PROSTITUTION IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA:
A REVIEW OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The purpose of this historiography is to examine the available scholarship on prostitution in the Progressive Era and anticipate the direction such research might head in the future. This study looks at early works on prostitution and how they focused on attitudes towards prostitutes, along with the moral reforms and laws put in place to combat the practice of prostitution. It notes changes in the ways prostitution has been studied since the 1980s, giving special attention to the work of pioneering scholars like Ruth Rosen and her groundbreaking book, *The Lost Sisterhood*. It also explores how views of prostitution shifted during the period of tremendous growth and change in the nineteenth century. Just as ideas of prostitution changed during this period, the angles and methodologies for studying prostitution also changed; this study explores how prostitution is now being examined through the lens of working-class culture, women and sexuality, and the development of urban cultural, economic, and political life. It identifies this new approach to examining prostitution from the perspective of cultural, political, and economic life of the mid to late-twentieth century as the next phase of this area of scholarship.
Prostitution has been practiced and talked about for millennia; however, it has only been in recent decades that it has become the focus of scholarly research. People’s views of prostitution say a great deal about the society they live in. For instance, Ruth Rosen, pioneering historian of gender and society, argues that the study of prostitution “can function as a kind of microscopic lens through which we can gain a detailed magnification of a society's organization of class and gender.”¹ This function, however, is only fulfilled when looking at both the prostitute and their trade. Although, a vast literature has been produced on almost every aspect of the prostitute and their profession, most of that has been written about prostitutes in other time periods. In fact, little has been written about prostitution in the Progressive Era as a whole. This lack of literature limits prostitution’s ability to reflect wider social beliefs and practices.

Nevertheless, with scholars from a variety of disciplines tackling this controversial issue from new angles, research on prostitution moved from an earlier broad approach, which focused on the practice from a societal perspective, to later shifting focus to examining the prostitutes themselves as complex individuals.

By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, America was consumed with a moral fervor to rescue helpless women from sex and autonomy. As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, the ambiguous legal status of prostitution gave way to an increase of anti-prostitution policing and social campaigns to crack down on brothels and red-light districts. Social reformers took up the cause of ending prostitution outright, reframing prostitution as the great social evil, a social disease that could, through their efforts, be cured. Reformers pushed for policies that took aim at organized red-light districts, seeking to criminalize the third-party businesses that

prostitutes relied on. This enthusiastic eruption against sexual immorality grew out of the presumption that society’s behavior can be controlled and regulated and that though this regulation man and his environment can be perfected.

Despite this growth in both prostitution and the reform efforts to combat it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States, this period has been less popular among researchers of prostitution. However, regardless of the few works focused solely on prostitution in the Progressive Era, there have been numerous works written that either cover prostitution as a whole and include the Progressive Era or cover the Progressive Era as a whole and include prostitution. For instance, Michael McGerr’s *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*, is a general overview of the Progressive Era and only touches on prostitution as a framing device to look at women, vice, and moral reforms as a whole.\(^2\) For instance, in his section “Transforming Americans,” he explains prostitution’s connection to liquor, saying “together, liquor and prostitution, the saloon and brothel, seem[ed] to be the very heart of ‘vice’ in the United States.”\(^3\) Much of this lack of scholarship is due to a deficiency in sources about these women.

On the whole, very little reliable information is available from primary sources about the everyday workings of prostitution. Many of the sources are simply concerned with prostitution as a social evil, rather than as a social component. Most historians of prostitution rely substantially on court records for information, as it was usually only when a prostitute was arrested that any


\(^3\) McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 84.
evidence of her existence was produced. However, over the past few decades, feminist scholars studying American prostitution have discovered new documentary sources.

Despite the increase of sources, scholars of prostitution in the Progressive Era have had to pull from a variety of different sources and reinterpret old data to build a significant body of theory and research. Ruth Rosen, for example, draws material from cities throughout the United States to examine the ways in which social class and gender systems interacted to shape prostitution and the reform attempts to combat it. Rosen also draws from sources on European prostitution to discuss some of the international social movements dealing with sexual trade.

Mark Connelly, on the other hand, focuses on contemporary journalism, urban vice commission reports, and a few public and private reports, painstakingly detailing and interpreting them. It is here that a change in the writing style occurs. Instead of trying to synthesize the sources, Connelly opts to write about the sources themselves and the history of how society perceived prostitution.

One of the first looks into prostitution in the Progressive Era came from David J. Pivar’s 1973 book, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900,* which is the first extensive study of the social-purity movement of late nineteenth-century America. In his study, he examines the motives behind the purity crusade, saying “reformers, alarmed over crime increases, [and] distressed over the widening social distance between the wealthy and poor …

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5 As noted in the title, Pivar’s book actually covers the period between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century.
came to see American cities as diseased.” He then tells the story of the men and women who led the crusade to purify American morals, while simultaneously drawing generalizations about American reform based on the experiences of the purity crusade. It is important to note that Pivar was writing his book at an exciting time in American historical scholarship. The 1970s saw a surge in important, thought-provoking work by historians on a variety of sex-related topics. Because of the newness of this topic, Pivar’s book contains a good deal of new material, for which it is apparent that he, out of necessity, conducted an impressive amount of research. Thanks to this effort, he was able to detail the course and accomplishments of the purity crusade, its effect on the woman's movement, and the involvement of purity reformers in allied reform.

