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“SIDEWALK’S QUEENS¹”: THE ECONOMICS OF POPULAR PROSTITUTIONS IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE PARIS

Alexandre Frondizi and Simon Porcher²

INTRODUCTION

Fin-de-siècle Paris was the symbol and one of the world metropolises of public prostitution. However, the analysis of its economy has gone largely unnoticed in the social sciences literature. For historians, the profound influence of Michel Foucault’s work on researchers who studied sexualities which are framed and marginalized by the technologies of power may also account for this absence³. The impact of virtualities conveyed by readily available sources, such as regulations, official speeches or the innumerable books and papers authored by physicians, policemen and others hygienist essayists, moralizing likes with a soft spot for the picturesque, is altogether undeniable. Although a few paragraphs were dedicated to brothel owners, historiography has failed to address the role of the economic agents of street prostitution.

Paradoxically enough, economists neither studied until recently the economics of prostitution which is based on markets as other informal activities. Sex workers cluster in some districts to be visible to their buyers and generally align their tariffs but can compete on their specific characteristics or the services they are willing to provide. This concentration of

¹ This expression comes from a letter of an inhabitant of the district of La Goutte d’Or, APP, J^C, BM², carton 51, Boulevard de la Chapelle, Dossier général, Lettre, 26 avril 1913. Some elements of this chapter have recently been discussed in FRONDIZI, Alexandre and PORCHER, Simon, “Informal Urban Economy: a Historical Approach of Paris Street-level Prostitution (1870-1914)”, Robert B. Shuman Award of the best student paper, Academy of Management, Boston, August 2012.

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³ FOUCAULT, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Translated by Alan Sheridan, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978 [1975], pp. 333; FOUCAULT, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, *An Introduction*, Translated by Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978 [1976], pp. 168.

sex workers can generate negative externalities for the neighborhood, positive externalities for some shopkeepers and the development of informal economy. The *Belle Epoque* is an interesting time period to study when one considers informal economy. For the first time, the whole economy became formal as France was turning into an industrialized country. In such a context, it was therefore surprising to witness the development of an informal economy which was becoming visible to both the population and the authorities. Being characterized by a clear development of the outdoor prostitution phenomenon, this period has spurred debates between historians. On the one hand, some like Corbin (1978) argued that the gentrification of Paris led to an increasing activity in unregulated prostitution based on seduction. On the other hand, Harsin (1985) argued that legal and administrative changes liberalized the access to keep bars while shopkeepers or landlords involved in prostitution faced diminishing entry costs of prostitution as associated penalties and punishment became smaller. There are however no clear-cut answers to this debate, neither from an historical perspective nor from an economic point of view.

This chapter aims at understanding the economic rationalities of the different actors of the informal public prostitution network and at measuring how their behavior impacts the financial considerations of the other actors of the urban economy. This chapter follows an economic history perspective which enables us to show that the meaning of prostitution varied largely depending on the immediate socio-geographic context. It also gives us the tools to fully grasp the complexity of an economic configuration based on power struggles and dynamics, without simplifying them. We feel the economic issues which are street prostitution specific but which also enlighten other issues of the modernization of urban economies in the Western world are best apprehended by a thick description of the economic practices which built up a local space – the working-class La Goutte-d'Or district – where

streetwalkers were remarkably numerous⁴. This sort of historical ethnography is the result of a thorough consultation of testimonies bequeathed by all those who were concerned by the dynamics of sex trade. The echo chamber created by these archives of the Préfecture de police – the headquarter of the Parisian police – sheds light on an economic reality in which a variety of figures intervene : prostitutes and clients, procurers and madams, wine merchants and small local business-owners, watchmen and policemen, landlords and building owners⁵. The interests of these economic agents combined very differently and were at times complementary and at others strictly antagonistic. One needs to explore the way these strategies shaped and structured the local economic space, notably by untangling the more or less conflictual ties between the informal economy of public prostitution and the formal economy of the district.⁶

THE STREETWALKER, AGENT OF A BAZAAR ECONOMY

One needs to start with the peripateticians' place in the urban market before moving on to the actual relationships they entertained with other economic agents of the public prostitution. Describing their practices, and attempting to see how the latter might fit in longer term professional paths will allow us to qualify the status and the economic activity of these women who offered sexual services to Parisian passerbys.

“Landing on the sidewalk”?

⁴ GEERTZ, Clifford, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New-York: Basic Books, 1973, pp. 3-30.

⁵ The chapter uses information sources come from qualitative records of arrests from the *Préfecture de Police de Paris*, the highest police administration at the regional level and letters of complaints from neighbors directly to the *Préfet de Police* and records of surveillance and raids from the *brigade mondaine*, the vice police squad in charge of regulating and enforcing prostitution.

⁶ For more methodological details and non-economic dimensions of public prostitution, see the original work from which this chapter is built on : FRONDI, Alexandre, *Histoires de trottoirs: prostitution, espace public et identités populaires à la Goutte-d'Or, 1870-1914*, Paris: MA Dissertation at the Doctoral School of Sciences Po, 2007, 331 pp.

According to Simmel (1988), one of the keenest observers of the birth of capitalist metropolis, 19th century society coerced a group of women into sacrificing their bodies to satisfy the sexual urges of young bachelors, which preserved the bourgeois conception of marriage⁷. Although this interpretation somewhat exaggerates their passivity in the process, the fact remains that street prostitutes were subjected to a double economic exploitation.

