The Prostitution of Sexuality

Barry, Kathleen

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Josephine Butler: The First Wave of Protest

In 1798, two private physicians were given the task of examining Parisian prostitutes; they were required to report to the police any cases of infection. In 1802, a dispensary was established, and the police began registering all public prostitutes, who were required to submit to semiweekly examinations. In 1871, at the International Medical Congress in Vienna, an international law was proposed to make regulation uniform throughout the world. By the middle of the century, this system had developed into regulation—state-supported prostitution. The state-regulated brothel (*maison close*) made prostitution legitimate. Regulation was accepted by many as a social reform that improved the hygienic conditions of prostitution.

During the French Revolution venereal disease was so widespread that it often undermined military effectiveness. The chief concern was to find a way to prevent disease without inhibiting soldiers' access to prostitutes. The practice of regulation of brothels quickly spread from the military to the general public. From its
institution in France and Germany, regulated prostitution began to spread across Europe. Officially, such regulation was seen as a mechanism for controlling venereal disease; unofficially, it legitimized prostitution and encouraged a widespread traffic in women.

Through regulation, official state sanction of prostitution in brothels accomplished three things of long-lasting impact: (1) it treated prostitution as normal and legitimate, (2) it covered up other abuses and the traffic in women, and (3) it introduced a new distinction between forced prostitution and “free” prostitution.

In the mid-nineteenth century, between 1864 and 1869, regulation was introduced into Great Britain through the Contagious Diseases Acts. When the Contagious Diseases Acts became law, one woman, Josephine Butler, dared to challenge them, and in doing so she created an international movement. In her campaigns against “forced prostitution,” Josephine Butler changed the direction of nineteenth-century European prostitution. For that time she stemmed the mounting tide that in the late twentieth century has re-emerged and is directed toward complete legitimization of prostitution. Butler’s motivations and politics were feminist—she not only helped protect women from prostitution, but she also wanted men held accountable for their sexual behaviors. Yet she and the abolitionist movement (the movement to abolish regulation) that she organized invoked a dangerous distinction by differentiating between free and forced prostitution. Regulation, having already legitimized prostitution, left the reformers in the position of confronting prostitution as violation only when it involved other victimizing practices such as pimping. To differentiate between freely chosen and forced prostitution was to imply that some prostitution is acceptable. Today it would be comparable to suggesting that drug abuse is acceptable when it is not forced, when people inject themselves without direct coercion from others. The liberal emphasis on consent, which, in Butler’s time, was developing as an ideology of industrial capitalism, has become a superficial and technical distinction that obscures the harm of the act itself.

Before launching her campaigns against legalized prostitution,
Josephine Butler had personally been engaged in helping young girls and women get out of prostitution on the docks in Liverpool. She outraged her neighbors when she brought prostitute women home, nursed them to health, and helped them create new lives. She persisted with the support of her husband. Deeply affected by the economic and sexual degradation to which these women were subjected, she saw how quickly women responded to supportive care, immediately grasping at the opportunity to get out of prostitution.

The Contagious Diseases Acts were designed to protect the health of military men by subjecting any woman whom the special Morals Police identified as a prostitute to a "surgical examination," which involved the use of crude instruments for special vaginal examinations by often cruel doctors. The coarse brutality of doctors, men who had only recently taken over the work of midwives, and the arbitrary police identification of women as prostitutes, combined with Victorian morality to create an outrage among women against such examinations. "The examination was demeaning because of its public character. Streetwalking at night was one thing; being forced to attend examinations during the day often taunted by young boys . . . was another."\(^3\) The acts were enforced in 11 garrison towns, military stations, and naval seaports. An amendment to the 1864 act required that all women identified by the Morals Police as prostitutes submit to a medical examination. If a woman was found to be free of venereal disease, she was then officially registered and issued a certificate identifying her as a clean prostitute. The state created the prostitution supply for customers.

The Percy case exemplifies the way in which regulation entrapped women. Mrs. Percy supported her family by working in a musical theater on a military base. Her 16-year-old daughter accompanied her each evening, and they were always escorted home by a military officer. One evening during their walk home, the police approached her and her daughter, identifying them both as public prostitutes and ordering them to report for the requisite
medical examination. Mrs. Percy’s daughter gave the following account to George Butler, Josephine’s husband, when she was taken in by the Butlers after her mother’s suicide:

They called the police and ordered my mother to go up to the Metropolitan Police Office and bring me with her. Mamma and I went. We there saw Inspector G———. He was in his room, and mamma was first called in alone. I cannot, therefore, tell what passed between mamma and the Inspector, because I was never the same person again after that hour. She told me that she assured Inspector G——— that she would rather sign her death warrant than the paper he gave her to sign. I was then called in. I shall never forget the moment when I stood before Inspector G—— and he accused me. He said, “Do you know, girl, why you are here?” I replied, “No, sir, I do not.” He said, “You are here because you are no better than you should be. You know what that means, I suppose?” I said, “No, sir, I do not.” He laughed in a horrible way when I said this.4

The Contagious Diseases Acts not only regulated and controlled prostitutes but they also showed the rest of the women that to venture out of their homes was to risk being identified as a prostitute and thereby put into prostitution. Mrs. Percy refused to submit herself or her daughter to the surgical examination, and she made her anger known through a letter to the Daily Telegraph. The Morals Police were determined more than ever to make a lesson of Mrs. Percy and her daughter. Under pressure, the theater that employed Mrs. Percy fired her. She and her daughter moved out of town but were convinced by one of Mrs. Percy’s coworkers to return to work under a false name.5 The Morals Police unrelentingly pursued Mrs. Percy, warning lodging houses that if they took her in they would risk being cited for running a disorderly house. In desperation, with no place to live or work, Mrs. Percy threw herself into the Basingstoke Canal.

