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The Prostitute’s Voice in the Public Eye: Police Tactics of Security and Discipline Within Victorian Journalism

Greta Wendelin

There was a shift in public rationality concerning prostitution in Victorian Britain, marked by the passing of the first Contagious Diseases (C.D.) Act of 1864. While the efforts of statisticians were critical in shifting public perception of prostitutes from “the fallen woman” to the more pedestrian harlot, popular discourse also had a part in generating this new rationality. Employing Foucault’s conceptualization of police, the appropriation of the prostitute’s voice within popular newspapers acted as a tactic of police. This is illustrated through a case study of anonymous letters to the editor of the Times of London in February 1858.

Keywords: Police; Security; Discipline; Journalism; Prostitution

When British Parliament passed the first Contagious Diseases (C.D.) Act in 1864, an act which provided “for the sanitary inspection of prostitutes” to prevent the spread of syphilis, it attracted little attention. Despite the minimal to-do, this act symbolized a momentous shift in public discourse that took place over twenty years. Public rationality had abandoned the tragic “fallen woman” who haunted melodramatic fiction and evangelical campaigns in favor of another figure, the woman found in the reports of the statistician. In an effort to grasp the nature of “the Great Social Evil,” researchers generated immense reports on prostitution garnered from data in police files and their own fieldwork, reports which were later instrumental to the C.D. Act of 1864. But when one realizes, just as the statisticians did, that accuracy in their investigation of the common harlot was impossible, the fall of the fallen woman to

Greta Wendelin is a PhD student in the Communication Studies Department at the University of Kansas. The author would like to thank editor Greg Wise and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions, as well as Robert Rowland and Kris Bruss for their insight and criticism. Special thanks to Dave Tell for his tireless encouragement, enthusiasm, and guidance. Correspondence to: Greta Wendelin, Bailey Hall, Room 102, 1440 Jayhawk Boulevard, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA. E-mail: gkw984@ku.edu

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the drab masses of part-time, working class prostitutes within public rationality simply cannot be credited solely to the deceptively neat columns of figures.

Arguably, the efforts of statisticians working within urban medicine did much to generate a new rationality of prostitution. Since the 1840s, evangelical writers pervaded public discourse in their defense of the patriarchal family and condemnation of these insidious women, who were “a source of pollution and a constant temptation to middle-class sons.” 2 One Congregational minister, J. B. Talbot, who investigated prostitution in the 1840s, recognized that poverty necessitated prostitution, but still passed heavy judgment on prostitutes: “[o]nce a woman has descended from the pedestal of innocence, she is prepared to perpetuate every crime.” 3 This view was bolstered by popular literature published at this time, such as The Bridge of Sighs and Mary Barton, which cast prostitutes as utterly lost to vice. 4

Of course, this prostitute existed largely in popular imagination. If anything was to be done about the common streetwalker, she had to exist as a more governable reality than as a character of moralizing fiction. Urban medicine, which was developed in France during the late 1700s, was one tactic by which prostitutes could be identified and controlled. 5 A. J. B. Parent-Duchâtelet’s study of prostitution in Paris was a stunning example of how urban medicine could radically alter discourse. Committed to “bringing the scientific method to the study of people,” Parent-Duchâtelet recognized that solid evidence could do away with calcified stereotypes of prostitutes. 6 For example, although he had initially believed these women were naturally disposed to immoral tendencies, after his exhaustive research of police files and interviews with Parisian prostitutes, he concluded that they were “victim[s] of poverty,” constituting a part of “the urban proletariat.” 7

Parent-Duchâtelet’s study immediately galvanized the English anti-prostitution campaigns in 1836. 8 As Pat O’Malley stated, “scientifically guided intervention began to displace the deterrent and moralizing discipline,” and the statistics generated through urban medicine were “deployed primarily as techniques whereby individuals could be identified as in need of correction.” 9 Identifying the dangers to the social body and concerns for public health began to vie with public morals, a tension that is clearly evident. 10 For example, although clear in his condemnation of fornication, W. R. Greg insisted in the April 1850 edition of The Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review that “illicit intercourse” simply “would prevail to a considerable extent;” therefore, prostitution should be regulated out of health concerns as it was part and parcel of any large population. 11 Gustave Richelot bolstered such opinions with weighty statistical investigations when he published his findings on London prostitution in 1857. Without proper regulation of prostitution, he claimed, “public morality becomes ruined, the health of the population becomes affected, [and] armies and fleets are ravaged by a loathsome disease.” 12