The street prostitutes' age, their social and geographic origin coincide with the beliefs of the day, that is that women turned to prostitution because of a shortage in urban work available for them. It might be more adequate to talk of a "partial validation", whereby prostitution would not be a mere mechanical effect, but the result of a choice under constraints. In any case, it was the product of a choice under a bounded rationality. Being excluded (unemployed) or sidelined from the urban economy which offered them part-time jobs (off-season) and apprentice salaries which made them dependent on their spouse or their family, some young workers used prostitution as a way to achieve financial independence. This professional alternative allowed them to leave the stifling and often exploitative domestic economy of working-class families. That was also true of women who were also excluded from the marriage or cohabitation due to their young age⁸. The act of leaving prostitution has received less scholarly attention and reinforces the hypothesis of limited rationality, since the streetwalkers did not hesitate to leave the profession when the job market had something more favourable in store for them. A vast majority left the profession when between the ages of 25 and 35, when marriage prospects were better suited to their interests. Such is the story of one of the prostitute observed in the archives, H  l  ne Legagneux, who

⁷ SIMMEL, Georg, "Quelques r  flexions sur la prostitution dans le pr  sent et dans l'avenir" (1892) in *Philosophie de l'amour*, Paris, Rivages Poche, Petite Biblioth  que, 1988, pp. 11-31.

⁸ For a study of working class's matrimonial strategies and logics, see FREY, Michel, "Du mariage et du concubinage dans les classes populaires    Paris (1846-1847)", *Annales. Economies, Soci  t  s, Civilisations*, 33/4, 1978, pp. 803-829 ; COTTEREAU, Alain, « Vie quotidienne et r  sistance ouvri  re    Paris en 1870 » in POULOT, Denis, *Question sociale. Le sublime ou le travailleur comme il est en 1870 et ce qu'il peut   tre*, Paris, Maspero, coll. Actes et m  moires du Peuple, 1980 [1870],   tude pr  alable, pp. 34-37 ; BATTAGLIOLA, Fran  oise, "Mariage, concubinage et relations entre les sexes. Paris, 1880-1890", *Gen  ses*, n  18, 1995, pp. 68-96.

started as a prostitute when she was 19 and who first married six years later a mover who worked in the neighbourhood. She then married a delivery coachman and “did not seem to prostitute herself at that point and only seemed to take care about her household”. Three years later she found herself at the head of a business selling “potatoes among other things”. But this store was “in reality a lair for procurers and painted girls”⁹. Therefore, stopping to sell one’s body publicly did not necessarily mean leaving the informal economy of prostitution altogether. Quite the contrary, it could mean climbing the hierarchy in this sector, it is likely that a former streetwalker used the social capital she enjoyed to become one of its entrepreneur. Such an observation limits the duality of the marriage and the prostitution markets (Edlund and Korn, 2002) and the diminishing value of prostitutes on the marriage market (Posner, 1992).

The fact that prostitution appeared as a professional alternative at a given points in time shows that for some workers, prostitution was part of a *continuum* of dependence. By securing their financial autonomy, it brought a solution to the generational, gendered inequality of domestic economy and of the urban market of formal work. However, these young women were exploited further because they tied new bonds of economic dependence. Of course, they depended on the clients, without whose demand they could not survive and who rented and consumed their sexual services. Feminists and radical anarchists of the day noted that many women provided similar services as those offered by prostitutes without receiving any kind of revenue, exposed as they were to owner demand at work or to conjugal duty at home. They also depended on all those who perceived a sizeable portion of the streetwalkers’ revenue: cabaret and hotel owners who, as we will see later, were merchants of informal prostitution, but also procurers. These young men shared the streetwalkers’ social

⁹ APP, J^C, BM², carton 38, 42 rue de la Charbonnière, Rapport du Service de sûreté, 18 janvier 1895 et carton 19, 40 rue de la Charbonnière, Lettre et Rapport du Service de sûreté, 8 juin et 29 juin 1896.

and professional background and had chosen pimping and petty crime for the same reasons they had chosen the sidewalk. They lived largely on the income of their “marmites”:

I am turning to you, writes prostitute Marie Thérin, to warn you of the deeds of my friend M^r Eugène Vaulayen in the past tree years I have been living with this man who is nothing but a pimp, unfortunately and since I engaged in prostitution and was threatened to be beaten, I did not dare to speak.

This man only lived on the money I brought him back and on some other traffic which is just as dishonest

This man has lived his whole life on the money which came from prostitutes [...]

For a long time now I have wish to lead another life, he left to look for another So since I am free today, this is why I am writing to you

Would you please call for me in his presence and then I will tell you everything, but please do so discreetly so that it causes me no harm, so I can still find work, sadly enough mister commissioner, there are too many people of this kind and too many poor girls who are forced and threatened to enter prostitution to ensure him of a revenue [...] ¹⁰

As this testimony shows, public women entertained complex, ambiguous relationships with their pimps who were both protectors and predators, “lovers” and exploiters, procurers and procured. At all rates, their bodies were subjected to a double merchandization since they depended on other agents of public prostitution.

