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Àpres vertiges (Tough Times)
Prostitutional arrangements and excesses during the second half of the nineteenth century

Gabrielle Houbre
COVERING THE PERIOD from the 1850s until the eve of World War I, this book examines the second half of the nineteenth century with its intertwining of political stability, turmoil, economic prosperity and poverty, social traditions and upheavals, cultural classicism and avant-gardism. Out of these contrasts, although sometimes mediated by mobile, nuanced interfaces, emerged the striking scenery of prostitution depicted in its plurality, ambivalence and emotional power. Paintings, sculptures, photographs, films, furniture and objects led to so many encounters with the protagonists of a shady world that intrigues, attracts, offends, repulses, questions without ever becoming tiresome.

To summarise briefly, the Second Empire (1852-70) came about through a coup d’état (2 December 1851) and collapsed during the Franco-Prussian War (19 July 1870 – 28 January 1871). The Third Republic (1870-95) was proclaimed on 4 September 1870, was contested by the Commune (March-May 1871) before becoming established in 1875 up until the 1914-1918 war. These different sexual identities, persisted throughout the nineteenth century, by placing women and girl prostitutes under the supervision of the police and registering the said prostitute(s) and client(s), as well as pimps and madams, councillors and police officers, actors and actresses, in the shadow and the bright light of a contested prostiutional order.

Regulation, contestation

By placing women and girls prostitutes under the supervision of the police des mœurs (vice squad), by forcing them to submit to medical check-ups (1802), then by legalising the existence of brothels or maisons de tolérance (1814), the Consulate opted for a novel method of overseeing female prostitution outlined during the Revolutionary period. Regulationism met venal sexuality halfway by taking it in hand rather than banning it or trying to eradicate it. With this regulatory social mission to carry out, it was then regarded as a ‘necessary evil’ in the light of sexual demands consistant with vitiility. This doctrine, reflecting ingrained beliefs with different sexual identities, persisted throughout the nineteenth century, and beyond. At the start of the Third Republic, Maxime Du Camp returned to the same type of topics in explaining prostitution in terms of ‘the brutalit of men’s passions, the organic and moral weakness of women.’ These prejudices, mixed with pragmatism, incited the authorities to present regulationism, also developed in the colonies, as a public health measure helping to control venereal diseases and liable to maintain the family unit. The idea was first to identify and create a file for women engaged in debauchery, then to relegate them to specific locations. Placed under the watchful eye of doctors and police, the brothel was expected to optimise the system’s efficiency. It fell to the mayors to draft their local byelaws and register the said filles soumises, the one exception being Paris, where this task was assigned to the chief of police. Women who applied to join a brothel were registered on the brothel-keeper’s books and issued with a number, while those opting to be streetwalkers received a card listing their health and other obligations. So prostitutionnal activity per se was not an offence. However, it could become one, as a ‘public offence against decency’ under the criminal code of 1810, which also explicitly punished procuring when performed on minors under the age of twenty-one.

Published in 1836, De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris, a veritable sociological survey of prostitutes, left a lasting mark on minds and register the said filles soumises, the one exception being Paris, where this task was assigned to the chief of police. Women who applied to join a brothel were registered on the brothel-keeper’s books and issued with a number, while those opting to be streetwalkers received a card listing their health and other obligations. So prostitutionnal activity per se was not an offence. However, it could become one, as a ‘public offence against decency’ under the criminal code of 1810, which also explicitly punished procuring when performed on minors under the age of twenty-one.

Corbin has published an abridged version of the book, La Prostitution à Paris au xixe siècle, Paris, Seuil, 1981.


Their own chief, François Carlier, himself confessed that his officers could oriously depending on how intimate they were with the illegal prostitutes. They were open to bribery and would carry out their repression more or less vig-

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of the problem that he proclaimed: ‘My theatre is a brothel. … It’s all very simple. I pay for the pleasure of one section of the audience, was the preferred theatre for dealings with these women by pocketing on average half of their takings for enlisting their help. being careful to keep the customer satisfied, whatever his preferences, they had no compunction in hiring very young girls, whom they would take to a home, or would present to an old family from the Périgord, as a stepladder to an accomplished society life.

Thus the ‘exceedingly unhappy’ Alphonsine bonhomme, who was a dancer at the Châtelet, ‘gave herself to just anyone for next to nothing’. At 17, a ‘publicite’ was in a cold sweat after the police found at her home a notebook with little whores who would dive into the festive hurly-burly, whether out of necessity or out of love of this kind of excitement. The Police were careful to give the pleasure venues primarily designed to cater for males: restaurants, cafés, concerts, theatres, opera house, dances, walks through the Bois de Boulogne, horse-racing at Longchamp. The Folies-Bergère, famous for the licentious casualness of its audience, was the most papered over, with its little tarts, and there was nothing the municipal police could do about it.

But it was the ‘stars of élite prostitution’—demi-mondaines, grandes courtesanes, grandes cocottes—leading society women—who electrified a clientele drawn from the upper echelons of politics, finance, industry, the military, and cultural circles, to which may be added the names of top members of the ruling families—starting with Emperor Napoleon himself—and cosmopolitan aristocracies. As an outward sign of both wealth and manliness, these dearly won conquests were paraded ostentatiously by their male escorts. Possessing an erotic and social shareholding that they capitalised upon skilfully: a monthly income of more than 10,000 francs, not counting treats, from their fancy man of the day. In 1865, ‘nothing was known of the whereabouts of a woman named Versieux, and a well-known actress Blanche d’Antigny, whose father was a carpenter and mother a linen maid, living in the lap of luxury in her private mansion for an annual rent of over 15,000 francs, received a gift of 50,000 francs’ worth of jewellery from the tsar’s prefect of police, pocketed 300,000 francs of Paul de Turenne’s money before leaving the young man without a penny, charged Prince Charles de Pompadour an extortionate sum for a one-night stand, and would never agree to sex for under 500 francs. Courtesans made their own contribution to the construction of haute-bourgeois Paris, not just by paying their bills or renting expensive rooms, but by getting themselves introduced to, or, in the case of those who had climbed to the very top, a private mansion. Despite her hugely successful stage career, Sarah Bernhardt had no compunction in playing the high-class escort when she was earning a fortune for herself, and paying for her own theatre. She was neither a ‘bride of fortune’ like the famous publicite in hiring very young girls, whom they would take to a home, or would present to an old family from the Périgord, as a stepladder to an accomplished society life. Thus Alphonse Bouillé, who was a dancer at the Châtelet, ’gave herself to just anyone for next to nothing’.

At the age of nineteen, she was of no fixed abode, ‘slept wherever she could’, and, under the influence of her fairy tales, she lapsed into the strained condition of being a woman by pocketing on average half of their takings for enlisting their help. being careful to keep the customer satisfied, whatever his preferences, they had no compunction in hiring very young girls, whom they would take to a home, or would present to an old family from the Périgord, as a stepladder to an accomplished society life.

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Even more than the underaged, what most excited lusty males was virginity, or at least what was passed off as such, and it could command some very fancy prices: thus the Peruvian consul, at the head of a fortune valued at thirty-five million, forked out 30,000 francs, not including his tip to the two procurers, for a supposedly virgin.\textsuperscript{155}

Le Livre des courtisanes highlights the role played by these procurresses with a difference in the illegal prostitution set-up, and in the rise of the maisons de rendez-vous (houses of assignation) beginning with the Second Empire.\textsuperscript{44} Preferred to the maisons de tolérance (conventional brothels) for their discreetness and catering to individual tastes, they attracted a clientele of gentlemen from the middle and elite classes, which was unfortunate for the police, for it made surveillance that much more difficult. Between 1890 and 1910, under the police prefect Lépine, the regulations were changed, rubber-stamping the decline of the brothels and legalising the houses of assignation.\textsuperscript{45}

Homosexuality, pornography

Only prostitution in the sense of paid sexual services provided by a woman to a man was covered by the official regulations. Heterosexuality was in fact just as consensual with the briefest prostitute-client relationship as it was to the long-term married couple. But while homosexuality was condemned socially no less with regard to paid sex as to disinterested practices, in both cases it was considered less unpalatable between women than between men. Venal lesbian sex acts featured among the topoi of male fantasies and talk about prostitutes.\textsuperscript{43} A worried Parent-Duchâtelet counted one-quarter of ‘tribads’ among the prostitutes of Paris under the July Monarchy, while for the Belle Époque Léo Taxil voiced alarm at the ‘horrid fantasies and talk about prostitutes. But, for a woman as for a man, paid sex could be arranged with a same-sex partner without it saying anything about one’s own sexual preferences.\textsuperscript{44} My [male] lover had me fixed up with a woman he brought me’, said one independent prostitute taken in for police questioning: ‘Women do it better than men. I prefer them.’\textsuperscript{45}