That same year, the Royal Commission on Health released a report on the shocking levels of venereal disease among troops, which prompted annual reports thereafter. 13 The national attention that these regular reports generated finally began to engage the attention of authorities, such as Sir John Liddell, the naval medical department’s director general, who argued for regulations that would “arrest disease at its
source.” Despite years of evangelical campaigns determined to do away with prostitution with philanthropic social work, the first Contagious Diseases Act passed Parliament in July of 1864 with little opposition, regulating prostitution not out of public morality, but public health. Under the act, if a policeman identified a “common prostitute,” she was required to submit to internal examination, and confined to a “certified lock hospital” if found to have gonorrhea or syphilis. In doing so, it was believed that the rampant rate of disease could at least be curbed.

To credit urban medicine alone with the shift in public rationality would be to ignore the uncertain confidence that statistics inspired, offering only an obscured image of the common prostitute and ultimately limiting access to the individual. Examination of urban medicine reveals that the methods of investigators bore a debilitating flaw. Anxiousness is pervasive in the statistician’s reports on prostitution: what if the numbers are not quite right—and certainly, how could they be? Mary Poovey stated, “prostitution challenged anatomical analysis because prostitutes were so difficult to count,” to the point that both “exaggeration and underestimation presented equal dangers to the would-be statistician.”

This hazard was a concern from the beginning of urban medicine, as it was for James Phillip Kay, who wrote about the working classes of Manchester in 1832. It was his hope that this “new discourse of statistics represents both the inadequacy of available information and possibility of perfect (transparent) representation;” however, the hope for truth in numbers seems to be thwarted, as for “nearly every one of the statistical tables Kay supplies, he offers some apology for what the figures cannot tell.” The stubborn silence of the figures perturbed other investigators as well, such as William Acton, a prominent investigator of prostitution in the mid-1800s, who complained about police estimates; he, too, was well aware that the police “have not attempted to include . . . the unnumbered prostitutes, whose appearance in the streets as such never takes place . . . and whose general conduct is such that the most vigilant of constables could have no pretence for claiming to be officially aware of their existence or pursuits.”

Henry Mayhew, in *London Labour and the London Poor*, also reported that it was difficult “to give . . . anything like a correct estimate of the number of prostitutes in London,” and cited sources which placed the number at anything from 8,000 to 80,000.

For the C.D. Act of 1864 to pass Parliament with little quarrel indicates that there was a policing of the population far more pervasive than that which could be affected by scientific studies. Powerful as they were, the confessions of the investigators themselves testifies to the stunted power of scientific method when applied to the common prostitute. While numbers struggled to assess the health of the social body, this was not the only social concern and locus of control: keeping up appearances of public morals was just as important as maintaining public health. Maintaining the moral façade of the public body was a concern distinct from maintaining public health, as Greg concluded within *The Westminster Review*, prostitution “must not be interfered with, unless carried on in such a manner as to outrage public decency or endanger public health.”
The public eye that looked after public decency had far less difficulty spanning the distance between government and prostitute than the statistics of urban medicine. The task of viewing the population and guiding public discourse fell, in part, to the keen gaze of the journalist. Journalists, who constituted the very public eye of Victorian society, enacted the role of police in generating a new rationality within the public. Their surveillance of the population via appropriation of the prostitute’s voice within the pages of popular journalism simultaneously generated an observation of prostitute as part of the social body and a disciplinary power by which to control the prostitute: common decency with respect to the public eye.

For Victorian London, there could not have been a better police force than one of the largest newspapers, the *Times*. While the urban medicine reports on prostitution had a limited audience, a publication like the *Times* certainly had a much wider readership. In 1850 its readership was four times that of four other major London newspapers combined, and in 1855 circulation was estimated at 62,000. Doubtless, the people reading the *Times* were guided by the rationality presented therein. In examining the police tactics of journalism in respect to prostitution, I chose to focus on a particularly exemplary case of policing through appropriation of the prostitute’s voice: a set of letters to the editor of the *Times* of London, in February of 1858, sent anonymously from alleged prostitutes, “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate.”

Critical to my analysis is Foucault’s conceptualization of police with respect to security and disciplinary power. After an overview of these concepts, I will briefly examine the police function inherent within journalism at this time before turning to an exemplary case of policing, a set of letters to the editor of the *Times* in February 1858 from two anonymous prostitutes, along with the editor’s reply.

### Discipline, Security, and Journalism

The proliferation of power throughout society is not only a major theme within Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, but is also explored throughout several other texts: lecture series, such as *Abnormal*, and *Security, Territory, Population*, as well as edited volumes and interview collections: *The Foucault Effect, Power, Power/Knowledge*, and *Technologies of the Self*, along with material by other authors, to describe functions of police within both a security and disciplinarian state, as well as identify the need for further development with regards to the interplay between security and discipline.

Foucault notes that security and discipline arise from a critical shift in governmentality. Up until the end of the eighteenth-century, monarchical sovereignty had produced a “spectacular, unlimited, personal, irregular and discontinuous power,” in effect, a power that allowed pockets of illegality to flourish unchecked. In conjunction with the monarchy was the government imposed by the Christian church, a “single, unique, and unifying power.” When the monarchical and Christian governments of Europe declined throughout the eighteenth-century, ways of governing had to function differently than before. “The safety of the Prince and his territory” was no longer of
The utmost importance; instead, emphasis shifted to “the security of the population and, consequently of those who govern it.” The aforementioned development of urban medicine was just one tactic within the “synaptic regime of power,” power that was exercised “within the social body, rather than from above it.” In effect, it became of the body of the individual, all its “acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behavior” that became the source of power, rather than the divine mandate of the monarch. As Thomas Lemke asserted, in this form of government, it is not merely politics plus knowledge, but a crafting of “political knowledge,” with an eye toward maintaining population.

Generating this knowledge was a task of the police. Of course, it is important to recognize that police is not a static conceptualization for Foucault. At times, he describes police as a part of security, as he does within “The Political Technology of Individuals.” As originally conceptualized in the eighteenth-century, the police were an administrative body, the individuals that worked to “see to everything pertaining to men’s happiness” and the preservation of life essential to the stabilization of the state. Foucault noted that “police” bears the negative connotation today because productive functions of police dissolved into other institutions, such as health care, social welfare, economic and population controls. Like Foucault, Jacques Donzelot recognized that police or policing is not necessarily the repressive enforcement of laws, “but encompassed all the methods for developing the quality of the population and the strength of the nation.” These institutions continue to generate the forces of normalization inherent within “normal distributions.” Once this knowledge was generated, government devised tactics by which they could “reduce the most unfavorable, deviant normalities in relation to the normal, general curve.” Therefore, population becomes a means to an end, in effect, “the instruments of government,” upon which “a range of multiform tactics” operate.

In conjunction with security is discipline, which dictates and regulates the things that one must do. The police are also aligned with disciplinarian power, as administrative bodies which seek to normalize a population, primarily through surveillance. Of course, as observation is a necessity to discipline, the constant demand for watchful attention to a population is one of the critical problems of a disciplinary government. When Jeremy Bentham conceived of the Panopticon in the late 1700s, he demonstrated the pervasive capacity of disciplinary power. While the Panopticon was originally a prison plan, Foucault noted that the primary function is surveillance, a type of power that examines a population. Panoptism includes those police tactics of careful observation, generating documents such as dossiers and case studies. Rather than the meticulous imposed order of discipline, panopticism sought to take police power down to an even more diffuse level, or order to “grasp [phenomena] at the level of their nature” through observation. This panopticism is precisely what constitutes “the formation of a disciplinary society” in that it supersedes the boundaries of “enclosed disciplines” and seeks to interconnect the sites of power, “making it possible to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements.”
Panopticism spread. For example: “the panoptic schema, without disappearing as such or losing any of its properties, was destined to spread throughout the social body.” The Panoptic system [were] . . . these apparatuses [on] which rested on the basis of small-scale, regional, dispersed Panoptisms, which he also called “centers of observation disseminated throughout society.”46 Both disciplinary tactics and surveillance “spread throughout the whole social body, the formation of what might be called in general the disciplinary society.”47 This is a critical point, as this kind of power must be “a productive network which runs through the whole social body.” So when those who governed had only limited access to the body, as was the case when statistical study was applied to prostitution, there had to be another means of gaining access to the bodies of individuals. Foucault seems to have understood that journalism was just this kind of tactic, although he never elaborated. For instance, in response to an interviewer’s question about Bentham’s confidence in the sobering influence of the panoptic gaze, he briefly commented, “it was journalism, that capital invention of the nineteenth-century, which made evident all the utopian character of this politics of the gaze.”49

Foucault speculated that Bentham “dreamt of transforming [disciplinary power] into a network of mechanisms that would be everywhere and always alert, running through society without interruption in space or in time.”50 I contend Bentham was doing precisely this not only when he drew the plans for the Panopticon, but also when he founded The Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review, a publication dedicated to commenting on public affairs, not the least of which included prostitution. Upon examination of this publication and others, it becomes clear that, as Foucault said, whatever limits may be fixed on juridicism, “universally widespread panopticism enables [power] to operate, on the underside of the law, a machinery that is both immense and minute, which supports, reinforces, multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law,” so that “the panoptics of every day may well be below the level of emergence of the great apparatuses and the great political struggles.”52

The common prostitute may have confounded the statistical apparatus of urban medicine, but for the journalist, she could be seen clearly. Just as police may seem to objectively surveil a population, content to stand “back sufficiently so that one can grasp the point at which things are taking place,” even to the point of letting a population speak for itself, this tactic may still bear a disciplinarian power. Of course, this act of speaking could very well constitute a confession, a tactic wherein the subject speaks of themself and an authoritative confessor renders the confession useful, either in absolution, judgment, or prescription of penance. Sex and confession are nearly synonymous within Foucault’s work: sex is “a privileged theme of confession,” and “confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex.”56 The confession was not intended to repress sex, but rather foster a normalizing force, fashioning sex in a way that was useful to the larger population: “far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which [sexuality] is bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of
the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective.” If the crux of security is to govern “without prohibiting or prescribing, but possibly making use of some instruments of prescription and prohibition,” the point at which “some instruments of prescription or prohibition” are employed suggests that normalizing power is a function of both security and discipline. Disinterested observation, or the ready ear of a confessor, may generate the very forces that create a more useful reality.

It is not difficult to see the disciplinary forces of police playing out in Victorian journalism. Seemingly imbued with a power that was greater than police or the legislature, journalists of the day viewed prostitution as a problem which only they could properly grasp. As an article in the April 1850 *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* declared, “statesmen see the mighty evil [prostitution] lying on the main pathway of the world, and . . . [dare] not examine its symptoms or probe its depth;” therefore, “it is from a strong conviction that this is not worthy behavior on the part of those who aspire to guide either the actions or the opinions of others, that, after much hesitation and many misgivings, we have undertaken to speak of so dismal and delicate a matter.” William Stead, who became editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1880 and would later publish his sensationalized exposé of child prostitution, “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” obviously had no such misgivings about his role as a journalist: he believed his paper should “lead the leaders of our race in its upward striving, hearing new words of command in every cry of the sorrowing and goaded.” Bringing the cry of the sorrowing and goaded to the people of London became the task of such journalists, so intent on altering public discourse; but it was not accomplished solely through disciplinary force. Rather, the appropriation of the prostitute’s voice, seemingly coming directly from the streets to the pages of popular publications, in part generated a new rationality: a rationality that would in part send the C.D. Act of 1864 through Parliament with little objection.

In examining the police tactics of journalism, I chose to focus on a particularly exemplar case of policing through appropriation of the prostitute’s voice. In February of 1858, a set of anonymous letters to the editor appeared in the *Times* of London. A letter from a sad, fallen woman who called herself “One More Unfortunate” appeared on 4 February, wherein she bemoaned her fallen state and entreated society to kindly regard her as a warning. This was followed by a plea from “Amicus” on 6 February, begging “One More Unfortunate” to please send him her address, so that she might receive his charitable help. “One More Unfortunate” wrote again on February 11, reflecting solemnly on her swift recovery from her former life. It might have ended there were it not for a letter on 24 February from “Another Unfortunate,” who sternly repudiated “One More Unfortunate.” She presented herself as a successful prostitute, content with her lifestyle and harshly critical of bourgeois society. The next day, the editor added his commentary to reflect on the perspectives of “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate.”

There are doubts as to whether these letters are really from “anonymous” prostitutes and not a clever journalist. What is known is that these letters were printed under the supervision of editor John Thaddeus Delane, (fawningly) described
thus: “He was the Times. You could trace the man in every line . . . for hardly an article appeared in the Times that did not pass under his supervision, and very few appeared that did not bear the traces of his pen.”\textsuperscript{62} Certainly, any editor could bear some influence, but there is no way of telling to what extent in these letters. More compelling than questions of authorship are how these letters functioned as a tactic of police, a dual force of security and discipline, in order to create a shift in public rationality. Through the appropriation of the prostitutes’ voices, these letters, the very confessions of “unfortunates,” sought a knowledge that subverted the opacity of numbers. Like statistics, the letters argue for a revised understanding of prostitution, as an inextricable part of society.\textsuperscript{63} This is accomplished by first doing away with the fallen woman stereotype and offering a more common harlot to the reader, which I address in the first section of my analysis, “From the ‘Fallen Woman’ to the Common Harlot.” Next, within “Generating Numbers Through Names,” I contend that these letters seek to quantify prostitution via pseudonyms, which denote the productive nature of prostitution. Finally, in “Common Decency as Control—Regulation with Regard for the Public Eye,” I argue that given the nature of the typical prostitute, these letters offer the public eye as the enforcer of common decency and the power by which to curtail prostitution.

