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

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Public City/Public Sex: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris is a thought-provoking work that opens up new ways of thinking about the relationship between urban spaces, urban identities and sexual practices and imaginaries. It is deeply researched and interpretively ambitious. It is enlightening and frustrating at the same time: a book with which you might argue, but which ultimately leaves you thinking differently about the city.

In *Public City/Public Sex*, Andrew Israel Ross makes several arguments. That which is best supported and executed in the book concerns efforts by police and others (including both experts and members of the general public) to control and make sense of sexual activity in the streets and other public spaces of the city. This argument is built upon a narrative concerning efforts to police prostitution that will be familiar to those who work on these topics. Since it is so central to Ross's book, it is worth reviewing here.

Drawing on the work of other scholars as well as his own research, Ross argues that in the early nineteenth century, police adopted a regulationist logic in order to limit the public visibility of female prostitutes.[1] Regulationism entailed the establishment of brothels (*maisons closes* or *maisons de tolérance*), in which prostitutes were supposed to both live and ply their trade, and the registration of prostitutes with police authorities. Prostitution was not illegal, but prostitutes were subjected to an extra-legal regime that allowed police to force women to undergo gynecological examinations to detect venereal disease, imprisonment for purposes of "treatment" if they were found to have venereal disease, and registration as prostitutes. These measures could be enacted regardless of a woman's statement concerning whether or not she actually sold sex, and without the need for any evidence that she had done so. This system fell out of favor in the late nineteenth century, as brothels declined in popularity and pressure mounted from abolitionist corners. In the late 1870s, a neoregulationist system took hold, as police moved away from efforts to limit prostitution to brothels. In Ross's work, this shift manifests itself as (1) ad-hoc efforts to clean up specific areas of the city known as centers of prostitution and (2) the surveillance of new commercialized leisure spaces, such as the *brasseries-à-femmes*.

Ross demonstrates that even during the 1820s and 1830s, when efforts to establish a brothel system were most vigorous, prostitution was both contained by and escaped this system. Women could and did sell sex as registered prostitutes working outside a brothel (*filles isolées*) or as unregistered prostitutes (*filles insoumises*). Even as brothels were established, police were not always eager to forbid prostitution in some public areas of the city, such as the Palais Royal, out of fear that it would only move to other areas. Regulationism, Ross concludes, was less about

enclosure than about ensuring that the sale of sex was contained in certain areas of the city – whether those were particular streets or institutions such as brothels. In one of his central arguments, Ross contends that these efforts to control prostitution led police authorities to create a more visible set of spaces for selling sex. The older woman who stood in front of the door or the street number that was larger than that of surrounding buildings, indicated the presence of a brothel. Thus, regulationism was not only about limiting sex to certain areas of the city; it was also about making sex legible to Parisians. This argument both builds upon and challenges Jill Harsin’s characterization of a shift in police concerns. Harsin argues that mid-century police efforts largely moved away from worries about sexual solicitation in spaces inaccessible to police to focus on dangerous individuals.[2] Ross, by contrast, demonstrates a continuity in concerns about rendering sex legible, both in space and on the body of individuals. He also demonstrates that efforts to render sex legible made it more difficult to contain.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Ross argues, regulationist logic expanded from its focus on female prostitution to include other sorts of public sex. In chapter two, Ross demonstrates that public urinals, constructed in an attempt to improve public hygiene, quickly became cruising spaces for men seeking sex with other men. Although urinals were not intended as spaces for public sex, their use for this purpose led police to apply a regulationist approach to these spaces as well. Rather than doing away with urinals altogether, or establishing a constant police presence there, new designs that rendered the urinals less visible from public view allowed them to continue functioning as sites of sexual display and as places where one could meet potential sex partners. Ross argues that because men used urinals for unintended purposes, urinals “disrupted the regulationist assumption of inevitable male desire directed toward women” (p.83). However, if we see regulationism as a project of rendering sex visible, the management of urinals fits squarely into the regulationist framework.