In 1869, after the final act passed, Josephine organized the Ladies National Association to campaign for the repeal of the acts. A statement from the association, summarizing its position, was published in the Daily News on December 31. It was accom-
panied by the names of 130 of the 2,000 women who had signed it; among the names were those of Josephine Butler, writer Harriet Martineau, and Florence Nightingale. The statement said, in part,

Unlike all other laws for the repression of contagious diseases, to which both men and women are liable, these two apply to women only, men being wholly exempt from their penalties. The law is ostensibly framed for a certain class of women, but in order to reach these, all women residing within the district where it is in force are brought under the provisions of the Acts. Any woman can be dragged into court, and required to prove that she is not a common prostitute. The magistrate can condemn her, if a policeman swears only that he “has good cause to believe” her to be one. . . . When condemned, the sentence is as follows: to have her person outraged by the periodical inspection of a surgeon, through a period of 12 months; or resisting that, to be imprisoned, with or without hard labour—first for a month, next for three months—such imprisonment to be renewed for her whole life unless she submit periodically to the brutal requirements of the law.

Victor Hugo was among the many who responded to this appeal; he encouraged the women to “Protest! resist! show your indignation!” and wrote, “I am with you to the fullest extent of my power. In reading your eloquent letter, I have felt a burning sympathy rise in me for the feeble, and a corresponding indignation against the oppressor.”

In organizing the Ladies National Association and in issuing their statement, Josephine began her political campaigns against prostitution and the acts behind them. While, as she believed, the injustices of the Contagious Diseases Acts would always be felt more keenly by women, she was acutely aware of the barriers that women activists had to confront even to summon the courage to speak in public, much less to challenge men’s control of the government, the acts, the streets, and indeed even public thought. Josephine insisted on separate ladies’ associations throughout her political career. She exhorted the women, “We must cease to ‘recognize superior wisdom’ in those who oppress us, and learn to abhor the despotism of a public opinion formed by men, which
has so long, and with such calamitous results, aimed at holding in bondage even the inmost thoughts of women."  

The Contagious Diseases Acts to regulate prostitution initiated a sexual slavery of women. Josephine responded with a war against that tyranny, a campaign for destruction of the sexist double standard of morality, and a demand for the personal liberty of all women. She called for a return to "the mark of a common standard of purity, and an equal judgment of the sin of impurity for both sexes alike." 

In her speeches she pointed out the results of the double standard on men's behavior:

The language of men towards women is, and has ever been, far too much of this character. "You must make us good, and keep us good; you must continually pray for us, we having no time (nor inclination) to pray for ourselves or you; you must save our souls while you minister to our daily comfort; . . . and somehow or other you must, you absolutely must, get us into heaven at last. You know how! We leave it to you; but remember you are responsible for all this." I think I should be ashamed, were I a man, to throw such awful moral and spiritual responsibility upon women, while doing little for their souls in return.

Butler believed that a social movement against legalized prostitution would not only protect women and girls from prostitution but would also help elevate the standards of sexual conduct. The campaigns to abolish state regulation of prostitution, focusing as they did on laws that actually promote prostitution and emphasizing the extreme cases wherein women and girls were trafficked, had the effect of historically overshadowing the larger and even more significant reality, the massive proliferation in prostitution itself.

With economic development, industrialization, and urbanization, in mid-nineteenth century United States and Europe, prostitution became highly visible and industrialized. Timothy Gilfoyle, in a history of prostitution in New York City, identifies the city as the "carnal showcase of the Western world" after 1820.
industrialization came the commercialization of women as sexed bodies for hire. Business stood to profit from the rental of their properties for prostitution, and “illicit sex” increasingly became an “attractive form of capital investment.”

Cities provided the condition of anonymity that customers require in prostitution. The earlier occasional or casual prostitution in mostly rural, preindustrial society gave way to pimps, who were initially hired by brothels to protect women from the mobs that formed in frequent brothel riots as the male citizenry reacted to the changing conditions.

With industrialization came a change in social mores. Commercialization emphasized public display of goods. “Never had so much been on show in the cities,” Alain Corbain tells us of the growth of prostitution in France, where prostitute women showed and offered themselves publicly. With urbanization and migration from rural to urban areas in Europe and the United States, women and girls found themselves at the bottom of the labor force. The developing sex industry siphoned women off the labor market—away from domestic labor, or work as servants, seamstresses, chambermaids, tailoresses, and milliners and into prostitution. The new affluence of the business classes and the increased standard of living of men in general as a result of industrialization, along with the increase of male immigrants for labor in these industrializing economies, increased the market demand for prostitution.

Dr. William Sanger, a nineteenth-century scholar on prostitution, found that a substantial increase in prostitution in New York City accompanied the midcentury increase in immigration. Of 200 prostitutes in New York City in the 1850s, Sanger found that three-eighths were between the ages of 15 and 20 and another three-eighths were 21 to 25. Gilfoyle, in his study of prostitution in New York City, summarized the situation through a remark of a police captain: “‘Startling as is the assertion,’ remarked Police Captain Thomas Byrnes in 1886, ‘it is nevertheless true, that the
traffic in female virtue is as much a regular business, systematically carried on for gain, in the City of New York, as is the trade in boots and shoes, dry goods and groceries.”

In the United States by 1870, prostitution was developing into a multimillion-dollar industry. Corbain shows a similar industrialization of prostitution in France and associates the increased demand for prostitutes with social changes that are evident today in the expansion of prostitution in the developing world, namely, the increased wealth of certain bourgeois social groups, with businessmen experiencing a rapid increase in wealth; an increased mobility among men of this class, in France; the development of international tourism, bringing large numbers of foreigners to Paris; and a large rural-to-urban migration.

Historian Judith Walkowitz pointed out that prostitution in English working-class communities had been fairly casual prior to the Contagious Diseases Acts. Before industrialization and regulation through these acts, prostitutes were not particularly identified as a special class and were thus allowed some opportunity for mobility out of prostitution. They were part of the community in which they grew up, and as women they were invisible in public because the private sphere still confined women’s existence. They were invisible as women but could be bought as sex. With depri-vatization, the deployment of sexuality, and the subsequent efforts to legitimize prostitution, the acts forced a distinct separation of prostitutes from their neighborhood. “They were designed to force prostitutes to accept their status as public women by destroying their private identities and associations with the poor working-class community.” Neighborhood women rallied to prostitutes’ support in resisting the acts. “Women seem to have been the organizing force behind public demonstrations in the defense of registered women. In their response to the Contagious Disease Acts, they appear motivated by personal sympathy for the plight of a neighbor, as well as by hostility toward the metropolitan police as interlopers in their community.” Further, community women assisted prostitute women in escaping public identifi-
cation by helping them get out of the area and into rescue homes in London.\textsuperscript{20}

At the time, Butler was not only the first woman but also the most radical, in a feminist sense, to challenge prostitution. Rather than staying comfortably close to her rescue work of supporting individual women, Josephine Butler was distinguished from many of her contemporaries in that she attacked those who profited from prostitution: slaveholders, pimps, procurers, and the state (laws and corrupt governments and police). But like many feminists of her era who became preoccupied with “social housekeeping,” her first goal was to purify the state on the assumption that if it were rid of corruption, if it were made morally responsible, and if its tyranny over women were toppled and its double standards abolished, then individual moral consciousness would follow.

