire, prostitutes had no choice but to seek the help of people more experienced and skilled than they, if they wanted to avoid any repetition

of the errors and ridicule of three years before. These helpful allies were found, for instance, among members of an abolitionist organization, the Mouvement du Nid. Most of these abolitionists, at that time, belonged to the left or extreme left wing of French politics, which were very active during the mid-1970s. They were involved in various other social movements (such as movements in defence of migrant workers, prisoners, mental health patients, etc.), and had at their disposal quite a vast repertoire of collective action. Among the various means of protest, occupation, and especially church occupation, was one of the most frequently employed – especially in conjunction with hunger strikes by immigrant workers (Siméant, 1998) – by left-wing activists inspired by Christian values such as the activists from the Mouvement du Nid. Occupying a church appeared to them – and to the prostitutes who sought their help – to be the best way to express their grievances, particularly as it was likely to have a strong impact on the media without threatening the women's anonymity.

The abolitionists' help not only gave the prostitutes the repertoire of collective action they lacked, it also brought organizational and strategic support during the whole occupation. Strategies were defined during daily meetings in which both prostitutes and activists from the Mouvement du Nid could express their opinions, and during which the political experience of the latter was very helpful to the prostitutes. It also allowed them to avoid some of the tactical mistakes that they would have committed due to their lack of political skills. For example, after those meetings tracts were written by the abolitionists, who had better qualifications and greater experience in this kind of literature than the prostitutes. This procedure ensured that the movement's public expressions would adopt and respect the forms (vocabulary, references, etc.) necessary to be perceived as socially legitimate.

Conscience constituents have also played a very important role in the other movements studied in this article. The Association nationale des prostituées benefited from the help given by one of the most influential French feminist organizations, the Mouvement français pour le planning familial, which supported the prostitutes, took care of financial matters, gave tactical and organizational advice and conferred some of its political legitimacy on the prostitutes' cause. However, due to conflicts among the prostitutes themselves and to the rapid defection of its main leader, this help was not enough for the organization to sustain its protest in the long run. Coyote, the Red Thread and the ICPR also illustrate prostitutes' dependence upon feminist allies. Interviews with the Red Thread's conscience constituents, for example, show the decisive role played by feminist allies in the organization's creation and development.[3] Those feminist allies formed another organization, distinct from the Red Thread, which was only composed of prostitutes, called De Roze Draad (the Pink Thread) and was aimed at helping prostitutes with organizational tasks

and overcoming the costs and risks of public exposure that prevented prostitutes from appearing in the media:

> The women who were active in the Pink Thread were mostly women who were experienced, who had jobs that had something to do either in social work or in publicity or the press. . . . They were very good and experienced in writing. So they could write about issues that were related to prostitution and were often recognized for it. They were also asked to appear on television programmes and other public events. . . . There were not very many prostitutes and there still are not very many, though more than before, who wanted to appear in public. (Interview with a member of the Pink Thread)

It has been said that the support that privileged individuals bring to powerless groups is ambiguous. This is especially true of the support given by the Mouvement du Nid activists during the church occupation in Lyon. Abolitionists traditionally define prostitution as a modern form of slavery, incompatible with human dignity, which should be brought to an end. Those abolitionists who helped prostitutes to mobilize in Lyon did not contradict their own principles, for they considered collective action as a consciousness-raising process that would finally help prostitutes realize that prostitution was a form of alienation and slavery, which they should give up. By helping the prostitutes to fight against police harassment, they hoped that the women would gain more self-esteem and self-respect, change their attitude of resignation to their work and finally consider a better future, other than prostitution. However, the majority of prostitutes did not want to give up their activity; they only demanded the end of repression and better working and living conditions. This shows that different people, belonging to different social worlds, who are involved in the same social movement do not necessarily share the same goals or definitions. The following section illustrates how these differences in social backgrounds, goals and representations often have a negative influence on the fate of a social movement.

