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UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
INSTITUTE OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES
OCCASIONAL PAPERS

**Prostitution in
Nineteenth-Century
Rio de Janeiro**

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31 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HA
1988

ISBN 0 901145 64 5

ISSN 0953 6825

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Acknowledgements

This work could not have been carried out without the support of the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), which from 1983 to 1987 awarded me a grant enabling me to study for a doctorate in history at University College London, as well as paying my return air-fare from London to Rio de Janeiro, where I spent three months on further research in 1984.

I would also like to mention Professor Leslie Bethell, Professor of Latin American History at University College London and my thesis supervisor, and Dr Colin Lewis (lecturer in Latin American Economic History at the London School of Economics and the Institute of Latin American Studies), who encouraged me to present this essay at a Brazil Workshop at LSE in March 1985. I presented the theme of this work for the first time as a lecture under the auspices of the Associação de Brasileiros Estudantes de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisadores na Grã-Bretanha (ABEP) in January 1985.

Finally, the translation and adaptation of this work into English would have been impossible without the assistance of Valerie King.

Luiz Carlos Soares

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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. Medicina 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 prerogatives 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

According to Lassance Cunha, the negro's evil influence on the family manifests itself by various means. First, through the use of negro wet-nurses, who infect the children with the germ of corruption in their milk. Second, by the demand for female slaves as companions and confidantes for the young, who might be corrupted by their language and example. Third, through the constant sexual availability of female slaves to their young masters. Fourth, in the idleness and capriciousness of white women whose slightest whim is obeyed by slaves. And finally in the taste that men develop for black mistresses, despising their wives.²⁸

Among the more general causes of prostitution listed by Lassance Cunha are celibacy, the idleness of the sons of rich and powerful houses, domestic problems that often overtake mothers and daughters, decline in religious observance, the publication of immoral works and a lack of moral and intellectual education (particularly among women); all of these contributing to a certain laxity in public standards of morality.²⁹ He also suggests that certain factors peculiar to the development of Rio de Janeiro could be considered as causes of prostitution. These include the hot climate, the early onset of puberty among the city inhabitants, its own position as a commercial and maritime centre where many and varied nations and customs meet and, lastly, the multitude of students and clerks living there who need to satisfy their carnal instincts.³⁰

Both doctors also draw attention to another factor in the demand for prostitution: the great disparity of numbers between the sexes, particularly among slaves and foreigners, there being far fewer women than men in these two groups. While the end of the slave trade and the gradual decline of slavery from the 1850s began to equalise the numbers of men and women in the slave population, the imbalance between men and women among the free population increased considerably with the steady growth of immigration. It was the opinion of these two doctors that "public women" were the only possible means of satisfying the demands of the legion of single men resulting from this imbalance. Indeed, an indirect reason for the growth of prostitution in Rio de Janeiro cited by these doctors was the increase in male homosexuality in the middle of the century. In his study of homosexuality (published in 1906), Dr José Ricardo Pires de Almeida argued that it had been particularly rife in the lower-commercial classes, among the Portuguese clerks and shop-boys. It caused such alarm that there were "official" moves to combat the "evil", such as the importation of the so-called "*ilhoas*", islander prostitutes, from the Açores and Madeira. Pires de Almeida himself tells us that:

These dregs of perverts had reached such startling numbers ... that to contain their evergrowing impetus, *official* sanction was given to the introduction of the first European whores [the *ilhoas*] in 1846 when the Portuguese Consul, Baron de Moreira, was attempting to halt the spread of sin among the petty commercials, which was then the worst centre of this social scourge.³¹

In a city where, as the doctors claimed, public morality was little regarded due to the lack of moral, intellectual and religious education, not even the catholic clergy was innocent of the prevailing debauchery, giving a poor example to their flock and contributing directly to the moral decline. Many cases of concubinage were recorded, involving “the incumbents of urban, suburban and rural parishes” who often lived openly with their women and children “referring to them as their “*comadres*” (godmothers) and “*afilhados*” (godchildren) and presenting them to their parishioners as such”.³²

But even priests did not always behave as “exemplary husbands”. Pires de Almeida relates that when they took negro or half-caste slaves as mistresses, they would frequently ill-treat both them and their children. Nor did the priests have the slightest scruple in

... outrageously exhibiting in public their drove of black or mulatto concubines and horde of children, some of whom ... they would sell, as is the custom among plantation-owners and other slave-masters.³³

Thomas Ewbank, who visited Rio de Janeiro towards the end of the 1840s, was also astonished by the atmosphere of moral collapse and corruption among the members of the clergy. Brazilian citizens, he reported, openly criticised the behaviour of the clergy, who in church “appeared respectable and devout, but their secret crimes had made this city a Sodom”.³⁴ Ewbank quotes an anonymous, but important, official’s assessment of the “appalling immorality” of the clergy:

They are assuredly the most licentious and profligate part of the community. The exceptions are rare indeed. Celibacy being one of their dogmas, you will find nearly the whole with families; and it is a substantial fact, which admits of no argument, that in their amours they are ever partial to women of colour – blacks or mulattoes.³⁵

However, it was not only the secular clergy who were subject to “moral corruption”. In many cases it was even more rampant among the regular clergy in the religious orders. Pires de Almeida asserted that the “grandchildren of Saint Francis and Saint Benedict” were very numerous, being for the most part “intelligent half-castes”. According to him, it was also common for the friars to disguise themselves and leave the convents by night to visit “bordellos, houses of good fortune, candomblés, cheap bawdy-houses and even public dancehalls, masquerades and theatres”. He cites a famous case of the time:

It is notorious that a friar, having been sentenced to *imprisonment within the convent*, was surprised by the police in a *public-house* in Beco de Cotovelo, disguised with a dishevelled blond wig, a fine image of Christ.³⁶

Ewbank also recounts a famous case which scandalised the city in the middle of the century, involving several friars and a prostitute:

St. Anthony's Convent was the scene of a direful tragedy. A young woman of doubtful reputation was visited by several of the monks, and subsequently introduced into the monastery in one of their dresses. After some days the affair became public; the police interfered, and found her in one of the cells in a dying condition. It is not a year since this transpired.³⁷

Decidedly, such instances could only undermine both the credibility of the clergy and their esteem among the population and, in the view of doctors, public authorities and foreign travellers, contributed to yet a further decline in standards, moral corruption and the licentiousness which governed Rio de Janeiro in the middle of the nineteenth century.

III. Public Prostitution

In his thesis of 1845 the young carioca doctor Lassance Cunha denounced the rise in prostitution and the consequent spread of venereal disease, particularly syphilis, in all classes of the city. In his paper, he distinguished between two types of prostitution: the public, which might be divided into three categories, and the private, practised by women with other occupations. In public prostitution, the prostitutes of the first rank were those frequented by the rich, living retired lives in outwardly respectable houses. The second rank were to be found throughout the city but principally between the Campo da Aclamação and Rua da Vala, and were mostly negro or Portuguese. Finally, those of the third category, in the words of the doctor, inhabited “the most sordid of shacks, where they entertain the worst of libertines; indulging in drunken lewdness and the excesses of sensuality”, which were concentrated “in the upper extremities of the Ruas dos Ferradores, Sabão, São Pedro, Hospício, etc”.³⁸

Thirty years later, in 1875, the chief of police in Rio de Janeiro, Ludgero Gonçalves da Silva, also worried by the increase in prostitution and venereal disease, conducted a survey and calculated that prostitution in Rio could be divided into “four distinct classes”:

First, the black or mulatto slaves kept in decently furnished houses by their masters and paid a generous allowance; secondly, the miserable wretches who dwell in tenements, living in squalid poverty, visibly marked by the diseases which infect them; thirdly, the young girls, almost all foreign, who live in houses of good appearance under the eye of women who receive the profits of impurity, satisfying the stipulations privately agreed between themselves. These girls are so tyrannically treated and with such rigour, that some of them have had to escape from the houses by climbing down knotted sheets from their windows. When these cases have been brought to the notice of the police they have been unable to take any action on behalf of the girls – who were by then in similar houses by their own

choice, and without suffering any constraint; fourthly, the no less miserable women who occupy sumptuous houses, wear silk, expensive plumes, jewels and diamonds of great value, frequent theatres and public places and have splendid carriages at their disposal.³⁹

Gonçalves da Silva's survey of the prostitutes in the city, based on information from the police authorities, established that there were 880 whores "who were publicly known as such". But the chief of police himself recognised that this figure was "far less than the truth", since it did not include "perhaps half the number of the whores of the first and second classes" mentioned above.⁴⁰