The weakness of Butler’s campaign lay not in her outrage nor in her organizing skills but in her strategy. Instead of campaigning against prostitution as customer abuse of women, Butler confined her campaigns to action against third-party coercion by pimps and state regulation. In opposing state regulation, she refrained from action in relation to “freely chosen” prostitution at a time when its industrialization made the women and the sex an ordinary commodity. Instead, by accepting the emerging concept of “forced prostitution,” which referred to the young girls and women found on the street and forced to undergo medical exams only to be registered as prostitutes, Josephine Butler in her campaigns also had to implicitly accept that there was a prostitution that was not “forced.” At that time, most of society considered prostitution to be harmful. Therefore, Butler’s position likely seemed to be making inconsequential distinctions between free and forced prostitution in the 1860s, a century before Western society became so thoroughly sexualized through pornography and the media. However, social disapproval of prostitution did not prevent it from becoming a major industry in Europe and the United States.
In campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts, we can locate the emergence of the notion that prostitution is either "forced" or "free." This notion made invisible the ordinary, everyday business of industrial capitalism, a prostitution industry. What Butler did not and could not foresee was that by the late twentieth century, the false distinction between forced and free would become the basis of major international campaigns to legitimize all prostitution and to shift the definition of woman to that of prostitute through the prostitution of sexuality.

In 1870 Josephine began to travel throughout England, lecturing on the acts and organizing people for action against them. From the beginning, she made her appeal to the working classes, where she saw the most suffering from the effects of the acts and the greatest potential for political mobilization. Whereas she experienced a lack of pretense and a commitment to ethical standards among the working class, and thus a potential for change, she found these qualities absent in the delicacy and remoteness of society ladies of her own class.

As she analyzed it,

The position and wealth of men of the upper classes place the women belonging to them above any chance of being accused of prostitution. Ladies who ride in their carriages through the street at night are in no danger of being molested. But what about working women? What about the daughters, sisters, and wives of working men, out, it may be, on an errand of mercy, at night? And what, most of all, of that girl whose father, mother, friends are dead or far away, who is struggling hard, in a hard world, to live uprightly, and justly by the work of her own hands.

Women "not only have been debarred from attempting to deal in any large sense with this evil, but they have been systematically drilled into silence on this topic." She struggled on behalf of the most oppressed and exploited of women, but because she struggled institutionally only against state regulation of prostitution, she short-circuited the potential feminist revolution she had sparked. It would be another century before feminism could build on Butler's equality campaigns and focus on fundamental change
in the sexual values and power that give men unlimited, unrestrained sexual access, including the purchase of women.

Butler, a careful organizer, built community outrage against the acts. This became the base upon which she built her campaign. But as she escalated her campaigns, public reaction escalated against her. In using the words “prostitutes” and “brothels,” she defied the womanly codes of Victorian morality, and her direct language was considered abhorrent. She challenged male self-interest where it had been most protected and secreted. Mob violence began to accompany her speeches. During one campaign against a liberal who would not support repeal of the acts, mobs of men and young boys scuffling and throwing rocks forced her to hide in a hotel attic. The next day she was forced by the management to leave the hotel. Wearing a disguise, she sought refuge at another hotel, but the mob located her there also. Despite the threats, she insisted on addressing the women’s rally as she had planned. A number of bodyguards, brought up from London by her supporters, enabled her to address the meeting, but afterward she had to run through streets and alleys to escape the mob. She eventually made it safely to the home of a supporter, who took her in and looked after her.23

As feared (or promised), regulation increased the traffic of women into prostitution. Meanwhile, everyday commercial prostitution expanded in the cities. But Butler’s movement in England focused on the traffic of English girls to continental European brothels. Girls were often procured through newspaper advertisements offering positions of employment, usually for domestic work, or they were approached in railway stations, where young girls coming to the city from the country were easily identifiable.24

Josephine built her campaign from small-town organizations into a national and then international movement, with strategies that later would be employed by the suffragist Pankhursts in the Women’s Social and Political Union campaigns. The strategy was to campaign against liberals who refused to introduce or support legislation to repeal the acts. As the movement grew, it attracted
different interest groups. Historian Edward Bristow points out, “There was something of interest in the new abolitionism for every possible kind of libertarian and radical, as well as for the haters of sexual sin.”

However problematic Butler’s distinction between “forced” and “free” would become to the work of twentieth-century radical feminists confronting sexual exploitation in prostitution, Butler’s own kind of feminist radicalism (she didn’t call it that) was evident in her confrontation against those who promoted prostitution and profited from it. She challenged the sexual double standards reflected in men who frequented prostitutes, and she insisted on a separate woman’s organization to lead that struggle.

One of those who became actively involved in this movement was Alfred Dyer, a Quaker who published books on various religious and social questions, among them works by Josephine Butler. Concerned with child prostitution in England, he began to work with Butler and other abolitionists. They campaigned to raise the legal age of consent from 12 to 18, to make it easier to prosecute procurers of young girls for child or “forced” prostitution.

