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GRUPO DE TRABALHO: 7 - A prostituição: Discursos e práticas

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The female prostitute as “the other”

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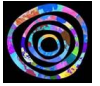
### Resumo

The unconventional character of sex work often engenders images of prostitutes as being anomalous persons. The professional activity then is believed to affect all aspects of life and personality of the (female) sex worker. Inversely, the conviction may exist that just specific types of women, with certain physical and mental characteristics, will enter this trade.

The notion of the female prostitute as the Other was particularly powerful in western thought at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and in our paper the ideas of that period about the “otherness” in its various layers will be explored.

This period was also the zenith of imperialism, the domination of Other people and inherently the sexual encounter of occidental men with oriental and African women. The images of these “exotic” women and the practice of prostitution in a colonial context will be an additional topic in this paper, to be related with the ideas in Europe about sex work.

Palavras-chave: prostitution sexuality gender 19th century feminism





Of the great transformations taking place in the western world in the nineteenth century, in this paper those on social and scientific terrain will be of special interest. Those terrains are narrowly related, as not only knowledge is power but, conversely, power relations affect the type of knowledge to be produced. The case under scrutiny here is the social opinion about prostitution as a phenomenon and about female prostitutes as a social category. An obvious relationship exists with sexuality, an overriding issue at the time, as has been shown by Foucault (1976) and other authors. We will, then, consider how the female prostitute in the course of the nineteenth century in the dominant scientific discourse and consequently the emerging middle class came to be viewed as the «Other», an anomaly, and which kinds of actions members of the dominating groups undertook to «help» those Others.

### **Some notes about prostitutes in history**

For many centuries, female prostitutes were accepted as an integral part of society. Albeit their position was low, they could take part in public life, as attested by the fact that in the Middle Ages they had their own guilds, with as patron saint Mary Magdalen, arguably the most popular saint of the Middle ages (Duby 1992: 63; Steinfatt 2002: 98).

Even the major Church Fathers, though out of principle condemning prostitution<sup>i</sup>, took the pragmatic stance of accepting this activity because of its “regulatory” effect on (male) sexuality. Famous is Augustine’s phrase, written in 386, the year of his conversion: *Aufer meretrices de rebus humanis, turbaveris omnia libidinibus*<sup>ii</sup>. Another great ecclesiastical authority, Thomas Aquinas, essentially had the same opinion. In the Middle Ages, the Church attempted to rescue prostitutes through a series of measures, including the establishment of convents for those who had forsaken their trade. Various female saints were known as being penitent former prostitutes, such as saint Verena.

From the beginning of the sixteenth century, in connection both with the terrifying spread of syphilis, and with the Protestant Reformation and Roman Catholic Contra-reformation, the attitude towards prostitutes changed from one of acceptance into tolerance (Flandrin 1991: 203).

### **A new vision**

During the eighteenth century, empiricism and rationalism allied itself with, or, more often, clashed with, theological doctrine. In scientific research, new analytic tools were used, in particular relating to the definition of human biology and its varieties. Regarding the human body, until that period no essential difference was recognized between the male and the female body: the woman was merely an imperfect man (Laqueur 1990; Joaquim 1997: 117; Birke 2001). When at the end of the eighteenth century the anatomic differences were recognized and clearly described, this idea was taken to the extreme with the assumption that men and women were each other’s opposites in all respects.

One of these was sexuality: in the nineteenth century “female desire was banned from the theoretical universe of the *scientia sexualis*” (Honegger 1989: 187). The official discourse became that women by nature had no interest in sex and that “their” men should protect them against possible assaults on their honour. This notion fitted well into the tendency of the time to banish the women of the emerging middle class to their homes where they should occupy themselves exclusively with household affairs. This way, they would be secure from any harassment by members of the lower classes and from disturbances of the public order.



The representation of the woman as weak and sexually apathetic was only valid for the women of middle and higher classes. For those belonging to the proletariat and to overseas people, other rules were valid – they were “different” and science was there to prove this.