Shortly before the survey ordered by Gonçalves da Silva, Dr Ferraz de Macedo had carried out a count of prostitutes living in four parishes of the city (Sacramento, São José, Santa Rita and Glória) in the first half of 1872, reporting that there were 1,171 women who might be considered as prostitutes. In his survey Ferraz de Macedo had included as "prostitutes" some women – florists, dressmakers, seamstresses, etc. – who "are employed during the day in the shops, offices and private houses" but who "easily yield to debauchery at night". However, in commenting on Ferraz de Macedo's work, Pires de Almeida noted that as well as these women it would also be possible to classify as prostitutes "the sellers of cigarettes and cigars in fictitious shops, formerly much frequented by erring clerks and night-wanderers of all classes", and "the extras at the different theatres" who "equally would sell their depravities in the watches of the night for the usual price".⁴¹ In the 1870s the continuing increase in prostitution so alarmed many police and medical authorities (such as the police chief Francisco de Faria Lemos in 1871) that they tended to forget the past when, they said, prostitution had been "covert" and "respectful of modesty". In the 1870s it had "achieved scandalous proportions" making "an ostentatious parade of all its repulsiveness".⁴²

Another aspect of prostitution at this time which both preoccupied and irked the authorities was the wealth of some prostitutes which, according to them, was often obtained from the despoliation of a family patrimony. Faria Lemos' opinion on this subject is very clear:

The luxury of the unhappy creatures who submit to prostitution necessarily demands enormous expenditure by their protectors, who are forced to resort to expedients to meet them that are dangerous to the well-being of their families or even criminal.⁴³

In the late 1880s and the 1890s prostitution in Rio de Janeiro again showed a dizzying rise. One of the reasons advanced by contemporary commentators to account for this was the abolition of slavery. According to them, many slaves on being freed abandoned their old masters and settled in Rio de Janeiro, resorting to prostitution "as a respite from work and a means of

survival". However, Pires de Almeida criticises this generalisation, vehemently denying that abolition had contributed to the increase in the number of carioca prostitutes to the extent claimed. For the doctor, the explanation for the rise in prostitution should be sought in the importation of European prostitutes:

While acknowledging these arguments, abolition only appears to augment the ranks of whores since the slave of yesterday, enslaved by her heart, finding herself free, purified herself by the modesty of her demeanour and not infrequently by her own marriage. We should not then confuse the facts nor blame abolition as a cause of libertinism, only because at the same time as abolition there was a huge influx of foreign harlots.⁴⁴

At the beginning of the 1820s the French traveller Jacques Arago mentioned, while relating various aspects of daily life in Rio, that "public women" were to be seen in every street, in every quarter, dressed in the elegant "manteau" edged with black velvet which served as a "uniform".⁴⁵ Again in the 1840s Dr Lassance Cunha also stated that the prostitutes, though scattered throughout the streets of the city, were strongly concentrated within a vast area between the Rua da Vala and the Campo de Santana in the parish of Sacramento, particularly in the Ruas dos Ferradores, do Sabão, São Pedro and do Hospício – the "red-light district" of the time. Another of his contemporaries, Dr Heredia de Sá, confirmed Lassance Cunha's remarks but stressed that there were still other prostitutes "scattered through other streets of the city, surrounded by honest families" living in "expensively furnished houses" where they plied "their infamous trade without querying the individuals' state of health".⁴⁶

Another French traveller, Charles Expilly, who visited Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 1860s noted that the "foyer" of Brazilian gallantry was located in the Ruas do Hospício, do Sabão, da Alfândega and do Senhor dos Passos, where the "ladies of the islands", Portuguese women who had come to the city "to make their fortune" and negros of diverse origins practised their trade in darkened houses. According to Expilly:

After the heat of the day they may be seen leaning out of the windows with a rose in their hair and another in their hand, smiling at the *senhores moços* (young masters) who pass. These cottages which have no more than two storeys and usually only one and exude a strong scent of lavender are too good, in effect, to give shelter to such repugnant creatures. I often traversed these streets, which lay on my way to the *Cidade Nova*, without ever entering: but mark well! I declare I never saw, either under the green awnings of these houses or through their windows, the slightest pretext for remorse. The negligence of their appearance and their persons as a whole was really very great. Looking at these degenerate courtesans, I could understand the Brazilian taste for women of colour, particularly negro women. There is a *Mina* black woman (...) that would be considered beautiful in Europe – and even in Paris.⁴⁷

It emerged from the 1872 survey of four parishes based on police records and organised by Dr Ferraz de Macedo that the parish of Sacramento was then the major centre of prostitution in Rio. The perimeter of the district as traced by the doctor conforms to that drawn by Arago, Lassance Cunha and Expilly, extending from the Rua da Vala to the Campo da Aclamação (now Campo de Santana). According to the figures collected by Ferraz de Macedo, approximately 90 % of the prostitutes in the four parishes surveyed were concentrated in the parish of Sacramento and 70 % of them were Brazilian nationals.⁴⁸ The table below will clarify this in more detail:

Parishes	Nationals	Foreigners	Total
Sacramento	752	307	1,059
São José	39	34	73
Santa Rita	13	12	25
Glória	14	–	14
Total	818	353	1,171

Evidently, Ferraz de Macedo's statistics only refer to the "low-class" prostitute and do not include those who were "installed in luxury" and frequented by the "cream" of carioca society.

In his study of 1906 Dr Pires de Almeida indicates yet more places where prostitution was practised in the previous century. These were the *conventilhos* ("nunneries") and the places where the negros would often practise religious observances of African origin, known as *casas de dar fortuna* (houses of good fortune), *candomblés*, *casas de passe* or *zungús*. According to the doctor very few of the *conventilhos* were still in existence by the end of the 1870s. The most famous of them was organised by a black woman known as "Barbada", who seems to have been between 55 and 60 in 1872. She was relatively fat and of medium height with a thick moustache and a semi-beard. Regarding the prostitutes controlled by Barbada, Pires de Almeida said:

The nunneries of Barbada entertained in a very luxurious style, staffed by beautiful *mucamas*, young mulatto slaves that she had bought, sparing no expense, and

shortly after *conditionally* freed. All of them were more or less white and more or less beautiful yet all of the girls were nearly hairless, since they were displayed in a brief dress and drawers.⁴⁹

On the subject of the frequenters of the *conventilhos* and the profits that Barbada made from her exploitation of prostitution, Pires de Almeida gives this description:

A numerous clientele, composed for the most part of young men in trade, students and old roués gladly went to the *soireés* given by Barbada, who had a considerable income, greatly profiting from these carousals, and even from the visits referred to as *singles* or mere encounters with the *nuns*. The money from the prostitution joined to the profits from selling a great variety of drinks which she had in vast store, always ensured this disgusting exploiter of vice a certain well-being in the early years of her career and a liberality of fortune in her old age.⁵⁰

In relation to the *casas de dar fortuna*, *candomblés*, *casas de passe* or *zungús*, it can be said that these establishments were more common in the first half of the century, and were frequently suppressed by the police authorities. One of the most prominent figures in this suppression during the second and third decades of the century was the legendary Major Vidigal, immortalised by Manuel Antonio de Almeida in his novel *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias* (*Memoires of a Sergeant of Militia*).⁵¹ In addition these establishments were expressly prohibited by the municipal authorities in the 1830s as specified in the ordinance of the Municipal Council of Rio de Janeiro transcribed below:

Section IV, Paragraph 7 – All houses commonly known by the name of *zungú* or *batuques* are strictly prohibited. The owners or heads of such houses will be punished with a period of 8 days in prison and a fine of 30\$000 [30 *milréis*] for the first offence and a sentence of 30 days in prison and a fine of 60\$000 for any subsequent offences.⁵²

Section X – Paragraph 28 – All negro songs, drumming and dances in houses or small holdings that may inconvenience the neighbourhood are forbidden. The owner of small holding or house will be fined 10\$000.⁵³

Yet despite this express prohibition, these establishments proliferated in the nineteenth century. The ban on them was mainly due to the fact that as they were meeting places for free and bond negroes, they often concealed runaway slaves, which frightened the authorities enormously.⁵⁴ However, it would appear that they were far more of a religious establishment than the “dens of harlotry” that Pires de Almeida described them as. The doctor’s definition was coloured by the preconceptions of the white, catholic, ruling-class towards the cults of African origin that had been introduced into the country by the blacks but which had expanded to include new adherents, including mestizos and even whites. These preconceptions can be seen very

clearly in his extremely fanciful reflections on these establishments:

The *casas de dar fortuna* have always in Rio de Janeiro been both the religious and profane *rendezvous* for the negros from the coast of Africa and their descendants. Fetishists and sorcerers, they celebrated their barbaric rites in the forests or in *zungús*, that had degenerated from their primitive forms to include all the lasciviousness and depravity of the whites, the mestizos and the creoles. Making use of crude idols, talismans, the head of a goat, dead chickens and living, plucked cocks, shaved dogs, a dozen animals, horns and other trinkets these blacks spent resounding days and libidinous nights.

