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It has been quite a while since the University of Chicago sociology department was known for its elegant studies of intrinsically fascinating forms of social life. This revised version of a Chicago Ph.D. dissertation reveals that something is left of that tradition. Goldman’s book is a well-researched, nicely written, descriptive study of something worth describing. It is a sort of historical ethnography focused on one of the extreme—and therefore both atypical and revealing—moments of Victorian society.

Nevada’s famous Comstock lode experienced a silver boom beginning almost simultaneously with the Civil War and peaking in the late 1870s. During the quarter century of prosperity that made Virginia City an enduring symbol of the Old West’s mining aspect, prostitution grew alongside speculator’s fortunes. It achieved an established, if not wholeheartedly accepted, place in local society. Like the ephemeral fortunes of lucky miners, however, both the institutionalized *demimonde* and the boomtown population that supported it faded rapidly toward the end of the century. Though Goldman has some aspirations toward timeless contributions to general theory, the value of her study lies in its historical particularities.

For the most part, the story portrays a familiar Victorian theme—the centrality of notions of “respectability” in social life. Goldman shows a yin/yang world of respectable and disreputable women. The particular contrast of the vulnerable, corsetted Victorian wife, asexual but sheltered comfortably in her home, to the bawdy houses’ “soiled doves,” free after a fashion and often rowdy—but also scared in the streets of the red light district—serves Goldman as it served Virginia City to portray the underlying logic of social life. The contrast between the “dirty” work of the lower classes and the “cleanliness” of their respectable betters was dramatized by the dirtiness of commercial sex and the cleanliness of asexual motherhood.
Prostitutes forfeited their rights to protection of the law and public assistance by "accepting" their occupation, just as manual workers forfeited much of their right to full political participation or control over their conditions of work. The implication in both cases is that the dirty worker had chosen his or her occupation in a sort of Calvinist/Weberian "elective affinity," revealing thereby his or her inner nature. Public rationalizations for brutality, dishonesty, and greed, therefore, could benefit from notions of both innate inferiority and voluntary degradation.

Despite the centrality of the respectability theme to her descriptions of the fast life in Virginia City, Goldman does not follow up generalization in that direction. Though there are a few superficial references to Marx and Marxists, her interest is not in stratification or social structure so much as in deviance. She concludes nearly every chapter with a section on "theoretical implications," and closes the book with a whole chapter on theoretical lessons. In the first place, it should be said that there are few theoretical implications drawn; these sections contain primarily much looser thoughts about possible generalizations. The class of phenomena to which Goldman wishes to generalize is prostitution. She seems to intend her case study less to illuminate Victorian America than to help develop a general sociology of prostitution.

Though critical of previous, and especially conservative, thought about prostitution, her analysis is essentially functionalist, with an overlay of psychoanalytic thought.

Prostitution is socially functional to the community in which it exists because it is set apart from approved relationships such as marriage. The invisible boundary between acceptable behavior and prostitution provided respectable people on the Comstock with an affirmation of their own morality and right to define what was right and wrong. . . . Acts of prostitution are not intrinsically "abnormal," but they must be labeled deviant in order to remain socially functional [pp. 155-156].

Psychoanalysis is used to account for the "compulsive," "rigid," and "intense" features that "went far beyond rationality and social functionality," and "cannot be understood solely in terms of social forces"; these must "have some of their roots in unconscious forces" (p. 164). Goldman's "theoretical" tack is to counter popular notions of criminality and deviance as explanations of prostitution with the
general sociological assertions that the phenomenon of commercial sex must be understood as part of an overall pattern of social organization and that blaming the prostitutes for it is therefore inappropriate.

Goldman also debunks the frontier myth of the popular prostitute with a heart of gold. She debunks it by showing the intense poverty, physical abuse, and stigmatization of prostitutes, and by indicating the rigidity of the boundary between respectability and disreputability, which prevented prostitutes from moving often into the arms of decent lovers or the lap of luxury. Her carefully mustered evidence shows how few prostitutes left fortunes large enough even to probate, how few women moved into the ranks of keepers of bawdy houses or saloons, how many prostitutes committed suicide or were murdered. She shows extremely well the pervasiveness of the theme of respectability within the disreputable community. Ethnicity (from the Chinese at the bottom of the ladder to a preference for French and American women at the top), class, education, looks, and talent all played roles in establishing a system of gradations as fine as that in the outside world. And for the most part, the prostitutes’ customers found the status of women their own status suggested. Goldman shows that age played relatively little role—contrary to modern opinion (though not necessarily to modern fact)—in establishing a prostitute’s desirability. The highest status prostitutes were the ones who could make commercial sex most closely resemble personal relationship, and correspondingly those who most approximated the ideal of respectable woman—but without forfeiting sexual allure. They maintained and their lovers encouraged an ambition of eventual marriage and full respectability, but they also knew the bottom line. As one of them wrote, “Poverty I am willing to bear without complaint if I have only you; but when you sleep with another—live with another—protect, cherish her—and she to call you husband, then I want money.”

The author of those words, Laura Fair, went on to murder her lover/client, protector/abuser. It is in the telling of stories like hers that Goldman’s book finds its best moments. Virginia City’s “Barbary Coast” is recreated with some flair. The difficult and disturbing occupation of its major denizens is well portrayed; the extent of their trials, both figurative and literal, is made clear. Grist is provided for the mills of those who would understand occupations on the borders
of legitimacy and for those who would unravel the mysteries of the Victorian world that seems so very distant from us and foreign to us, and yet which is so clearly our ancestor.

— Craig Calhoun
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill