



**Paulo Drinot.** *The Sexual Question: A History of Prostitution in Peru, 1850s–1950s.* Cambridge Latin American Studies Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Illustrations. xv + 313 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-49312-3.

**Reviewed by** Katherine E. Bliss (Center for Strategic and International Studies)

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**Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

Paulo Drinot's *The Sexual Question*, a comprehensive analysis of the history of regulated prostitution in Peru, adds complexity and depth to scholarly understanding of how ideas about gender, sexuality, and health influenced national and regional debates over immigration, family, work, and social progress during a period of political mobilization, intense urbanization, and economic transformation.

Drinot defines the sexual question in Peru as the set of sexual issues that many believed “stood in the way of the flourishing of the population and the solutions that were devised to address those problems” (pp. 7-8). Starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, Peruvian doctors, politicians, clergy, and social activists weighed in on the sexual question in medical journals, newspapers, speeches, and letters to public officials. While they fretted about the implications of sexual promiscuity for population growth, there was consensus among this diverse set of commentators that female prostitution was a necessary evil, rooted in men's natural drive to experience frequent sexual encounters with a diverse number of partners. By this logic, making a subset of women sexually available to men prevented far greater sexual transgressions, such as homosexuality and masturbation, from disrupting social life.

However, there was little agreement among this same group as to what led women in Peru to prostitution; how to deal with syphilis, gonorrhea, and other sexually transmitted infections; or how to manage what some commentators described as “scandalous” and “a necessary evil” (pp. 81-82). Some posited that women's natural attraction to luxury goods explained their engagement in sexual commerce, while others blamed poverty, low access to education, and crowded living conditions. For many observers, the weakness of Peru's men, embodied in the military's catastrophic losses to Chile during the War of the Pacific, explained their devotion of time and scarce resources to brothel visits. While other countries in the region, such as Argentina and Mexico, readily adopted European regulatory schemes to create red light districts and require women who sought to work as prostitutes to register with public authorities, Peru delayed doing so until the early twentieth century. It was only then that municipal authorities in Lima took steps to create a registry for public women, designate a *barrio rojo* on the outskirts of town, and set up a network of health dispensaries to treat sexually transmitted infections.

The book is organized chronologically, charting the rise and fall of the regulation of prostitution over six dense chapters. The first three cover

public debates over the governance of sexual commerce in Peru and focus on changing views regarding masculinity and femininity, as well as the rules and logic of regulation itself. The second three chapters focus on the establishment of the tolerance zone in 1928; the influence of international and eugenics arguments in favor of an abolitionist approach to reducing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in the country; and growing public concerns over the links between prostitution, immigration, and organized crime in the 1940s and '50s.

Given that the overarching emphasis of the analysis is on the fate of the regulationist project, the voices and perspectives of those who were most influential in arguing for and against it—doctors, public officials, clergy, and later, social workers—dominate the text. Their disparaging remarks about prostitutes, madams, pimps, and others involved in sexual commerce, their hand-wringing about the negative implications of local prostitution for the fate of the nation, and their heartfelt aspirations to redeem women from involvement in a disreputable activity will be familiar to anyone who has studied these issues in other countries. Drinot is careful to root his analysis in the ample historiography of sexual commerce in Latin America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, and in the context of work about gender, sexuality, and social policy, making it clear when the situation in Peru was similar to or different from other cases. He is particularly attentive to how debates about prostitution in Peru reflected a much larger set of national anxieties about race and ethnicity, exploring how Asian immigrants were unduly blamed for facilitating prostitution in the twentieth century, while experts painted indigenous populations as being overly susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases. Throughout the text, Drinot is clear about the limitations of his archival sources; to the extent possible, he features the voices and perspectives of prostitutes, madams, and brothel owners, as well as residents of the *barrio rojo*, but he is always careful to note when information to

confirm or counter a particular assertion made by a medical expert or outraged client, for example, is not available.

An especially interesting topic in the second half of the book is the development of a system of health clinics that treated venereal diseases free of charge. Initially the no-cost treatments were intended just for women registered as prostitutes who were found to be infected with syphilis, gonorrhea, or another sexually transmitted disease; however, authorities eventually reasoned that prostitutes' clients and others vulnerable to venereal disease should also be able to access appropriate therapies. These dispensaries were located in working-class neighborhoods in Lima, and their interactions with patients gave officials a much clearer idea of the conditions under which sexually transmitted infections were circulating among the population. To encourage anyone with disease symptoms to seek testing and treatment and to prevent the sick from hiding their afflictions or failing to complete the full set of therapeutic measures, they began to make all visits free of charge. What started out in Lima was eventually extended to other parts of the country where rates of sexually transmitted infections were also of concern. The data gathered from the clinics showed that many patients had not been infected by prostitutes. It provided strong evidence for the failure of regulation to prevent the spread of venereal disease and gave proponents of abolition ammunition for their successful campaign to dismantle the regulations in the 1950s.

Through a close examination of the rise and fall of the regulation of prostitution in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Peru, Drinot sheds light on how ideas about gender, race, and scientific expertise underpinned public debates over political participation and national prestige during a period of rapid social change. A compelling and well-researched analysis, this book will be of interest to those concerned with the history of public health and medicine, gender and sexuality,

social reformism, and post-independence Latin America.

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