Men and women of every caste, completely nude, congregate in these *candomblés*, and – by means of convulsive dances – in the steam of *pango*, the taste of spicy African food, pray for the souls of dead companions and celebrate marriages – all in the midst of unbridled debauchery, of depravity without name, copulating in pairs in hidden places, in dark gardens and remote apartments.

In general the concubines were recruited in the street and stealthily taken to the *casas de passe* which were almost exclusively the nauseating habitations of negro stall-holders known as *zungús*, or barbershop cellars which had been leased to free blacks at a moderate price for this end; or even, if the customers were slaves, the outbuildings of the *public-houses* of the Rua da Misericórdia and Becos da Música and do Cotovelo; and if they were of a slightly higher class, to the *Palácio de Cristal* (Cristal Palace) on the Rua dos Latoeiros [now Rua Gonçalves Dias], on the corner of Rua do Rosário.⁵⁵

More recent chroniclers of the life of the city such as Gastão Cruls and Vivaldo Coaracy, who have studied its history, confirm that in the final decades of the nineteenth century the “lower-class prostitutes” were still concentrated in the parish of Sacramento. Gastão Cruls noted that they had spread from the Ruas do Sabão, da Alfândega and do Senhor dos Passos into the Ruas de São Jorge, do Espírito Santo, do Núncio, do Senado and Sete de Setembro (the old Rua do Cano).⁵⁶ Vivaldo Coaracy specifically stated that the “hierarchy of prostitution in Rio” began with “the *cachaça* of the Rua de São Jorge”, passed through the Largo do Rocio and “finished with the obligatory champagne in the ‘chic lodgings’ of the Catete and the roads which open off it”. Referring to the prostitutes of Catete, this chronicler writes:

It was the period when high-class procurers such as Suzana, Richard and Tina would lead their troupe of elegantly mannered ‘artistes’ to Colombo’s for an aperitif to display their graces and attractions.⁵⁷

At the turn of the century, as Vivaldo Coaracy informs us, prostitution began to move from the old parish of Sacramento into other areas. From the Rua de São Jorge and the Largo do Rocio, the “lower-class prostitutes” extended into an area between the Ruas do Espírito Santo and do Lavradio, where there was “a series of old houses, mostly terraced, with doors and win-

dows hidden by venetian blinds” which “had originally been honest dwellings, in the far-distant times when the Largo was a residential district”, but at this time it was a “red-light district”. Coaracy asserts that when the Prefect Pereira Passos began to remodel the city in the first decade of this century, in particular the Largo do Rocio, he “proceeded to clean up the old square materially and morally”.⁵⁸

The following is a description of the red-light area of Rio and its habitués at the turn of the century supplied by Vivaldo Coaracy:

Like an octopus extending its tentacles or a cancer spreading through the city, the district penetrated the Rua do Espírito Santo and then connected with the Rua do Senado, advancing to the Rua do Lavradio where stands the Hotel Aliança of shameful memory, until by stages it reached the Rua do Riachuelo. On the other side of the Largo do Rocio, along the Rua de São Jorge and including the Ruas do Regente, do Núncio and da Conceição spread another zone of putrescence; of prostitution in myriad forms, the lowest rungs on a filthy ladder. In this district it was dangerous for any pedestrian in a hurry to attempt to cut through the unruly crowds of half-drunken and aggressive soldiers and sailors that at night boiled through these streets of infamous renown.⁵⁹

The “public women” of Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century were not only recruited from among native Brazilians but also non-Brazilians, principally free Africans and Europeans. The novelist Machado de Assis alludes to the presence of European prostitutes in the city since the early decades of the century when he relates the story of young Brás Cubas, at the beginning of the 1820s. His parents sent him to Europe to study at the University of Coimbra, as he had become enamoured of Marcela, an enchanting and immoral Spanish woman who had already seduced many men. Young Brás Cubas’ passion for this courtesan had led him into folly, incurring many debts to support his mistress and buy her expensive gifts. His frightened parents, unable to see any other means of ending the romance, forced him onboard a ship to Portugal.⁶⁰

From the 1840s this European contingent was augmented by the immigration of women from the Portuguese islands – as “*ilhoas*” – who entered the city on the pretext of seeking “a place of employment” and “of being used in domestic service”. Later, prostitutes began to arrive from France, Poland, Austro-Hungary, Albania, etc. By the 1870s the influx of these women “had almost completely stemmed the flow of Portuguese *ilhoas*”, according to Pires de Almeida; he argued that in the second half of the century the number of Brazilian women involved in prostitution was very small, no more than “one-fifth part of the public women”. Furthermore, only a fifth of the Brazilian prostitutes came from the “middle-class” of the *fluminense* region (including both the *Corte* and the Province of Rio de Janeiro), which the doctor thought “most worthy of note”. Of the foreign prostitutes, the Polish were, according to him, the most numerous, comprising some two-thirds of

the European contingent.⁶¹

However, Ferraz de Macedo's 1872 survey of the 4 parishes, which Pires de Almeida himself cites, contradicts these observations. As we have already noted, according to Ferraz de Macedo approximately 70 % of the prostitutes in the four parishes were Brazilians. However, these statistics only refer to "lower-class prostitution" so it is possible to infer that the French, Polish, Austro-Hungarians and other nationalities were originally destined for a "higher" category of prostitution, whereas the *ilhoas* were still destined for the "lower".

The first great band of *polaca* prostitutes arrived in Rio in 1867. According to Pires de Almeida, 104 Polish prostitutes entered that year. Of these, 37 moved onto the River Plate and 67 took up residence in Rio. The influx of Polish women in various categories of prostitution increased considerably over the following years, though it fell a little around 1893 as a result of the revolt of the Brazilian Navy against the new republican regime (which temporarily closed Rio de Janeiro harbour to cargo and passenger vessels). In the years following 1888 a fifth of the Polish prostitutes left Rio to settle in Santos and São Paulo, leaving a "vacuum since filled by Italians, Orientals and Russian Jews". In the three years immediately following the abolition of slavery (1888–91) the importation of prostitutes of these nationalities increased significantly, apart from the temporary reduction around 1893 caused by the naval revolt, mentioned above.⁶²

The importation of European prostitutes was organised by "*caftens*" or pimps, nearly all of them Jewish, who exploited the prostitutes and prostitution, obtaining huge profits. In 1880, the carioca police authorities managed to have 21 of these pimps, all Jewish, deported from the country.⁶³ The "canker of pimps" was considered by the authorities to be one of the main drawbacks to the "concourse of foreign whores" that was, "to a certain extent, beneficial", taking into account "the relative morality that (should) exist in capitals".⁶⁴

Regarding luxury or "high-class" prostitution, that of the "chic lodgings" in Catete and the surrounding area, it can be said that it was the preserve of Frenchwomen or white Brazilians, the "*cocottes*" as they were called. The French prostitutes were a fixture among their contemporaries who frequented Catete. At that time it was said that many of them worked as dressmakers during the day in the Rua do Ouvidor (the most fashionable street in Rio) and then at night were given over to pleasure and immorality. An anonymous report published in one of the city's newspapers denounced the predilection for these French prostitutes:

Is it possible that the head of a certain family would abandon the love of his wife and children to blindly pursue the affections of a certain modiste, a woman already corrupted by orgies?⁶⁵

Besides the dressmakers, some French singers and actresses were also being denounced by the guardians of public morality, and by uneasy wives frightened of losing their husbands, while at the same time they were besieged by the men of wealth and position who frequented the theatres and fashionable cafés. At the end of the 1850s and during the 1860s the two most famous French courtesans were Mademoiselle Aimée who sang in the Alcazar Theatre on the Rua da Vala (the future Rua Uruguaiana) and Madame Deurand, a French opera singer. The newspapers of the time even speak of the demonstration of rejoicing and jubilation (including fireworks) organised by the wives of many highly-placed gentlemen on the beach of Copacabana when a certain French artiste left Rio de Janeiro, greatly enriched by the generosity of many important men.⁶⁶

