Tiffany A. Sippial


When nineteenth-century sex workers self-identify as “we the horizontals” (p. 85), it is important for historians to take note. Tiffany Sippial has done just that in her history of female prostitution in Havana. In an unusual but productive departure from conventional periodization in Cuban history, her book spans three political regimes often analyzed separately. As Havana moved through colonial, U.S.-occupied, and postcolonial moments, issues surrounding the commercialization of sex persisted as women thwarted, coopted, or suffered within plans for regulation and control. The chronological parameters make sense in terms of Sippial’s interests, as the timing of different regulatory schemes did not coincide neatly with political landmarks. But they were related, and one of the book’s strengths lies precisely in the way she contextualizes each regulatory moment as affected by and effecting changes in notions about nation, regeneration, and subjugation as well as the sciences of hygiene and medicine.

Prostitution was not just part of these debates, she argues, it was often central to the reframing that occurred at different political junctures. Indeed, changing regulatory schemes were often pointed critiques of the politics of prior regimes. In the 1870s, a very loosely defined and ambiguous set of regulations that criminalized disruption of public space but not prostitution itself gave way to a regulatory regime that included mandatory pelvic exams, taxes on “madams,” and mandatory licensing. Cast as a modern remedy to traditional Spanish colonial practices, it formed part of a regenerative effort in a colony fighting for independence. While the regulations eventually resulted in the renovation of a Hygiene Hospital and more humane treatment of ailing women, Sippial also notes the ways that they were subject to corruption and evasion. This regime remained in place until the postcolonial moment, when debates about nation and modernity cast prostitution as an exploitative system perpetuated by state sanction, if not outright complicity. Moreover, concerns about the purported white slave trade cast women who engaged in prostitution as victims in need of rescue rather than propagators of vice and disease. While many ambitious reforms failed to materialize, Sippial argues that the State’s move away from regulation and licensing in the newly independent Cuba afforded women greater mobility and control over their working conditions. It was this ambiguous state, neither illegal—but susceptible to accusations of disorderly conduct or public solicitation—nor tightly regulated, in which prostitution continued to be a viable source of income for many women throughout the
republican period, until Castro’s revolution embarked on a full program of so-called rehabilitation for prostitutes.

Sippial carefully notes the provenance of many of her documents and bureaucratic archives. Even better, she indicates moments when the paper trail disappears, and offers explanations as to why that might be the case. The absence of documents becomes part of a plausible story. For example, in the years just prior to the 1895 War of Independence, what had been rich rosters of arrests and criminal cases involving prostitution thin out considerably. Perhaps this was due to distraction in the face of impending war. Perhaps this was due to colonial officials’ determination to sanitize their archives of references to vice, which could be construed by Americans as reasons to doubt Cubans’ capacity for self-government. The choice to consider these possibilities rather than ignore the paucity of sources for this period renders her claims even more persuasive. Moreover, she uses the documents that are available to her to great effect, following women through scant archival traces and whenever possible offering richer portraits rather than limiting a woman’s appearance in the text to a single arrest or confinement to the hygienic hospital.

At times, however, self-described prostitutes left much more robust archival traces. One of the most effective chapters analyzes La Cebolla (“the onion”), a short-lived newspaper that included articles authored by self-identified prostitutes (hence “we the horizontals”) and their defenders. La Cebolla often attacked the regulatory regime, corrupt policemen, and hypocritical elites who both condemned prostitution and participated in it. The articles Sippial describes are outrageous, funny, biting, and astute. It is a gem of a source, and she exploits it fully even as she allows for justified skepticism about its authorship. Through her analysis and inclusion of information about the conditions of production, circulation, and consumption, her treatment of it brings out the full significance of this fascinating publication.

It is easy to understand Sippial’s unswerving reliance on the term “prostitute,” since she is drawing mostly from law-enforcement and public health sources. Yet this tends to reify the category and leave little analytical space for women who may have had a looser association with sex work. Was there a spectrum of engagement with sex work, ranging from occasional participation to supplement incomes as domestic servants or washer-women to full-time residence in houses devoted to the sex trade? Law enforcement or public health officials would not have differentiated among them, though the women themselves may have. A dependence on prostitute as a social category rather than as a discursive strategy may obscure the range of choices—however limited—Cuban women may have had over the years and during different regimes.
Yet Sippial’s narrative is a complex one, bridging dramatic shifts in political regimes and encompassing a variety of actors, including doctors, politicians, writers, ordinary inhabitants of Havana, and many memorable women. Moreover, her methodological dexterity contributes to the richly textured stories she tells. And she accomplishes all of this with a light theoretical touch and readable prose.

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