The prostitute was fundamentally different from the pure women of the middle class because she openly recognized her sexuality. From the 1850s, sex workers were viewed as the Great Social Evil (Walkowitz 1980), a threat to morals, to society and economy. The idea that men needed to be protected against them ran parallel to the idea that middle-class women needed protection against men not belonging to their own circle. The class division certainly carried as much weight as the gender division, views about this being nurtured by ideas about sexuality.

The professional activity of the female sex worker was believed to affect all aspects of her life and personality. Conversely, the conviction existed that just specific types of women, with certain physical and mental characteristics, would enter this trade.

Prostitutes came to be seen as a “type”, an idea in accordance with the taxological tendencies of the developing scientific areas such as physiology, anthropology and psychology and eagerly absorbed by the public at large. The gigantic book by Pierre Dufour<sup>iii</sup> about the history of prostitution has gone through numerous editions and translations, the one into Portuguese being published in 1885. In the famous work by Herrmann Heinrich Ploss, *Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde*<sup>iv</sup>, first published in 1884, a chapter was dedicated to the «Anthropology of the Prostitutes», as if they formed a special tribe<sup>v</sup>. Anthropology (and in particular its branch of phrenology, fashionable at the time) was interested in human beings different from the standard of the western urban middle-class male. Therefore its favourite objects of study were not only exotic people but also the poor, the criminals and the prostitutes of western society – as well as Woman in general.

Among the scientific researchers were those who maintained that their apparent lack of sense of honour in itself indicated the limited mental capacity of the prostitutes<sup>vi</sup>. Tovar de Lemos (1908) concluded from his physiological studies of prostitutes that many of them had a “male physiognomy; a tendency toward homosexuality and a low fecundity – in short, they did not tally with the standard of femininity. Among the many other studies carried out at the time, in Portugal and beyond, the most famous were those by Lombroso and his school, such as *La donna delinquente*, (in which the female prostitute was equated with the male criminal.

## Ladies lend a hand to women

The introduction and acceptance of the ideal of the “housewife” meant that women in the middle classes had plenty of time for themselves, especially if they had domestic servants (Lasch 1997: 96-102). Many of these *ladies of leisure* dedicated part of their time to voluntary work in civil associations, in particular in the areas near to the private sphere: caring for children and the sick, crusading against alcoholism and prostitution. Social problems were in general localized in the world of the “others”: in the proletariat, among the people in the colonies, among the prostitutes.

It was not only occupation of time and a spirit of charity that motivated their activities but also self-protection. The period of industrialization involved a deep misery of the urban proletariat, many of them recently migrated from their rural areas. The world of this underclass was a completely different one from that of the middle and higher classes: these last-mentioned had an implicit social aversion of the “great unwashed”, about whom existed images of violence and filth. As De Swaan (1979), Walkowitz (1992) and others have argued, the bourgeoisie felt threatened by them through the possibility of assault, contamination and social upheavals (“King Mob”, in the words of Walkowitz). Ladies should therefore be at home, and if they had to go out, they



should be at the right places, at the right time, and never unaccompanied. Of women who acted in different ways, it was assumed that it was to earn money in a job (which would mean that they belonged to lower classes), or more specifically, because of activity in the sex sector. The pursuit of Ladies against social evils should also be seen in this light, along with the attempts of the patriarchal state (and male members of the bourgeoisie) to discipline the proletariat (see Donzelot 1997; Crespo 1990).

So it was that in the movement for the abolition of prostitution, ladies in practice took the lead. Internationally, the activities of these pressure groups were triggered by the Contagious Diseases Acts in England, which ordered the regular medical inspection of any woman supposed to be a prostitute. These Acts, promulgated in the 1860s, were similar to the system of “regulation” which existed in continental Europe: prostitution was permitted, but the women (seen as the source of contamination) had to subject themselves to this humiliating and usually ineffective procedure.