Aloísio de Azevedo, in his celebrated novel *O Cortiço (The Tenement)*, describes the world of the “cocottes” in relating the adventures of Pombinha, who had once lived in the tenement of the Portuguese, João Romão. Unable any longer to bear her monotonous life with her husband, Pombinha runs away and takes refuge with her godmother, the prostitute Léonie, who initiates her into luxury prostitution:

Now the two cocottes, inseparable friends, terrible in that unbreakable solidarity which made them into a single creature with two heads, dominated upper and lower Rio de Janeiro. They were to be seen wherever pleasure was to be found; in the afternoon before dinner they drove through Catete in an open carriage with Jujú at their side. At night, in their box at the theatre, they would attract the eyes of old councillors, their bodies drained by politics and avid for sensation, or they would take into the private rooms of hotels fat and sensual owners of coffee plantations who came to Rio heavy to spend a year's profits, the fruit of their slaves' labour. Over the two of them broke a wave of philandering. Pombinha, after only three months in an open bed had become as expert at her trade as the other: her unhappy intelligence, born and bred in the mire of the inn, soon flourished admirably in the deep morass of vice she had entered; she performed miracles of her art and appeared to have divined all the secrets of her new life. Her lips touched none without drawing blood and she knew how to drain even the most avaricious of men of all that they had to give, drop by drop.⁶⁷

IV. Clandestine Prostitution

As Dr Lassance Cunha observed, clandestine prostitution was practised by women who also had other occupations and did not live exclusively by prostitution. According to him, clandestine prostitution mainly involved slaves. The slave-girls who walked the streets

... nourish our social cancer for a few coins, by responding to the first that approaches them in the scandalous scenes of libertinism and immodesty provided by men who are clearly not negros in sordid taverns, behind butcher shops, etc.⁶⁸

Similarly, domestic slaves who remained in the house sought to attract their master, who would abandon the “bed of his loving wife” for the “sensuality of the slave compound”.⁶⁹

In a recent work the North-American historian Sandra Lauderdale Graham has developed some ideas which conflict with the generalised assertions of Lassance Cunha. In her opinion there would have existed a division between the slaves employed exclusively within the house, the domestic slaves, and those who worked outside or had the permission of their master to go into the street, particularly in wealthy households. The masters who most rigidly followed the dominant moral codes confined some of their slaves to domestic work on the premise that the world outside the house might tempt them or lead them astray. On the other hand, it was the sexually experienced slaves who were employed outside the house, since this experience enabled them to face the outside world with more confidence. Thus, according to Graham, the old Portuguese tradition of distinguishing between those who “served behind doors” and those who “served outside the house” was maintained in Brazil.⁷⁰

Another US historian, Mary Karasch, mentioned that the sexual imbalance existing in Rio de Janeiro, with a much larger male than female population, would have contributed to increasing prostitution among slaves. Many young slave-girls, principally those belonging to middle or low-income households, were obliged by their masters to prostitute themselves or had taken advantage of the existing situation to enter clandestine prostitution.⁷¹

During the first half of the nineteenth century many owners bought the slaves destined for prostitution directly from traders in African slaves. In fact, many of the gypsies in Rio de Janeiro were not only involved in the slave-trade but also exploited clandestine prostitution. According to Pires de Almeida these gypsies passed “their leisure hours in total lasciviousness” with their slaves.⁷² However, with the final end of the African slave-trade, the northern and northeastern provinces of the empire began to supply the coffee-growing provinces of the south-east (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais) with their slaves, and the trade in “young slave-girls” destined for prostitution flourished, becoming notorious in the city of Rio de Janeiro. In another study of prostitutes, published in 1873, Dr José de Góes expressed shame at the notoriety that the city had acquired, being known as “our Cyprus”. He reported that:

After a very short time, the immorality involved in buying slaves for prostitution had reached such a point that the State authorities were shamed into taking steps and stopped many abuses.⁷³

(See the discussion of police repression of clandestine prostitution in the years 1870–71, below, section VI.)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the French painter Jean Baptiste Dabret in depicting the *aluá*-sellers (a drink made from crushed and sweetened rice), who were noted for their elegant and dainty dress, made a subtle allusion to the double lives of these slaves:

Their preoccupation (with their elegant and dainty dress) doubly profits the negress with a light and self-seeking nature to engage in new and lucrative pursuits which she cultivates for the rest of the year, by means of furtive visits which bring her money on the pretext of charity or in recompense for some small service that she has willingly performed.⁷⁴

By the middle of the century, when the prostitution of slaves, both domestic and for gain, was well-known, many owners had no scruple about announcing the “services” of their slaves in the city’s press. The historian Delso Renault has collected a series of dubious advertisements from the Rio newspaper of the time, which announce the sale of black female slaves with domestic and sexual skills. The *Jornal de Commercio* announced:

(For sale) a pretty young black, with the principles of sewing and no cause to displease the purchaser. [25 Oct. 1847]

For sale a beautiful black girl, able to please and with beginnings of education. 141, Rua da Alfândega. [29 Jan. 1851]

(Selling in the Rua do Ouvidor) a young black, suitable as a gift, who knows how to sew well and care for children; very affectionate. [16 July 1851]⁷⁵

The slaves of Rio de Janeiro practised prostitution by day and by night, many of them evading the by-laws prohibiting their movement after 7.00 pm with the tacit consent of their owners. Paragraph 6, Section VII of the *Corte Code of Ordinances* was sufficiently clear on the subject of this ban and its sanction:

All slaves that are found at large after 7 o’clock at night, without the written permission of their owner bearing that day’s date, whatever their declared aim, will be imprisoned for 8 days; the owner being informed afterwards.⁷⁶

This by-law was overcome by the simplest possible means. Owners who obliged their slaves to prostitute themselves or those who simply closed their eyes to their slaves’ “nocturnal activities”, gave them the written authority they needed to be on the streets after the curfew. The money earned by the slaves on their “working-trips”, whether on the streets or in the houses where they lived was often taken in its entirety by their owners, although some were content with a daily or weekly sum, allowing the slaves to keep whatever remained for their own use. Some of these women were able to save enough money to buy their manumission and become free women.

This method of climbing the social scale did not, however, free them from the prejudice and discrimination which society showed towards prostitutes. These women rose in the social hierarchy of prostitution but never began to enjoy the “respect” and “prestige” which the courtesans or “cocottes” in the second half of the century received, hindered by the colour of their skin or by the memory of their past slavery.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, some black women such as Barbada of the famous “nunneries” achieved a “high position” in the hierarchy as procuresses, organising brothels or arranging meetings between the prostitutes and their clients or eventual keepers.

Charles Expilly in the early sixties described very clearly the exploitation of a slave forced into prostitution by her religious and devout mistress, who had had many slaves but had been ruined and obliged to sell all except two:

These two girls were, in truth, equally young and cheerful, equally pretty, slothful and greedy. One went out of the house in the morning. She was sent to the street to do a little trade in fruit, and every night she had to bring 2,000 réis (6 francs) to her mistress, who was not unhappy to employ her again.

The other had arranged to have her night free. Every day the mistress wrote out a permit which she gave to her in exchange for 2,000 réis. If the slave was stopped on the street, she would immediately show her pass. With this paper confirming that she was fetching a doctor, or looking for medicine, or carrying an urgent message to a friend of her mistress, she was allowed to go on her way without difficulty to the house where she was awaited.

This made it possible for the devout lady to obtain a daily income of 4,000 réis, or 12 francs, which she kept without the slightest scruple.

One morning the second slave did not return. The hours passed without her appearing. The mistress said her rosary over and over again to maintain her patience. The bells rang for vespers and still no negress came. Finally, at the very moment that the devout lady had resigned herself to reading her prayers in her room, the slave appeared. Immediately the mistress shook out her whip. The girl smiled and without a word, placed four notes of 1,000 réis on the table, 2,000 for the night and 2,000 for the day.⁷⁸

Besides the testimony of foreign visitors and of doctors in their academic papers, it is also possible to find information regarding the use of slaves for prostitution in many court proceedings filed in the Arquivo Nacional do Rio de Janeiro. One such case, in 1879, was occasioned by Amelia Francelina Cabral de Azevedo, a Brazilian, applying for a writ of *habeas corpus* on behalf of her slave Catarina, a mulatto of 17 years of age, a domestic servant. The girl had been picked up and held at the disposal of the chief of police for the *Corte* by the Deputy Commissioner for the 2nd district of the parish of Sacramento, João Nunes da Costa, because of complaints that she had been forced to prostitute herself by her mistress. We will first consider the rich and detailed explanation given by the Deputy Commissioner for the imprisonment of the slave referred to:

By virtue of the reserve orders of the Chief Commissioner of Police on houses of toleration, where slaves are coerced by their owner into submitting to prostitution, many of them in this degrading state have been constrained to it by persons of one or the other sex; and knowing that Amelia Francelina Cabral, resident at 93, Rua de S. Joaquim, had as a slave a young mulatto that prostitutes herself for fear of punishment, I visited the said house on the 19th day of last month, to obtain information, accompanied only by my orderly in civilian clothes. I was received by the inhabitant of the said house, and, acquainted with the reason for my visit to her house she told me that the girl had gone out for a walk. I insisted that when the girl returned she was to undertake to send her to the police station and left with this promise.

