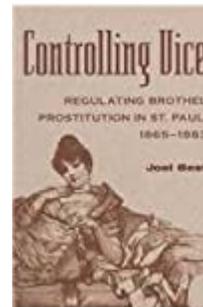




Joel Best. *Controlling Vice: Regulating Brothel Prostitution in St Paul, 1865-1883.* History of Crime and Juvenile Justice Series. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998. 175 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-5007-5.



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Soiled Doves and and

Soiled Doves and “Practical Men”: The Regulation of Deviance in a Midwestern Town

In 1999, Minnesota Governor Jesse “The Body” Ventura, known for his candor about a wide range of issues, aroused public ridicule when he suggested (among other things) that prostitution should be legalized. “Prohibiting something doesn’t make it go away,” Ventura claimed, in an interview with *Playboy* magazine. “Prostitution is criminal, and bad things happen because it’s run illegally by dirtbags who are criminals. If it’s legal, then the girls could have health checks, unions, benefits, anything any other worker gets, and it would be far better.”

Joel Best’s *Controlling Vice*, a “historical and sociological study” (p. xi) of prostitution in St. Paul, Minnesota on the eve of the Progressive Era, suggests that such pragmatic attitudes not only have historical roots in Minnesota, but have hardly been uncommon in the United States. Best tells the story of the informal regulation strategy that characterized the official stance toward brothel prostitution in St. Paul from 1865-1883. During those years, madams and their prostitutes were arrested, charged, fined and then released to resume their

activities, with the implicit understanding that the process would be repeated on a monthly basis. This open regulation of brothel prostitution ensured a certain degree of stability for prostitutes and their customers, creating a “stable marketplace for vice” (p. 34). As long as brothel madams and their prostitutes paid their monthly fines and sought to keep drunkenness, violence, theft and other disorderly behavior to a minimum, the police left them alone. Prostitutes who did not adhere to these guidelines were subject to harsher sanctions. Those who behaved themselves, however, could ostensibly remain in operation for several years.

As Best shows, St. Paul’s method of controlling prostitution provides an intriguing opportunity for the historian, or in this case, the historically-oriented sociologist. The public nature of the strategy (police officers, public officials, and the press openly acknowledged that regulation, rather than prohibition, was their aim) made St. Paul prostitution in these years relatively visible. Best’s extensive survey of local records, arrest ledgers, prostitute registrations, extensive local newspaper accounts, court documents, jury lists, and the records of homes for

“fallen women” allows him to trace the relationship between prostitutes, police, and the public, and to explore the lives of the prostitutes themselves. Arrest ledgers and prostitution registration lists, in particular, provide a wealth of details about the role played by brothels in the St. Paul community. Moreover, publicly acknowledged regulation ensured that prostitutes themselves felt little compunction about speaking to the press or calling in the authorities when confronted with unruly or dishonest customers.

Their visibility in the public record allows Best to devote considerable attention to the lives of the madams and prostitutes themselves. He argues that the relative stability of this “illicit marketplace” in St. Paul allows historians a unique opportunity to view prostitution as a profession, complete with opportunities for advancement, geographic mobility, economic success, and ultimately, retirement. He explores the factors leading up to the women’s selection of prostitution as a profession, their lives within the brothels, their relationships with each other, with their madams, with customers and with the police, and their lives after prostitution.

Best places his study in the larger context of similar informal regulation schemes in place across the country. As he points out, studies of prostitution and vice control have tended to focus on large or frontier cities and towns, ignoring more “typical,” relatively stable communities such as St. Paul. In the late nineteenth century, Best argues, the relative stability of these communities made the control of vice more paramount, placing more pressure on social control agents to keep deviant behaviors such as prostitution under wraps. Officials faced with the mandate to maintain order found that regulation, rather than straightforward prohibition, better suited their purposes. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, regulation strategies had lost ground to prohibition as Progressive reformers succeeded in tightening restrictions against prostitution and other vices. New concerns about urban poverty and crime, political reform, and newly strengthened moral reform campaigns led to the decline in regulation systems across the United States.

Best devotes considerable energy to situating himself in the historiography of the sociology of deviance and social control. He intends for his work to respond to gaps in both the history of prostitution and the sociology of deviance and social control. His main beef is with sociological studies that, he claims, tend to oversimplify the motivations of social control agents, assuming “that social control agents always adopt a strategy of prohibition” (p.