¹⁰ APP, J^c, BM², carton 30, 3 rue Stephenson, Lettre, 15 décembre 1926. We decided in this chapter to correct the numerous spelling mistakes as they were difficult to export from French to English, not without regrets.

Supply creates its own demand

The Parisian society was both capitalist and patriarchal and women who were on the game faced two exploitation systems which combined. The first was the formal and domestic economic system from which they were excluded or which left them underpaid. The other was the informal prostitution economic system, which led them to sell their bodies doubly. This is concurrent with the male supremacy which characterized 19th century sexual ideology, in which women were entirely passive¹¹. These features might have led a number of specialists to underestimate the *agency* of the streetwalkers themselves, which cannot be doubted upon from the moment one studies the public offer of sexual services.

Thanks to an analysis of the circumstances which presided over the entering or leaving of prostitution, we have already shown that a limited rationality intervened when choosing the sidewalk. This professional path gave women and their procurers the financial individuality and the economic existence which domestic economy and the formal work market respectively denied them. This accumulation of wealth inevitably aroused jealousies and temptation among neighbors. Workers complained to the police and often expressed their legitimate anguish at the thought of having their children tempted to enter sex trade because they were exposed to status symbols – clothes, jewelry, knives, gramophones, motorized bikes etc. – which were showed off by prostitutes and procurers on the neighbourhood's sidewalks. In the socio-economic context of the district however, the official statistics and the career of certain streetwalkers show that there was nothing so extraordinary in the story of Nana¹², the most famous Parisian prostitute in literature, whose upward mobility from the

¹¹ WALKOWITZ, Judith R., "Dangerous Sexualities" in *A History of Women in the West*, vol. IV, *Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*, edited by Geneviève Fraisse and Michelle Perrot, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 369-398.

¹² Quotations are drawn from ZOLA, Émile, *L'Assommoir*, Paris, Pocket, 1998 [1877], pp. 337, 372, 417, 420, 422, 429, 440-446. Readers can see in the details of this novel – Zola's first bestseller and his first novel to be translated in English – a thin understanding of popular and public prostitution. In a following novel, *Nana*,

sidewalk to high-end prostitution, moving relentlessly from an exploiter to another. Far from becoming the passive victims of their procurers, in return they demanded their protection against all those who could become a liability to their profits – competition, noisy neighbors, the police – and as police reports and letters of the various people who benefited from their trade certify, they did not hesitate to set one against the other, to change “pimps” or to find new places to solicit or turn tricks, so as to improve their working conditions and maximize their profits.

Nevertheless, the agency of women who offered their sexual services stands out when one analyses the inner workings of the public prostitution market. It is on that specific point that many researchers have denied 19th century streetwalkers any form of agency. They believed that the fluctuation and the very existence of a market of prostitution were based on demand only. Although this idea might be coherent on the scale of a global, theoretical prostitution market, it is invalidated when one looks at the exchanges between providers and consumers of sexual services from an ethnographic perspective. Prostitutes no longer appear as a mere merchandise at the disposal of a predisposed clientele: thanks to a distinctive *hexis* and a wide array of proven seduction techniques, they managed to turn the man in the street into a client, whom they sometimes pickpocketed during the trick. They did so by “swaying their hips along the sidewalk, by impudently catching the passerbys by the arm, and by teasing them with their proposals”; this forced physical promiscuity with “the potential customer”¹³ was part of a proactive soliciting. It is actually the originality of this unadvertised relationship between providers and customers which prompted the legitimate parallel between the public economy of sexual services and the bazaar economy. Just like the merchant who has a spot on the “primitive market”, the providers did not go through these substitution

readers can discover the next stage of the prostitional career of the main character. Furthermore, readers can find a thick description of the financial issues of high-end prostitution, the novel being dedicated to this world.

¹³ APP, J^c, BM², carton 27, 23 rue de la Charbonnière, Rapport du Service mixte des garnis, 14 novembre 1904 et carton 60, 96 boulevard de la Chapelle, Rapport du Service mixte des garnis, 6 juin 1905.

public spaces which are characteristic of modern urban economy to advertise, create or make demand soar, on the contrary, their services were presented out loud and *de visu* on the sidewalks¹⁴. Just like him, they used verbal or physical interjections which sometimes annoyed the onlookers. They first needed to draw the customer's attention, before they turned it into a need or a desire for consumption which they simultaneously offered to satisfy. Just like him, again, they did not hesitate to haggle over their prices and to adapt them to the social profile of the passersby so as to talk them into accepting their offers. As a matter of fact, the archives show prices varying between 1.5 and 2.5 Francs per trick, showing a price variability depending on the client and perhaps on the seasonality of demand.

The streetwalkers behaved just like the agents of a bazaar economy. In short, the way they worked on the Parisian sidewalks shows that contrary to what traditional representations suggested "the men's looks and desires" did not "drive the business"¹⁵, supply also prompted demand on the public prostitution market.

NEGATIVE EXTERNALITIES OF PUBLIC PROSTITUTION

Although a parallel can be drawn between a streetwalker and a merchant in a bazaar economy because their respective productivity depends on their ability to foster demand, street prostitution nonetheless dealt with rather original merchandise. Other agents in the local economic space often bemoaned its 'original' externalities on their own business. Behind a moral discourse, they actually condemned the negative impact the activities of streetwalkers had on their trade.