In effect, when the said mulatto presented herself at the station, she confessed to me that it was true that she had led a life of prostitution in her mistress's house, yielding up all the money she received to her mistress. I decided that the girl should be sent to the Chief of Police, while the case was under consideration.

And, therefore, it is totally untrue that a search had been made of the residence of the said Amelia or that the minor Catarina was arrested or sent to prison, as she was placed at the disposal of the Chief of Police, since I had no knowledge of what subsequent course he intended to pursue.⁷⁹

The deposition of the slave Catarina confirmed the statement of Deputy Commissioner João Nunes da Costa, and also slightly clarifies for us the question of the "labour relations" of the prostituted slaves:

She stated that about a month previously she had been brought from Rio Grande do Norte in a consignment of slaves for João Fonseca, who had sold her to Amelia Cabral, where she had been for three weeks, which time she spent at the window being visited by men. Soon after her arrival, she had been deflowered by an individual who had paid her mistress money for this privilege. Her mistress had forced her to stay at her window until one o'clock at night and had taken all of the money that she earned, threatening her with punishment and the House of Correction when she did not earn enough money. She was punished by her mistress, who slapped and beat her, because she did not want to become a prostitute.⁸⁰

The final result of this proceeding was that, despite the weight of evidence produced against Amelia Francelina Cabral de Azevedo, her plea to have the slave Catarina returned to her was granted. After the release of the slave, there is no means of verifying whether the charges brought by the sub-commissioner were pursued or not, but the granting of Catarina's release and her return to her owner demonstrated the limitations imposed on any attempt to rescue slaves coerced into prostitution, which ran up against the property laws as consecrated in all their plenitude by the Constitution of the Brazilian Empire.

Some police and judicial authorities, scandalised by the extent of slave prostitution in Rio de Janeiro, also disclosed the mechanisms used by slave owners to exploit their slaves in this capacity, confirming the accounts of

Charles Expilly and Deputy Commissioner João Nunes da Costa and that of the slave Catarina herself, in her deposition before the court. In 1871, the Police Chief of the *Corte*, Francisco de Faria Lemos, asserted that:

Public outcry in the city has reached a crescendo against the immoral scandal of slaves prostituted either by their masters' orders or by their express consent, these owners thereby gaining exorbitant profit. They force these unfortunates to commit acts that are extremely offensive to the public morals, exhibiting them at their windows semi-naked, where by words, gestures and almost by force, they incite passers-by to libidinous ends to satisfy the rampant greed of their owners.⁸¹

A Municipal Judge, Miguel José Tavares, in response to Chief of Police Francisco de Faria Lemos regarding the investigations into slave prostitution in 1871, minutely described this practice:

The slave positioned at the window is not a woman but a machine that moves at her mistress's bidding, who makes her laugh at the passers-by by fear and threatens tears with a whip, since she is obliged to produce at the end of every day no less than ten thousand réis. Riddled with syphilis, she is not allowed to abstain from her vilenesses and must receive whoever appears, even when nature demands abstinence; by threats and promises they are forced to raise their skirts, and thus their mistresses are true encouragers of depravity, selling in exchange for a thousand réis the infection of syphilis and the health of their slaves, who, however robust they might be, cannot resist such excesses. What I have just narrated is but a pale version of the statement made by these unfortunates under interrogation. This is not merely bodily brutality but also cruelty to the soul, since they prostitute the heart and the most pure and intimate sentiments, those of modesty and decency, which are the right of every woman, even if she is a slave.⁸²

Despite public condemnation and the actions of some police and judicial authorities from the end of the 1860s, the prostitution of slaves survived until the very dawn of Abolition.

V. Homosexuality and Male Prostitution

The study of homosexual practices in the last century, whether male or female, is extremely difficult since documents and data on what was until recently a taboo subject are practically non-existent. Even police records are extremely reticent regarding homosexuality. In researching police documentation of this period only one subtle reference to this practice has been found to date. In 1819 the free creole Germano Pereira Braga and the slave Domiciniano were imprisoned "on the application of João Rodrigues Carrilho, for leading astray a slave belonging to the plaintiff".⁸³ Mary Karasch has made the suggestion that because of the mid-century "scarcity" of women, male homosexuality was not uncommon, particularly among boys, both free and slaves, employed in domestic service. Karasch cites,

among others, Dr Heredia de Sá's discreet comment about "that atmosphere of depravation which envelopes our youth, impregnating in them vices so much more perilous".⁸⁴

A mine of information on male homosexual practices in Rio de Janeiro is to be found in the work of Dr Pires de Almeida. Although his book was not published until 1906, Pires de Almeida had lived and practised during the second half of the nineteenth century and much of his information about homosexuality in Rio de Janeiro was obtained from his own observations and the vast oral tradition of the carioca population regarding the daily life of the city.⁸⁵

We have already taken the opportunity to refer to Pires de Almeida on the subject of the increase in homosexuality in Rio de Janeiro in the 1840s and 1850s. According to him, the determining factor in the importation of the first *ilhoa* prostitutes was the necessity at that time of containing the alarming increase of "the perversion" which was spreading, particularly in the poorer commercial classes, chiefly occupied by clerks of Portuguese origin, "bumpkins ... who were easily seduced".⁸⁶

However this was not the only sector where homosexuality flourished. Pires de Almeida also noted that it was common practice among slaves, and that their owners were often guilty of encouraging it:

Obeying the same perversion of custom, yet greater in its development, slavery presented society with the ghastly spectacle of pederasty unchecked on the one hand and, on the other, even supported by lecherous masters and dissolute cravings.⁸⁷

In view of the existence of widespread homosexuality in Rio at this time, Pires de Almeida not only felt able to justify the growth of female prostitution and the introduction of the *ilhoas* but also to present it as being far less of an evil than homosexuality. Furthermore, homosexuality led to another evil, male prostitution, which was "incomparably worse" than that of women. He prescribed punishment for homophilia as a crime, in order to combat the evil's spread:

The practice of sodomy should, for the rest, be rigorously punished, once it can be proved to have happened. This crime has been provided for in our laws, having been frequently punished even in less civilised times.⁸⁸

Dr Pires de Almeida, therefore, viewed with delight the drop in male prostitution in the city during the 1870s. According to him the "sole cause" for this happy state of affairs was the "vertiginous rise in female prostitution" and "unfortunately in clandestine prostitution". But despite the decline in pederasty and male prostitution, they remained emphatically present

throughout the city. Pires de Almeida discussed the thesis of another doctor, Ferraz de Macedo, written in 1873, that although these practices were widespread, they had become concentrated in the parishes of Sacramento, Santana, Santa Rita and São José:

It merits notice – says Dr Ferraz de Macedo – that in almost all of these areas there are special houses, veritable sinks of extreme degradation, where rooms are let at all hours of the day and night for the consummation of acts so repulsive that decency forbids speech.⁸⁹

In his thesis Ferraz de Macedo had drawn a distinction between “active” and “passive” pederasty and attempted to trace the lifestyle of the “passive pederasts”, considering them to be the instigators of male prostitution:

Among the passive pederasts there are many who live exclusively on their *indústria da bagaxa*; although their number is not so limited, it has been growing in a quiet but distinct manner, according to their behaviour and attractions.⁹⁰

Up to the end of the century homosexual encounters were still taking place on public places. According to Pires de Almeida, the Largo do Paço, the Campo de Santana and the Largo do Rocio were the centres of carioca pederasty and at night these areas produced the

... most appalling scenes of immorality; having for actors soldiers, sailors and vagabonds of every kind, who under cover of darkness are given over to the horrible commerce of this disgusting vice.⁹¹