This marked the beginning of Butler’s engagement in coalition organizing with men. Dyer learned of the traffic of young English girls to the continent, where they were forced into prostitution. A friend told him about a young English girl who was held in slavery in a Brussels brothel and was discovered by an Englishman who frequented the brothel. Although the Englishman was taken with her plight, he did not want to risk exposing his own identity by helping her escape, but he did relate the incident to a friend, who conveyed it to Dyer. Dyer methodically researched the story and, confirming details of the account, printed it: a 19-year-old girl “was courted in London by a man of gentlemanly exterior, who promised her marriage if she would accompany him for the purpose to Brussels.” En route, at Calais, she was left with another man while her “lover” explained that he had to pawn a watch to get some money and would join her in Brussels. She never saw
him again. Arriving in Brussels, she was taken to a closed brothel, the man with her was paid, and she was officially registered under a false name as a prostitute.26

Dyer correctly anticipated being charged with sensationalism when he published this story. The Brussels commissioner of police denied the alleged practices in a letter published in English newspapers. Dyer undertook his own investigation. In Brussels he visited several houses of prostitution, including one where he had heard that a young Englishwoman was being kept. He managed to buy time with her, and she told him her story of being seduced by a man in London who promised her a job in Brussels; when she accompanied him there, she said, she was brought to this house and officially registered by its proprietor as a prostitute under a false name. Her story was similar to that of the woman who had been taken to Brussels under the promise of marriage. According to Dyer, she wanted him to help her escape.

As Dyer reports it, he did not arrange for her escape himself but instead went to the authorities. Police corruption in regulated systems of prostitution was well known, so whether he went to the police in order to test their responsiveness or out of a sense of male bonding, we don’t know. In any event, he was not successful. The commissioner of the police district performed a cursory investigation and reported that all was in order. Dyer returned to the house on his own and was denied access.

This incident and many other assertions regarding the traffic in women and girls for sexual slavery have been considered groundless by some contemporary historians who have blithely accepted the new but easily institutionalized distinction between “free” and “forced” prostitution imposed by the state regulation that encouraged trafficking. For example, Bristow argues that the woman allegedly held in the house was in fact a “professional prostitute,” by which he means “a woman who has chosen the work of a prostitute and set herself up in business.” The commercialization of prostitution—its ordinary, everyday sexual exploitation of women, which was not confronted by abolitionists un-
less it was "forced"—was endowed by researchers with the sense of a profession. More than that, Bristow's dismissal of such incidents followed from his casual disregard for the exploitation of women evidenced in his description of how, in the decade preceding Dyer's investigation, the British embassy had been responsible for returning home about 200 English girls. "While a few were innocent victims, most seem to have been professionals who did not know they would be kept in more severe circumstances than prevailed in the world of English vice." 27 This is an academic approach to research that reflects ideological acceptance of the position of regulation law, which was to treat all prostitution as normal and legitimate unless it was proven to have been coerced. In discussing prostitution in New York City, Gilfoyle reflects a similar male-liberal, proprostitution bias: "The willingness on the part of some women to choose prostitution over other forms of labor reflected an alternative attitude regarding their bodies." 28 Gilfoyle's academic nonchalance regarding sexual exploitation obscures the reality of nonchoice among poor female laborers. The sex industry—then in New York and Paris, now in Bangkok and Manila—compensates for the discriminatory wages that impoverished women in early industrialization.

Despite the economic impoverishment that industrialization caused for women, Dyer and those moral crusaders who flocked to Butler's campaigns emphasized the most extreme cases of "forced" prostitution. Specifically, the Dyer escapade revealed the changes in Butler's campaign strategies, the effect of abandoning her women-only organizing in favor of coalition with would-be supporters whose primary concern was not women. It is notable that not only did Dyer not free the woman who told him she wanted to escape; he may also have seriously threatened her life when the police informed the brothel of his report to them. When men entered the campaign against regulated prostitution, particularly in rescue work and investigations, one notes that consistently their behavior was dominated by righteous heroics in which the fate of the victim is secondary to the escapade they are per-
forming. Distinguishing “free” from “forced” prostitution promoted such male heroics, which, marked by paternalism, allowed men who were acting from fatherly concern and care to play the hero. Further, it opened the space for treating the rest of prostitution not as exploitation but as a mere profession. Meanwhile, men’s misguided concern for the plight of girls forced into prostitution created its own sensationalism, which in turn discredited the reports of the traffic in women. That was the cost paid by Josephine Butler and her movement when she welcomed the support and involvement of men like Dyer.

Dyer published his findings, and they were vehemently repudiated by Belgian authorities. Yet, with pressure from Josephine Butler, the British Home Secretary initiated an investigation. In 1880 he commissioned a London lawyer, T. W. Snagge, to inquire into the traffic of young English girls into prostitution in Brussels. Snagge had no prior connection with the abolitionist movement, with Butler, or with Dyer. His official report completely confirmed Dyer’s allegations.29 He found that English girls were being exported by systematic traffic to Belgium, France, and Holland for prostitution; that English girls were frequently induced by misrepresentation or false promises to leave England; that they ended up in prostitution houses; and that in those houses they were “detained by duress or subjected to cruelty and forced against their will to lead a life of prostitution.”30

In May 1881, Snagge’s findings led to an inquiry into legislation that would specifically curtail procuring and trafficking of English girls to other countries. Further inquiry into juvenile prostitution led to proposed legislation to raise the age of consent to 16. Strong opposition to the proposed legislation raising the age of consent and repealing the Contagious Diseases Acts resulted in its being compromised and stalled in committees.

Josephine Butler, desperate over the fate of this critical legislation, embarked on another paternalistic venture: the “heroic” plans of the famous English journalist W. T. Stead. Although Stead was by reputation a somewhat sensationalistic journalist,
he was a first-rate writer and editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. His work and newspaper were known for their respectability and were solidly entrenched in the British middle classes. He joined the campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts when he heard the reports of abuse and torture in many of London's brothels. One brothel owner, Mrs. Jeffries, who specialized in providing virgin girls, was taken to court through Butler's efforts, only to leave after payment of a minimal fine.\(^{31}\)

Neither the courts nor Parliament could be moved. The abolitionists had to rely on public opinion, which they would stir to outrage by exposing the exploitation and abuse in the brothels. Stead decided to look into allegations of child abuse in London brothels. As he learned of the atrocities, he is said to have forgotten his middle-class securities and given way to a personal agony and anger. He interviewed little girls as young as 4 years old who had been repeatedly raped in these brothels. He spent 6 weeks exploring and investigating the prostitution world of London's West End. But to publish a convincing argument, he needed final, unimpeachable evidence of the ease with which children could be purchased, examined for virginity, and turned over to brothels.