However, despite the appearance of sex-based works in the 1970s, the scholarship on prostitution was limited to a narrow frame. For instance, Charles and Carroll Smith Rosenberg’s 1974 book, *The Prostitute and the Social Reformer: Commercial Vice in the Progressive Era: Sex, Marriage, and Society*, covers state laws and city ordinances regarding prostitution, the enforcement of those laws, medical inspections of prostitutes, sexual hygiene and sex education, and all other manner of things concerning the “problem” of prostitution.

Then, around the 1980s, there was a readjustment in the way the topic of prostitution was approached: before, prostitution was studied in terms of its sensationalism, focusing on

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7 Pivar, *Purity Crusade*.

peoples attitudes towards the prostitute and their profession; references were buried in literature on deviance and vice, crime, and public health. Thereafter, historical studies began to display a change in emphasis, focusing on the prostitutes themselves, and their role within wider society.

Although not directly concerning the Progressive Era America, Judith R. Walkowitz’s influential work *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (1980), analyzes the role of women, both those who were prostitutes and those who were not, in the passage and repeal campaigns of the Contagious Diseases Acts, in doing so exploring the place of the prostitute in wider Victorian society. Possibly thanks to this work, the literature on prostitution is being examined through the lens of working-class culture, the history of women and sexuality, and the development of urban cultural, economic, and political life. The variety of subjects covered and angles taken when researching and writing about prostitution has expanded.

These scholars have many different goals when examining prostitution. Mark Connelly, for example, in his 1980 book, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era*, combines the techniques of intellectual, social, and cultural history to compose a cultural study of anti-prostitution thought and action that reveals “contradictions, limitations and possibilities of the

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10 These approaches and angles includes the study of: nineteenth-century political culture and the cultural and social contests over sexuality by Judith Walkowitz; Asian-American and US urban history, race and ethnicity, immigration, and gender and sexuality by Mary Ting Yi Lui; late nineteenth and twentieth-century African American history, as well as urban, gender, and civil rights history by Cheryl D. Hicks; North American border-making processes Chinese in the Americas, sexuality and morals policing, and diasporas and transnationalism by Grace Peña Delgado; and aesthetics in contemporary culture, social geography, and contemporary, as well as studies in religion by cultural sociologists like Jonathan Cordero.
cultural context in which anti-prostitution flourished.”

Connelly is the first to interpret every major aspect of his subject. He explores the relationship between prostitution and the issue of independent, mobile women in the cities. He examines the belief in a direct relationship between prostitution and immigration, along with the problems of venereal diseases. He also details the urban Vice Commission reports on the extent of commercialized sex in the cities, the "white slavery" hysteria, and the concern about prostitution in connection with the mobilization for World War I. His goal is to explain why prostitution became a major national issue by examining “the cluster of ideas, beliefs, emotions, and fears that propelled anti-prostitution in the early twentieth century.”

Connelly and Rosen alike emphasize the symbolic importance of the reform. They perceive anti-prostitution as a symbolic discourse on changing societal conditions and the associated anxieties and fears.

While much has been written on vice commissions, reformers, and anti-prostitution in the Progressive Era, little has been written about the prostitutes themselves. In addition to Connelly’s all-encompassing work on prostitution, Ruth Rosen’s *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* presents an additional side to the controversial issue, giving an empathetic understanding of prostitutes’ views as well as incorporating reformers’ perspectives, like those before her. Her work seems to be the first to examine the work and lives of prostitutes, together with the efforts of reformers. In Rosen’s research, prostitution is no longer defined as a deviant activity, but is examined as patterned interaction embedded in and reflective of overall social organization and cultural values. Rosen believes focusing on a

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traditionally marginalized group brings the societal structure and cultural values of a society to light.

Ruth Rosen’s *The Lost Sisterhood* is a rare book that looks at prostitution in the first two decades of twentieth-century America. In this work, she examines the growth of urban prostitution, the reactions of a reform-obsessed society, and the progressive era legislation that resulted from this obsession. She describes how early twentieth-century Americans viewed prostitution, explains why some women chose to become prostitutes, and describes the reform movement and subsequent regulations that developed before World War I.

Although a short read, *The Lost Sisterhood* is a compelling book that joined a fast-growing list of articles and books on prostitution and has made a worthy contribution to both the literature of American prostitution and its role in American history as a whole. Rosen skillfully shows why the reform efforts not only failed to eradicate prostitution, but also served to intensify the prostitutes' problems. She fully presents the perspectives of the reformers, as well as those of the prostitutes, which adds to the scope and richness of the study. Rosen, in *The Lost Sisterhood*, suggests, that prostitution was a temporary state of sin, a personal vice, rather than an occupation or status. With the advent of the Progressive Era, the hey-day of prostitution came to an end. Rosen notes that while Victorians considered prostitution to be a “necessary evil” that protected middle class women from the passions of men and the prostitute to be a protector of domesticity, prostitution later became viewed as a “the social evil,” that was a moral problem on a national level.

