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Andrew Israel Ross, *Public City/Public Sex: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 2019. 264 pp. \$110.50 (hb). ISBN 978-1-4399-1488-5; \$34.94 (pb). ISBN 978-1-4399-1489-2; \$34.95 (eb). ISBN 978-1-4399-1490-8.

Review Essay by William Peniston, The Newark Museum of Art

In *Public City/Public Sex*, Andrew Israel Ross traces “the struggle between those who tried to control evidence of sex in public and those who provided it, sought it out, and otherwise encountered it” (p. 2). The first group included men who maintained order within the city through politics, legislation, commercial affairs, medical treatments, and above all, police practices. The second group consisted of “women who sold sex” (prostitutes) and “men who sought sex with other men” (pederasts, as they are called at that time). Men who bought sex, whether from women or boys, were at the center of this whole struggle, but because of their privileged position in society, they have not received the attention that they deserve—not then and not now.[1] Ross recognizes their importance—and the existence of other men who claimed the city for themselves—although he does not treat them as a monolithic category, and that is probably a good thing.

Of these categories, especially the terms “prostitute” and “pederast,” he writes:

I deemphasize the relative weight historians of sexuality have placed on the ‘marginalization’ or ‘enclosed world’ of prostitution and the development of subcultures among men who sought sex with other men.[2] Indeed, the very insistence on writing a ‘history of prostitution’ or a ‘history of homosexuality’ orients the project around specific identities that may or may not have even operated at the time. In contrast, my approach refuses to take ‘identity’ as my analytical center. Instead of tracing the ways specific individuals, defined in large measure by modern sexual categories, responded to repressive police forces intent on maintaining strict distinctions between ‘honest’ Parisians and ‘indecent’ women and ‘depraved’ men, therefore, I question these categories” (p.10-11).

I am, of course, one of those historians whose writings Ross is deemphasizing, although he does cite us all with respect.[3] Along with Jill Harsin, Michael David Sibalis and others, we saw our scholarship as part and parcel of our politics of identity, whether from a feminist or gay point of view. Ross is using new theories (queer theories) that grow out of new politics (queer politics) that throw into question some of our basic assumptions. I am not entirely sure if I understand his point of view, but his questions are worth thinking about.

In questioning the categories of prostitute and pederast, Ross pays particular attention to urban spaces, especially brothels, urinals, dance halls, and cafés, because he argues that space, especially in the nineteenth-century city of Paris, influenced the ways individuals related to one

another. The *maisons de tolérance* (the tolerated brothels) became the symbol of the regulatory system that the police—and the medical profession—put in place in the early years of the nineteenth century. Designed to restrict prostitutes to specific locations within the city, where they could be easily examined for health reasons and closely watched for disciplinary reasons, they were part of an imperfect apparatus which could not and did not prevent women who sold sex from using the streets, parks, and squares of Paris. Eventually it became difficult for the police, or even the male residents of the city, to tell who was a registered prostitute, who was a clandestine prostitute, or who was just a working-class woman running an errand. The result was that the brothels were contested almost from their very beginning, prompting discussions that had an unintended consequence: “the production of a system of signification that would allow people to recognize public sex in order to either enter such places or—preferably—to avoid them” (p. 52).

Whereas the *maisons de tolérance* provided a “seminal drain” for men in the city, urinals were designed to provide another kind of drain for men who roamed the city. Whether worker, professional, businessman, or aristocrat, all of them sooner or later would need to relieve themselves, and so, beginning in the 1830s, public urinals appeared on the city streets. Very quickly, however, they also began to be used by men who sought sex with other men—another unintended consequence. And this, of course, produced another round of discussion in the middle of the century by police officers, medical experts, social commentators, and male residents of the city. On the urinals of Paris, Ross concludes: “I refuse to unravel the various contradictions in the uses and discourses of public urinals in Paris during the second half of the nineteenth century. Rather, I allow them to remain confused spaces in which new and unexpected possibilities for pleasure emerged in the modern city” (p. 92).

Later in the century, the *maisons de tolérance* declined due to “a number of factors”: “the rise of new spaces for consummating a sexual exchange, powerful critiques of the system from the government officials and the press, changing sexual tastes, and the physical destruction of tolerated brothels during Haussmanization” (p. 134). Consequently, sex became dispersed throughout the city, giving rise to a “public sexual culture” consisting of “those who recognized the signs of sex,” an ever-expanding category throughout the century (p.21). “The women who sold sex and the men who sought sex with other men, *and other Parisians* (my emphasis here), have often been treated as distinct groups,” Ross states. “However, all three were in constant dialogue with one another, not simply through sexual encounters as clients but through chance recognition on the street” (p.152).