He proposed a plan, and Josephine concurred: he would find a procurer who would actually purchase a child and go through all the steps short of turning the child over to be sexually abused. A former female procurer, Rebecca Jarrett, who was under Josephine's care, was asked to carry out this project.

Rebecca Jarrett had entered prostitution at the age of 12 (the age of consent then), and after many years she had started her own brothels and procured young girls and women to work for her. She had tried to leave prostitution many times, but as long as she stayed in London she could not sever her connections from her former life. Finally, at age 36, she was taken in by Florence Booth, from the London-based Salvation Army, who sent her to Josephine.\(^{32}\) In Winchester with Josephine, Rebecca severed her connections with prostitution and became actively involved in rescue work. Her knowledge of the world of brothels and prosti-
tution made her almost fearless; she was able to go into many dangerous places and induce young women and girls to leave and come back to Winchester, where she took care of them.\textsuperscript{33}

Rebecca agreed to help Stead. Under his direction she made her contacts and informed an old friend that she wanted to buy a child. The friend obliged and produced various children for Rebecca’s inspection. Rebecca chose Eliza Armstrong, a 13-year-old girl. Stead gave Rebecca a £5 note for the purchase and told her that she must be absolutely sure that the parents were aware the child was being purchased for immoral purposes.\textsuperscript{34} Mrs. Armstrong reportedly drank up her share of the money and was arrested that night for drunk and disorderly conduct.\textsuperscript{35}

Without Josephine’s knowledge, the child was taken by Rebecca and Stead to a midwife who was used by brothels to certify that young girls were virgins. So caught up was Stead in his own scheme that he never questioned the ethics of subjecting the girl to the very practices he was ostensibly condemning. Josephine was enraged when she learned of the extent to which he had carried his scheme. But he had the evidence he needed. The next day Eliza was taken to France and placed with the Salvation Army there.

With this final proof, on July 6, 1885, Stead launched his attack with the first in his series of articles entitled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.” Under the subheading “A Child of Thirteen Bought for £5,” he published his first exposé describing the story of Eliza Armstrong and the conditions of prostitution.

The public’s first reaction was stunned disbelief, followed by charges of sensationalism, followed by public indignation that led to near rioting. “The Home Secretary begged the editor to stop publication of the articles, fearing riots on a national scale. Stead replied that he would stop them the moment he received assurance that the Bill [raising the age of consent to 16, suppressing brothels, and protecting victims] would be carried through without delay.”\textsuperscript{36} The \textit{Pall Mall Gazette} was banned by major news agents but sold out immediately on the streets. Hundreds of London
newsboys were arrested for selling the papers, but the charges were dismissed. “It was on this day that George Bernard Shaw, who was the reviewer on the Pall Mall Gazette, took a bundle of papers out into the Strand and sold them.”

“Three days after the storm broke, Richard Cross, the new Home Secretary, put the Criminal Law Amendment Bill through its second reading.” It moved swiftly into law. Mass meetings were held in London and elsewhere. Public indignation from the Stead exposés had finally become a national concern. These gains were not without cost, however.

The first cost was paid by the most immediate victims of Stead’s masquerade: Eliza Armstrong and Rebecca Jarrett. When the Eliza Armstrong story hit the papers, Mrs. Armstrong’s neighbors were angry at her for selling her daughter and using the money to get drunk. She defended herself by beginning a search for her daughter. First, she reported to the police that Eliza was missing. Eliza’s father claimed that the child had been taken from him without his consent. Stead, Rebecca Jarrett, and others were arrested, charged with abducting Eliza from her parents and indecently assaulting and drugging her. This turn of events gave Stead’s enemies, particularly those trying to thwart repeal of the Contagious Disease Acts, an opportunity to try to discredit him. Both Stead and Rebecca Jarrett were convicted and sentenced to brief terms. Just as Eliza was used by Stead, so she then was used by his opposition.

Imprisonment could only heighten Stead’s personal and political sense of martyrdom in his battle. But for Rebecca, a recently reformed prostitute, the trial and conviction meant having her past dragged up before her and hearing herself publicly condemned. So harsh and abusive was the court that Josephine wrote a tract in defense of Rebecca, blaming herself for having convinced the well-intentioned woman to work with Stead. In that tract she wrote angrily of Stead’s attitude after the trial: “He speaks of having had a fair trial; compliments the prosecution; confesses himself to have been to blame; hopes that nothing will
be done to reverse the sentence. . . . Perhaps Mr. Stead may think that he himself was courteously treated but what of the courtesy or even decent fairness shown in regard to Rebecca, upon whom the utmost of vituperation permissible in a Court of Law was vented? 40

The other costly result of the Stead exposé was political. Josephine Butler’s movement was to be swept aside by the religious moralists who began en masse to take over the work after these exposés. Their righteous indignation was aroused over the issue of staining the purity of innocent English girls. They were preoccupied with protecting female virtue in order to preserve the family and contain women in the private sphere once again. In the beginning of her campaign the British churches had steadfastly refused to support Josephine; but once the issues caught the public’s attention and created moral indignation, the church began to take an active role in the movement. By then the false distinction between free and forced prostitution had served to legitimate everyday street and brothel prostitution. Society began to look only at the trafficker as the social scourge and cause of the problem.

Josephine had made the tactical mistake of resorting to coalition politics with paternalistic men in order to build her movement. Inevitably this brought the purity crusaders in under her banner. She may have shared some similar convictions with them, but their political goals were decidedly different from hers. They played heroics, searched for the spotlight and attention, and strengthened the idea that women and girls needed to be protected by men. They intensified the sense of female dependence and emphasized female purity as the condition of women. What was wrong with prostitution, then, was that the originally pure were violated. Butler, on the other hand, not only campaigned for women’s freedom, independence, and right to self-support; she also attacked men’s sexual behaviors as the foundation of the double standard of sexual morality that produced the exploitation of women in prostitution.
Some men who worked with us at the beginning, shocked with the
cruelty and illegality of the acts, fall off when they understand the
thoroughness of our crusade, and that it is directed not only against
cruel result of vice, but against the tacit permission—the indisputable
right as some have learned to regard it—granted to men to be impure
at all.\textsuperscript{41}

She spoke of purity, but she meant something entirely different by
it than did the purity crusaders. Her demand was for a purifica-
tion of the state and of males’ behavior. If that were attained, she
was sure that protection of the individual liberty of women would
follow. By contrast, the purity crusaders wanted to return women
to the confines of repressive roles and Victorian morals by vigor-
ously reasserting the traditional patriarchal distinction between
“madonna” and “whore.”