From the “Fallen Woman” to the Common Harlot

Like the statistics of urban medicine, the letters printed in the Times addressed a common misconception about prostitution: the romantic myth of the suffering fallen woman.\textsuperscript{64} As Mayhew said four years after these letters, “it is a vulgar error, and a popular delusion, that the life of a prostitute is as revolting to herself, as it appears to the moralist sternly lamenting over the condition of the fallen.”\textsuperscript{65} While he endeavored to do away with these misconceptions with his painstaking fieldwork, there was yet another means by which to amend this misconception; for example, through the drama of “One More Unfortunate,” whose first letter was printed on 4 February. She neatly fits the fallen woman stereotype: in her letter, she established that she was once of decent status, whose parents had taught her by “precept and example,” and before her descent into vice, she had been an ex-governess of a “highly respectable family.” “One More Unfortunate” bemoaned that she was “cut off from the moral, social and religious worlds,” whose best hope is that she may serve as a moral object lesson for those good people she passes in the street. Her shame was so deep that she explained in the P.S., “I cannot give you my name, having so disgraced it, nor my address, as it is disreputable.” Just two days later, on February 6, a brief reply from “Amicus” asks “One More Unfortunate” to remember that “no mortal on this side of the grave need call herself ‘lost,’ however far gone in sin.” This kind benefactor offered to lend “One More Unfortunate” the help she needs if she “will communicate her name, however ‘disgraced,’ and her address, however ‘disreputable’” to him. “Amicus’s” offer did not go unheeded, as “One More Unfortunate” explained a week after her initial letter on 11 February: “Amicus’ reminds me that
One, than whom no greater ever trod this earth, was most solicitous about the least deserving . . . I beg him to accept my thanks.”

This exciting drama of “One More Unfortunate” is not just a cliché tale of kindness from strangers. The romantic tragedies of popular moralizing fiction must be done away with, as it neither reflected the reality of prostitution, nor was a useful conceptualization in which to base governing tactics. If “One More Unfortunate” was just this type of woman, it only makes sense that some generous reader should respond to her tragic story and “take her up tenderly,” just as “One More Unfortunate” urged the public to do for her kind. Therefore, “One More Unfortunate” once again becomes part of society as she muses on 11 February, “although society is dead against us, we are not all incapable of being lifted out of the mire of reprobation, and becoming, as many are now, wives and mothers of exemplary behaviour, whatever be passing within.” This drama suggested that while there may be suffering fallen women out in the streets, they would be saved by the kind Christians within society; in effect, removed from public concern.

Of course, very few women on the streets were part of the abandoned sisterhood. Another anonymous letter written by “Another Unfortunate” was printed the following 24 February. At face value, the story of “One More Unfortunate” stands in contentious opposition with the letter from “Another Unfortunate.” “Another Unfortunate” holds no romantic notions about her lot in life. In testament to her lower class upbringing, she explains, “my parents did not give me any education; they did not instill into my mind virtuous precepts nor set me a good example. They were drunks and laborers, who offered ‘Another Unfortunate’ nothing except the freedom to become a prostitute. This freedom is partly due to a complete lack of moral upbringing, as “Another Unfortunate” “knew nothing of the laws of God but by dim tradition and faint report.” No moral education, along with her views on sex, further confirmed her opinion that she is just “one of those who, as Rousseau says, are ‘born to be prostitutes.’” “One More Unfortunate” talked of sex in terms of “ruin and degradation” in her first letter, but “Another Unfortunate” spoke of sex as a natural and ubiquitous element of lower class life. By the time she was thirteen, she reported:

I had larked [had sex] with the boys of my own age . . . I had seen much and heard abundantly of the mysteries of the sexes . . . such things had been matters of common sight and common talk.

