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Ross, Andrew Israel. *Public City/Public Sex: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019. Xi + 248 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 (pb and ebook). ISBN: 978-1-4399-1489-2

Review Essay by Jill Harsin, Colgate University

In 1903 sociologist Georg Simmel, in “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” wrote about the challenges faced by those in the heavily populated modern urban centers. People in small towns, he suggested, have an affective response to those they encounter. Village dwellers know each other, they have a long history together, and thus they are also, for that very reason, constrained in what they might do. In contrast, city dwellers develop what he called a “blasé” attitude to urban life, partly out of necessity; otherwise, they would be constantly on edge, overloaded by sights, sounds, and smells. But cities also allow for anonymity and thus a kind of freedom, or at least the possibility—and indeed, the need—for self-definition in the midst of mass culture.

I was thinking about all of this as I read Andrew Israel Ross’s fascinating study of Paris and the sexual culture that developed with urbanization. Ross begins with a challenging and provocative comparison of the *maison de tolérance* and the public urinal, both of them representing an attempt to channel natural urges—male natural urges—towards specific places where they would not intrude on the public. As Ross indicates, the morals police in Paris were faced with a continuing paradox in regard to prostitution. In controlling it, the Prefecture acknowledged that it existed. By signing women up and giving them membership cards, they essentially created an authorized profession. In trying to channel prostitution away from public view, they allocated spaces where it could occur—spaces, in fact, that existed only so prostitution could occur—and made them highly visible, since they had to be marked in some way so that the unwary passerby could avoid them, or perhaps be tempted inside.

The urinals, in contrast, were meant to control the-world-is-my-*pissoir* attitude of male nineteenth-century Parisians. The photographs of early urinals indicate that they were hardly about privacy, nor about removing the immodest act from view. The half-kiosk of the 1870s, elaborately decorated in bas-relief designs, nevertheless left virtually the entire body of the user visible, and spared the public nothing of the splashes and sounds and smells.[1] It almost goes without saying that there were no comparable facilities for women. Public hygienist Jean-Baptiste Fonssagrives brushed away the lack of equality in this realm: “There is no parity in this matter between the withdrawn and sedentary life of the gynaeceum and the exigencies of exterior life . . . which drive men in great cities” (p. 69). The message was that women did, and should, remain at home. The other underlying assumption behind such urinal-design strategies was that since “respectable” women would not be on the streets, one need not worry about offending the others, the working classes and the unrespectable, who did not matter.

The old strictures began to change, as Ross has suggested, with the rebuilding of the city. The reconstruction of Paris under Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann was documented in the photographs of Charles Marville, hired by the city government to preserve both the old Paris that was vanishing as well as the emerging new capital of the boulevards. Streets were torn up to install sewer and gas lines, to enhance the circulation of traffic, to get rid of ramshackle eyesores and dark little alleyways. The Universal Exposition of 1867, a showcase for art and industry, most importantly displayed the new Paris itself. A few short years later, during the Franco-Prussian War, Paris was bombarded by the Prussian army and then burned during the Bloody Week of May 1871. Some of the most familiar edifices vanished or, like the Tuileries, were left as vacant shells for years. The effects of both of these destructions, in the 1850s and in 1870-71, had the effect of destroying familiar patterns of urban life. There were now newly accessible and gentrifying districts. The working classes moved to the suburbs. The impoverished *zoniers*, who had always existed on the margins of city life, now often lived illegally in the defensive “zone” just outside the fortification walls; their improvised communities were preserved by another great photographer, Eugène Atget. Thus, the ragpickers (*chiffonniers*), the night soil men, the vagrants and beggars, were pushed out and away from Paris. Of their kind, only the prostitutes were allowed to remain.

The rise of consumerism, exemplified by the department stores, also had the effect of bringing respectable women into the streets. New urinals had to become more private. The most elaborate ones, again, as shown in the wonderful photos of this study, looked like little public monuments. They also took on a new function, as places for men who wished to pick up other men. The police undertook the duty of watching and infiltrating these spaces, trying to catch miscreants in the act and to figure out the signs by which they could be recognized: “They enter into a stall as soon as one is free,” reported one such policeman; “if all the stalls are occupied, they enter into the vestibule and pass a quarter of an hour by examining the physiognomy of the people who enter and leave, unbutton themselves five or six times during this length of time . . .” (p. 73). And, of course, there was the occasional embarrassing catch, as of a Municipal Council member in 1876 (a Count, no less) who claimed that he was merely investigating the problem that he had heard so much about (p. 83).

