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Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro

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Introduction

In this paper I have focused principally on female prostitution in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, using two basic sources: medical publications (theses, books and articles) and the reports of the Police Chiefs, published as appendices to the reports of the Imperial Ministers of Justice. It is these two bodies of evidence which most clearly show the strategies adopted by the authorities of the time in controlling prostitution in Rio. In consulting some medical articles and theses, I have followed the lead of the group of researchers coordinated by Roberto Machado, whose *Danação da norma. Medecina social & constituição da psiquiatria no Brasil* (1978) also inspired some of the conclusions that I have reached in this paper. Other sources consulted include narrative accounts by foreign visitors, novels, court and police proceedings. All these yielded valuable information which helped in the construction of a portrait of female prostitution in Rio during the last century.

I would have liked to have studied the questions of homosexuality and male prostitution in Rio more fully, but the scarcity of sources has forced me to concentrate on female prostitution. The section on homosexuality and male prostitution does, nevertheless, give some idea of their extent and practice in the city in the nineteenth century.

For the sake of readers who may be unfamiliar with the social context of prostitution in Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century I have included a short initial section dealing with some aspects of the economic and demographic development of the city.

I would also like to make the point that the transcriptions from sources of the period, although they may seem excessive to some, have been made not only to familiarise readers with the language and terminology used, but also to present literally contemporary thinking on the subject under discussion. It was felt that these transcriptions might give, if only partially, a measure of the morality and mentality of the men of the period, in particular those who were linked to the dominant groups or who exercised some form of power and authority, such as doctors and police chiefs.

It is important to stress the tentative nature of this work, in which I am, basically, simply trying to draw attention to important aspects of the social history of Rio de Janeiro which until now have been neglected by historians and social scientists alike. I do not claim to have exhausted the subjects touched on, in such a short paper. Further research into the question of prostitution in Rio in the nineteenth century is at present being undertaken by Magali Engell at the Universidade Federal Fluminense in Niterói and by Marinete dos Santos Silva at the Institut des Hautes Etudes de l'Amérique Latine in Paris. It is to be hoped that all these efforts, although separately carried on, may one day be integrated into a more comprehensive study of the social history of Rio de Janeiro.

I. The Growth of Rio de Janeiro in the Nineteenth Century

The arrival of the Portuguese Royal Family in Rio de Janeiro in March 1808 completely changed the life of the hitherto small and somewhat dreary colonial city. The presence of the Court not only transformed Rio into the capital of the world-wide Portuguese Empire but also stimulated the growth of the urban economy and an improvement in the living conditions of the wealthiest sectors of the population. At the same time there was an expansion in the cultivation of coffee and sugar in the vicinity of the city, that is to say, in the rural parishes (*freguesias*) of the *município* of Rio de Janeiro.[1] Expanding coffee and sugar production and, above all, the opening of Brazilian ports to international commerce considerably strengthened Rio de Janeiro's position as the great export and commercial centre of southeastern Brazil.[2]

All these changes in turn fuelled a notable increase in population, in particular as a result of the opening of the country to foreign immigration and the introduction of ever-increasing numbers of African slaves, employed in various economic activities and as domestic servants. The population of the *Corte**, estimated by John Luccock as just under 60,000 individuals in 1808,[3] had risen to 116,444 in 1821, according to a census taken in that year. Of these, 86,323 (74.13 %) were living in the urban and suburban parishes, the city of Rio de Janeiro itself, and 30,121 (25.87 %) in the rural parishes; 58,895 were free (50.58 %) and 57,549 were slaves (49.42 %). Unfortunately, the 1821 census provides no information on the balance of sexes within the population.[4]

The rapid growth in population after 1808 led to the enlargement of the urban area to include the marshlands surrounding the city, which had been infilled, the mountain foothills, previously unoccupied areas along the shoreline such as Flamengo and Botafogo and low ground further inland such as valley of Laranjeiras and Engenho Velho. This process of urban expansion was consolidated after Brazil's independence from Portugal was declared on 7 September 1822, and by the end of the 1830s the city limits extended from São Cristovão in the north to Botafogo in the south and from the sea in the east to the Tijuca mountains in the west.[5]

During the 1840s the environs of the city of Rio de Janeiro ceased to be the centre of coffee production as by this period its cultivation had expanded over the mountains towards the valley of the river Paraíba in the provinces of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais. The total production of the

* The term *Corte* (Court) is used throughout this paper, as it was in the nineteenth century, to denote the area encompassing the urban (and suburban) parishes of the city of Rio and the rural parishes surrounding it which together made up the *município* of Rio de Janeiro (also known after the creation of the province of Rio de Janeiro in 1834 as the *Município Neutro*). The *Corte* became the *Distrito Federal* with the establishment of the Republic in 1889.

