H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Philip Howell. *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the Empire.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xii + 299 pp. .00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85365-1.

Reviewed by Richard Cosgrove
Published on H-Law (March, 2010)
Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep

The World's Oldest Profession Revisited

This study of policing prostitution in nineteenth-century Britain and the empire addresses two questions of British history that have engaged the attention of scholars for the past several decades. The first issue is the dichotomy often drawn between domestic and imperial history, as if they were two separate spheres. As Philip Howell puts it, the metropole (Liverpool and Cambridge)/colony binary does not work well when applied to the regulation of prostitution. Second, while conceding the primacy of race in imperial relationships, Howell argues that race alone cannot explain the development of policy in the imperial examples of Gibraltar and Hong Kong. The emphasis throughout is on the variables of local conditions that created complex problems; official policy toward prostitutes rarely admitted simple answers.

A generation ago, scholarship on Victorian prostitution examined the phenomenon primarily, although not exclusively, in the context of feminist history. Accepting that commercial sex reflected all manner of class and gender issues, the plight of the prostitute took center stage. Was she an individual whose participation in the sex trade led to drugs, drink, and destitution? Or did life on the street create a sisterhood whose bonds deflected the inevitable horrors of perversion and violence that she too often endured? This volume advances past these issues by focusing on strategies for the regulation of what could not be abolished.

Eradication of a social evil energized attempts to regulate conduct in Victorian Britain in many areas. The incidence of venereal disease in the military caused grave concern. Reluctantly, the government attempted to solve the problem through the famous (or infamous) Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1867, and 1869. Concerned about the physical and moral health of the military and its readiness to shoulder imperial burdens, these statutes attempted to resolve the problem by dealing with the prostitutes, not their customers. They applied only to a lottery of military camps. The acts embodied such a double standard of conduct that opposition from Josephine Butler and others led to a repeal of the offending legislation in 1886. The system of enclosure and inspection had failed.

Four case studies, two domestic and two imperial, provide the empirical evidence for this study. The first examines Liverpool, the capital of Victorian prostitution. The port had a large number of ships with potential customers constantly arriving and, understandably, brothels proliferated not far from the docks. Liverpool municipal authorities attempted to manage, not suppress, prostitution with a lighter touch than the Contagious Diseases Acts. This policy of regulation failed and "even the discreet, modest and informal supervision of prostitution was deemed politically unacceptable, backward-looking and incompatible with British values" (p. 110).

In the next chapter, the situation in Cambridge receives careful treatment. Here, of course, instead of the military it was the students who required protection from their baser desires. Town and gown both had a vested interest in regulating undergraduate conduct but in this case as well there was little interest in suppression. After all, prominent children of the nation's political and social elite might be lectured but never ordered. The university proctors deterred but did not deny opportunities for casual sexual adventure.

Moving into the empire Gibraltar presented yet another policy choice. A regulatory policy amounted to tyranny over a dependent population and could not work. On Gibraltar, local authorities used the legal status of non-British aliens to shape the contours of prostitution. The legal system itself became the instrument of regulation rather than a specific statute, with residence rights the primary vehicle for an ad hoc supervision. Compared to other imperial territories, of course,

the population numbers involved on Gibraltar were exceedingly small. The lessons drawn from this example, however, seem well considered.

In Hong Kong prostitution meant the services of a non-European race. As Howell makes clear, race did matter because separate groups of women catered to Europeans and to the Chinese population. Race did not just mean biological difference; it was a political construct that affected local policy. The Chinese population has its own traditions with respect to prostitution, and in the end the colonial government had to accept these circumstances. Even when racial arrogance vexed the relationship between governors and the governed, there were limits to what the British could accomplish.

The arguments of this book are sophisticated in language and concepts, so it would be an unlikely choice for undergraduate assignment. For specialists in Victorian history with an interest in prostitution at home or abroad, this volume makes a welcome contribution to the growing historiography about these issues.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Richard Cosgrove. Review of Howell, Philip, *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the Empire.* H-Law, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29273

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.