Such arrangements were by no means uncommon among the elites. Thus the comte de La Ferrière took advantage of the licence associated with the Opéra ball to persuade two society women to ‘come up to his box and abandon themselves to the attentions of his mistress’, a courte- san; meanwhile the prefect, Janvier de La Motte, set up assignations at a Paris hotel between ‘society ladies from the city of Évreux’ whom he had first met, and ‘a girl tasked with initiating [them] into certain mysteries of love probably unknown [to them]’.\textsuperscript{46} Lastly, some women responded to a specific request from society women, who adopted for the occasion behaviour similar to their male clients, if two anecdotes from the memoirs of Albert Viel-Castel are to be believed. The first is about the sister of a theatre director who, having only just come into some money, ‘rushed to Cico’s, the actress Pauline Cico, who was playing at the Vaudeville at that date, rather than the daughter of the well-known surgeon, de Beaumont, “caught last year in a whorehouse, in a compromising position with a tricarrelé,” and noting that “this pockadillo does her no harm, she is accepted in society.”\textsuperscript{46}

Not only was prostitution not listed as a misdemeanor in the Napoleonic codes, neither was homosexuality.\textsuperscript{47} The police only became involved when things spilled from a private setting over into the urban domain, as when Bordeaux was rocked by two cases of homosexual prostitution that hit the headlines twelve years apart. Not because the practice had died out during the intervening years, but because, the first time around, caught by surprise in the Place des Quinconces, some forty ‘worthy descendants of Sodom’ were committed for trial and handed stiff sentences.\textsuperscript{48} The effect of the punishment and the local press coverage of the event was chiefly to send prostitution underground inside private homes, beyond the reach of the police and the courts. In 1878, some ‘newcomers’ ventured once more into the Place des Quinconces

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\textsuperscript{155} Jan Sluijters, Women Kissing, 1906, oil on canvas, 36 × 24 ½ in., Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum

\textsuperscript{44} Corbin, op. cit. (note 11), p. 472.

\textsuperscript{45} The Pretty Women of Paris, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1996

\textsuperscript{46} La Victoire de la démocratie, 11 December 1878.

\textsuperscript{47} Charles Vermiètre, Trois et quatre, Paris, Perrot, 1893, pp. 89–100.


\textsuperscript{50} Charles Vermiètre, Trois et quatre, Paris, Perrot, 1893, pp. 89–100.
414. Jean Béraud, Prostitutes’ Charge Room at the Police Headquarters, 1886, oil on canvas, 56 3/4 × 43 1/2 in., Texas, private collection

405. Albert Brichaut, Saint-Lazare Visiting Room. Jennies to the left. Family to the right. Guards in the middle, c.1898, photograph taken from a collection of photographs on Parisian brothels, aristotype, 8 1/4 × 6 1/2 in., Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France

451. Collection Spitzner, Female Face with Syphilis: iron, wax, 10 3/4 × 13 1/2 × 4 in., University of Montpellier

441. Dr León Charles Jolivet, Victim of Syphilis, c.1915, gelatin silver print, 6 1/4 × 4 1/4 in., Paris, Collection Gérard Lévy

1127. Registre BBI / BFI Register: Guy Augustine, dite Débureau / Augustine Guy, known as Débureau, c.1861, Paris, Archives de la Préfecture de Police


1126. Surveillance carried out at the Folies-Bergère, municipal police report, 8 October 1876, Paris, Préfecture de Police
to engage in ‘obscene unnatural acts or indecent fondling in public places’.

Since their rallying sign was a handkerchief around the neck or sticking out of a pocket, they were easily picked out by the Bordeaux police, who brought twenty-four of them before a court judge. Seventeen were minors aged from twenty to thirty and from a broad range of backgrounds. The youngest were charged with ‘obscenities’ with gentlemen in urinals, the standard venue for male prostitution.54 Two were sent or sent back to a reformatory. Another doubtless owed his acquittal to the savoir-faire of his father, an industrialist who came up to the witness stand to reassure the judges that his paternal authority was about to make an example of the boy. Several were categorised by the press as being of the ‘feminine type and mannerisms’, or even a ‘fairy’, themselves readily using feminised nicknames – ‘la Boîteuse’, ‘la Belle Charcutière’, ‘la Cantinière’ – or feminine ones – ‘Eugénie’, ‘Marguerite’ – much as some Parisian male prostitutes borrowed the names of leading courtesans.55 Most, even those reportedly from ‘honourable’ families, were sentenced to six months in prison and a sixteen franc fine.