Corte was insignificant compared to the number of coffee sacks which were brought down the mountains in mule trains to the port of Rio de Janeiro for export. With this expansion Rio de Janeiro became the major port for the exportation of coffee and consequently the commercial centre and financial mainstay of the entire coffee growing region of the Paraíba valley.[6]

According to the census organised by Dr Roberto Jorge Haddock Lobo, the population of the *Corte* in 1849 was 266,466 inhabitants: 155,864 free (58.49 %) and 110,602 slaves (41.51 %). Of these, 205,906 individuals (77.27 %) lived in the urban and suburban parishes of the city proper and 60,550 (22.73 %) in the rural parishes. Males (152,955, or 57.4 %) greatly out-numbered females (113,511, or 42.6 %). The imbalance between the sexes in the free population had greatly increased since the 1820s, with 87,464 men (56.12 %) and 68,400 women (43.88 %). The disproportionate increase in the number of men may be partially explained by the greater number of them among the immigrants (particularly Portuguese) arriving in the Brazilian capital. Among the slaves of Rio de Janeiro there were also a great many more men than women: 65,591 (59.3 %) compared to 45,011 (40.7 %).[7]

The increase in the population of the *Corte* was really extraordinary, practically doubling between the early 1820s and the end of the 1840s. This was not only due to vast numbers of immigrants from Europe but also to the importation of African slaves, with the result that the slave population of the *Corte* itself also doubled during this period. The expanding cultivation of coffee and the constant need for labour ensured that large numbers of African slaves were regularly unloaded from slavers' ships onto the beaches close to Rio de Janeiro until the slave trade was finally abolished in 1850.[8] The majority of those slaves were sent to the coffee and sugar plantations of neighbouring provinces and the considerable number still remaining in Rio de Janeiro were employed in more varied tasks. Many foreign travellers in Brazil around the middle of the century were astonished by the enormous number of Africans to be seen walking in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, often commenting that, with the variety of native costumes and languages, they might imagine themselves in Africa.[9]

Foreign travellers also emphasised the economic importance of the capital of Imperial Brazil in the middle of the century. For example, the Frenchman Charles Ribeyrolles wrote:

> Rio, as may be affirmed, lived on trade and may rest on its generous destiny as entrepot and capital. Do the provinces of the south and west not concentrate in her storehouses? Does she not hold the ships of every nation in her port, paying rich dividends to her customs? Does Rio not enjoy the prerrogatives of the metropolis, the seat of the empire with its great luxuries and great profits?[10]

Nevertheless, to enable the city better to adapt to its economic position it

was necessary in the 1850s to embark on an extensive programme of public works and the provision of new urban services such as gas lighting, public hygiene and a sewerage system, and the creation of urban transport companies, especially tramway companies. This is in addition to the expansion of existing services and the establishing of the banking, commercial and manufacturing facilities suitable to a great port. The construction of the Dom Pedro II Railway also began in the 1850s but it became operational only in the middle of the following decade, linking the coffee-producing areas with the port of Rio de Janeiro. These changes started the city on a gradual process of urbanisation, characteristic of societies which begin to adopt a capitalist organisation of production.[11]

Many of the new banking, commercial, service and urban transport enterprises were floated as stock-holding companies and opened their doors to public involvement. As a consequence of this, many coffee planters, import and export merchants, as well as one-time traffickers in African slaves, who had seen their activities finally banned by the Brazilian authorities in 1850, sought to invest their excess capital in the new enterprises, and so contributed to the growth of a large market for shares in Rio de Janeiro, galvanising the until then sluggish stockmarket in the city.[12]