In the 1880s the doctor further notes that the “sodomites” still openly indulge “in their lubricious pleasures in cheap hotels and rooms rented by the hour or in their own homes” unashamed “by the light of the sun or the shadows of night”. All of these rendezvous were known to the police, no longer willing to tolerate the “practice of masculine libertinism” and, as an attempt aimed at its suppression, they closed the most notorious hotels.⁹²

Apart from private residences and public places, homosexuality was also common in some “respectable” institutions such as monasteries, religious orders and the armed forces. Again according to Pires de Almeida, the “sodomy” in religious institutions was “growing exceedingly through the actions of the African contingent and their descendants, who served as nourishment to their tonsured masters who scandalously entertained themselves with lewdness”. While at their rural houses the Franciscans, Benedictines and Carmelites would organise “veritable mixed seraglios, where there was much libertinism with female slaves”. Yet the inverse happened in the city:

... when these brethren are assembled in the central houses of their orders, in

the monasteries and convents, some of their cells, in the intervals of the daily offices and religious observance, shelter boys and youths both day and night; nor is it uncommon for a reversal of roles between the host and the guest.⁹³

According to Pires de Almeida, the “catamites” were often recruited from the religious orders’ own sacristies “even to the point where the major orders would keep and educate the boys, some of whom attain the highest positions in society”. With regard to this method of social-climbing, the doctor comments:

Thus, in the same way that, in the words of an illustrious traveller, foreign languages are most rapidly learnt from the *lips* of a woman, many of our finest classical scholars have been saturated with the perfumes of the *Aeneid* and the odes of Master Horace, by clandestinely shaking the habit of our friars.⁹⁴

But as well as the practice of homosexuality, another factor which claimed the attention of Pires de Almeida was the “effeminacy” of many monks. One of the most typical and popular examples was that of a friar who became “an orator of great brilliance” but who “through his womanish behaviour and mummery and his languid and equivocal gestures has merited the significant name of *Sinházinha* among the people”.⁹⁵

Furthermore, homosexuality was also apparently very common in the armed forces, particularly before the proclamation of the Republic. After the events of November 1889, the “moral standards” of the soldiers and sailors would have been raised if there had not been a considerable and parallel increase in female prostitution around the barracks. The tolerance of female prostitution had, in Pires de Almeida’s words, caused an increase in “lechery and depravity” in the vicinity of military establishments: “in compensation sodomy has almost completely disappeared”.⁹⁶

Finally, Pires de Almeida made a short list of the “most famous sodomites” of the city in the last century, based on his own knowledge and popular tradition. Among others, he includes “Brigadier L... P...”, who lived with some youngsters in his house in Largo de São Domingos; an important parliamentarian from the North, “the Viscount of C...”; Arthur Cabral, also known as “Traviata”, an extremely irreverent figure who had taken part in the opera which gave him his nickname and was the lover of a Police Commissioner; and the slave Athanasio Creoulo, who was employed as a street seller of sweets and pieces of sugar cane and received private visits, in his small house on Rua da Constituição, from clerks to Imperial senators.⁹⁷

VI. Attempts to Control Prostitution

The enormous increase in female prostitution in Rio de Janeiro in the middle of the nineteenth century brought to the attention of the doctors and the police authorities a phenomenon that, although it was already known, had

overstepped the bounds imposed by the moral and religious laws of the slave society. Because of the impossibility of stamping out prostitution, doctors and some police authorities, appointed as defenders of public morality, proposed a strategy of containment and control. However, to justify the adoption of this strategy, they had to develop a number of moral arguments, in which female prostitution was seen as being a “great evil”, but one which was “necessary” to maintain the stability of the family and society as a whole, and therefore needed regularisation.

Dr Heredia de Sá had already made this point very well in 1845:

Prostitution is a great evil, but a necessary evil in that it is an evil that hinders the demoralisation of society, an evil which assures the tranquility, the honour and the peace of the family. It is a genuine benefit derived from demoralisation and the legislators must protect it. The great politicians, the illustrious legislators should turn their attention to it and legalise it. The civilised nations that we imitate have brought the ultimate refinement to its regularisation, the police incessantly watch and hinder that which would otherwise inundate society with a torrent of ills, which would certainly overwhelm it, were it not restrained.⁹⁸

This general argument was developed by the police and medical authorities in a number of specific arguments in which the unchecked spread of prostitution was seen as a direct threat to work as a means of social progress, to inheritance and the security of property, to public health, to population increase and to religion.⁹⁹ In short, unbridled prostitution constituted a threat to society because it was capable of striking at society’s foundations and of corroding its basic precepts.

In 1877, Miguel Calmon du Pin e Almeida, the Police Chief of the *Corte*, stressed the danger which prostitution represented to labour, by discouraging it and creating the illusion that the life that prostitution offered was easy and luxurious:

Uprooting from their place not only effort but intelligence, perseverance, and artistic talents or skills, (prostitution) makes an end of work as a means of moral and material advancement, the base of private fortune and the prosperity of the nation, and thus is prejudicial to society.¹⁰⁰

Thinking of this threat to the institution of labour as the generator of social wealth and the dignifier of man, Gonçalves da Silva, the Chief of Police for the *Corte* between 1872 and 1875, suggested that prostitutes should be employed in domestic service, “with the greatest possible advantage to themselves and to society”.¹⁰¹

The illusion of an easy and luxurious life was what, in Gonçalves da Silva’s opinion, attracted many women to prostitution. They would rather don “the

repulsive but occasionally ornate and gold-embroidered mantle of prostitution” than the more humble one of a more honest and dignified profession.¹⁰² Furthermore, the luxury that prostitutes often displayed was obtained from the dissipation of the property and rightful inheritance of families whose neglectful and libidinous heads squandered all on their “courtesans”, adorning them with the best that the finest French shops in the Rua do Ouvidor could offer. On this subject, Gonçalves da Silva stated:

The ostentatious luxury enjoyed by the shameless and unhappy creatures who submit to prostitution is obtained at the cost of dissipating a family's patrimony, who are reduced to misery through the neglect of their head, and is often achieved through the use of immoral and criminal means.¹⁰³

It was the same Chief of Police, one of the most prominent figures in the fight against the unlimited spread of prostitution in Rio in the last century, who highlighted the threat to public health offered by prostitution through the spread of syphilis and other venereal diseases which resulted in death and suffering. Furthermore, he said, by encouraging libertine propensities among single men, prostitution discouraged marriage and procreation. In this sense the “canker of civilisation” not only mocked “good habits” but also constituted a direct impediment to the “augmentation of the population”.¹⁰⁴

On the other hand, prostitution set men and women on the road to a life of orgies, lechery and lasciviousness, negating all the precepts of the catholic religion, which was the official religion of the Imperial Brazilian State. This had established the institution of matrimony, being the eternal and indissoluble union between persons of different sex, as the basic precept for sexual relationships and procreation. Gonçalves da Silva noted the impossibility of legalising prostitution from a religious point of view, although such legalisation would suit morality, public health, the increase in the population and the sanctity of property.¹⁰⁵

However, as the Chief of Police stated contentiously, if in reality prostitution did deny the principles of religion, it was, like gambling, vagrancy, and lechery, one of the “sad fruits of a lack of civil and religious education” and directly resulted from this failure. Prostitution and other vices, all of them the precursors to many crimes, could only effectively be curbed by the police if, before all else, the population had received an adequate education in their civic and religious duties.¹⁰⁶

Despite the growth of prostitution in the middle of the century no action was taken to stop or control it until the 1870s, when it received the energetic attention of Police Chiefs Faria Lemos and Gonçalves da Silva.