The question of legibility is key to Ross’s work, although it is not an argument that he spells out as consistently or systematically as he might have. Ross convincingly demonstrates that in the management of street prostitution and brothels, as well as in the management of urinals and other public cruising grounds, police were less concerned with eradicating sex in public than with assuring that it only took place in certain types of public spaces. While Ross frames police efforts within a chronology that shifts from regulationism to neoregulationism, his evidence and interpretation of the evidence instead suggests a consistency over the course of the nineteenth century, whereby police efforts were concerned with making public sex legible. This is not altogether insistent with earlier scholarly discussions. Jill Harsin, for example, described neoregulationism as “less a matter of substantive change than it was a matter of public relations.” [3] While her emphasis is on measures applied to female prostitutes such as medical examinations, Ross’s focus on public spaces also bears out an interpretation in favor of overall continuity. As Ross demonstrates, the spaces where sex was available to the public may have changed somewhat, but the logic behind the management of these spaces remained the same.

This is an important argument, but it is presented in a way that is confusing for the reader, in part because Ross lays out his chapters in a loosely chronological fashion while also moving forward and back in time in various chapters. This organization suggests greater change than his evidence bears out, especially when one considers other continuities. While reading this book, I was reminded again and again of stories and images of *grisettes*, or young working girls, in the early

nineteenth century. In descriptive literature on Paris, which included works such as the *physiologies* and *Les français peints par eux-mêmes*, the *grisette* was consistently on display – whether on the street or through a shop window – to men seeking a sexual partner.[4] In the early part of the century, sex was also rendered visible through published works that identified places where prostitutes could be found, just as it was, as Ross indicates, in the late nineteenth century. [5] Entertainment venues, such as the Opéra or the bal Mabille, were notorious as places where men could meet women for sexual encounters.[6] Ross acknowledges this last point, and provides numerous—and fascinating—examples that demonstrate that street solicitation by male and female prostitutes as well as cruising areas frequented by men remained prevalent throughout the nineteenth century.[7]

I raise this point about continuity less to challenge Ross’s argument than to suggest that efforts to control “*how not whether* venal sex appeared to the populace” may have been more consistent throughout the period Ross studies, from the 1820s through the 1890s, than he sometimes seems to suggest (p. 52). It is this consistency, I would argue, that is so important to Ross’s depiction of urban modernity. Ross contends that public sex was central to modern urban culture, which scholars once saw as emerging with the renovations of the city undertaken during the Second Empire. Under the direction of Prefect of the Seine Baron Haussmann, older crowded neighborhoods were opened up by broad thoroughfares that facilitated the movement of goods, people, and troops through the city.[8] However, recent works situate characteristics of this urban culture, such as an emphasis on public health and mobility as well as commercialization and visibility (spectacle), in the earlier nineteenth century.[9] Ross draws upon both timelines of urban modernity in a way that is sometimes confusing. However, if we focus on his reconceptualization of regulationism as a means of rendering sex visible in the city, then we see that it fits clearly within a revised chronology, which posits that significant shifts in urban management and in ways of thinking about the city emerged in the early part of the nineteenth century.

Although placed within a framework of a shift from regulationism to neoregulationism, Ross’s work actually demonstrates a different sort of change over time: an expansion of the regulationist logic from female prostitutes to other segments of the population over the course of the nineteenth century. This is an important and intriguing argument that is unevenly executed. Ross does an excellent job in showing how the approach that police took to brothels was applied to public urinals and to commercial entertainment venues of the late nineteenth century. In each case, the ability of Parisians to find sexual partners was facilitated by attempts to control where and how one might seek out sex with strangers. These locations were readily visible in themselves, but were also made even more visible by texts—whether those of medical experts or guidebooks—that explained what they were and how to use them. As Ross argues concerning brothels, the legibility of these sites rendered them “more fully integrated” into urban space. One might also argue that other urban spaces, such as the Palais Royal or the Tuileries garden, which were known as spaces of sexual encounter, functioned in similar ways.

One of the linchpins of this argument concerning the expansion of regulationist logic is a contention that in order to resolve problems in policing men who had sex with other men, who could not be arrested unless caught having sex in public, these men were depicted as having many of the same characteristics as female prostitutes. The link between prostitution and same-

sex sexuality was discussed at length by Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, who argued in 1836 that female prostitutes turned to other women because they were disgusted by and disillusioned with their male clients. Ross builds upon this connection to argue that same-sex relations with other men were rendered venal by authorities' belief that such men were either blackmailers or their victims.