Economic and urban growth continued throughout the 1860s and 1870s, with the number and extent of the financial, commercial, industrial and public service companies steadily increasing. However, in terms of simple population total it is possible to see that there had been relatively little population growth since the end of the first half of the century. The free population increased in the 1850s and 1860s due to intensified immigration from Europe, in particular from Portugal; but at the same time the slave population was considerably reduced. The latter may perhaps be explained by the high mortality rate among slaves in cholera and yellow fever epidemics during the 1850s but also by the draining of slave labour from urban centres to the coffee plantations after the final cessation of the African trade. Immigrant labour was by now widely used in exactly those occupations formerly filled by slaves.[13]

According to the 1872 census the *Corte* had a total of 274,972 inhabitants, comprising 226,033 (82.2 %) free and 48,939 (17.8 %) slaves. Thus it can be seen that the slave population at this time represented a little less than a fifth of the total population and had been reduced to less than half of the slave population recorded in 1849. As for the division between the sexes, men still had the numerical superiority, 158,766 (57.74 %) to 116,206 women (42.26 %). The imbalance between the sexes in the free population had again increased, with 133,880 (59.23 %) men and 92,153 (40.77 %) women, which again may be explained by the still greater number of male immigrants arriving in the city. On the other hand, the slave population, although diminished, was clearly tending towards a balance between the sexes: 24,886 (50.85 %) men and 24,053 (49.15 %) women.[14]

Despite the crisis of the slave economy and the decay of coffee cultivation in the environs of Rio de Janeiro and in the valley of Paraíba during the 1870s and 1880s, the economic and demographic expansion of Rio de Janeiro continued. The number and size of the banking and commercial establishments and the urban service and public transport enterprises also continued to grow and in the 1880s manufacturing industry began to establish itself in the city and its environs, beginning the process of industrialising the Brazilian southeast. The setting up or the expansion of these concerns relied on the involvement of foreign capital (particularly British) as well as a great deal of capital transferred from the coffee industry in the Paraíba valley, which, faced with the crisis it was undergoing, turned to activities which offered less risk, more profit and better prospects.[15]

Great masses of European immigrants, still predominantly Portuguese, continued to arrive in Rio de Janeiro and the population maintained its steep growth curve, although the slave population continued to drop due to accelerated sales to the coffee regions. No population census of the *Corte* was taken in the 1880s but it is known from the statistics issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Trade and Public Works that in 1884 the considerable total of 32,103 slaves remained in the *Corte*. This slave population was reduced drastically in the following four years and by the beginning of 1888, on the eve of the Abolition of Slavery (13 May 1888), numbered only 7,488 individuals. Following Abolition many ex-slaves left the coffee-growing areas and made their way to Rio de Janeiro in search of new work, which also contributed to the city's subsequent population growth.[16]

The census organised in 1890, the year following the Proclamation of the Republic (15 November 1889), gives a good idea of the growth of the population of the city of Rio de Janeiro and its environs (now known as the *Distrito Federal*) in the two previous decades. According to this census, the population of this area was 522,651 individuals, of whom 422,756 (80.88 %) lived in the city proper (urban and suburban parishes), 92,803 (17.76 %) in the rural parishes, and 7,092 (1.36 %) were part of the floating population. The figures indicate that between 1872 and 1890 the population of the *Corte* practically doubled.[17] Of these half million inhabitants, the vast majority were of Brazilian origin (398,532 individuals, or 76.25 %) while foreigners (124,119 individuals) made up 23.75 % of the population. Men still predominated among the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro with 293,657 individuals (56,19 %) as opposed to 228,994 women (43.81 %). Among those of Brazilian descent the proportion of males to females was almost equal with 204,996 men (51.44 %) and 193,536 women (48.56 %). The imbalance was far more pronounced among the foreign population with 88,661 men (71.43 %) and 35,458 women (28.57 %), which indicates that Rio de Janeiro remained a source of attraction for male European immigrants above all for those of Portuguese origin.[18]

During the 1880s the city limits expanded again and many areas to the west were occupied. Carl von Koseritz, a German immigrant settled in Rio

Grande do Sul, travelling by train through the suburbs of Rio in 1883 passed "5 or 6 small stations" and noted that the suburbs extended for many miles.[19] By the time of the abolition of slavery and the proclamation of the Republic, the city perimeter had already engulfed the "distant" district of Engenho Novo (according to Dom Casmurro, the famous character in the novel of Machado de Assis).[20]