In 1852 the then Chief of Police for the *Corte*, Alexandre Joaquim de Siqueira, made a survey of prostitution in Rio and presented his findings to the Municipal Council for their sanction. The Council resolved to consult the

Junta Central de Higiene (Central Hygiene Committee), which approved the suggested measures for controlling prostitution. This body then sent the results of the survey and the suggestions of the Police Chief to the Ministry of Justice. However, under pressure from the Emperor himself, the Ministry “summarily decided that to regulate prostitution implied its recognition, and consequently conferred legality on it”, and nothing further was done.¹⁰⁷

Doctors, alarmed more than others by the increase in prostitution and the spread of venereal disease in the city, suggested in their debates and meetings at the Imperial Academy of Medicine that the Police department should take effective measures to regularise and normalise prostitution. In 1854 Dr Antonio José Pereira das Neves defined the position of the Rio medical community when he defended the thesis that the public authorities should at all cost “limit prostitution and end the spread of harlotry in every quarter of the city”.¹⁰⁸

Again in 1858, the Police attempted to act on morality, to “correct the habits” of women of “dubious lives”, by identifying and registering all of the women in the Ruas do Sabão and da Alfândega. However, the action of the Police was violently criticised by the press, who said that the Police in Rio were not in a position to dictate morality. The *Correio Mercantil* even alleged that “there is no prostitution that might properly be described as such among us”. But after making this claim the paper contradicted itself and practically confirmed what all the inhabitants of the city already knew, in speaking of certain “houses” in the centre of the city, where people congregated

... late into the night with rowdiness, cursing and other things of which decency forbids mention. A curfew would not be a bad thing in that it would oblige certain ladies to close their doors, as crippling the cause would stop the effect.¹⁰⁹

Towards the end of the 1870s two French visitors, Louis and George Verbrugge, were still commenting on the Municipal Council’s lack of initiative in identifying and combating this “veritable scourge of public health”. The City Council permitted overt prostitution in every part of the city “which at nightfall is all but transformed into a brothel”.¹¹⁰

In fact the authorities, with few exceptions, refused to take the problem of prostitution seriously. A report by the *Junta Sanitária Policial* (Police Sanitation Committee) at the close of 1870s, based on the deliberations of the Legislative Assembly, displayed great sophistry in stating that prostitution was a foreign – and more precisely European – phenomenon that had invaded the Brazilian cities and towns. It was necessary to stem the foreign tide which had brought this evil and sullied the “purity” of the Brazilian people:

In general, the agents of the evil come from outside. They are the froth skimmed from the putrid stews of the Old World’s cities that speculation has cast up on our shores.¹¹¹

The statistics collected by Dr Ferraz de Macedo in 1872, as has already been seen, firmly contradicted this finding of the Committee. Although the importation of foreign prostitutes had considerably increased in the years since 1850, he had found that 70 % of the prostitutes operating in the four central parishes of the *Corte* were native-born.

But despite the unwillingness of most authorities to oppose the uninhibited spread of prostitution, it was in the 1870s that the struggle began to have effect, when suggestions made by the medical community were implemented by the Police. In 1876, Dr João Francisco de Souza suggested that among the measures to be adopted by the Police against prostitution was the creation of a place which while allowing some form of moral and physical control over the prostitutes, also ensured society the safe means of satisfying sexuality or the sexual urge that the doctors of the period wanted.¹¹²

Police Chief Gonçalves da Silva recognised the “near-impossibility” of “extinguishing prostitution” but, unlike Dr João Francisco de Souza, declared that the “remedy” for the unbridled spread of prostitution depended rather on “the prevalence of good habits than on the use of coercion”. But very pragmatically, and perhaps realising that “prevalence of good habits” had yet to be established in the country, he also proposed that coercive measures should be taken to limit prostitution. The measures proposed included the registration of prostitutes, periodic medical examinations for them, their subjection to a “certain regime” and a signed undertaking of good behaviour. The Police Chief himself recognised the limitations inherent in the first three measures, since they might “give rise to injustices, considering that prostitution is not merely a simple offence against modesty, and prostitutes may be confused with women who live dubious lives”.¹¹³

The signed undertaking of good behaviour was for Brazilian justice the catch-all solution to the problem of “troublemakers, drunks and prostitutes”. Provision was made for these “delinquents” to be subject to penal sentences should they repeat the offence or break their undertaking.¹¹⁴ The adoption of preventative measures for Rio de Janeiro was defended by the authorities who, like the Justice Minister João Lustosa da Cunha Paranaguá, claimed that it was justified by being a city “inhabited by a heterogeneous population, in habits and professions as in interests, and where dangerous classes already exist”.¹¹⁵

But in the case of prostitutes, a parole of good behaviour had a serious limitation which was determined by the criminal code, as Gonçalves da Silva noted. According to the code, only “prostitutes who disturbed the peace of families” could be obliged to sign the undertaking and where this condition could not be proved, “the authorities were prevented from taking any proceedings against them”.¹¹⁶

Hampered in their fight against the expansion of prostitution the Police authorities attempted a measure which they considered would have an immediate effect: the imprisonment and deportation of the “*caftens*”, nearly

all Jewish, who explored the importation and prostitution of European women. As we have already related, in 1880 the Rio Police managed to have twenty-one of the most important “*caftens*” expelled from the country. However, this did not produce the desired effect as even as these “*caftens*” left their lucrative trade, others took their places, and the importation of European prostitutes continued to rise rapidly until the end of the century, according to the testimony of Dr Pires de Almeida.¹¹⁷

Dr Lassance Cunha stated in 1845 that clandestine prostitution practised by slaves was “the lowest and most lamentable to be seen” and therefore should be rigorously opposed. However, by its very nature, clandestine prostitution escaped “the scope of the law” and evaded “the vigilance of the most conscientious police”. He proposed that slavery should be abolished in the *Corte* as a solution to the problem of the prostitution of slaves, justifying it as follows:

Do you wish to abolish it (prostitution)? Begin with abolishing slavery in the capital, where slaves are a mere luxury. If our plantations cannot dispense with African labour, then there are no plantations in the city and therefore here we can dispense with this shameful market which corrupts us in every way.¹¹⁸

If the protests against slave prostitution were muted in the 1840s, the situation had changed by the 1870s. Chief of Police Faria Lemos noted that public concern about “the immoral scandal of slaves prostituted” had considerably increased in Rio de Janeiro.¹¹⁹ Possibly this reflected a change in public opinion, which, swept by the new winds of liberalism, began to take a more critical stance on the institution of slavery and its forms of economic exploitation, of which the prostitution of slaves was the ultimate example.¹²⁰

In the light of the growing public concern about clandestine prostitution, nothing remained for the Police Chiefs Faria Lemos and Gonçalves da Silva except to take the strongest action in crushing it. In 1869, the former represented an official letter written in 1867 by the then Chief of Police Luiz Carlos de Paiva Teixeira to the Municipal Council. This elaborated on the need to impose penalties on “the owners or hirers of slaves who use them for prostitution”. Nevertheless, the Municipal Council again ignored the letter, disregarding Paiva Teixeira’s consideration that the matter was of “the utmost gravity, and indispensable to the adoption of repressive measures”.¹²¹

Police Chief Faria Lemos then resolved to act within the limits of his authority and together with a Municipal Judge, Miguel José Tavares, attempted to impose the unconditional liberation of slaves prostituted by their masters, basing his actions on a precept of Roman law remembered by the Judge:

Among the ancient peoples – said the Judge –, where slavery was permitted by

law, the master who forced his slave into prostitution was obliged to free her.¹²²

Faria Lemos ordered that the deputy commissioners of all districts should report the names of “slaves that are publicly prostituted by the order and consent of their masters in their own houses or those of persons who rent them for such criminal traffic”. After receiving the reports from the Chief of Police, bearing the names of more than 200 slave prostitutes, the Judge in his turn appointed guardians and began the process of liberation. The guardians required the immediate removal of their wards to the protection of respectable families or public depository, which refused to accept them “on the pretext that they had no guarantee of recompense for feeding them”.¹²³

Yet another unexpected problem arose as once the press of the *Corte* became aware of the first judicial investigations, many owners of prostituted slaves freed them conditionally. According to the Judge, more than 150 manumittances were registered in the *Corte* by the owners of prostituted slaves, but many of the guardians achieved the freedom of their wards, “some of whom were to be forced to earning a wage in family houses”. The final result of this fight was the unconditional liberation of 106 women and the Judge very optimistically claimed that “the slaves in these circumstances” had disappeared.¹²⁴ This was an illusion since in 1875 the Chief of Police Gonçalves da Silva reported that the prostitution of slaves continued with effrontery in Rio de Janeiro and proposed the same solutions as had been adopted by his predecessor:

No-one has the right to abuse their property, and even less when this consists of human beings. It should therefore be understood that there is an urgent need to make provision for masters who destine their slaves to prostitution, as a means of making this unequalled abuse disappear. The loss of the slave in such a case would be a just penalty to punish such a reprehensible act.¹²⁵

Despite the willingness of some authorities, it proved impossible to abolish the practice of owners prostituting their slaves until the *Lei Aurea* was passed in 1888. The writ of *habeas corpus* obtained by Amelia Francelina Cabral de Azevedo in 1879 for the release and return of her slave Catarina Parda, despite proof that she had forced the girl into prostitution, makes manifest the failure of Brazilian law to curb such practices and punish those responsible. The same tribunals that in 1871 had freed 106 prostituted slaves prevented later attempts once the owners, following expert legal advice, invoked Article 179 of the Imperial Constitution, which “guaranteed property in its plenitude” – a guarantee extended to the ownership of slaves.¹²⁶