Heteronomous Mobilizations

The fact that the presence of conscience constituents within a social movement can be a source of problems has long been stressed by analysts. McCarthy and Zald noted that 'conscience constituents are fickle because they have wide-ranging concerns. . . . Organizations which attempt to involve them in face-to-face efforts may have to suffer the consequences of the differences in background and outside involvements from those of beneficiary constituents' (McCarthy and Zald, 1987: 1232). Other analysts have been more critical, stating that 'elite' involvement in a social movement can have negative effects on its chances of success as it tends to moderate the insurgents and to channel them towards more reformist

goals and less effective forms of protest. For example, McAdam states that because all movements challenge the established structure of polity membership, the response of elite members 'typically consists of a two-pronged strategy that combines attempts to contain the more threatening aspects of the movement with efforts to exploit the emerging conflict in a fashion consistent with the members' own political interests', and adds that 'given this typical response to insurgency, elite involvement in social movements is not likely to benefit insurgents' (McAdam, 1982: 26–7). From this point of view, the support given by relatively privileged members of society to a deprived population must be regarded as an attempt to control, or 'channel' (Jenkins and Eckert, 1986) its mobilization.

No data support this 'social control' theory. Even if, as is shown later, the presence of conscience constituents within a prostitutes' movement can have very ambiguous (or even worse, negative) effects on its fate, this does not stem from any supporter's deliberate intention to weaken the social challenge posed by prostitutes. Contrary to the social control theory, external supporters are sincere in their desire to help a stigmatized and marginalized group's fight for better living conditions and for a better status in society. In interviews, these supporters stress the fact that they are always careful to preserve prostitutes' autonomy and to give their help only when required to do so. They are all the more vigilant about the risk of adopting the prostitutes' cause since they know that they are particularly vulnerable to accusations of seeking to 'manipulate' the powerless population they claim to defend – an accusation which is common between rival activist groups.

The problems that stem from conscience constituents' presence and influence are in fact inevitable, as they are closely linked to the prostitutes' dependence upon their resources and skills and to the differences in social backgrounds that separate external allies from the women they want to support. Due to their lack of experience and political competence, prostitutes very often have no choice but to put critical choices into the hands of their allies, as they appear better able to identify the best tactical options. Leaving to conscience constituents the tasks of choosing a form of protest within a repertoire of collective action, of writing tracts, or of appearing in the media is the best way to overcome some of the risks and costs of mobilization. However, the prostitutes are inevitably deprived of some important aspects of their protest, such as its public image. In particular, prostitutes are forced to adopt a political discourse, with words and references which are not theirs but those of their supporters. The analysis of the tracts that were issued during the church occupation, for example, shows a strong Christian influence, in accordance with the beliefs of the abolitionist activists from the Mouvement du Nid who wrote them. As prostitutes were presented mostly as mothers claiming the right to maintain custody of their children, these tracts were completely silent

on the sexual aspects of prostitution. Organizations supported by feminists show a similar trend, as they tend to present the prostitutes' cause as part of the whole feminist movement (for example, by defining prostitutes' demand to enjoy the same rights as other workers as a particular aspect of the more general feminist struggle for women's access to work and to financial autonomy), whereas a majority of the mass base of prostitutes do not consider themselves as feminists, and do not share many feminist values, such as independence from men. Due to prostitutes' tactical and organizational dependence upon their supporters, their attempts to publicly protest can be nothing but heteronomous mobilization.

