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Prostitution in Brussels

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Introduction

As an urban centre from the Middle Ages on, Brussels has had a long history of prostitution, which has, however, remained largely underresearched. The nineteenth century remains the best explored period. In particular the so-called white slavery scandal has recently produced several studies by Belgian sociologists and historians. In general, the focus has been mainly on the genealogy of the different regulations. Very little is known about the prostitutes and even less about their clients. (Discursive) control has attracted the attention, practices of the different actors far less.

When talking about Brussels, it has to be borne in mind that it is a very complex region where 19 city councils govern over 19 heterogeneous territories, urban or rural, rich or poor, industrial or more service-orientated. This diversity makes it difficult to present one coherent narrative. That was also a problem for the municipal police corps during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They were not allowed to go after prostitutes in the territory of another municipality. And the regulations often differed from one municipality to another. After the First World War for example, nine municipalities had regulations relating to prostitution, five explicitly had none and no regulation is known in five others. Among the nine municipalities with an explicit set of rules, eight were inscribed in a policing framework: in Anderlecht, however, medical logic prevailed. The control of prostitutes was not directed by a police officer, but by a physician who even had some policemen under his command.

Societal reaction and legal situation

Very attached to the autonomy of local authorities, in 1836 the new state of Belgium confined the daily control of prostitution within the hands of the municipalities. Influenced by the so-called "French model" of Parent-Duchâtelet, i.e. a regulationist approach in which prostitution was considered as an inevitable evil, in 1844 Brussels adopted a very detailed set of rules which earned the Belgian capital the title of the "best regulated town in the world" and which was an example for other cities in Belgium, which often simply copied the guidelines valid in Brussels.

The set of rules which was rephrased in 1877 and 1922 in Brussels can be resumed as follows: prostitution — when controlled and limited to certain geographical urban spaces — was allowed and even encouraged. (Regulated) prostitution was seen as necessary. The goal of the regulationist approach was to make prostitutes invisible in the public space but controllable for the police and medical authorities. The regulation system distinguished between two kinds of prostitutes, those working inside specific brothels and those called *éparses*, who were not related to one specific whorehouse. The control of the women was double: by the police who inscribed the women on a register and by a municipal physician, whom the women were obliged to visit twice a week to pass a physical examination. A special unit existed at the Saint-Pierre hospital, where prostitutes were

confined when diagnosed with an illness. Brothel keepers were also controlled by the municipal authorities; they had to pay a fee in order to exercise their trade. Unlike other towns such as Paris and Vienna, controlling prostitution not only had costs — a common complaint often formulated by opponents of regulation — but also brought money into the communal budget. A strict hierarchical social differentiation existed between the brothels, which were categorized into different classes. For example, before the First World War, a first-class brothel with more than five women was required to pay 150 francs a month to operate. In the 1870s, that configuration showed its limits — the number of official brothels was declining and the number of clandestine prostitutes growing — and in 1877 a new set of rules reinforced the police prerogatives by creating a vice squad. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the deportation of foreign women and men suspected of being prostitutes or pimps by the *Sûreté publique* also became one of the ways of punishing undesirable persons.

The “white slavery” scandal (1880–1881) put Brussels on the global map of prostitution for a number of years. In 1880 several Belgian and British newspapers revealed that 40 minors — most of them English girls — were working as prostitutes inside brothels in Brussels with the tacit approval of the local police. For several months the scandal was hotly debated not only in Belgium but also in the United Kingdom. Several managers were sentenced to terms of imprisonment and the head of the local police and the mayor of Brussels were forced to resign. That was an important blow to the regulationist approach that had been the dominant ideological framework in which prostitution was regarded during the nineteenth century.

During the First World War, surveillance was under the control of the German occupiers. Their approach was highly regulationist: soldiers needed to have access to prostitutes “to rest” from the experiences they underwent at the front. In order not to weaken the German army with venereal disease, prostitution was, however, strictly controlled. The German military police worked hand in hand with the local vice squads. Medical control of prostitutes was exclusively German at the Molière hospital in Saint-Gilles, where one of the German physicians was the famous German poet Gottfried Benn. The increase in prostitutes due to the presence of a large number of German soldiers lasted until after November 1918 when Allied troops replaced the German ones. It was not until the end of 1919 that the number of prostitutes decreased significantly. After the First World War, the authorities in Brussels maintained the medical intercommunal structures that had been imposed by the German occupiers: they centralized the testing of prostitutes at the community clinic and all prostitutes who were diagnosed as ill went to a common hospital in Uccle.

With the staging of various white slavery scandals, the abolitionist movement had received a certain impulse in Europe in general and in Belgium in particular. From the 1870s on, regulations were criticized for favouring prostitution and corruption. In 1881 the *Société de moralité publique* was created in Brussels in order to promote the abolitionist agenda. At the beginning, the *Société* was able to gain wide support across party lines: liberals, socialists and Catholics were united. After 10 years, however, puritan Catholics gained a majority inside the *Société* and several years before the outbreak of the First World War, the association collapsed. Yet that institutional decline did not correspond to an ideological decline. One of the major arguments of the abolitionist movement was the fight against the prostitution of minors. The Le Jeune law in 1912, named after Jules Le Jeune, the Catholic Minister of Justice at the time, was a first major victory for the abolitionist movement.