II. Prostitution and the Contemporary Moral View

Some of the richest sources for the study of prostitution in Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century are the theses presented in the Faculty of Medicine by young doctors and in specialised medical journals and publications. Although the topic of prostitution did not constitute a major taboo, even in these works the subject is hedged around with delicacy so as not to offend the religious ethic that dominated the slave society. The doctors attempted to explain prostitution as both a natural and a social phenomenon, in an effort better to understand and control a necessary evil that society, being unable to eradicate, was obliged to tolerate. Seen as a fact of nature, prostitution was linked to male sexual instinct, an organic necessity that because of original sin is a major aspect of satisfying the pleasures of the flesh. According to Dr Miguel Antônio Heredia de Sá in a work published in 1845:

> (...) a man avid for venereal pleasure is tormented by an imperious irresistible necessity; an astonishing excitation electrifies his body, a fierce fire consumes his organs, the arteries pulse with excessive force, his moist eyes burn with a supernatural brilliance, his face flushes, his breathing becomes ragged, his generative parts become tumescent and congested and he experiences a sensation of heat and titillation within them. Thought no longer has any force, nor is the will dominant: all of his faculties are concentrated on a fixed idea. This urgent appetite persecutes a man, robbing him of all other sensations of the objects which surround him, the dangers which threaten; he is delirious with a fever which consumes him, driven by a necessity which impells him, carried away as though by supernatural powers. He is insensible to all, and only alive to the delights which he craves. The most astonishing obstacles do not fetter him, nothing can stop him: all disappears before the ardour of his desire. Only the organism reigns: honour, virtue, duty, religion and all he holds sacred are but chimeras; only the desire which torments him alone is real, only the pleasure which obsesses him exists.[21]

Dr Herculano Augusto Lassance Cunha, in a dissertation on prostitution published in the same year also affirmed that "it is in our own natures that we should seek the pathogenesis of this social disease".[22]

Nevertheless, it is Heredia de Sá who also gives the most detailed explanation of prostitution as a social factor. According to him, prostitution had existed since the dawn of history as a means of filling a biological necessity of man, the satisfaction of his sexual instincts. In these terms it may be seen as a stabilising factor in society, enabling a man to discharge the excite-

ment caused by the imperious need for sexual pleasure without creating major problems in the social organisation. If on the one hand the necessity of dealing with male sexual instincts is what determines the existence and the level of prostitution then on the other it is a product of the human mass and of the functioning of the social organism, its usages modified by the customs, education, laws and climates of each country.[23] For Lassance Cunha, one of the most important causes of prostitution as a social factor was the excessive wealth of some and the misery of many, a poverty which drove many women into this way of life. In the doctor's opinion wealth and poverty could be explained by the organisation of society based on private property. This, while it had a positive aspect in being the foundation of the social structure, also had a negative one in being the cause of unequal fortunes. Poverty was another cause of prostitution due to immorality and lack of conscience among the rich. Society was thus "vicious not merely through the misery of the poor but through the passions of the rich".[24]

In the case of Rio de Janeiro and other Brazilian cities a specific and very important cause of prostitution was the institution of slavery, as it always encouraged the conditions for the reproduction of prostitution. For Lassance Cunha, there were three aspects to the relationship between slavery and prostitution. Firstly, slavery induced profoundly negative characteristics in the slave-masters. Slavery

> ... produces sloth, indolence, arrogance, vanity and tyranny in his master; clouds the purity of education, drains the fountains of industry, bars the progress of intelligence, cools the sacred fire of religion and perhaps patriotism, and finally is a permanent example of moral corruption. But ... these factors cause public decay, and if the slave produces these evils, it follows that the slave is one of the most extreme causes of prostitution among us.[25]

Secondly, the institution of slavery created a situation in which the poor were "ashamed to work", which in its turn produced a situation of "unjustifiable misery in a rich, fertile and unpopulated country". He continues:

> ... what, in Rio de Janeiro, is the misery of the women of the inferior classes who have their youth and all their strength? It is sloth, pride and vanity; an immoderate desire for fine clothes; they are accustomed to doing nothing. It is because of the repugnance that they feel for work that there are slaves to render this service, service that is the lot of their equals in countries where slavery does not exist.[26]

Thirdly, there is the presence of slaves within a household. Slavery by its very nature creates "candidates" for prostitution, since the negro is, above all

> ... by his nature and education, rough, uncouth and stupid. Ignorant of modesty, he understands nothing of morality nor virtue and, having an erotic nature, is extremely lascivious.[27]