The issue of religious morality is a tricky one in relation to the
sexual exploitation of women. On one hand, religious morality
aimed at social purity was hypocritical, paternalistic, and elitist.
On the other hand, Josephine Butler represented the kind of reli-
gious conviction that turned toward humanitarian relief and hu-
man rights. Of this kind of reformer David Pivar has pointed out,
“Rather than appealing exclusively to religious institutions, they
directed themselves toward the ‘universal’ religious sentiments
common to all men.”\textsuperscript{42} Josephine was a deeply religious woman
whose humanitarian work was inspired as much by her religious
beliefs as by her commitment to human liberty. She brought her
religious beliefs into her campaigns. She called upon them in her
speeches, and her rescue work with prostitutes usually involved
religious appeals for their conversion. But hers was a religious
conviction that emphasized human dignity and liberty. When soci-
ety has little to offer prostitutes as an alternative to the brothel or
the street, when the condition and status of women is so low, the
availability of social opportunities or employment for women so
scarce, it is not surprising that, in her rescue work, Josephine’s
commitment, rescue work, and campaigns were welcomed as con-
crete support from women.
Because it was in part motivated by religious beliefs, Josephine’s work, viewed from a historical perspective, now appears to have been a part of the social purity movement and has been reduced by historians to that. But the goals of the social purity movement were in direct opposition to those of Butler’s feminist work. What in fact happened was that the social purity movement, by attaching itself to women’s causes, was able to build a mass movement and to co-opt the work of feminist leaders like Josephine Butler.

By 1886, when the Contagious Diseases Acts were finally repealed, the conditions of prostitution had worsened. Under regulation, the international traffic in women had reached a peak. Prostitution had changed and solidified. The effect of the Contagious Diseases Acts was to transform neighborhood prostitution of working-class women “into a specially identified professional class. . . . The eventual isolation of prostitutes from general lower-class life was largely imposed from above, although it received the passive acquiescence of the poor themselves.”43 Separating women from their neighborhoods into distinct red-light districts and brothels identified the women as prostitutes more specifically and thereby made their ability to leave prostitution much more difficult. In the early years of the Contagious Diseases Acts, most prostitutes were young and single; by the late nineteenth century, the rigidifying of this social role resulted in women remaining in prostitution longer. Their social mobility had been effectively curtailed.44 Undoubtedly other social factors facilitated the formalized categorization of women as prostitutes, but clearly the impact of the Contagious Diseases Acts was to create among women a distinct out-group in which women were socially if not physically trapped. In turn, this social and geographic isolation facilitated the criminal organization of prostitution, complete with pimps, procurers, and organized brothels.

To challenge the new conditions in all of their subtleties required the clear political vision Butler had brought to the earlier campaigns. Rather than combating prostitution per se, Butler
fought organized prostitution, which she saw as incompatible with female emancipation and individual liberty. In one statement she asserted, “My principle has always been to let individuals alone, not to pursue them with any outward punishment, nor drive them out of any place so long as they behave decently, but to attack organized prostitution, that is, when a third party, activated by the desire of making money, sets up a house in which women are sold to men.” Butler believed that women’s liberties could be achieved only by forcing the state to expose and break up rings of organized procurers and brothel keepers.

The problem is that what is violating, dehumanizing about the experience of prostitution is, first and foremost, the reduction of sex to exchange. Third-party control is another and different violation of women, and by focusing on the “third-party” pimps in prostitution, Butler strengthened the distinction between “free” and “forced” prostitution. Once prostitution had been differentiated in this way, campaigns against “forced” prostitution gave implicit acceptance to prostitution that is not imposed by a third party. Butler accepted prostitution. This was the fundamental weakness of her new campaign. In opening her movement to coalition politics, she narrowed its platform to forced prostitution and that became the foundation of the abolitionist movement. This opened the door to the rampant paternalism of the purity crusaders and religious moralists who began to dominate the movement. Social reform focused on the prostitute and the need to “uplift” her rather than on the customer and the objective of eliminating him. This led to the position of condemning all prostitutes except the innocent and pure victims, who could be saved and returned to their former state of innocence and purity, a reaffirmation of the madonna-whore standard.

One can only conjecture about the influence of Victorian male sexuality on the co-optation of the abolitionist goals and the redefinition of prostitution itself that resulted from these later purity crusaders. “Spending”—the Victorian euphemism for the emission of sperm—was seen as weakening, debilitating.
extraordinary fervor, purity crusaders lectured that sexual containment was the ideal state.

In fact, Corbain points out that in the early years of regulation in France, the intent was to control or contain sexuality—"to repress, or at least to control, all forms of extramarital sexuality under the pretext of supervising prostitution." Containment was supposed to allow men to store up their energies. And incontinence, besides being weakening, was morally wrong, sinful. Consequently, men were advised against masturbation and urged into marriage; as husbands they would not be expected to perform frequently, for it was widely believed that women had no sexual drive. The responsibility for sexual containment rested on women. While this was the creed of Victorian male sexuality, it was never assumed that men could live by the values of containment. The sexual double standard constructed male infidelity as inevitable. That infidelity was treated as a response to sexual repression as a rationalization for prostitution. As long as prostitutes were separate, isolated, and different from other women, Victorian men could secretly frequent them, taking care of their seemingly suppressed sexual desires, which could hardly be suppressed if they were seeking prostitutes, while maintaining a posture of containment in their daily lives.