For a time, at least, some of the new and disarranged neighborhoods were up for grabs, with no clear boundaries to separate those who were respectable and those who were not. Ross has made good use of the complaints sent in to the police by homeowners and businessmen, outraged that their neighborhoods were being disrupted. There was, for example, the man whose home shared a thin wall with a neighbor who made a little extra money by renting out a *chambre de passe*, a very short-term lodging that catered to prostitutes and their customers. He and his wife and children “could hear everything that happened there” (p. 173). Or there was the case of the man who complained that when he made his nightly walks, between 9 and 11 pm, in an area near the Champs Elysées, he was constantly subject to vulgar propositions from prostitutes, who even touched him to get his attention. Why did he have to endure this simply because he wanted to walk? And here a gentle criticism for Ross, who sounds a bit judgmental: “Why he insisted on roaming the area at night, when such encounters were more common, is left unexplained” (p. 171). Like many male (but no female) city-dwellers, he might well have said that he had the right to walk where and when he wanted.

It has been thirty-five years since I published *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Paris*.^[1] The fields of women's history, of gender and sexuality, of LGBTQ studies, have evolved rapidly out of virtually nothing. When I began to teach European women's history, in the early 1980s, there were still relatively few sources available, not only to assign, but to learn from myself. Women sometimes appeared in general histories, usually portrayed as interfering or ineffectual, but their situations were never studied in a structural way that would take legal, institutional, or customary issues into consideration. Famous women, often the subjects of sentimental biographies, were studied as a matter of their personal quirks and their love affairs, both real and imagined. As for ordinary women, there was little to go on as yet: some demographic studies, some family reconstructions, some attempts to theorize from the margins of works about something else. But historians of women, working steadily, asking new questions, expanding the field, were quickly filling in the histories we did not know and were asking new questions about what we thought we already knew about social structure and agency.

I was inspired by the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies of Seebohm Rowntree, Mrs. M. Pember Reeves, the Women's Cooperative Guild, and others, whose work captured the words of working class women.^[2] And that is what I tried to do. I conceived of my work as a kind of rescue project, not as their contemporaries would have understood the word, but as a way of ensuring, in some small way, that their lives would not be forgotten. My sources allowed me only to read the words of those arrested for prostitution. Many officers merely noted down the names of those they hauled in, but as in Ross's sources, there were many cases when the police actually became interested enough to record what they said, even to speculate on why they might have said it. After all, the police had a certain familiarity with these women who were carded and whom they saw with some frequency, especially those who were truly down and out, and whom they suspected of simply wanting shelter, even with the police, for the night. I also attempted to explain why working-class women fought so hard against being registered, and were often despondent when they were: it placed them in a limited category that they could never leave. But of course, as many soon realized, they could leave it: by going home to the provinces, by changing their names, by simply vanishing for a few months, so that eventually they would be classified as "disappeared" in the wilds of new urban Paris.

In the case of men, as Ross describes, the Second Empire *chef de sûreté*, Louis Canler, tried to categorize the men looking for same-sex encounters with other men: a bizarre conflation of an attempt to resurrect the system of classification, to alert the unwary, to laud police expertise, and to create a nineteenth-century "Fear of Missing Out" in those too naive to realize that they were surrounded by a sexual bazaar. Canler's categories and names were nonsense, of course: slang ceases to be used almost as soon as outsiders pick it up, but one of his categories summed up the situation of the city quite nicely: the *rivettes*, often of high station, often targets of blackmail, but who "have nothing that could distinguish them from other men, and it is necessary that the observer have the greatest attention joined to the greatest practice in order to discern them" (p. 143). They were there, in other words, and they looked exactly like everybody else.

Ross ends his study with the breakdown of the system of *tolérance* in the late nineteenth century. Heterosexual prostitution, same-sex couples, same-sex prostitution, cross-class opportunities, seemed to swirl throughout the city. There was talk of "special" hat shops, brasseries, seamstress workshops, and other apparently benign spaces of women's labor that

catered to prostitution in their secret back rooms, a genuine annoyance or worse for the women whose work forced them to interact with the public. As Ross indicates, anxiety was caused by ambiguity. Was the woman who glanced at you, perhaps held your glance a bit too long, signaling her availability? Perhaps she was. Or perhaps she was merely thinking her own thoughts.

NOTES

[1] Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[2] Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty, A Study of Town Life* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1901); Maud Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week* (London: The Fabian Women's Group, 1913); Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Life As We Have Known It* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931); and Margaret Llewelyn Davies, ed., *Maternity: Letters from Working Women, collected by the Women's Cooperative Guild* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1915).

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