

## Sex work, State formation, and sexuality in modern Peru

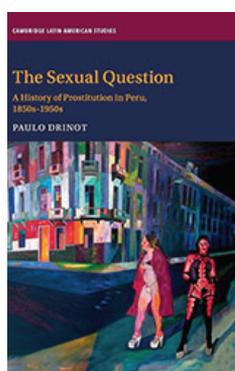
### *Trabalho sexual, formação do Estado e sexualidade no moderno Peru*

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DRINOT, Paulo. *The Sexual Question: A History of Prostitution in Peru, 1850s-1950s*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 313p.

A few years ago, while reviewing archival material on Valparaíso, Chile, I ran across reports of women engaging in sex work in temporary housing after the 1906 earthquake. The authorities quickly made it clear that sex work itself was not the main issue; much more important was where it was happening. I thought there was a much larger story to be told, but since I was researching a rather different topic, I took a picture and made a note of it. Paulo Drinot, in his new book *The Sexual Question: A History of Prostitution in Peru, 1850s-1950s*, takes on the subject of sex work in Peru and does so by drawing on an enormously wide range of sources, care for geography, and an attention to historical change from various angles.

The heart of *The Sexual Question* is an examination of how Peruvian society moved from an understanding of sex work that involved regulating it to one that sought abolition. Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, many within Peru pushed an analysis of sex work as something that needed to be regulated.

This framework developed partly out of the context of conversations happening globally at the time and partly from concerns specific to Peru. Drinot patiently walks the reader through various perspectives on sex work over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, showing how interpretations and propositions overlapped or departed from one another, until the first regulatory plan of 1905 through the *Multas y Licencias Especiales de Policía*. Even if it may not have functioned very well, it set the stage for later regulations, especially after 1914. In 1928, José Francisco Mariátegui, the prefect of Lima, “ordered the closure of all the city’s brothels and their transfer to La Victoria, a new working-class district in the periphery of the capital” (Drinot, 2020, p.147), thus creating the *barrio rojo* that would geographically concentrate sex work until it was closed down in 1956, when the pendulum had swung away from regulation and back towards abolition. While examining these changes, the reader learns a great deal

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about the quotidian experiences of sex work, too; the use of fiction and memoirs help to create a vivid picture of what it may have been like to live that life. Drinot is also careful to show that even if the broader narrative is of a shift toward regulation and then back to abolition, in every period both perspectives were present. A book that told this story, and this story alone, would be well received by this reviewer. But Drinot does much, much more in *The Sexual Question*.

The book is also a story of State formation. Belief in the framework of regulation among part of the population also required them to conceptualize the State as something that “should” step in to oversee how this sector of society functioned. And stepping in meant that it needed to analyze sex work from multiple perspectives: there needed to be an analysis and, indeed, a construction of “normal and abnormal or desirable and undesirable male and female sexuality” (Drinot, 2020, p.9). Drinot, in turn, historicizes these categories, and from there the reader is taken through some fascinating discussions of gender and sexuality – the section on the *mujer muchacho* is particularly interesting – that reveal certain anxieties and the role of the State as regulator and protector. Books by Carlos Aguirre (2005) and Juan Carlos Yáñez Andrade (2008) would pair well with *The Sexual Question* for thinking through State formation in this time period in Peru and Chile.

Drinot also uses the two maps in the book to great effect in this piece of historical geography. As Drinot (2020, p.92; emphasis in the original) writes, “not only was the ‘geography’ of brothel prostitution modified by the introduction of regulation; brothel prostitution ‘itself’ was transformed by regulation”. Part of the rationale for creating the *barrio rojo* in La Victoria was precisely due to its peripheral location spatially and socially from the historic city center. And when the character of La Victoria shifted and a *barrio rojo* was no longer acceptable in such a place, Carlos A. Costa, the mayor of La Victoria, suggested the creation of a new *barrio rojo* “far from any populated urban area ... enclosed by a high wall of 3 meters with a single entrance” (p.266). *The Sexual Question* is an example of the necessity of integrating geography into historical analysis.

One of the things Drinot does well is include the voices of many different actors. Following the lead of Rita Felski (1998, p.2), the “experiential realities of human subjects” are a key element to the historical trajectory of the sexual question. We see sex workers protest their forced move from one location to the next, complain that other sex workers are not abiding by the rules, and at one point even organize what seems to be a brief street protest (Drinot, 2020, p.274-275); we also get the voices of their neighbors, the police, state bureaucrats, and doctors, among many others.

And central to this history is medicine. Drinot (2020, p.2-3) shows how lawyers, doctors, and social scientists “pathologized” Peruvian society as “fundamentally unhealthy, both physically and morally,” which in turn “allowed for the possibility of regeneration”. This relates directly back to State formation. It also proposes that “medicalization was resisted, contested but also embraced, even co-produced, by different actors for a variety of reasons” (p.14). The discussion of medical debates and how people on the ground interacted with them are particularly generative for thinking through this era in Peruvian (and Latin American) history.

I should emphasize two more things briefly. First, Drinot shows what kind of history can be written when you spend the time to sift through a variety of sources, from archival records, medical theses, periodicals, memoirs, and a global secondary source list. Second, the book opens up many new avenues for research. In Chapter Five, for instance, Drinot (2020, p.214, footnote 56) discusses the role of *asistentas sociales* in antivenereal campaigns and notes that this group still lacks much historical investigation in Peru, while also referencing the fine work of María Angélica Illanes (2006) on Chile.

*The Sexual Question* is a superb work that will required for anyone interested in modern Peru, as well as the global history of sex, sex work, State formation, and medicine.

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