The seven adults were aged from twenty-four to fifty-one, and among them the clients they were identified; they included three married family men, which raises the question of their bisexuality as much as their homosexuality. A man servant prosecuted for inciting minors to commit obscene acts, in addition to the standard public offence against decency, was given the heaviest sentence, namely two years’ imprisonment and a fifty franc fine, and was additionally stripped of his civil rights for five years. This was because he faced the serious charge of having ‘sullied’ the home by taking in young boys in the absence of his master, who was none other than Senator Charles de Pelleport-Burité, a former mayor of Bordeaux.56 We should therefore not be surprised to see the Parisian daily Le Temps, in its issue dated 12 December 1878, reporting on the ‘emotion’ felt at the prefecture of the Gironde and putting it down to the number of people mixed up in the affair, either directly or indirectly. One, a pharmacist reportedly from ‘honourable’ families, were sentenced to six months in prison and a sixteen franc fine.

Most, even those

from Marmande, saw the love letters he had been exchanging with one of the young suspects publicly disclosed at the hearing.57 So what came in for popular disapproval here was the male homosexuality rather than the prostitution. According to La Victoire de la démocratie, the crowds gathered around the court building reportedly booed these ‘disgusting characters’.58 The reporter, expressing the wish that the city now be rid of such ‘base acts’, nonetheless ends his article with a question: ‘When is it going to be the turn of the bedroom workers?’, which amounted to a call for full criminalisation of all male prostitution.

From mid-century on, surveillance of what were considered deviant illegal sexual practices was in place and further tightened during the decade 1860–70, targeting not just the transoumâtres, but also ‘pederasts’ and leading players in the pornography industry.59 The register devoted to countering pornography showed, above and beyond the etymology of the word, the material interconnections between prostitution and photographic pornography.60 Nearly fifteen per cent of women posing in front of a camera lens were described by vice squad officers as filles publiques (streetwalkers), although the actual figure was higher.61 And a sitter could so easily slip into prostitution and the ambiguity turned into a generalisation given curricularising players in the pornography industry.62 The reporter, expressing the wish that the city now be rid of such ‘base acts’, nonetheless ends his article with a question: ‘When is it going to be the turn of the bedroom workers?’, which amounted to a call for full criminalisation of all male prostitution.

Judgement of the Tribunal of Premiere Instance of Bordeaux, police correctionnelle (county magistrates’ court), 9–10 December 1878, Archives Départementales de la Gironde, XU 7039.


La Victoire de la démocratie, 12 December 1878.

Ibid.

12 December 1878.

The Paris Prefecture of Police possesses six invaluable registers devoted to illegal sexual practices: BB1, the most complete one, is the one published as Le Livre des courtières, op. cit. (note 13); BB2, entitled ‘Suivre les galantes 1859’, catalogues incessantly and inaccurately 292 women, put on file in late 1859 or early 1860; BB3, dated 1853 to 1868, is devoted to the fight against pornography, particularly photographic. The last three, BB4, BB5 and BB6, devoted to homosexuals, extend from the Second Republic to the early years of the Third; BB4 was recently published as Le Registre infamant, op. cit. (note 45).

Eponymously, ‘pornography’ does indeed mean ‘writing about the prostitute’.

The word was coined by Restif de La Béatitude in his 1769 book Le Pornographe ou La Prostitution réformée.

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other hand, none of these twenty-four polkas features a woman frolicking with two male partners. And while ten prints offer sapphic sequences, none suggests pederasty in any shape or form. While these pornographic photographs are intended for a huge male audience, others, in calling-card format and dedicated to cross-dressing prostitutes, are kept at the Prefecture of Police or by collectors. This is proof of the fact that, like prostitution, the pornography industry did also cater for a male homosexual clientele.  

Whether a disavowal, in a sense, of unsatisfactory sex within marriage or a convenient palliative to male celibacy, prostitution crudely underlined the structural inequalities of gender and wealth in nineteenth-century French society. From its female population of sex workers to its mediatised élite, extreme mobility was still the rule, and upward mobility could be just as sudden as a sharp fall from grace. From this standpoint, prostitution takes on all its meaning in its plurality. As they literally careered through life, these women would change customers, sexual practices, fortunes, housing, cities and even countries. At this time that saw the growth of transport, those who were able willingly took off to try their luck in the other capitals of prostitution such as London or Brussels, but they also ventured much further afield to places like Russia, America, Egypt or Turkey. Their unstable and precarious lifestyle was also much more exposed than others to the risks of illness, abortion, incest, violence, madness and suicide. Between living on the fringes of society and gender subversion, between reprobation and seduction, they either put up with or made the best of a prostitutional activity that was both tough and exhilarating.


Register BB/3, fol. 19.


Jean Béraud, *The Proposition or The Assignation in the Rue Chateaubriand*, c. 1885, oil on panel.  


Register BB/3, fol. 19.


*Le Livre des contraceptions*, *op. cit.* (note 15), p. 44.