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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 Norma Broude, American University

In this book, Andrew Israel Ross presents a history of the forms of state regulation and police control that were brought to bear on the practices of female prostitution and male homosexuality in the city of Paris over the course of the nineteenth century. Following Foucault and using “public sex” as his overarching frame of reference, Ross seeks to integrate “histories of sexuality with histories of Paris by emphasizing the mutually constitutive nature of space, sex, and identity” (p.11). He emphasizes the role played by urban spaces and entertainments in bringing together the categories of “female prostitute,” “male homosexual,” and “normal” Parisian, blurring the “lines between supposedly distinct, class, gender, and sexual identities” (p.15). And he charts the ways in which governmental efforts to manage sex and those who solicited it in the public spaces of Paris were shaped by, and in turn shaped, those public spaces, exerting a profound influence on the character of public life for all who lived in or visited the city. In building his arguments, Ross ably synthesizes a wide variety of documentary materials, drawing archival support from unpublished police reports and records as well as from published studies by medical and legal authorities of the period. In this respect, his book resembles other accounts of its subjects in an established and growing secondary literature that he also draws upon.

Ross’s book, however, differs from most of its modern predecessors in two important respects. On the model of François Carlier’s late nineteenth-century *Études de pathologie sociale: Les deux prostitutions* (Paris, 1887), it deals with both of these phenomena—female prostitution and male pederasty—in tandem and not in isolation from one another; and it presents the two as complementary. Ross’s distinctive contribution is to stress and explore that complementarity in new ways and to recognize the interactive nature of the regulatory efforts and public policy initiatives that were designed both to control and facilitate them. An example highlighted by the book is the history of the public urinal for men and its proliferation in Paris, to which Ross devotes a detailed and lengthy chapter. The growing ubiquity of the urinals, he argues, facilitated men’s access to the public life of the city and, by implication, to the female prostitutes who plied their trade there. But the urinals quickly became sites for same sex solicitation, an unexpected outcome that created new opportunities for other forms of male desire to flourish.

Ross’s account emphasizes the equation commonly drawn in the nineteenth-century between the female prostitute and the male pederast, but acknowledges the fundamental differences in their situations. The fluidity of identity enjoyed by the male prostitute and his upper-class clients was not available to the female prostitute. Whether confined to a regulated brothel or acting more

openly in the public space, her identity as a prostitute was forever cemented by the regulatory structures of police enforcement (p. 98). Conversely, medical and legal studies of the period help to confirm the casual nature of homosexual activity among many young, working-class men and boys, who were willing to sell sex to other men in order to support their own material tastes, but who nevertheless did not identify either as sexual “inverts” or as prostitutes.[1]

I approach Ross’s book as a feminist art historian; and it is from that position that I assess its strengths and its limitations. Among its strengths are assertions like this one, made early on in the book’s Introduction: “Strategies to manage the appearance of public sex in Paris were always premised on a common understanding of a male sexual desire that would always need to be fulfilled” (p. 23). The impressive clarity of this statement about the privileged role allotted to male desire in the organization of public life and space in Paris is for me, as a feminist reader, an important and foundational contribution that this book makes, even as its own analyses continue to take for granted that self-same cultural assumption and “understanding.”

For what is fundamentally at stake for me in the social history that this book explores is the underacknowledged issue of patriarchal power and the control that it exerted over the lives and identities of women of all classes, whether or not they were sexual workers in the public space. The relevant groundwork for this position, which I do not find sufficiently taken into account by Ross’s book, was laid several decades ago by the feminist literary historian Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick [2], who, as I have written elsewhere, “goes beyond Foucault to see the modern discourse on sexuality, organized by and around the intertwined economic interests of the social sciences and the medical, legal, and psychiatric communities, not just as an instrument of control over the individual but as a tool for the maintenance of the patriarchy and the family structure on which the power of the patriarchy depends.”[3] Sedgwick’s influential writings also affirm the important role that was played by the homosocial norms of the nineteenth century in encouraging, supporting, and masking homosexual culture and same-sex experience, another relevant avenue of inquiry that is not addressed here.

The story that Ross’s book tells, of how public sex became integral to the evolving image of modern Paris, largely discounts—and indeed relegates to a footnote—the social and economic conditions that compelled women to sell sex in the brothels and on the streets of the city (p. 98, n.17). It also ignores the lived experiences of these women, who were marginalized, exploited, debased, and consigned to lives of abject misery by a patriarchal culture that was organized around the satisfaction of male desire. The depths of that misery can be glimpsed in some of the visual art of the later nineteenth century, in the brothel imagery of male artists such as Edgar Degas and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.[4] But the story is rarely told by and from the point of view of the women who experienced or observed it. Ross could have found a striking exception to this in the writings of Flora Tristan, the early nineteenth-century French social reformer and crusader for the rights of women and workers. Tristan understood prostitution as an evil that was forced upon women and that stemmed from the patriarchal organization of the family under capitalism. Her analyses of the social and economic conditions that drove women into prostitution and her vivid descriptions of the degradations that they suffered can continue to shock and enlighten readers today as they did in her own era.[5]

Also critically overlooked in this book is the extent to which the sexualization of the city functioned, in a larger and more general sense, as a patriarchal instrument of control over the lives of women of all classes. Contemporary police reports that reveal the dangers for a woman of being misidentified and falsely arrested as a prostitute if found loitering or alone in a public place are incidentally cited in Ross's account. And he acknowledges that the zealous policing of prostitution in Paris could impinge on the lives of those who were not themselves involved with the public sale or solicitation of sex (pp. 149-50). But he gives no consideration to the profoundly restrictive effects that this regime of surveillance and enforcement had on the lives and social conditioning of women who were not prostitutes, but whose freedom of movement in the city and whose agency, both personal and professional, were always controlled and curtailed by this culture of public sex and police surveillance, and by the behavioral norms that were mandated by that culture for the "honest" or respectable woman. As the painter Marie Bashkirtseff famously put it in a *Journal* entry dated January 2, 1879:

What I long for is the freedom of going about alone, of coming and going, of sitting in the seats of the Tuileries, and especially in the Luxembourg, of stopping and looking at the artistic shops, of entering churches and museums, of walking about old streets at night; that's what I long for; and that's the freedom without which one cannot become a real artist. Do you imagine that I get much good from what I see, chaperoned as I am, and when, in order to go to the Louvre, I must wait for my carriage, my lady companion, my family? [6]

Some of these freedoms began to seem less unimaginable to women of Bashkirtseff's class later in the century when, as the art historian Ruth Iskin has argued, the rise of the department store and its dependence on the female consumer began to normalize the presence of middle and upper-class women in public.[7] While these women were still unable to circulate with the same freedom, invisibility, and anonymity that the culture afforded the legendary male *flâneur*, these transitional opportunities have nevertheless been recognized as crucial for the eventual emergence of what would become known as the "modern woman." Their importance, however, is dismissed by Ross, who, citing Iskin in particular, complains that "these analyses displace working-class women—who did indeed sometimes engage in sexual transactions—as somehow less indicative of women's place in modern society while also reinforcing a clear divide between the two" (p. 185). I would suggest instead that it is Ross who is here displacing the *bourgeois* woman as "less indicative of women's place in modern society," as he does throughout this study, where women of all classes are consistently sexualized, and the wider impact of the world of public sex as a tool of control over their agency is too often discounted or ignored.

In the book's final chapter, "Selling the Pleasures of Paris," Ross usefully chronicles the growing popularity in Paris of drinking establishments such as the *Brasseries à Femmes*. These were staffed by female servers who sold drinks and enticed customers with their real or implied sexual availability, and thus provided, he says "a useful complement for the regulated brothel" by century's end (pp.193-94). In this chapter, Ross focuses on the ways in which these drinking establishments and other popular entertainment venues such as *café concerts*, public dances, and music halls inadvertently lent support to nascent homosexual subcultures in late nineteenth-century Paris. The dominant association of these sites with heterosexuality, he argues, would

have provided effective cover for the same-sex transactions that might also occur there. And in this regard, he reduces the women who may or may not have been selling sex in these establishments to “a tool for the protection and preservation of male-male desire in new ways” (p. 211).

The fluidity and ambiguity of sexual and class identity that became integral to the appeal of these places of entertainment is a point that Ross attempts to reinforce visually with a discussion and expanded interpretation of Édouard Manet’s *Bal masqué à l’opéra* (*Masked Ball at the Opera*, 1873, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC). Here he proposes that one or more of the masked women depicted in Manet’s painting may have been meant to reference or suggest the cross-dressed men who, as police archives affirm, would mingle with the crowds at the Opera Ball in order to flirt and solicit sex with other men. To my eye, however, the masking that is integral to the painting’s subject is perhaps too successful in concealing the specificity of that suggestion. As an art historian, I would be more comfortable in accepting the suggested reference as deliberate on Manet’s part if supporting evidence of his interest in the subjects of cross-dressing or male same-sex solicitation could be found elsewhere in his oeuvre. That, however, is not the case. Overt and even covert interest among French nineteenth-century artists in the subject of male same-sex desire or solicitation as an aspect of “modern life” is in fact rare, with a notable exception provided by the work of Gustave Caillebotte. In 2002, in an essay entitled “Outing Impressionism,” I reinterpreted Caillebotte’s *Le pont de l’Europe* (*The Europe Bridge*, ca.1876. Musée d’art moderne, Petit Palais, Geneva) as an image that reflects and documents the practices of upper-class men who cruised the public spaces of Paris in search of same-sex partners. Contextual support for my interpretation, in this case, was provided not only by the historical archive but also by the existence of a substantial number of other works in the Caillebotte oeuvre that shared in and sustained my reading.[8]

Nevertheless, I would still commend Ross here for his effort to address Manet’s painting not merely as an illustration of a piece of history (more typical, in my experience, of the way in which historians tend to use and subordinate works of art), but rather acting in this instance somewhat more as an art historian might do, in an attempt, however inconclusive, to deepen and expand the prevailing interpretation of Manet’s painting with support from the historical archive.

## NOTES

[1] See Norma Broude, “Outing Impressionism: Homosexuality and Homosocial Bonding in the Work of Caillebotte and Bazille,” in Norma Broude ed., *Gustave Caillebotte and the Fashioning of Identity in Impressionist Paris* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 117-174; on these issues, 131-35.

[2] The relevant books by Sedgwick are: *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); and *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

[3] Broude, “Outing Impressionism,” in *Gustave Caillebotte and the Fashioning of Identity in Impressionist Paris*, pp. 117-174; this quote, 119.

[4] On this larger subject, see Linda Nochlin, *Misère: The Visual Representation of Misery in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018).

[5] See, for example, Flora Tristan, *London Journal, 1840*. Translated from the French (*Promenades dans Londres*) by Dennis Palmer and Giselle Pincetl (Charlestown, MA: Charles River Books, 1980), chapter 8.

[6] *The Journals of Marie Bashkirtseff*, trans. Mathilde Blind, 1890. Modern edition with introduction by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London: Virago, 1985), 347.

[7] Ruth E. Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[8] Broude, "Outing Impressionism," in *Gustave Caillebotte and the Fashioning of Identity in Impressionist Paris*, pp. 117-174.

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