Similarly, while police (incorrectly) assured themselves and others that they could always identify a prostitute, after mid-century authorities asserted that they could identify men who sought sex with other men through certain physical characteristics and behaviors. One of these was effeminacy, which was considered to be particularly evident in male prostitutes. Asserting that men who had sex with other men possessed characteristics attributed to female prostitutes helped to facilitate (or at least justify) police efforts to manage same-sex activity in the city. Yet it also opened up the possibility of more fluid gender boundaries. Ross argues that "these conceptualizations of male same-sex sexual behavior could also efface the difference between the male and the female prostitute" (p. 117). Ross does an excellent job in his discussion of how this association between female prostitution and male same-sex activity was developed and spread in a variety of texts, even including two examples that indicate that this formulation of male same-sex sexuality as akin to prostitution was adopted by members of the public outside police circles. However, the connection to specific forms of regulationist policy is not made explicitly, and is especially hard to tease out on the first read of the book. Ross does not tell us, for example, if efforts to define male same-sex sexuality in terms of female prostitution allowed for more effective policing of public urinals. Similarly, in chapter six, on the *brasseries-à-femmes/hommes* and dance and music halls, Ross picks up the themes from chapter three: sex as a commodity, gender and sexual indeterminacy, and the use of authorized spaces for unintended purposes. Ross's implicit argument that these spaces functioned like brothels is original and convincing, but again the reader would be helped by more significant signposts to make these connections clear on first read.

The book is well-researched, drawing primarily on materials from the Paris police archives and from texts by medical, legal, and public health experts. One of the source bases from the police archives are letters that were written to authorities by Parisians complaining about public sex, and specifically unwanted solicitation by men and women. These sources form the basis for chapters four and five, which are thought-provoking but ultimately unconvincing chapters. Chapter four demonstrates well that the quest for legibility was one that expanded beyond police authorities, as letter writers demonstrated a difficulty to "know, delimit, and categorize" (p.127) strangers in public spaces of the city. Ross argues that sexual solicitation produced an "open and unstable public" (p.152) comprised of those solicited and those doing the soliciting, who were united only through the act of eliciting and experiencing desire. While these arguments are intriguing, they rest more on supposition than clear-cut evidence. Ross reads the letters as revealing sexual identities that are easily destabilized by desire. This is a plausible reading and no doubt accurate in some cases. However, it is possible to imagine other reactions to solicitation that might reinforce pre-existing identities. In other words, one might imagine that solicitation could reinforce a sense of oneself as an "honest family man" as one reacted with disgust and a sense of superiority to solicitation. The point here is that we simply can't know, and the letters do not appear to provide enough evidence that can allow us to say one way or another. This matters because Ross contends throughout the book that spaces of public sex— brothels, urinals,

commercialized spaces, and streets—produced sexual desire and thus (following Foucault) produced certain types of sexual subjectivities that, “may or may not have been linked to a particular kind of identity, whether homosexual or heterosexual” (p. 4). This important contention remains suggestive rather than conclusive.

Ross’s depiction of urban spaces as sites of open communities and fluid identities is one of the strengths of the book, but it seems to be contradicted by the strong statements Ross makes concerning the expansion of state control over sexual activity in the final chapters. In chapter five, for example, Ross argues that letter writers’ calls for intervention in ridding public spaces of solicitation resulted in the creation of a “panoptic city” in which inhabitants “undercut their own claims to autonomy” (p.181) and whereby “letter writers had rendered themselves into prisoners” (p. 177). “There could be no privacy in the modern city,” he concludes (p. 182). In chapter six, commercialized entertainment venues are depicted as exercising a similar power; they “sold the public sexual culture but managed to successfully restrict it to those who could afford to pay” by containing it within spaces controlled by entrepreneurs and surveilled by police (p. 200). These assertions are confusing, given that the letters Ross draws upon reveal a continuation of sexual solicitation on the streets about which police seemed little concerned.[10] His characterization of sex as a vector of control in the final chapters leads into a conclusion in which he asserts that “[p]ublic sexual activity outside the commercial realm has been almost entirely removed from public view” (p. 218). Although scholarship shows that developments in cities in the west, such as gentrification and the commercialization of public space, has tended to render public sex less visible, it has not disappeared.[11] In part, this is because, as Ross demonstrates so well for the nineteenth century, city dwellers use urban spaces in unintended ways.[12] Ultimately, I found Ross’s argument about the unstable and fluid nature of public sexual culture more convincing than his concluding arguments concerning the extent to which that culture became controlled and restricted by the late nineteenth century.