¹⁴ For an anthropological analysis of the bazaar economy, see GEERTZ, Clifford, "The Bazaar Economy: Information and Search in Peasant Marketing", *The American Economic Review*, vol. 62 (2), 28-32, 1978, and for a economical analysis on street-level contemporary prostitution, see LEVITT, Steven D. and VENKATESH, Sudhir A., "An Empirical Analysis of Street-Level Prostitution", 2007, working paper.

¹⁵ CORBIN, Alain et PERROT, Michelle, "Des femmes, des hommes et des genres. Entretien avec Alain Corbin et Michelle Perrot", *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, n°75 (July-September 2002), p. 176.

The impact of street prostitution on regulated brothels

Naturally, the district's brothel owners were the interest group which fiercely and systematically denounced the financial downsides of the streetwalkers' activity, since they were both the natural competitors of public prostitution as well as the official representatives of the formal economy of prostitution, in a country which was reglementarist in terms of sex trade.

Town councils were in charge of a regulated market of prostitution until April, 13 1946 when the "Marthe Richard" bill was adopted, which put an end to the "French system" by outlawing brothels nationwide. Within this framework, in return for their observance of administrative regulations, brothel owners enjoy a sex trade monopoly. In their frequent letters to the Parisian chief police officers, they demanded the protection of the public agents in charge of monitoring the prostitution market and they denounced the illegal competition of streetwalkers. Although they complained about the expenses and the losses resulting from their strict observance of the rules (for instance, underage prostitution and clients), they seemed to have lost all faith in a legalist solution to their complaints. In reality, they doubted the capacity and the good will of those who would be in charge of enforcing the law in the field. The members of the vice squad were themselves agents of the informal economy of prostitution, and had very specific interests to advance. Not only through the financial effects of their repressive role, but especially through the source of their revenues. Their professional *raison d'être* and their salary actually depended on the perpetuation of illegal prostitution, all the more so since they drew illegal financial profits out of it, a situation which was well known to the residents. Let alone the confirmed cases of bribery and organized pimping which must have been more present than what the biased sources from their own corporation reveal; these policemen could sell their professional secrets and legal loopholes made it easy for them to negotiate a selective application of the law with street prostitutes and owners of

places where women solicited or turned tricks. At all rates, the brothel owners were the official entrepreneurs of prostitution, and it is clear from their complaints that they insisted less on the illegal character of the activity than on the successful competition of the streetwalkers.

Competition raged between agents of the informal economy of public prostitution and caused landowners or wine merchants to send the police letters to give away the local colleagues, as investigators often found out. It did however change nature when it was confronted to the members of the formal economy of sex trade, who on the contrary, completely took on the responsibility of the financial stakes contained in their plaints:

Right opposite the brothel I own, 25 rue de la Charbonnière, is a hotel, located at 22 of the same street, several women solicit clients there but also in front of my building, they take clients back to the hotel I mentioned. Two former of my own, whom I have just dismissed, have even sought refuge there and exercise the same kind of activity.

I pray you will accept my complaint and will restore order in this case, considering the loss it causes me.¹⁶

If this letter is a somewhat classic grievance, one which was often expressed by official brothel owners, it is however original because it shows that streetwalkers - through their freedom of circulation for instance - incited prostitutes in brothels to emancipate. What systematically caused them “a commercial liability” and “financial liabilities”, and went as far as dragging them “on the brink of the financial precipice”, was the monopoly of soliciting

¹⁶ APP, J^C, BM², carton 14, 22 rue de la Charbonnière, Lettre, 6 février 1888.

merchandise which the non-official competitors enjoyed. These entrepreneurs explained they fell prey to a disloyal competition: unlike the landowners who benefited from the sexual services which the prostitutes offered in their institution, they could not get directly in touch with the passersby to offer their services:

No man can approach my door without being called or even dragged away from my house. I have no other defense Monsieur le Préfet than filing a complaint with you, since my regulations do not allow me to put a woman on my threshold or at one of my windows.¹⁷

Hence the *Madame*'s implicit suggestion to go back to the time when brothel owners had the right to use “walkers” (*marcheuses* in French) on their premises. Since the red light and the emphasized number at the location on the street did not do enough for publicity, having these “solicitors” – whom the manager of the house of prostitution did not shy away from using, if the hotel owner is to be believed – would be a way to establish an illegal, but at least fair competition.¹⁸

The impact of street prostitution on shopkeepers and annuitants

Aside from brothel owners who were in direct competition with public prostitution to satisfy masculine demand of sexual services, the latter also affected the finances of other actors of the urban economy. In fact, the local business owners' and landlords' complaints were the result of the original intervention of streetwalkers on the urban space, a highly competitive ground.

¹⁷ APP, J^C, BM², carton 65, 74 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 25 octobre 1906.

¹⁸ APP, J^C, BM², carton 65, 74 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Rapport de l'Officier de paix du 18^e arrondissement, 26 janvier 1892.