The other main threat posed by conscience constituents lies in the differences in social backgrounds that distinguish them from the prostitutes they seek to help. Because they belong to (exceedingly) different social worlds, supporters and prostitutes do not share the same goals, interests, or representations of the issues, and these differences can be a source of tension or conflict. This problem was particularly acute within the Dutch organization the Red Thread. The routinization of the action and the progressive feminist supporters' demobilization led to very painful conflicts between the different categories of activists. These conflicts emerged after a few years of activism, after the initial enthusiasm waned and at a time when it became clear that the organization's activism would have little influence on the government's willingness to officially recognize 'sex work'. The most important point was the fact that, according to the prostitutes, some feminists benefited personally from their involvement in the movement, a benefit from which they felt excluded, as is explained by this feminist:

> Many women in the Pink Thread had better social positions and could use what they learned about prostitution in their work, and very often the prostitutes felt used. And felt that the Pink Thread women, the allies, were taking advantage of their knowledge on prostitution, for their own benefit, and not for the benefit of the prostitutes. That was not always true but they felt it was like that. And that has to do with the feeling that you don't get recognition anyway. . . . Some women were in the Pink Thread . . . wrote a book about prostitution, one made a book of interviews, and the book got a lot of publicity. And it was not the prostitutes, it was the writer of the book that got a lot of publicity. There was always this feeling of being used, or feeling that they did not get enough recognition, public recognition. (Interview with a second member of the Pink Thread)

Feminists were sincere when they thought that writing a book could be helpful to the prostitutes' movement, as it could help change dominant derogatory representations about prostitution. But, because it was a cultural product that reminded the prostitutes of their social illegitimacy and their low educational level, it was experienced as a form of symbolic

violence that reaffirmed the weight of the stigma attached to prostitution, and was denounced as a form of exploitation. The conflict endangered the alliance between feminists and prostitutes, and finally weakened the organization.

This example shows that alliances between prostitutes and external supporters are both a condition for the emergence of a social movement and one of the main dangers it has to face. Because, despite their sincerity, they are led by different motivations and goals, because they do not really speak the same language and have different interests and concerns, the alliance between a deprived population and conscience constituents necessarily involves some misunderstanding. As long as this misunderstanding remains implicit or unconscious, it cannot endanger the collective action. But once it becomes explicit, it leads to the development of feelings of rancour that are all the stronger since they concern a highly stigmatized population. Taking into account such problems, which are closely linked to the differences in social backgrounds and motivations that distinguish people united in (what they consider as) the same cause, must lead the study of collective action to put the collective dimension at the centre of the analysis, instead of taking it for granted.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that, despite all the obstacles, prostitutes' collective action is not impossible. Their mere existence has proven that a stigmatized population such as that of prostitutes is not condemned to resignation indefinitely, but can sometimes find the resources needed to publicly express its demands and grievances. But, on the other hand, prostitutes' social movements have proven to be very fragile, and their outcomes appear to be all the more uncertain or disappointing. Some of the movements studied here have been very short-lived (the church occupation movement, the Association nationale des prostituées), and have failed to impose their claims. To be sure, the Lyon church occupations enabled prostitutes to achieve what Gamson calls 'procedural success',[4] as an official report on prostitution was ordered by the French government immediately after the movement. This report can be considered as political recognition of the legitimacy of the prostitutes' grievances as their leaders were officially heard in a consultation process, but this success was in fact very limited, as the government never enforced the recommendations, close to the prostitutes' claims, of the report. Even if this movement has contributed to change the dominant image of prostitutes, and has allowed them some public respect by challenging their derogatory reputation, they have not been able to sustain their mobilization in the long run or to exert any real

influence on the political system, and their condition in the final event remains unchanged.

Coyote, the Red Thread and the ICPR, even though they still exist, have also faced many difficulties. These organizations have mostly failed to achieve their main goals. After more than 25 years of existence, Coyote has never been able to seriously challenge the American laws that prohibit prostitution. The recognition of prositutes' human rights that stands at the centre of the ICPR's fight is not applied in many countries, and the UN's position regarding prostitution remains abolitionist. The Red Thread has achieved one of its main goals, as the Dutch government has legalized prostitution. But the organization has played only a minor role in the process, as the legalization is an initiative by the Dutch government and will principally serve its own interests (which are mainly connected to immigration control), but not directly those of prostitutes. These three cases (Coyote, ICPR, the Red Thread) show that as prostitutes' social movements become more professional, they do not necessarily develop, or offer more opportunities for success. On that point, these movements seem to contradict Gamson's assertion that organization and bureaucratization play a decisive role in a protest group's chances of achieving success (Gamson, 1990: 95–6).