This review has covered a lot of ground, and I hope it is able to suggest the richness of *Public City/Public Sex*. The study may frustrate the reader at times, but it will cause her to rethink long-standing assumptions about how nineteenth-century Paris functioned in relation to the management of public spaces and sexual activity. *Public City/Public Sex* brings together what have previously been two separate strands of scholarship—that on prostitution and that on male same-sex sexuality—to argue that the management of sexual desire and behavior in public spaces was as much a characteristic of nineteenth-century urbanism as were measures designed to improve public health, facilitate traffic or provide new commercial spaces. In demonstrating that these efforts had unintended consequences, his work should prompt scholars to rethink the impact of other forms of urban management that have been largely viewed as a top-down effort. As in the work of Richard Hopkins on the creation of greenspaces, cited above, Ross demonstrates that modern urban spaces were continually reshaped by negotiations between authorities and users. I congratulate Andrew Ross on writing this book, which will be a “must read” for anyone working on nineteenth-century cities and urban cultures, as well as for those interested in the history of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century.

NOTES

[1] The regulationist system is described and analyzed most thoroughly in Alain Corbin, *Les filles de noce: Misère sexuelle et prostitution au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1978) and Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[2] Harsin, *Policing Prostitution*, 242-250.

[3] Harsin, *Policing Prostitution*, 336.

[4] Victoria E. Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris, 1830-1870* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 20; Susan Hiner, "Picturing Work," in Victoria E. Thompson, ed., *A Cultural History of Work in the Age of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 40.

[5] Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace*, 21.

[6] François Gasnault, *Guingettes et lorettes: Bals publics et danse sociale à Paris entre 1830 et 1870* (Paris: Aubier, 1986), 195-8.

[7] The geography of male same-sex encounters in Paris of the 1860s and 1870s is discussed in William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Routledge, 2004), chapter 10.

[8] There is a vast literature on this transformation of Paris. See for example, David H. Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958); Howard Saalman, *Haussmann: Paris Transformed* (New York: G. Braziller, 1971); Jean des Cars et. al., *Paris-Haussmann: Le pari d'Haussmann* (Paris: Pavillon de l'Arsenal, 1998); David P. Jordan, *Transforming Paris: The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

[9] See for example, Karen Bowie, ed., *La modernité avant Haussman: Formes de l'espace urbain à Paris, 1801-1853* (Paris: Éditions Recherches, 2001); Nicholas Papayanis, *Planning Paris before Haussmann* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); H. Hazel Hahn, *Scenes of Parisian Modernity: Culture and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Sun-Young Park, *Ideals of the Body: Architecture, Urbanism, and Hygiene in Postrevolutionary Paris* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018); Erin-Marie Legacey, *Making Space for the Dead: Catacombs, Cemeteries, and the Reimagining of Paris, 1780-1830* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[10] On this point see also Richard S. Hopkins, *Planning the Greenspaces of Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 125-7.

[11] Mark E. Casey provides an overview of scholarship on such trends in "The Queer Unwanted and Their Undesirable 'Otherness,'" in Kath Browne, Jason Lim and Gavin Brown, editors,

Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007): 125-135.

[12] The persistence of public sex is clear from websites such as “Queer Europe,” which describes how men use the triumphal arch of the Carrousel (near the Louvre museum) as a cruising ground, and “The Gay Locals,” which specifies which Paris metro stations are best for meeting men. On SmarterTravel.com, an article about how to avoid prostitution tells readers where to find it. <https://www.queereurope.com/cruising-map-paris/> ; <http://www.thegaylocals.com/blog/29/3/2015/cruising-paris-metro>; “Is Paris Safe? Warnings and Dangers Travelers Need to Know,” <https://www.smartertravel.com/is-paris-safe-warnings-and-dangers-for-travelers/>. (All sites accessed March 2, 2020).

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