Among the new spaces that Ross indicates in the second half of the nineteenth century were the drinking establishments that featured women servers who may or may not have sold more than just drinks. He notes that as the line between waitresses and prostitutes blurred so did the line between female patrons who may or may not have been prostitutes and female patrons who may or may not have been “honest” women. Even male patrons may not have been the typical clients of female prostitutes. Parallel to these drinking establishments were the *brasseries à hommes*, or perhaps, more accurately, the *brasseries pour hommes*. Even some *brasseries à femmes* morphed into *brasseries pour femmes* where the lines between heterosexuality and homosexuality blurred.

Dance halls and music halls made performance central to the experience. As Ross writes: “The culture of sex that grew up on the street, rooted in the activities of female prostitutes and men who sought sex with other men, became repackaged as middle- and upper-class entertainment” (p. 200). This was particularly true of the masked balls where it became difficult to tell who was a woman and who was a man dressed as a woman or who was a man and who was a woman dressed as a man. “The play of gender and sexual desire attendant with the masked ball of the opera was a source of anxiety and amusement” (p. 209).

Ross’s use of space as an analytical tool is thought-provoking.

I trace how certain categories—the female prostitute, the male homosexual, the ‘normal’ Parisian—remained rather murky when approached through an analysis of space. Indeed, I argue that urban space brought the three groups together without necessarily defining them as different from one another... Their shared participation in an urban sexual culture ultimately highlights the rather blurry lines between supposedly distinct class, gender, and sexual identities (p.15).

In doing so, he largely succeeds in challenging our notions of sexual identities as applied to the public sexual culture of nineteenth-century Paris.

His chronology is impressive: from the early years of the regulatory system under the First Empire, the Bourbon Restoration, and the July Monarchy when the *maisons de tolérance* were symbolic of a policy of enclosure to their decline in the Second Empire and the Third Republic when a new policy of surveillance was put in place; from the construction of urinals in the 1830s to the establishment of *brasseries à femmes* and *brasseries à hommes* in the Belle Époque; from a public of subjects deferential to the authorities in the first seven decades of the century to a public of citizens willing to assert their own claims to the city in the last third of the century. Ross notes how all of these changes shaped the attitudes of the men and women who lived in Paris throughout these times.

His in-depth reading of his sources (police records, officers’ memoirs, medical treatises, social commentaries, and most especially, the letters of ordinary individuals) is sophisticated, drawing out implications that are not always obvious. For example, in a wonderful chapter entitled “Public Sphere/Public Sex,” he analyzes the letters written by “ordinary” Parisians to the police complaining about disturbances caused by prostitutes and pederasts—disturbances that the police should be eliminating for the safety of the average male residents of the city. René Serrand was one of these “honest men” who wrote a letter in 1881 complaining about “prostitutes and their protectors” who “assault passers-by and follow and insult them after they have repelled their obscene propositions.” He went on to call “these bareheaded women and these young men with effeminate voices” “the shame of our neighborhood” (p. 161). Ross points out that in this letter, Serrand asserted his right to complain as a tax-payer and a republic citizen to whom the police were responsible. His letter also displayed a knowledge about the public sexual culture that implicated his own participation in it, whether willingly or unwillingly. And finally, Ross demonstrates that Serrand was not alone in this category of supposedly “honest men” (pp.157-182).

In the end, Ross should be congratulated for doing something that other historians have avoided: examining the connections between prostitution and pederasty as a common problem for the male residents of the city of Paris throughout the nineteenth century.[4] In doing so, he sheds new light on all Parisians. And what a complicated lot they were!

## NOTES

[1] The older generation of historians to whom Ross refers include Alain Corbin, *Les Filles de noce: Misère sexuelle et prostitution au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982), translated by Alan Sheridan as *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985) on prostitution; Michael Sibalís “The Regulation of Male Homosexuality in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, 1789-1814,” in *Homosexuality in Modern France*, edited by Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 80-101, and “The Palais Royal and the Homosexual Subculture of Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 41 (2001): 41-77; William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004) on homosexuality; and Jean-Marc Berlière, *La Police des mœurs sous la IIIe République* (Paris: Seuil, 1992) on the police.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid. More recent works include Régis Revenin, *Homosexualité et prostitution masculines à Paris, 1870-1918* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005); Gabrielle Houbre, *Le Livre des courtisanes: Archives secrètes de la Police des mœurs, 1861-1876* (Paris: Tallandier, 2006); Véronique Willemin, *La Mondaine: Histoire et archives de la Police des mœurs* (Paris: Hoëbeke, 2009); and Laure Adler, *La Vie quotidienne dans les maisons closes, 1830-1930* (Paris: Fayard, 2010).

[4] Ibid.

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