When it came to describing the perverse effects of the informal economy of prostitution on their affairs, a number of parallels can be drawn between the grievances of local businessmen who were outside the sex trade circuit and those of brothel owners. Both suffered from the impact of the streetwalkers' activity on the passersby, as these words of a piano and organ manufacturer show:

These girls [...] stay around and solicit [...] without any shame and in a provocative manner, in spite of all the observations which are made to them or to the landlord who supports them and makes it possible for them to parade at his terrace, even to insult the passersby and to go as far as slapping her in the face in front of my shop. My shop is located a yard away from Monsieur Duluc's liquor place and that is where I have music instruments. No client can stop in front of my shop without his being called out by those impudent girls.¹⁹

The display in shop-windows appeared trivial in comparison to the means deployed by public women, and the same craftsman added a few months later that "if someone stopped to look at his shop-window, they had to leave shrugging because they were so obsessed by these girls' ignoble talk"²⁰. Even the shopkeepers with a loyal clientele, like this café owner, were worried about the prosperity of their businesses:

The public women who are constantly in front of my building [...] will not leave. This is a great liability for me, because they call out to all my clients. They say they will not come back because of these women.²¹

¹⁹ APP, J^C, BM², carton 19, 90 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 15 mai 1900.

²⁰ APP, J^C, BM², carton 19, 90 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 27 août 1900.

²¹ APP, J^C, BM², carton 15, Boulevard Barbès, Dossier général, Lettre, 27 mars 1903.

In fact, all the misgivings about a loss of actual or potential clients revealed the incompatibility of two economic conceptions of the urban space: while for certain the latter constituted the “primitive market” in which supply played a very central role, others understood it as a “modern market” in which supply respected the free circulation of potential consumers. Hence the ever-growing number of conflicts opposing two groups with antagonistic economic and spatial logic. Although letters to the police and insults were symbolic ammunition, they nonetheless had financial effects:

A corridor separates my shop from that of a wine merchant. Not only is his institution a meeting point for girls of ill-repute, it is also located in front of my very door, in front of my shop-windows. Scandals break on a daily basis from eight in the morning until eleven in the evening.

My clients cannot enter here without being approached by these women.

In the past few days, when my wife commented on the situation and the owner of the place and the streetwalkers called her all sorts of disgraceful names.²²

There are other instances of this. The streetwalkers did not hesitate to threaten the noisy neighbors “because they thought it was harmful for them and their business and that men who saw women at the windows on the other side of the street did not dare to enter this unregistered brothel”²³. Nor did they shy away from requiring “of their dishonourable company that they smash the shop-windows of the shop-owners who tried to get rid of them”²⁴.

The recurring clashes between members of the public prostitution and local shopkeepers show that the urban space was still a highly disputed ground. Of course on the

²² APP, J^C, BM², carton 19, 90 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 28 octobre 1898.

²³ APP, J^C, BM², carton 19, 90 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 23 juillet 1893.

²⁴ APP, J^C, BM², carton 58, 1 rue Belhomme, Lettre, juillet 1891.

district scale, all actors fought over the population's attention or its consuming urges. On the metropolitan scale or on larger ones, capitalism shaped and organized the city spaces into a hierarchy. Yet, the representation of spaces played a central role in the social and spatial segregation that is an inequitable distribution of functions, resources and prices. Local authorities have long been aware of this phenomenon and now hire regional administrators or call in territorial marketing agencies. If the reputation of the Goutte-d'Or district was a pull factor for men in search of cheap sexual services, it was a push factor for the potential clients of local businesses. Some of the residents of the district usually decided to move to adjacent streets because they were deemed more peaceful and more appropriate for shopping. Such was the case of charwomen who "no longer dared to venture in these areas" when they did their errands²⁵. The reputation partly explained the social structure of this residential district since it had a determining influence on the setting of land prices and therefore on rents as well. Prostitution was a bone of contention on this very point. It did not so much conflict with the financial interests of the shopkeepers as with those of the landowners who rented buildings:

Naturally my lodgers leave or threat to do so when they are exposed to all the repulsive things which take place across the street. I find it very unpleasant to suffer from this unproductiveness only because the house I rent out is just by the hotel.²⁶

The author of this petition – which was signed by about twenty shopkeepers and landlords – complained about the departure of certain tenants, which led to deep mutations in the social composition of the apartment buildings he owned. A woman of private means explained that

²⁵ APP, J^C, BM², carton 51, Boulevard de la Chapelle, Dossier général, Lettre, 29 août 1910.

²⁶ APP, J^C, BM², carton 19, 90 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 23 juillet 1893.

working-class families – “tenants with children” and “decent lodgers” – gradually moved out of her apartment building²⁷. If the number of prostitutes tarnished the reputation of the neighborhood and meant a real-estate liability for some, it simultaneously enabled poor workers to find cheaper accommodation. On a market where housing turnover was a requirement, these complaints echoed the landlords’ realization that their property was being devaluated compared to other Parisian districts because rent prices had dropped. This is all the more true since local realities and images opened up new social and professional horizons for these goods:

Another three traffic shops have opened on the street (27), right opposite the house I own (24) It causes me considerable wrong for my rents as I have vacant rooms and shops. Any kind of business is rendered impossible by this crowd of girls and procurers who start at 8 in the morning and finish at 3 or 4 am.²⁸

As this other man of individual means unwillingly explained, the vacant rooms and shops could be rented out and become easily profitable. Provided of course that one adapted to the local economic context and turned a previous negative externality into a positive one. To put it differently, instead of hitting the finances, sex trade could bring in a lot of money to the shopkeepers and the local landowners.