The fragility of prostitutes' social movements is linked to different factors. We have seen that prostitutes' close dependence on their allies is one such factor, as it can lead to internal conflicts and defections that may deprive the protest group of the resources it needs. This is a problem especially for feminist conscience constituents: because prostitutes' protests 'speak' to feminist preoccupations such as women's sexuality or violence against women, they are moved to join their mobilizations and to bring them their political resources and skills. But feminists and prostitutes have proven to be too different in their motivations and social backgrounds to sustain their alliance in the long run – proving that, despite the sincere willingness to establish equal relationships, sisterhood is more a stake than a given.

But what seems to be the main obstacle confronted by these movements is the ambivalence that most prostitutes feel towards their activity, an ambivalence that is directly related to the stigma of prostitution. Because selling sex is their sole source of income, prostitutes can consider it their 'profession', whose criminalization or absence of official recognition is felt to be an injustice. But, because they experience the stigma attached to 'sex work' on a daily basis and (more or less consciously) share the socially dominant negative opinion towards this occupation, they are not entirely convinced that prostitution is really a profession that deserves recognition. The leaders of the movements who entered into protest and created a professional organization as a way to give up prostitution are examples of this ambivalence: for these women it is ultimately better to

give up prostitution and to join the 'normal world' than to stay within a marginalized population. Their defection shows the weight of the dominant pejorative representations of prostitution that have the power to compel and to be shared by the very people they discredit. For them, the exit always seems more valuable than the voice. As long as the prostitutes' relation to their condition remains ambivalent, social movements fighting for the recognition of prostitutes' rights will face huge difficulties to mobilize them, and will remain marginal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Béatrice Gougeon, Janine McCollin and to all the participants at the ECPR workshop on 'Prostitution and Trafficking as Political Issues' (Copenhagen, April 2001) for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this text.

NOTES

1. About the feminist debates on prostitution, see mainly Barry (1979), Bell (1987), Overall (1992), Pheterson (1989, 1996), and Zatz (1997).
2. 'Conscience constituents are direct supporters of a SMO [Social Movement Organization] who do not stand to benefit directly from its success in goal accomplishment' (McCarthy and Zald, 1987: 19).
3. Another friendly organization was crucial in the creation of the Dutch movement – the Mr. A. de Graaf Foundation, which is a state-funded organization that conducts research and develops policy proposals on prostitution, played an important role by linking together isolated prostitutes that intended to organize but did not know each other.
4. Gamson (1990: 28) distinguishes procedural successes from substantive successes. The first category designates the acceptance of a challenging group by its antagonists as a valid spokesman for a legitimate set of interests. The second category focuses on whether the group's beneficiary gains new advantages during the challenge and its aftermath.

REFERENCES

Barry, Kathleen (1979) *Female Sexual Slavery*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Bell, Laurie, ed. (1987) *Good Girls, Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face*. Toronto: The Women's Press.
Boltanski, Luc (1990) *L'Amour et la justice comme compétences*. Paris: Métailié.
Bourdieu, Pierre (1980) *La Distinction*. Paris: Minuit.
Corbin, Alain (1978) *Les Filles de noce*. Paris: Aubier.
Delacoste, Frédérique and Priscilla Alexander (1987) *Sex Work. Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*. Pittsburgh: Cleis Press.
Dobry, Michel (1990) 'Calcul, concurrence et gestion du sens', pp. 357–86 in P. Favre (ed.) *La Manifestation*. Paris: Presses de la FNSP.