Whereas the wickedness of “One More Unfortunate’s” sin troubled her deeply, “Another Unfortunate” had no such affinity for the melodramatic. In contrast, her story reaches a rather anticlimactic point when she describes her sexual initiation:

I lost—what? not my virtue, for I never had any. That which is commonly, but untruly called virtue, I gave away. You reverend Mr. Philanthropist—what call you virtue? Is it not the principle, the essence, which keeps watch and ward over the conduct, over the substance, the materiality? No such principle ever kept watch and ward over me, and I repeat that I never lost that which I never had—my virtue.
Without any qualms as to her amorality or lower class origin, “Another Unfortunate” represented in persona what investigators offered in numbers. The frank testimony of “Another Unfortunate” counters the fallen woman narrative of “One More Unfortunate,” a lower class prostitute boldly confessing her amoral upbringing. The editor further recognizes this unromantic nature of prostitution in a reply the following day on 25 February: “The great bulk of the London prostitutes are not Magdalens either in esse or in posse, nor specimens of humanity in agony . . . nor preparing to throw themselves from Waterloo-bridge, but are comfortably practicing their trade, either as the entire or partial means of their subsistence;” there is no point, then, to “attribute to them the sentimental delicacies of a heroine of romance.”

Generating Numbers Through Names

Not only was it important for political knowledge to articulate who the prostitute was, but also how many there were. Even without the numbers of a statistician, there were other means by which to quantify the common prostitute. Here, it is their very names which indicate the pervasiveness of prostitution within society. The authors of these letters call themselves “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate,” names that imply replication, identifying themselves as only one of many unfortunates, or just another and another and another. They spoke as one for many more. Society did not merely contain pockets of bad women, but was positively rife with them, inasmuch as prostitution was a natural offspring of industrial society. “Another Unfortunate” offered the most vivid images of this condition, as she metaphorically constructs prostitution as some sordid crop springing from the fertile beds of industry: “[prostitutes] are the natural growth of things, and are constantly ripening for the harvest.” More gruesome still, she asks, “If I am a hideous cancer in society, are not the causes of the diseases to be sought in the rottenness of the carcass?” Cancers cannot exist outside a body, but grow out of it; if prostitution is a cancer, it can only be assumed that it was fostered by the larger social body.

These two metaphors clearly depict prostitution as an inevitable part of society. Even though “One More Unfortunate” employed conventional sentiments expressing a separation between the fallen prostitutes and good society, her call for gentle treatment of “lost mortals” in the February 4 letter was rooted in an awareness of the productive nature of society: “Recollect it was man who made us what we are,” and not only does man make prostitution by patronage, but it is also man who makes women into prostitutes when he “employs us on starvation wages.” From this perspective, society is a veritable prostitute factory, making the women who make the goods for consumption into prostitutes, making prostitutes through patronage, and making prostitutes into “the Great Social Evil.” “The Great Social Evil,” in turn, made possible a colossal body of discourse, fixated on prostitution as “an object of fascination and disgust,” proliferating discussion not only in legislation and evangelical social work, but within “novels, manifestos, letters to the editor, and police reports.”66 Evil must be converted, eradicated, or at least controlled, and as “the Great Social Evil,” prostitution became the single greatest threat to men, women,
and the family. With such an immanent and consuming evil embedded in society, the profusion of messages concerning prostitution sprung from the evil it supposedly was. But within these letters, one confronts an evil neutralized. “One More Unfortunate” became reintegrated into bourgeois society as a reformed prostitute, thanks to “Amicus,” and “Another Unfortunate” was every inch a self-made success: she frequented all the decent places of entertainment, her clothiers warmly and knowingly accepted her patronage; she was nothing less than a shining example of Victorian consumerism. Despite the demonized fantasies of prostitution, when one recognizes, through the voices of “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate,” that “the Great Social Evil” is produced by society itself—plentiful and happening in plain sight—“the Great Social Evil” becomes incompatible with what is really quite normal. Of course, just because something is normal does not mean that disciplinary force is foregone. As with any activity of the population, it is not enough to simply observe, but the disciplinary force inherent in this act of observation also bears a role in shaping this reality into a more useful one.

**Common Decency as Control—Regulation with Regard for the Public Eye**

The editor of the *Times* was right to conclude on 25 February, “we have long since outlived the days when ‘Scarlet Letters,’ indicative of their shame, could be attached as marks of ignominy to those who had gone astray. We cannot import this offence as a crime into our Penal Code.” After all, pinning a scarlet letter on “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate” would have proved difficult, as they were not the kind of prostitutes that could be easily picked out of a crowded London street. But just because moral law could not be imposed without destroying society did not mean that infractions against discretions should continue unchecked. Let the public eye determine what is punishable. Appease bourgeois sensibility by enforcing outward decency as advocated within the letters of “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate,” but respect the prostitutes’ right to exist within the society that made them by prudently restraining the extent to which prostitution is suppressed.