As the purity crusades emerged into the twentieth century, they were dominated by two themes: the immoral destruction of innocent girls' virtue and sinful incontinence in men. Therefore their call was for purity and preservation of the family. Sensationalized accounts increased, describing sweet, innocent young things being chloroformed and dragged off to foreign brothels. Girls who resisted and fought to their death were seen as martyrs. The purity crusade included other reform issues, especially temperance. Often in their exhortations, leaders associated the evil of the traffic in women with the immoral debauchery of drink. Addressing the victimization of women became the means of attacking other behaviors that flouted religious principles—drunkenness, free love, and so on. And all of these issues, which had
powerful implications for the conditions of women’s lives (wife abuse, etc.), were distorted to serve the end of religious purity.

Sensationalism, derived from and spirited by the purity crusades, cast doubt on the actual accounts of the traffic in women and children. Sensationalistic writers and speakers dramatized their cause through horrifying and probably often fictionalized incidents of sex slavery. This created a separation between city/street prostitution and the traffic in women. Butler had been careful to focus on all exploitation of women involved in prostitution and had not separated her rescue work from her political campaigns, local prostitution from international traffic, one race from another. However, the sensationalism of the purity crusaders raised doubt as to whether traffic in women actually existed. Furthermore, street prostitution began to be treated as “free” in contrast to the “forced” prostitution associated with trafficking. This set the stage for the modern formulation of prostitution as mere “sex between consenting adults.” Legitimization of prostitution was the final result of this campaign.

The regulationalist distinctions between free and forced prostitution accepted by Butler and the abolitionists defined exploitation: a woman had to be forced, and her character had to have been impeccable prior to her violation (as is required always in rape cases). The less sweet, innocent, and young she was, the less likely it was that she could be recognized as having been exploited.

As industrialization produced a public sexualization of women, the public reduction of woman to sex followed. Sex industries that burgeoned in this era normalized the public sexual exploitation of women.

It was in this climate that the term “white slavery” first came into common use. While the term rarely appears in Butler’s writing or speeches, when she did use the term she used it to refer to the entire problem—regulation, prostitution, traffic in women. The term “white slavery” was formally used at the 1902 Paris conference, where representatives of several governments met to
draft an international instrument for the suppression of the white-slave traffic (Le Traité des Blanches). While the term initially was intended to distinguish the practice from nineteenth-century Black slavery, it had immediate appeal to racists, who could and did conclude that the antitrafficking efforts were directed against an international traffic in white women. So, in addition to being sweet, innocent, and young, women were victims only if they were white, despite the evidence that the traffic included women of color. The term eventually embodied all the sexist, classist, and racist bigotry that was ultimately incorporated within the movement dominated by religious morality. Because of the confusion and misuse resulting from the term, the international conference of 1921 recommended that the term “white slavery” be dropped and replaced with “Traffic in Women and Children.” This was subsequently the language of the League of Nations’ and the United Nations’ studies and reports.

The 1902 Paris meeting led to the International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic, which was ratified by 12 nations in 1904. It was designed to commit governments to take action against “procuring of women and girls for immoral purposes abroad.” This agreement led to the 1910 Mann Act in the United States. This act (amended later to include traffic in males as well as females) forbids transporting a person across state lines or international boundaries (exporting or importing) for prostitution or other immoral purposes. The ambiguous term “immoral purposes” suggests the extent to which the purity movement had succeeded in becoming the lawful guardians of female virtue. The question of women’s will was entirely excluded from consideration, and therefore the issue of individual liberty was lost in the language of the act. In addition, “immoral purposes” could and would eventually be defined by the courts according to prevailing male definitions of morality. Prostitute women became the scapegoats for hypocritical morality. Their victimization by prostitution was made invisible.

This series of laws formalized and legalized the ideological and
practical separation, engendered by the purity crusade, between international traffic in women and local prostitution, thereby distracting attention away from the continuing enslavement of women in local prostitution.

The growing feminist movements at the turn of the century began to address prostitution and tried, unsuccessfully, to provide a political concept for analyzing male power. In reaction, antifeminist women attacked the feminists as purity crusaders and charged them with sensationalism. Teresa Billington-Grieg, who had been a member of the Pankhursts' Women's Social and Political Union but who split from that suffrage group, added fuel to this debate when she wrote “The Truth About White Slavery” in 1913. In writing the article, she gathered evidence from various police officials to prove that there is “no organized trapping.”

Attributing the scandal in white slavery “in no small measure to the Pankhurst domination,” she goes on to react to sensationalism. “Fed on such ridiculous scandal-mongering, these women have convinced themselves that a large number of men go regularly and deliberately to a safe and secret place of vice to engage in a pastime that is a life and death struggle to a trapped girl.” Yet that is exactly what the statistics revealing massive increases in prostitution showed. As a forerunner of contemporary proprostitution ideology, Billington-Grieg demanded a further separation of issues—that of sexual abuse of children from that of the white-slave traffic. In the former “an intemperate degenerate is passion-driven into the sudden commission of an atrocity; in the other, there is a cold-blooded, calculating deliberation which reduces the matter from bestiality to the worst possible devilishness.” For the female victims, this would seem like a hair-splitting distinction.

With each distinction built on the original misogynist free-force dichotomy—white slavery versus free prostitution, child prostitution versus free prostitution—the basis for validating prostitution enlarged. It was built on the racism that labeled traffic “white slavery” and on the paternalism that assumed that
violation of females occurred only if they were children. The debate that had raged in Europe and America simmered down to an acceptance of prostitution. Investigating commissions accepted the formalized distinction between white-slave traffic and prostitution. The 1914 Massachusetts "Report of the Commission for the Investigation of the White Slave Traffic, so called" concluded,

Every story of this kind has been thoroughly investigated and either found to be a vague rumor, where one person has told another that some friend of the former (who invariably in turn referred the story farther back) heard that the thing happened, or, in a few instances, imaginary occurrences explained by hysteria or actual malingering. Several of the stories were easily recognized versions of incidents in certain books or plays.

But according to Ernst Bell, the most literal interpretation of white slavery was incorporated into the revised 1902 Massachusetts law in such a way that few incidents could be considered white slavery. According to the revised law, the procuring must be fraudulent and deceitful, and the woman must be unmarried and of a chaste life. If the procurer married the girl to circumvent the law, he could not be prosecuted; if the girl had made one mistake in her life, she could not be protected from being procured. 53

Although its language was woefully inadequate, the Mann Act initially facilitated prosecution of procurers in the United States. In comparison to 1907, when only one alien was debarred from the United States for procuring, "in 1914, 254 procurers and five men living off the earnings of prostitutes were excluded, and 154 procurers and 155 persons living on the earnings of prostitutes were deported." 54

Maude Miner collected significant material on white slavery from cases she handled in night court in New York and in her work in refuge shelters. She documented the procuring tactics and methods used to induce young women into prostitution. But despite these known methods, she asserted, "There has undoubtedly been exaggeration about the white slave traffic in some of the
newspaper accounts and in the moving picture films which have also exploited vice. Yet the facts in authentic cases are too hideous to be told.”

The traffic in women and children persisted despite the fact that it had been socially redefined into nonexistence. At the turn of the century in California, through the rescue work of Donaldina Cameron, an enormous traffic in young Chinese girls was revealed. The girls were being purchased in China, brought to the United States, and sold in San Francisco, either in open markets or directly to individuals. Many were reported being sold into domestic slavery for $100 to $200. Brothel slaves were sold for $1,500 to $3,000. The girls were often acquired from interior provinces and exported through Hong Kong, and they believed they were coming to the United States for arranged marriages. Donaldina Cameron spent many years seeking out these girls and rescuing them from the back alleys of San Francisco’s Chinatown.

Marriage was the means of procuring Jewish girls in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century.

Procurers were known to go through the traditional ritual and then take their legally unmarried and largely unprotected partners off to a domestic or foreign brothel. . . . In 1892 twenty-two men were convicted in Lemberg for procuring girls from small Galician towns with promises of jobs as servants, and selling them to brothels in Constantinople, Alexandria and points east of Suez. The Austrian consul in Constantinople had rescued sixty of them from virtual imprisonment the year before.

During this period, most feminists were engrossed in the battle for legal equality and the right to vote; at the time these rights were seen as fundamental to any other moral or legal changes. Some feminists addressed the issue of white slavery, but it never became a major focus of the movement, either in England or in America. Yet a few voices continued to speak out.

Christabel Pankhurst, writing for the British suffrage movement in 1913, connected the prevalence of white slavery with the denial of votes for women. Regulation had spread to India
through British colonization. Pankhurst expounded on the government’s responsibility for white slavery there and showed how the absence of women in Parliament prevented legislation that would provide women fair wages and thus left them vulnerable to white slavers.\textsuperscript{58}

Emma Goldman, writing in 1917, also associated white slavery with economic exploitation, “the merciless Moloch of capitalism that fattens on underpaid labor, thus driving thousands of women and girls into prostitution.”\textsuperscript{59} And she added, “Whether our reformers admit it or not, the economic and social inferiority of women is responsible for prostitution.”\textsuperscript{60}

Lack of economic opportunity for women was in fact the source of huge profits for procurers and madams. But those profits were only possible because of customer demand—because of men buying sex or women’s bodies. Radical feminist Christabel Pankhurst asserted,

White Slavery exists because thousands upon thousands of ordinary men want it to exist, and are willing to pay to keep it going. These men, in order to distract the attention of the other women who are not White Slaves, are very willing to make scapegoats of a few of the Slave Traders, but all the time they rely upon their being enough traders to maintain the supply of women slaves. By force, by trickery, or by starvation enough women will, they believe, be drawn into the Slavery of vice.\textsuperscript{61}

Feminists like Pankhurst tried to reassert the connection between men’s responsibility and the exploitation of women—the politics with which Josephine Butler had begun the movement. The political analysis of women like Pankhurst and Goldman placed the focus back on those who create and maintain the institution. According to Goldman,

Fully fifty percent of married men are patrons of brothels. It is through this virtuous element that the married women—nay, even the children—are infected with venereal diseases. Yet society has not a word of condemnation for the man, while no law is too monstrous to be set in motion against the helpless victim.\textsuperscript{62}
And Christabel’s militancy was as pronounced on this issue as it was on suffrage:

Intelligent women are revolted by men’s commerce with white slaves. It makes them regard men as inferiors. So great a want of self-respect and of fastidiousness excites their scorn and disgust. The disparity between the moral standards of men and women is more and more destroying women’s respect and regard for men. Men have a simple remedy for this state of things. They can alter their way of life.63

And by “altering their way of life” she meant sexual self-control—not repression, but responsible control.

For these feminists, as for Butler, the situation called for a fundamental behavioral change in men. If the moral values of patriarchy were to be radically altered, so would the nature of the society be. But co-optation of feminist causes successfully prevented that change.

Sporadic feminist protests continued. Through the 1920s and 1930s studies were conducted by the League of Nations and later the United Nations that affirmed a continuing traffic in women and children who were forced into prostitution. Regulation as a form of prostitution slavery was finally forbidden by an international treaty, the 1949 United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, which called upon nations to close brothels and punish those who procure for and promote prostitution.

Even when the British feminists were the most militant, the women’s rights movement that had spread throughout Europe and North America since the mid-nineteenth century had begun to wane. Its demise was complete by the end of World War I, but it left a problematic legacy in the abolitionist position on free and forced prostitution. On one hand, while campaigning for increased rights and freedom of choice for women, the movement accepted the idea that prostitution was inevitable. Apparent free choice sanctioned prostitution, and Butler would not interfere with women who had not been forced by pimps. Behind this
liberalism, it was assumed that women in prostitution who were not controlled by pimps were different, unlike women who married or at least had conventional relationships. They were not like the women and girls who would have married had they not been procured and forced into prostitution. It was further reasoned that prostitutes who had no pimps and had not been procured did not need protection and support. Human rights, support, and care were reserved for those women who had been procured because, according to the distortion of patriarchal thought, they would have been married if they had not been trafficked. Therefore they were the “good women.”

The distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution intensified differences in the two classes of women, a distinction that remains to be challenged by feminists and removed from universal human rights law. To do that requires taking up Butler's most basic challenge: Do men have the right at all to buy women's bodies for sex?