POSITIVE EXTERNALITIES OF PUBLIC PROSTITUTION

The “impending ruin” that the plaintiffs saw for themselves was usually part of a rhetoric exaggeration to rouse the sympathy of the speaker, to persuade him of the urgency of

²⁷ APP, J^C, BM², carton 62, 60 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 25 février 1913.

²⁸ APP, J^C, BM², carton 51, Boulevard de la Chapelle, Dossier général, Lettre du 10 avril 1903.

the situation, to have the police intercede on their behalf in the conflict which opposed them to concurring economic agents. A financial loss must have been at the origin of their complaints, otherwise how could one account for them? A plausible explanation would be that they shared space with and envied other shopkeepers who got richer each passing day thanks to public prostitution instead of losing money. Not only was public prostitution better suited to the local context, it also had a dynamic of its own which led it to gradually take over the neighborhood.

Wine merchants and slumlords

Hotelkeepers, cabaret owners and dancehall managers of the Goutte-d'Or district did not leave women solicit clients in front of their buildings out of charity. The interest was entirely financial. This probably explains why information on the economy of street prostitution is more easily found when reading historians of Parisian cafés than when reading historians of sex trade²⁹.

These shopkeepers benefited directly from the presence of the streetwalkers, their clients and procurers who ordered drinks and slept in furnished rooms just like any other client. They claimed the illegal right to host this numerous clientele, which was probably composed of heavy consumers, just as this former prostitute turned wine bar owner explained:

My trade compels me to receive all manners of persons who stroll by the Boulevard de la Chapelle; of course, there are public girls among my clients, and my interest is to receive them like the rest, without granting them more liberty in my house for all that.³⁰

²⁹ HAINE, Scott W., *The World of the Paris Café. Sociability among the French Working Class, 1789-1914*, Baltimore Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, chapter 7, "Women and Gender Politics. Beyond Prudery and Prostitution", pp. 179-206.

³⁰ APP, J^C, BM², carton 38, 42 rue de la Charbonnière, Lettre, 9 décembre 1898.

This other woman, a cabaret owner and landlady “could not believe that the meaning of the bill was to forbid the shopkeepers to sell when no scandal or complaint had been reported to the administration”.³¹ These testimonies show that the managers proposed a *sui generis* interpretation of the police regulation. This interpretation was based on the distinction between prostitute as a merchandise and prostitute as a client, and shed light on an inner contradiction in the police regulation:

Women in the streets are all the more tolerated that the préfecture issues them cards and that as people in charge who are subjected to hierarchy we are hit constantly. I’ve been addressed several fines.³²

However its subtlety resided in that it fitted perfectly with the core values of the reglementarist system, which did not repress prostitution in itself, but only its public component. These demands especially concealed the more active part that these shopkeepers played in the sex trade business. Just like a landlady who placed a prostitute at a house of prostitution in exchange of a commission of 70 francs, some took advantage of their ties with streetwalkers to act as an intermediary in the placement of some of their clients in maisons closes of the Paris area. This landlady used the young woman’s “utter destitution” as a pretext, and explained that it was “out of charity that she had placed her” at the only manager of a prostitution house she knew of. Their correspondence shows that certain shopkeepers enjoyed a wide network of local partners to whom they could address their “special delivery”; or in the landlady’s words to the owner of the house of prostitution :

³¹ APP, J^C, BM², carton 65, 74 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 4 juillet 1907.

³² APP, J^C, BM², 22 rue de la Charbonnière, Lettre, 26 février 1914. Giving cards mean that police registered them.

If however, it is troublesome for you to pay the due price of placement and expense of the young lady, just send me a note and she will be placed somewhere else.³³

One thing is certain: public prostitution did have positive externalities for wine merchants and slumlords in the urban areas in which this informal economy thrived.

Landlords and cabaret owners did not only benefit from their everyday contact with streetwalkers, they made money out of prostitution itself. Since they witnessed every single step of the prostitutional process, from the offer of sexual services to its ultimate consumption, contemporaries saw in the owners the true entrepreneurs of public prostitution. “You are here faced with, how shall I put this, merchants? After all, this is a form of business which makes you rich” or so did this member of the Conseil de Paris think as he spoke of the landlords of the Goutte-d’Or district to the assembly³⁴. Apart from asking prostitutes to talk customers into ordering drinks in their cabarets or even in their rooms, the shopkeepers made money out of certain soliciting spots. Women paid a fee which enabled them to offer their services from the thresholds and windows of the stores, which gave them access more quickly to a shelter during police raids. There was no comparison between soliciting and tricks, which constituted a far greater source of revenue for merchants. They rented out their hotel rooms or the back room of their wine bars based on a complex price scale. The streetwalkers could pay 1 franc per 15-minute trick maximum, which meant giving away half of their service’s price; they could also subscribe to an average flat rate deal of 3 francs for a night, 5 francs a day, 9 francs a week or 28 francs a month with an extra 50 centimes per trick. This is yet another proof – as if any was actually needed – of the economic rationality of the agents in the sex

³³ APP, J^C, BM², carton 1, 42 rue de Chartres, Rapport Service mixte des garnis, 16 juin 1903.

³⁴ *Bulletin municipal officiel*, mardi 18 mars 1913, p. 1581.

trade business. All attempted to maximize their profits through limited risk taking. The flexibility of these flat rates allowed the economic agents to adapt to the fluctuations of the practice, which varied intensely depending on the time of the day, of the week, of the month, but also on the working hours of clients and their paydays. It fitted perfectly with the vast range of streetwalkers, who had more or less experience, who had more or less circulation facilities, and were more or less determined to have busy days. As for hotelkeepers, they used fixed revenues in order to reduce their dependence on the financial situation; to foster the streetwalkers' loyalty, but also to beat off competition from their local colleagues. However, if one looks at the great number of tricks which were turned in the furnished rooms of the neighborhood, the variable income of these flat rates is likely to have brought in more to their owners. Of course critical distance is required when studying the declarations of certain residents, for instance when they describe the constant "comings and goings, all day long" or when they claimed that "[everyday] more than two hundred women entered the place and prostituted themselves there"³⁵. It was common for policemen to spot between five and ten venal couples in a hotel during raids or to spot about the same number of couples entering in a half-hour span³⁶. The significant number of venal couples spelled considerable capital inflow for those who rented out rooms. Prostitution was taken into account in the landowners' budgets, which included potential 5 francs fines which they could be charged for not abiding by the law. Such was the case for this hotelkeeper:

On October 22, the commissioner staged a police raid in our neighborhood and gave fined shopkeepers who had public girls on their premises. Since he found one in my institution, I deem it fair to receive the same treatment as the others,

³⁵ APP, J^C, BM², carton 34, 88 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 27 août 1894 et carton 51, Boulevard de la Chapelle, Dossier général, Lettre, 26 avril 1913.

³⁶ APP, J^C, BM², carton 20, 108 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Rapport Commissaire de la Goutte-d'Or, 19 janvier 1899 ; carton 10, 116 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Rapport Service mixte des garnis, 20 décembre 1912 et carton 58, 1 rue Belhomme, Rapport des gardiens de la paix, 24 novembre 1891.

but there must be a mistake because I have been fined twice for a single person instead of only once like the others. Is it because the girls were not registered in the police records? I did not think it was my responsibility to do so since I did not accommodate these girls.³⁷

Not only did these managers admit to renting out rooms to venal couples whom they did not accommodate, but the fines they received were felt to be a fair punishment, or even some sort of tax on their sex trade revenues.

The « red light district » of fin-de-siècle Paris

For the landlords, the thought-out diversion of their hotel rooms was profitable and they took on responsibility for it. What best reveals their degree of involvement in the informal economy of public prostitution is the way they fitted out their shops entirely for prostitution purposes. Taking into account these new commercial spaces is all the more heuristic as it brings the dynamic relationship between sex trade and shop business to the fore.

In neighborhoods which were popular with prostitutes, local cabaret and hotel owners got in the use of reserving specific areas in their buildings for tricks, such as the first floors of furnished apartments or rooms looking onto the courtyard in cafés or dancehalls. However, fitting out of the ground floor which looked onto the street and converting it into rooms where priced sexual services were performed was entirely new in fin-de-siècle Paris. Prostitution shops developed in the Parisian landscape and widened the range and terms of sexual services public offer. These shops were mentioned in a previous testimony of a landowner who complained about financial loss; these shops resemble these of Amsterdam in the Netherlands:

³⁷ APP, J^C, BM², carton 39, 98 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 28 octobre 1891.

At this number [27 rue Charbonnière] a former shop which is now closed has been converted by the owner into a house of rendez-vous. He fitted three doors in the said shop; each opens on a bedroom and in front of each bedroom stands a woman who accosts passersby.³⁸

These shops made up of “three or four compartments”³⁹ opening on the street, heralded the advent of a new form of public prostitution, characterized by an unprecedented, maximum proximity between the locus of solicitation and the place where tricks were turned, between the public space of supply and the private space of consumption of sexual services. This spatial setting gave public women more freedom, since they settled there more durably than in other places and since they no longer had to pass by the owner’s or the cabaret manager’s desk before a trick. It marked above all the crossing of a commitment threshold to the informal economy of street prostitution:

These shops belong to the hotels and bar owners who also hire the prostitutes who work there ; there is a day team and a night team, with a shift usually occurring around six in the evening. It is clear that prostitution is a lucrative business. From a moral point of view they are procurers, but we lack substantial proof to charge them with pimping. On the other hand, it is a rare thing to find underage prostitutes on their premises; they keep breaking the terms and clauses of the police regulation dated February, 15 1910.⁴⁰

³⁸ APP, J^C, BM², carton 34, 88 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 22 juin 1903.

³⁹ APP, J^C, BM², carton 51, Boulevard de la Chapelle, Dossier général, Lettre, 29 août 1910.

⁴⁰ APP, J^C, BM², carton 51, rue de la Charbonnière et Boulevard de la Chapelle, Dossier général, Rapport du Commissaire de la Goutte-d’Or et de l’Officier de paix du 18^e arrondissement, 24 avril 1913.

“Hassled by the policemen about the women who stayed there”, the landlord, who had been renting out “rooms in exchange of 5 francs a day with a permission to perform their special trade”, shamelessly asked the Préfet de police to “let him have a hearing about the rooms he owned on the ground floor looking onto 27 rue Charbonnière”⁴¹. In trying to make the offer of sexual services grow, these owners really did deserve the title of merchants of public prostitution. They actually liked the idea of being associated to owners of “maison de rendez-vous”, such as this letter of a woman to the Préfet about her prostitution shop shows:

With your consent I ask the favour to own a “maison de rendez vous” 23 rue Charbonnière.

I have made a similar request about six weeks ago, and it has remained pending to this day.

I vouch to strictly abide by all police regulations.⁴²

This former prostitute turned cabaret owner wished to run her business out in the open, although the terms and the sociology of this form of street prostitution might have differed greatly from the “maisons de rendez-vous” system.

The development of prostitution shops is not only relevant because it attests to a new form of public prostitution sustained by dedicated landowners and wine merchants in fin-de-siècle Paris. It also reveals the conquering dynamics of the streetwalkers’ activity and substantiates the complaints of shopkeepers, since prostitution shops were replacing more traditional businesses. A police investigation confirmed the indignation of a resident who noticed that on “78 boulevard de la Chapelle, a tailor had just been expelled in order to put

⁴¹ APP, J^C, BM², carton 34, 88 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Contravention, 7 juillet 1903 et carton 34, 88 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Lettre, 9 mars 1911.

⁴² APP, J^C, BM², carton 27, 23 rue de la Charbonnière, Lettre, 5 mai 1903.

two new business premises in place” which were destined to sex trade; the change in trade was the result of an alleged impossibility to find another kind of tenant⁴³. The police commissioner and the district officer, who were fine connoisseurs of the local economic reality, reused this excuse and turned it into a general theory about the commercial changes in the neighborhood:

Trade is so to speak non-existent in this part of the Goutte-d’Or district, so much so that most shops which are not rented by bar owners would be vacant if the hotelkeepers and the bar owners had not thought about turning them into room for public women. ⁴⁴

The landlord gave the same explanation when accounting for his involvement in sex trade :

Mister Besombes declared he had no other choice but to turn two shops into rooms because they were located near the rue de la Charbonnière, and business is rendered impossible there due to the number of girls who solicit at every door. And he adds that in order for the rooms to be a fruitful investment, he rents them out to prostitutes. ⁴⁵

The pattern seemed clear: sex trade was taking over traditional trade which was experiencing serious difficulties due to the offensive practice of streetwalkers. For some it was a vicious circle and for others a virtuous one, prostitution bred prostitution: “the small housekeeper had

⁴³ APP, J^C, BM², carton 57, 21 rue de la Charbonnière, Rapport de la Police judiciaire, 20 janvier 1915.

⁴⁴ APP, J^C, BM², rue de la Charbonnière et Boulevard de la Chapelle, Dossier général, carton 51, Rapport Commissaire de la Goutte-d’Or et de l’Officier de paix du 18^e arrondissement, 24 avril 1913. Police officers of the Préfecture working in the district made the same point : “As they could not use shops with an entrance rue de la Charbonnière, most shopkeepers rented it to prostitutes [...]”. *Ibid*, Rapport du Service mixte des garnis, 24 décembre 1912.

⁴⁵ APP, J^C, BM², carton 34, 88 Boulevard de la Chapelle, Rapport du Service mixte des garnis, 18 juillet 1903.

to leave these ladies the floor”, explained a neighbor very simply⁴⁶. In truth, the shops did not disappear altogether, rather they became specialized in the trade which was best adapted to the district’s economic environment, in the only trade in which the proposed merchandise walked over to the potential client. This reconversion of shops for the most lucrative trade was part of a profit-maximizing logic.

CONCLUSION : INFORMAL ECONOMY AS AN INHERITANCE

As a group of tenants staying in the Goutte d’Or district put it “It was as though one was instantly transported to some reserved neighbourhood of Toulon or Marseille”⁴⁷. This image conveys a sense of the progressive monopoly of the urban space by sex trade. The development of prostitution shops brought us to draw a parallel between the commercial condition of the Goutte d’Or district at the turn of the 20th century and the red light district of Amsterdam. A comparison between these places and spaces adorned with red lights – that is to spaces which were officially dedicated to regulated prostitution by public services – tended to minimize the role played by the agents of the informal economy of public prostitution in this new business configuration at the local scale.

We believe that likening the streetwalkers’ role to that of an agent in a bazaar economy enables to better grasp the complexity of public prostitution as well as the economic issues at stake. These “queens of the sidewalk” were the agents of the economic and urban life in Paris. It was the way they performed their job which rendered their services, their trade more appealing, because it was less risky as well as more profitable, than businesses in formal urban economy. The shop-owners and the landlords were part of this informal business, gambled on it, and shaped the present but also the future of a Parisian district. They drastically transformed the economy, the social composition and the reputation of the Goutte-

⁴⁶ APP, J^C, BM², rue de la Charbonnière et Boulevard de la Chapelle, Dossier général, carton 51, Lettre, 17 janvier 1912.

⁴⁷ APP, J^C, BM², carton 51, Boulevard de la Chapelle, Dossier général, Lettre, 23 juillet 1904.

d'Or. Their gradual monopolization of the commercial and public place left a long-lasting imprint. Since history can help decode the economy of a place, let's just say that the share of the informal sector in today's Goutte d'Or district economy is very probably a legacy of the dynamic turn towards informal public prostitution which was taken at the end of the 19th century.

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