Gamson, William (1990) *The Strategy of Social Protest*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (Orig. pub. 1975.)
Goffman, Erving (1975) *Stigmate. Les usages sociaux des handicaps*. Paris: Minuit. (Orig. pub. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963.)
Hirschman, Albert O. (1995) *Défection et prise de parole*. Paris: Fayard. (Orig. pub. *Exit, Voice, Loyalty*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.)
Høigård, Cecilie and Liv Finstad (1992) *Backstreets: Prostitution, Money and Love*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Ingold, François-Rodolphe (1993) *Le Travail sexuel, la consommation des drogues et le HIV: Investigation ethnographique de la prostitution à Paris, 1989–1993*. Paris: IREP.
Jaget, Claude (1975) *Une vie de putain*. Paris: Presses d'aujourd'hui. (English edn: *Prostitutes, Our Life*, Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1980.)
Jenkins, Craig J. and Craig M. Eckert (1986) 'Channeling Black Insurgency: Elite Patronage and Professional Social Movement Organizations in the Development of the Black Movement', *American Sociological Review* 51: 812–29.
Jenness, Valerie (1990) 'From Sex as Sin to Sex as Work: COYOTE and the Reorganization of Prostitution as a Social Problem', *Social Problems* 37(3): 403–20.
Jenness, Valerie (1993) *Making it Work: The Prostitutes' Rights Movement in Perspective*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
Kempadoo, Kamala and Jo Doezema, eds (1998) *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*. New York: Routledge.
Kitsuse, John I. (1980) 'Deviants Coming Out All Over: Deviants and the Politics of Social Problems', *Social Problems* 28(1): 1–13.
Lowman, John (1987) 'Taking Young Prostitutes Seriously', *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 24(1): 99–116.
McAdam, Doug (1982) *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930–1970*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
McCarthy, John D. and Mayer N. Zald (1987) *Social Movements in Organizational Society*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
Mathieu, Lilian (2001a) 'An Unlikely Mobilization: The Occupation of Saint-Nizier Church by the Prostitutes of Lyon', *Revue française de sociologie* 42 (annual English selection): 107–31.
Mathieu, Lilian (2001b) *Mobilisations de prostituées*. Paris: Belin.
Oberschall, Antony (1973) *Social Conflict and Social Movements*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Olson, Mancur (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Overall, Christine (1992) 'What's Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work', *Signs* 17(4): 705–24.
Pheterson, Gail, ed. (1989) *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*. Seattle: The Seal Press.
Pheterson, Gail (1996) *The Prostitution Prism*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
Serre, Anne et al. (1996) 'Conditions de vie des personnes prostituées: conséquences sur la prévention de l'infection à VIH', *Revue d'épidémiologie et de santé publique* 44: 328–36.
Siméant, Johanna (1998) *La Cause des sans-papiers*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
Snow, David A., Louis A. Zurcher Jr and Sheldon Ekland-Olson (1980) 'Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment', *American Sociological Review* 45: 787–801.
Tilly, Charles (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*. New York: Random House.

Walkowitz, Judith (1980) *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weitzer, Ronald (1991) 'Prostitutes' Rights in the United States: The Failure of a Movement', *The Sociological Quarterly* 32(1): 23–41.

Weitzer, Ronald (2000) 'The Politics of Prostitution in America', pp. 159–80 in R. Weitzer (ed.) *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry*. New York: Routledge.

Zatz, Noah D. (1997) 'Sex Work / Sex Act: Law, Labor and Desire in Constructions of Prostitution', *Signs* 22(2): 277–308.

Lilian Mathieu *is a sociologist and researcher at the CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique). She has recently published 'An Unlikely Mobilization: The Occupation of Saint-Nizier Church by the Prostitutes of Lyon',* Revue française de sociologie *(2001, No. 42, annual English selection),* Mobilisations de prostituées *(Paris: Belin, 2001) and 'La Prostitution, zone de vulnérabilité sociale',* Nouvelles questions féministes *(2002, 21(2)). Address: Laboratoire d'analyse des systèmes politiques, Maison Max Weber, Université Paris X, 92001 Nanterre cedex, France. [email: lmathieu@u-paris10.fr]*

◆