The campaign against the Acts started officially in 1869 and managed to unite people who were inspired by distinct motives. The first were of a feminist character, as the Contagious Diseases Act discriminated between the sexes and classes. Women were the victims of these laws, just as they were the victims in the prostitution sector, victims of the male vice. The second set of motives were of a moral character condemning all extra-marital sex and certainly if it was a sort of commodity.

In England an association of protest against the CDA was founded in 1869, initially exclusively consisting of men, although prominent women (such as Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale and Josephine Butler) had already publicly disputed the Acts. In the parallel Ladies' National Association, which soon was to welcome men as well, Josephine Butler played the foremost role.

Her charisma, her eloquence, and her courage to discuss in public topics of sexuality conferred her international fame and promoted the growth of the abolitionist movement – resulting in, amongst others, the repeal of the CDA in 1886, and in the longer run, of the regulamentarist regimes in many countries, including the Netherlands.

The abolitionist movement in this last-mentioned country reflects the patriarchal relationships. For some decades, men (most of them protestant ministers) out of religious and moral motives had been attempting to combat prostitution and to monitor and re-educate penitent prostitutes, with the help of ladies of their class. This resulted in the Dutch Association against Prostitution (NVP, *Nederlandsche Vereeniging tegen de Prostitutie*), with a strictly male membership, although small groups of women were also working for the same purpose.

When Josephine Butler visited the Netherlands in 1883, she was surprised about the absence of women in the formal abolitionist movement. She actively attempted to secure the admission of women to the existing association or alternatively, to help establish a Women's Association (De Vries 1997: 105-110). And indeed, in that same year the Women's Association for the Advancement of Moral Consciousness (*Nederlandsche Vrouwenbond tot Verhooging van het Zedelijk Bewustzijn*) was founded. The term prostitution was carefully omitted from its name. Presided by aristocratic ladies, it was the first women's movement in the Netherlands with an explicitly political goal. Its militancy showed in its large-scale petition against the traffic of women, in 1885, and some years later in a great national petition against the practice of prostitution (Bossenbroek and Kompagnie 1998: 168, 192-193).

The NVP remained the real nucleus in the movement, while the Women's Association was allotted the role of “auxiliary”, which in practice meant that it did the labour-intensive but hardly noticed work – thus reflecting the male and female roles in almost all sectors of society. In the course of time, this would lead to conflicts between men and women in the abolitionist movement, attesting to the growing assertiveness of women.



## Concluding remarks

The voluntary associations of the nineteenth century offered some possibility of self-realization to the women of the leisured classes. The accompanying activities such as meetings, speeches and the management of funds were also exercises in citizenship. This was the case with associations for the missions, but much more so in the organizations combating prostitution, as this was a political and polemic cause, and, moreover, with a sexual character.

These organizations for the benefits of the disadvantaged may thus be called, in various degrees, training grounds for feminism<sup>vii</sup>. They had some aspects in common, the most important being that they worked for people who they thought to know, but it was a knowledge based on books and discourses. Rather than personal contacts, it was the image of "The Other": the alcoholic, the pagan African, the prostitute, that inspired their actions.

It is certainly worthwhile to look for parallels in twenty-first century movements fighting sex work.

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<sup>i</sup> As it was so closely related with the cardinal sin of lust (and thus incompatible with the cardinal virtue of temperance).

<sup>ii</sup> “If you eliminate the prostitutes from human life, everything will overflow with lust.” *De ordine* 2.4.12.

<sup>iii</sup> (Pseudonym of Paul Lacroix). *Histoire de la prostitution chez tous les peuples du monde, depuis l'antiquité la plus reculée jusqu'a nos jours*. First published in Paris, 1851–1853.

<sup>iv</sup> Published in English as *Woman : an historical, gynaecological and anthropological compendium*.

<sup>v</sup>

<sup>vi</sup> Snoek Henkemans in De Vries 1997: 89.

<sup>vii</sup> About feminism in activities on behalf of the missions, see Beaver 1980; Huber and Lutkehaus 2000.