
There is something about the world’s oldest profession that seems to attract the best and brightest commentators on human social relations. For the turn of the nineteenth-century, it was male novelists like Emile Zola (France) and Federico Gamboa (Mexico). For the turn of the twentieth, it has been female historians like Judith Walkowitz (England), Donna Guy (Argentina), and, most recently, Katherine Bliss. The book’s expansive subtitle—from prostitution to public health to gender politics—gives some indication of prostitution’s appeal. As the introduction explains in more detail: “Studying the urban debates over prostitution, public health, gender relations, and reformism is . . . a good way to shed light on questions of revolution, state-building, and popular experience” (p. 11). *Compromised Positions* also manages the delicate trick of engaging important theoretical questions—gender and sexuality, biopolitics and governmentability, state hegemony and popular resistance, the practices of everyday life—while sparing the uninitiated or uninterested reader distracting forays into high theory. In sum, *Compromised Positions* is an exhaustively researched, intellectually ambitious, and elegantly written book that will, like its illustrious predecessors, prove richly rewarding to everyone from pomo theoreticians to old-school social historians, from aficionados of the history of prostitution and/or modern Mexico to advanced undergraduates in history and women’s/gender studies classes.

*Compromised Positions* has six semi-autonomous chapters. These chapters are framed by a substantive introduction that connects the main themes (outlined above) to the upcoming chapters and a provocative conclusion that discusses the past and present failures of the Mexican state to address the social inequalities that foster prostitution or to cope effectively with public health crises like the current HIV/AIDS epidemic, despite over a hundred years of reformist rhetoric.
The chapters are arranged more or less in chronological order, beginning with the 1872 Reglamento para el ejercicio de prostitución en México (Regulation for the Exercise of Prostitution in Mexico) and ending with the “abolition” of legalized prostitution in 1940.

In addition to chronological exposition, each chapter presents a different side of the prostitution “problem.” In the first chapter, Bliss provides a legal and cultural history of the Porfirio Díaz regime’s efforts to classify, regulate, and police prostitution at a time when Mexico City was growing by leaps and bounds. Rapid urbanization helped produce a dangerous “city of pleasure” — as many as 30,000 prostitutes in a city of just 400,000! — that deeply troubled social reformers who agitated with some success for increased government regulation. As it did in most places, increased regulation succeeded not in controlling prostitution or venereal disease but in enhancing the disciplinary power of public health bureaucracies. Chapter one also recovers some of the cultural aspects of prostitution from the perspective of elite flaneurs like Gamboa and from as much of the prostitutes’ perspective as can be reasonably gleaned from judicial and criminological records — a particularly impressive feat of historical reconstruction. The second chapter examines the impact of the Mexican revolution (1910-1920) on attitudes towards and practices of prostitution in the capital. According to Bliss, the revolution produced a “new political economy of vice” as a new political class attempted to reconcile revolutionary promises of social redemption, the practical difficulties of urban administration, the lack of employment opportunities for women (and men), and a political culture of revolutionary machismo and corruption.

If anything, the “city of pleasure” was more overtly sexualized than before and revolutionary ideologues and social reformers deployed images of violence and moral disorder in order to empower state action. Chapter three details growing concerns about national degeneration in the face of a syphilis epidemic that was killing more and more Mexico City residents every year — from 0.82 percent of deaths in 1916 to 1.82 percent in 1925 — and the consequent expansion of government social services, including the Departamento de Salud Pública (Department of Public Health) and the newly formed Departamento de Readaptación y Prevención Social (Department of Social Rehabilitation and Prevention), along with the creation of new institutions like the Tribunal para Menores Infractores (Juvenile Court) and the Escuela de Corrección (Reformatory for Girls). This bureaucratic expansion, Bliss tells us, meant increased state authority over “popular private lives, family matters, and plans for the future” (p. 125). Chapter four explores the way bureaucratic social reformers sought to redefine “traditional” notions of masculinity. Their initial campaign against irresponsible fathers who brought venereal disease into the
nuclear family (and thus threatened national reproduction and productivity) floundered in the face of widespread public resistance; a subsequent judicial assault on pimping provided a more acceptable way to promote a public discourse about responsible male behavior (especially since pimps were typically identified as foreigners).

State public health policies often produced unintended consequences. In chapter four, for example, Bliss notes that women sometimes used accusations of pimping as a means of soliciting official support in their ongoing struggles with male partners, often dropping charges once the men got the message. In chapter five, popular resistance to state policies takes center stage as “respectable” residents of marginal neighborhoods designated as “tolerance zones” fought back, often appropriating official discourses about rights, citizenship, and patriarchal responsibility. Less respectable residents resisted as well by transforming tolerance zones, with their flourishing cantinas, cabarets, and dance halls, into popular nightspots that urban dwellers from all over the city found irresistible. Chapter six closes out the story of legalized prostitution in Mexico City. Faced with a bewildering array of interest groups, contradictory agendas, and “abolition” pressure from Mexican feminists, eugenicists, and international reform movements, the Mexican government ended efforts to regulate prostitution, opting instead for “social prophylaxis” in the guise of the delito de contagio (crime of contagion) that punished anyone with venereal disease who “has sexual relations, or nurses children, or in any other manner threatens the health of another . . . with prison up to six years and a fine up to 100,000 pesos” (p. 205).

It is difficult to quibble with such a fine book, but I do have one minor disagreement. In order to highlight the rise of the Mexican welfare state in the 1920s and 1930s, Bliss downplays continuities between Porfirian and post-revolutionary social reform agendas. Certainly the state’s role as the principal agent of social redemption changed dramatically, but the reformers themselves —most of them trained under the late nineteenth-century positivist curriculum— remained quite consistent, even if the more moralistic and conservative among them (like prostitution expert Dr. Luis Lara y Pardo) lost influence. Still, this is a debating point rather than an error, and Bliss’s position is eminently defensible. Quibbles aside, Compromised Positions is a wonderful and important addition to a distinguished genre.

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