VII. The Creation of Brothels and the Sanitisation of Prostitution

Once the medical experts and Police authorities had decided that prostitution was a “necessary evil” which prevented the demoralisation of society and ensured the tranquility of the family, it fell to these champions of the dominant morality to propose solutions and attempt to restrain its uninhibited expansion in the city. When Dr João Francisco de Souza suggested coercive measures, including the creation of a place where prostitutes might perform their “office” that would, at the same time, facilitate their control, he was merely re-stating what was the consensus of opinion in the Rio medical community since the 1840s. He was explicitly recommending the creation of brothels, institutions which would regulate and limit prostitution to the social position and pattern established by the ruling ethic. This would place the police in the de facto position of being able to prohibit the copulation of infected prostitutes since, in the words of Dr Heredia de Sá,

No criminal law prevents them from copulating when they are infected with syphilis, and it is only after they are riddled with disease, when their bodies can no longer serve them, that they seek medication, either entering the hospital of Santa Casa da Misericórdia or being treated in their own dwellings.¹²⁷

Dr Lassance Cunha in 1845 was one of the first to establish the criteria necessary for the organisation of a brothel. Firstly, a brothel should be a hierarchical gathering of prostitutes under the authority of a “ruler” who would be “to a certain extent responsible for the insults to the public morality, health and peace practised in her bordello”. Secondly, the prostitutes exercising their office in the brothel should be obliged to register with the police, which would facilitate their physical and moral supervision and frighten further candidates for prostitution with the brand of a police file. Thirdly, these prostitutes would be obliged to submit to a medical visit every four days, which would consist of a complete examination of their sexual parts with a speculum. As well as these measures, there should also be a separate provision for men and prostitutes infected with venereal disease, which would enhance the control over prostitution. On entering this “hospital”, the man would have to declare the name of the prostitute who had transmitted the disease to him, to enable the authorities to take the necessary precautions. Fourthly, the prostitutes in the brothel would be forbidden to expose themselves in an indecent manner or to talk to men at their windows.¹²⁸

Regarding the location of the brothels, the doctors suggested that specific areas, later popularly known as “*zonas de meretrício*” or red-light districts, should be created to prevent the indiscriminate practice of prostitution throughout the city. At the same time, they attempted to control the movement of prostitutes, proposing such measures as prohibiting them from occupying the same parts of theatres as “honest women”. According to João Francisco de Souza, women who lived “exclusively by ‘open door’ prostitu-

tion” would be “obliged to live in determined streets of the various parishes of the *Corte*”.¹²⁹

To medical opinion of the last century, the creation of brothels could only be advantageous to society, and it was again Lassance Cunha who first noted the benefits that would accrue:

In this most ready and efficient manner the disorders of libertinism would be easily known and suppressed by the vigilance of the police; modesty would not suffer the scandalous depravity and indecent language, actions, gestures and disarrayed dress of the most ignoble of classes Concentrate on prostitution: it is the most solid guarantee which might be offered to the morals, health and security of the public.¹³⁰

Thus, though undoubtedly deplored in absolute moral terms, prostitution was only to be condemned outright in so far as it was uncontrolled. The medical experts and the police authorities, in arranging for the creation of brothels as part of their coercive measures to control prostitution, were not developing a general strategy to negate or repress sexuality. Very much to the contrary, they wanted to contain it in all its dimensions.

Prostitution had to be controlled so that the “perfect”, the “normal” relationships, those established through the love of a man and a woman would not be threatened or corrupted by the “necessary and tolerated evil”. Alternatively, the “perfect” love relationship could only be realised in matrimony, as the creation of the “perfect couple”. This creation would have as a necessary counterpoint the creation of a “hygienic prostitute” who would have “well defined functions” and the brothel would be the proper place to fulfill these functions. Thus, the brothel as the major goal of attempts to sanitise sex and prostitution from the 1840s.

These conclusions conform to the ideas of Michel Foucault¹³¹ regarding the emergence of a new sexuality in western European society after the eighteenth century – a policy which had arrived in Brazil after the 1840s and found its main defenders in the medical community. The creation of this new sexual policy was related to, and was a constituent part of the emerging capitalist-industrial society. In the organisation of production typical of this society, a privileged position was reserved for the nuclear family as the main agent of the reproduction of the labour force. This stressed the importance of marriage and procreation, which emerged as the basic elements of a new morality.¹³² Consequently, sexual practices and relationships which were not contained within this new morality or deviated from it were considered, *a priori*, as “abnormalities” or elements of a social pathology. It is in this context that there arose a need to control and regularise prostitution as an “evil”, albeit one that was necessary to satisfy male sexual instincts; and to condemn male or even female homosexuality as an “abnormality” or a “disease”. It is sufficient to record here the words of Pires de Almeida who, in the western medical tradition, considered homosexuality – “sodomy” – as “a

crime”, “a vice”, “an incomparable evil” which was against nature and the organisation of society, and as such should be punished with the rigour of the law.

On the threshold of the disintegration of the slave society and the emergence of a new industrial-capitalist order in the great Brazilian urban centres the medical and police authorities resorted to the sexual policy which had already been adopted in Europe since the eighteenth century. However, they had to attempt to adapt it to the specific conditions of a country where, since its earliest beginnings, the population had never accepted as such many “sins” deplored by the Catholic Church.

NOTES

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2. On the re-furbishing of the Brazilian urban centres after the “opening of the ports” in 1808, see Emilia Viotti da Costa, “Urbanização no Brasil no século XIX”, in *Da monarquia à república: momentos decisivos* (São Paulo, 1977).
3. John Luccock, *Notes on Rio de Janeiro and the southern parts of Brazil; taken during a residence of ten years in that country, from 1808 to 1818* (London, 1820), pp. 41–2.
4. Arquivo Nacional do Rio de Janeiro, Estatística: 1790–1865, Códice 808, vol. IV.
5. Robert Walsh, *Notices of Brazil in 1828 and 1829* (London, 1830), pp. 141–8; Johann Moritz Rugendas, *Viagem pitoresca através do Brasil*. First published 1835. Translated into Portuguese by Sérgio Milliet (São Paulo, 1940), pp. 18–19; and Daniel P. Kidder, *Sketches of residence and travels in Brazil* (London, 1845), vol. I, pp. 23–4.
6. On the expansion of coffee into the Paraíba valley and the role played by the city of Rio de Janeiro as commercial and financial centre of the coffee growing region, see Stanley J. Stein, *Vassouras. A Brazilian coffee county, 1850–1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).
7. Roberto Jorge Haddock Lobo, “Recenseamento da população do Rio de Janeiro”, in *Almanak administrativo, mercantil e industrial do Rio de Janeiro*, Suplemento (Rio de Janeiro, 1851), pp. 231–240; and Hermann Burmeister, *Viagem ao Brasil através das províncias do Rio de Janeiro e Minas Gerais*. First published 1853. Translated into Portuguese by Manoel Salvaterra and Hubert Schoenfeldt (São Paulo, 1952), p. 325.
8. On the African slave trade and its abolition, see Leslie Bethell, *The abolition of the Brazilian slave trade. Britain, Brazil and the slave trade question: 1807–1869* (Cambridge, 1970); and Robert E. Conrad, *Tumbeiros. O tráfico de escravos para o Brasil* (São Paulo, 1985).
9. On slavery and slave life in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, see Mary C. Karasch, *Slave life in Rio de Janeiro, 1808–50* (Princeton, 1987); and Luiz Carlos Soares, “Urban slavery in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro”, unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1988.
10. Charles Ribeyrolles, *Brasil pitoresco*, vol. I. First published 1859. Translated into Portuguese by Gastão Penalva (Belo Horizonte-São Paulo, 1980), p. 184.
11. On the urban improvement of Rio de Janeiro, see Richard Graham, *Britain and the onset of modernization in Brasil, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1968); Almir Chaiban El-Kareh, *Filha branca de mãe preta. A companhia da estrada de ferro de D. Pedro II: 1855–1865* (Petrópolis, 1982); and Luiz Carlos Soares, “A manufatura na sociedade escravista: o surto manufatureiro no Rio de Janeiro e nas suas circunvizinhanças (1840–1870)”, in Frédéric Mauro (ed.), *La préindustrialisation du Brésil. Essais sur une économie en transition: 1830/50–1930/50*

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12. Maria Bárbara Levy, *História da bolsa de valores do Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro, 1977), pp. 65–105.
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