The letters maintain that decency should be preserved. Moral law could not be imposed, but flagrant displays of vice should be punished. In reference to the blatant displays of immorality on the streets, “One More Unfortunate” exclaims in her first letter, “there is a scandalous eye-sore and annoyance existing; remove it!” The editor was clearly in agreement: “outward decency” should be enforced. Prostitution may not be a disease that can be expunged from the body, but visual offenses should still be curbed. “Why should it be tolerated,” asks the editor, “that any of us cannot take mother or wife, sister or daughter, for a walk in Regent-street, or pass them in and out of a theater or other place of public amusement, without being compelled to bring them into contact with what they had better not see?” This concurred with “One More Unfortunate,” who solemnly accepted responsibility for her actions in the letter on 4 February: “if I parade my iniquitous trade so as to commit a public outrage, I must expect to be checked in such openly vicious courses, for I believe the
liberty of the subject should end where injury to others begins.” Even “Another Unfortunate,” proud as she was, did not “use bad language” or “offend the public eye by open indecencies,” as she, too, was aware of the societal pretenses of morality.

This public eye that surveilled the actions of prostitutes on the streets in part constituted the disciplinary force that would control the extent to which prostitution could flourish. As “sex became a matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals to place themselves under surveillance,” these letters enacted this keen awareness of the common prostitute: she was observed and observer, and she prudently circumscribed her actions according to the order that society demands. Of course, while prostitution offended public decency at times, it could not be suppressed in accordance with a morality that was not there, as “One More Unfortunate” warns in her first letter, “while you gentlemen seduce, keep, abandon, and then patronize us indiscriminately . . . be careful how you legislate for the oppression of one portion of your victims.” Prostitutes warranted a degree of protection from society, as individuals who also compromised the state. They were part of the state not only as a product of its sexual morality, but also as producers in a capitalistic system. After all, “Another Unfortunate” viewed prostitution simply as an opportunity to put her natural desires to “profitable use.” Similarly, the editor constructs them as partners in their capitalistic society:

They consider the calling an advantageous one, and they look upon their success in it with satisfaction . . . In fact, as it would seem, the great bulk of these persons look to their calling, as others do to their success in various kinds of trade or business, without misgiving, or shame, or anything of the sort.

Prostitutes, if understood as entrepreneurs, are then placed under the same strictures as other businesses. Let them conduct their business as necessary, argues the editor, with control “pointed at the preservation of outward decency; to aim at any other result by legislation or police regulations would be absurd.” Morality is not the aim of government, reasons the editor, but instead “peace and order;” government must maintain decency, yet permit a large portion of the population to practice their trade as they must or want to do. The sinning woman must not be told “go and sin no more.” Instead, the confessor reasons, a certain measure of sins are most useful, yet only to the point at which both individual and society benefit.

“Another Unfortunate” argued that “to subject us in mass to the pressure of force—of force wielded, for the most part, by ignorant, and often by brutal men—is only to add the cruelty of active persecution to the cruelty of the passive indifference which made us as we are.” Along with “One More Unfortunate’s” initial plea to “pray tell those good gentlemen who are bent upon ‘putting us down,’ that theirs is not only a delicate, but a difficult undertaking, and they should be careful lest they have more to answer for than they dream of in their philosophy.” Prostitutes must be controlled, as are other members of society, in order to maintain the state. However, this should be done in an artful manner, without hypocritical brutality or undue persecution.

In response to “Another Unfortunate,” the editor remarks, “This is certainly a new view of the ‘Great Social Evil,’ and worthy the attention of all persons who are
endeavouring to deal with it in a more complete manner than we can venture to recommend in the present state of our knowledge.” Obviously, “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate” are more than just “anonymous” prostitutes writing into The Times to be heard. They articulated political knowledge, advancing “the present state of our knowledge” from eradication of “the Great Social Evil” to upholding “common decency.”

The Voice in the Public Eye—Security Generating Discipline

William Acton, one of the most prominent investigators of prostitution, stated in his hefty tome published in 1870, “My readers may recollect the effect produced by the letter of a brickmaker’s daughter, when published in ‘The Times’ for 24 February 1858.”68 He reprints substantial portions of the letter, but he does not elaborate on exactly what “effect” the letter of “Another Unfortunate” had on the public. Yet, if the public reaction to these letters is lost, the impact and power inherent within the letters certainly is not: when even a leading researcher of the day cited the letter of “Another Unfortunate,” and had little doubt as to whether or not his audience would remember it over ten years after it was initially printed, the policing committed by journalists in shifting public rationality seems as immediate and clear as the voice brought into focus within the eye of the Times.