Brian Donovan, a sociology professor at the University of Kansas, on the other hand, examines numerous white slavery claims in his 2006 book, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender,

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and Anti-vice Activism, 1887-1917. His book is a concise treatment of the differing approaches toward prostitution by the major reformers of the Progressive era. He looks at how the variations in those stories contributed to the changing meanings of race and gender. The merit of Donovan’s pursuit is clarified when he explains that, “white slavery narratives … performed the ideological work necessary for gender and racial formation … [and these] Crusades against white slavery helped build racial hierarchies.”

There has also been a large collection of both articles and books that have been written about prostitution in the Progressive Era, but with a regional focus. One of these regionally focused works is Jayme Rae Hill’s 2008 dissertation, From the Brothel to the Block: Politics and Prostitution in Baltimore During the Progressive Era. In it, she explores the factors that led some women into prostitution, studies the ideas and goals of the progressives who sought to abolish prostitution, and traces their attempts to abolish prostitution.

Generally speaking, sex work has been criticized and stigmatized in American society for quite a long time. However, in the historical scholarship on prostitution in the Progressive Era

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14 Brian Donovan, White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-vice Activism, 1887-1917 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 129.

this fact is generally irrelevant. Regardless of a historian’s personal moral values, prostitution generally has been examined through a morally agnostic lens. Prostitutes themselves are viewed as neither victims nor predators, but as individuals who made difficult choices when confronted with limited options. For instance, in her book *The Lost Sisterhood*, Ruth Rosen never romanticized or sensationalized the topic of prostitution. However, she did offer an assessment of her personal views of prostitution in the introduction to her book. She wrote that she “regard[s] prostitution neither as the worst form of exploitation women have ever suffered, nor as a noble or liberating occupation.”¹⁶ That is not to say that these historians do not have their own opinions on the controversial subject and that those opinions do not affect their line of questioning. She adds that it is necessary to know the author’s thoughts on a controversial topic, as these opinions affect the kinds of questions they will ask and how they will interpret the responses.

There are some minor problems in the literature focusing on prostitution during the Progressive Era. Many of the scholars of this subject seem to overstep when they make definitive statements about prostitution and its influence on other aspects of the Progressive Era. Although sound in theory, many of these ideas are not backed up well enough by imputative facts. For example, as groundbreaking as it was, Pivar’s work raises more questions than it answers. His arguments are muddled by his decision to end his study prematurely at 1900. However, other historians have remedied this issue,¹⁷ deciding to cover farther into the twentieth century. Pivar’s argument that the purity movement against prostitution was "the originator of modern sex


¹⁷ For an example of this see Brian Donovan’s *White Slave Crusades*. 
education”18 is also unconvincing due to a lack of evidence. Another example is Brian Donovan’s *White Slave Crusades*. Although a well-written and interesting work, it only examines a very small and elite group of reformers. His examination of the implications of these viewpoints on issues of gender and race are also exceedingly speculative. He also gives no mention of class considerations, especially the desire of the middle class to discipline the unruly proletariat, and the struggle for political power in American cities among the middle and lower classes. It is useful for its analysis of the implications of these viewpoints on issues of gender and race. Another issue is that Rosen and Connelly both misrepresent the symbolic meanings of moral reform by overemphasizing remedial aspects of the movement and underplaying preventive reforms such as education. Another minor downfall in prostitution scholarship is that, except in rare instances, the prostitute is assumed to be female, however, male prostitution has been as prevalent as its female counterpart.19 It is possible that the attention given to female prostitution has overshadowed it, but that does not excuse the lack of literature.

While there is a good deal of work produced about late nineteenth and early twentieth-century prostitution, the field is by no means satisfied. There are few works devoted to minority prostitutes and there are only, in recent years, accounts of prostitution described as a working-class culture. Much of this absence of scholarship is caused by a shortage in sources about these women, but therein lies part of the challenge for scholars. These women existed and there must have been things written either by them or about them beyond court records. Once discovered, a new realm of scholarship on prostitution could emerge.

By comparing recent histories of prostitution with earlier ones, it might be possible to


19 For more about male prostitution see George Ryley Scott’s *History of Prostitution: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd., 1936).
chart the direction in which the historiography of prostitution is heading. The emergence of new primary sources and the recent surge in feminism in mainstream media imply that research on the topic of prostitution is far from finished. The majority of the existing literature about prostitution in the Progressive Era was only published in the last few decades and has covered a wide range of topics, however, it focuses primarily on the regulation of prostitution. With the help of authors like Ruth Rosen, it has been made clear that any reinterpretation of progressivism and reform in historical writings cannot present prostitution as a simple afterthought, but as a symbol for the fears and anxieties brought about by changing industrial and societal conditions. Using prostitution to look at the cultural, political, and economic life of the mid to late-twentieth century could be the next phase of this area of scholarship.
Bibliography


"I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work." _____Lydia Phillips______