10) rather than regulation. Such an approach, he argues, “distorts” the goals and practices of social control agents; informal regulation is interpreted as a failed prohibition effort or, worse, the manifestation of a corrupt system. Best suggests that examining regulation systems allows historians and sociologists to see how the twin aims of social control agents, controlling crime and maintaining public order, can intersect in important ways. Attention to such alternative strategies, Best claims, provides a more nuanced understanding of deviance and social control.

Best also seeks to engage several of the debates about the gender dynamics of prostitution, regulation, and social control. He situates himself in the gender debate early on and periodically throughout the book, both in his initial, tantalizing claim that “Studying gender requires examining men as well as women” (p. viii) and in his challenge of feminist interpretations of prostitution. Best succeeds, in part, in demonstrating the complexity of the relationships between male social control agents and female prostitutes, and between prostitutes themselves (he rightly points out, for example, that feminist interpretations of prostitution should not overstate the degree of female solidarity present among prostitutes; on the other hand he tends to oversimplify the arguments of the aforesaid feminist studies). Scholars interested in examinations of crime and gender may nonetheless find his analysis a little too pat. He seems unwilling to commit to a full-on examination of the gender dynamics of not only the St. Paul regulation scheme, but of the interplay of vice, morality, and reform in general; nor does he fully engage the feminist analyses he is implicitly critiquing. The lack of more complicated attention to the gendered undertones of vice and reform undermines his discussion in several areas, such as his analysis of the “double-standard” inherent in St. Paul’s prosecution of female prostitutes but not of male gamblers, and his examination of why de facto regulation schemes were ultimately overpowered by prohibitionist policies and practices across the United States by 1920. Though he alludes to the increased political success of moral reform movements, he neglects a more thorough discussion of the increased political power of women in effecting reforms in vice arenas—such as prostitution—considered to morally infringe upon the domestic sphere.

A second aspect of Best’s study that may be frustrating, particularly for historians, is the limited nature of his study. His time frame is narrow, covering only an 18 year period, and he abruptly ends his examination in 1883, claiming succinctly – and unsatisfactorily – that

a two-year reform in the system “created a gap in the court records, making it nearly impossible to trace individual madams and prostitutes” (p. 97). Also, although he briefly discusses the general social and political changes that contributed to the decline of informal regulation, a discussion of the changing political and social context in St. Paul and in the Midwest into the early 1900s could have enriched his analysis. Best seems too ready to paint St. Paul as a “typical” example of informal regulation, neglecting a more thorough examination of why St. Paul may in fact have been unique, or at least unusual. Those familiar with St. Paul’s similarly practical stance toward gangsters in the early 1900s, for example, may wonder if something about that city’s political and social climate made its officials more receptive to such strategies.

One of the most important contributions here lies in Best’s insistence that the relationship between morality and deviance has been under-examined in analyses of deviance and social control. He makes a convincing case for reexploring the role played by morality in the debates over illicit practices such as prostitution. He suggests that the ultimate failure of informal regulation strategies such as that used in St. Paul can be found in regulators’ inability to make a “convincing moral rationale” (p. 137) for such practices. Best positions his morality argument as a counterpoint to “interests” interpretations that see deviance and social control as defined by groups who gain economically or politically by doing so. However, some readers may feel that he tends to downplay the ways in which particular groups have investments in particular definitions of what constitutes moral or respectable behavior. Put another way, he stops short

of exploring the more complex ways in which morality and “deviance” intersect. While historians and sociologists will find Best’s examination of the relationship between prostitutes, police, and “respectable” citizens both fascinating and useful for thinking about social control and the social construction of respectability, they may be frustrated by his unwillingness to engage the larger questions about power that his discussion inevitably raises.

Despite these shortcomings, Best’s study is both readable and rigorous, and the interdisciplinary nature of the work should make it accessible to scholars from a wide range of disciplines: sociology, women’s history, business history, criminology, political history and regional history. Readers unfamiliar with the literature on deviance will especially appreciate his comprehensive and clear (though at times bit repetitive) explication of the historiography of deviance and social control. He succeeds in demonstrating why such a case study of regulation is a necessary addition to the field.

Best’s study is especially bolstered by its investigation of the complex realities of the lives of St. Paul’s prostitutes and their role in the larger community. His social historical bent is enriched by his sociological attention to detail, and he demonstrates a remarkable sensitivity for teasing a complex portrait of madams and prostitutes, and of brothel life in general, from his data. He is also able, with limited data, to develop an intriguing yet carefully reasoned argument about the general public’s often ambiguous stance toward vice and social control. All in all, *Controlling Vice* provides a fascinating and detailed account of the complex intersections of deviance and respectability in an “average” nineteenth-century city.

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