As even a respected authority took this letter seriously, so did others. The public developed a taste for colorful accounts of prostitution versus the careful reports of urban medicine, so that “the sensationalism of the Pall Mall Gazette prevail[ed] over the social reality of London Labour and the London Poor.”69 Clearly, those who sensationalized and offered the voice of the prostitute were instrumental in generating the rationality. The scintillating confessions that the Times offered that February demonstrate the radical power of panoptic technology when displaced from a material Panopticon. The gaze could freely peruse the streets of London, offering the truth to the public in the voices of those who guilelessly reproved society for its pretended morality, yet also subjected the self to the very morality that circumscribed the good Victorian.

Almost thirty years after “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate,” the surveillance offered by popular journalism continued to outshine the sober numbers. “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” a scandalous exposé of child prostitution carefully orchestrated by William Stead, was printed in 1885 within the Pall Mall Gazette; while circulation had been around 8,000 just two years earlier, the story and ensuing outrage raised circulation to 12,000.70 Judith Walkowitz stated that “The Maiden Tribute’ became a component of political culture, the everyday culture of work, family, and gender relations; the mass culture of the new journalism, the official culture of the law, and the high culture of intellectuals,” a knowledge that was “taken up by different social constituencies and revised for a variety of political purposes.”71 Surely, while the works of sociologists such as Parent-Duchâtelet, Mayhew, Greg, Acton, Richelot and others guided public rationality when they offered a scientific perspective of prostitution through numbers, numbers simply
could not penetrate the inscrutable prostitute who walked about in plain sight. It was also the watchful eyes of the Times, offering the voice of the prostitute to the population, that helped to generate a new political knowledge and disciplinary force. Journalism could surveil any dark corner of the streets, hear the individual’s confession and position this voice in relation to the reader; this constituted a powerful/knowledgeable relationship, as “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge.” In this case, both the individualizing force of discipline and the fostering of life within the larger population are generated between the “Unfortunate” and entirety of the Times readership.

As though he anticipated a measure of incredulity from the audience as to the identity of the “unfortunates,” the editor assures the reader in his reply on 25 February, “we are not endeavouring to palm off a cunningly executed literary imposture upon our readers,” and yet, despite the facile disavowal of ulterior motives, it is difficult to forget that “there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives.” The ostentatious transparency of letters from anonymous prostitutes may give a reader pause, but when the common woman from the streets spoke, articulate and familiar with Rousseau as she was, people listened. Police may operate “without the full awareness of the people,” hidden behind anonymous letters to the editor, neatly disguised as a candid voice from the streets. While the authorship of these letters, either really by “unfortunates” or someone else, may never be revealed, these letters do reveal the subtle “multiform tactics” that police may employ to shape discourse and create a new rationality of the population. In the space between the vitriol of evangelical writers and the sanction of prostitution through the C.D. Act, public discourse was wrenched from one understanding to another: prostitute as fallen woman to common whore. Viewing the letters of “One More Unfortunate” and “Another Unfortunate” as an exemplar of policing exercised by journalists demonstrates the means by which the voice of the prostitute was appropriated to generate a useful political knowledge of the population.

Prostitution as “the Great Social Evil” inherently limited discourse. Superseding these limits was no easy task, as it was one which required a shift from morals to the business of the body that proliferated industrial Britain. Countless documents, hours of government deliberation, and social science were critical in shifting discourse from the view of prostitution as an evil that could be plucked out of society to grudging acceptance of individuals produced and productive in society. Yet, despite the power of numbers, it seems that the voice of the common prostitute offered to the common reader of the Times bore a considerable power in turning “the Great Social Evil” into just “Another Unfortunate” reality of industrial Britain.

Notes


[2] Ibid., 33, 34.
Police Tactics of Security and Discipline Within Victorian Journalism

[3] Ibid., 39.
[14] Ibid., 76.
[17] Ibid., 1–2.
[19] Ibid., 233.
[20] Ibid., 83.
[30] Ibid., 125.
[37] Ibid.
[40] Foucault, Power, 59.
[44] Ibid., 207.
[47] Ibid., 209.
[49] Ibid., 162.
[55] Ibid., 61.
[56] Ibid., 63.
[57] Ibid., 152.