After 1918, the city of Brussels first seemed to reaffirm its regulationist stance with a new municipal regulation in 1922 that replaced the old 1877 one. But that apparent consensus was fragile. In 1924 the mayor of the Belgian capital proposed suspending the existing regulations for six months in order to demonstrate that the abolitionist model was more successful. His proposal received a wide majority: 41 out of 42 councillors voted in favour of the experiment for which several new associations lobbied, such as the *Comité National Belge de Défense contre la Traite des Femmes et des Enfants* founded in 1921 by Isidore Maus or the *Ligue Nationale Belge contre le Péril Vénérien* in 1922 created by Adolphe Bayet with the support of the royal family. A community clinic was put in place: prevention and education was central. But forestalling the regulations did not mean abolishing medical controls, quite the opposite: most of the experts agreed that the only solution should come from the medical field, which was, however, quite divided on the matter of a best solution, for example Bayet, president of the *Ligue Nationale* and defender of an abolitionist solution, and Dujardin, military doctor and sworn opponent of the former.

Discussion of the experiment illustrated the medicalization of the social phenomenon on both sides. Avoiding venereal disease was the key point, used by most of the discussants. Several politicians (and physicians) underlined the importance of the problem by linking it directly to the demographic and moral consequences of the First World War, which had weakened the “Belgian race”. Numerous medical articles were published arguing with the help of various statistics that the post-war period was being characterized by the wide dissemination of syphilis and gonorrhoea.

Finding a consensus on the results of the experiment proved, however, to be very difficult: the archives of the police and the mayor of Brussels are full of letters from people protesting against the experiment. As only the city of Brussels had adjourned the rules, many prostitutes from the surrounding municipalities had changed their place of work and there was a great surge of visible prostitution in the municipality. Echoes in the press were also mainly negative, so that the regulations were reintroduced in 1925. The commission that had been created to evaluate the six-month experience properly did not produce any results. So regulation remained in place till after the Second World War. In 1948, a law proposed by Isabelle Blum put an end to the Belgian regulation system.

Organization of the trade

Very little is known about the organization of prostitution. The practices that were revealed during the white slavery panic showed that the worlds of the local political elite, the police officers and the tenants of the brothels were closely entangled, everybody being interested in maintaining the existing system.

In general, regulated prostitution was organized around two systems: the brothels called *maisons closes*, which were favoured by the police and the municipal authorities, and other brothels called *maisons de passe*, to which the so-called *éparses* took their clients. In contrast to a common opinion expressed regularly in books favouring regulation, half of the brothel keepers in Brussels were men. The *maisons closes* especially were in free fall from the 1860s onwards: from over 40 in the 1850s to less than 10 in the 1880s. At the end of the decade, the city of Brussels had only 12 houses where prostitution was officially allowed. The reason for that rapid decline has not yet been researched. It is

probable that some tenants tried other municipalities such as Saint-Josse-ten-Noode or Schaerbeek, the second and third most important communes for prostitution during the First World War, communes where controls were perhaps less rigid: only the city of Brussels had a substantial vice squad. But it is also plausible that the number of unregistered brothels became more important over time. Generally it is very difficult to advance precise numbers of women working as prostitutes outside the official registers. The number of 15,000 to 20,000 women that some politicians advanced in the 1920s was largely exaggerated. Flexner estimated in 1914 that 3,000 non-registered prostitutes existed in Brussels with around 150 that were registered. The only precise numbers that exist are related to the number of women who had been detected as ill: in 1919, 47 registered prostitutes and 204 non-registered prostitutes (a proportion of one in four) were in hospital.

The urban spaces where prostitution took place in Brussels remained remarkably stable over the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. As regulation tried to make prostitution invisible, brothels were mainly situated in small backstreets of the bigger boulevards. The area around the North Station was especially known as one of the busiest red-light districts in Brussels in the nineteenth century and has remained as such throughout the whole of the twentieth century until the present day.

Social profiles and causes of prostitution

From the mid-nineteenth century, local authorities in Brussels had been engaged in a regular effort to quantify prostitution. A continuous series of registered prostitutes (*prostituées inscrites*) exists from 1854 to 1923. Those numbers need, however, to be viewed with care. First of all, they only represent those who were registered: evaluating the number of prostitutes who have not been recorded numerically is difficult (see above). Secondly, those numbers are deeply entangled in political and social negotiations that are not stable over time. Taking these biases into consideration, the published numbers show the following evolution. The number of prostitutes inside brothels was around 200 from the 1840s till the 1860s before falling under 100 till the 1920s except for a significant surge between 1875 and 1882. For the *prostituées éparses* the evolution was roughly speaking similar but the surge more exceptional (almost 400 women registered as *éparses* in 1879).

In the mid-nineteenth century, most prostitutes came from the incessant flux of rural migrations, mainly from Flanders. At the beginning of the twentieth century, that population had far less of a mobile profile: most were then from Brussels. There was a great number of foreigners until the 1880s when the white slavery scandal caused a significant drop in prostitutes coming from France or the United Kingdom. They again gained in importance after the First World War. During the war the composition of the population slightly changed. The number of married women increased probably owing to the absence of their men at the front and their precarious living conditions. Owing to limitations on mobility, foreigners and women from other Belgian provinces dropped in number.

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