

**Zones of Tolerance and of Exclusion:
Progressivism and Prostitution in Argentina and Brazil, 1863-1930**

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The late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries in Latin America saw nations such as Argentina and Brazil creating and re-creating their legal and political apparatuses with constitutions that reflected a dedication to progress and social change.¹ Prostitutes in this period were associated with both low morals and with the spread of disease, increasing societal contempt for and government attention to their profession in an age characterized by fears about the perceived moral and physical decay of society. Brazil and Argentina both experienced population and immigration increases in the urban centers of Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, changes that led to an increased incidence and awareness of prostitution in the cities. These port cities led their respective nations in both foreign immigration and industrialization, causing them to be at the forefront of progressive movements that focused on urban problems.² The legal status and social treatment of prostitutes evolved differently in these two cities, but government intervention and an attempt to regulate prostitution was found in both regions in the progressive post-colonial period. In general, the ideals of progressivism that motivated both governments and elite citizens to campaign against the perceived problem of prostitution stemmed from classist and racist assumptions about the urban poor, an attitude that led to attempts to restrict or otherwise control

¹ Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 2.

² James R. Scobie, *Argentina: A City and Nation*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 13; Robert M. Levine, *The History of Brazil* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 74-75.

the daily lives of subaltern women in the cities.³ Ultimately, despite a marked increase in government involvement, the policies adopted during this period did little to stem the disease, poverty, social scorn, and legal persecution that affected women thus employed in either Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro.

Progressivism and positivism were the focus of Latin American governments during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The positivist philosophy emphasized empirical, scientific approaches to better understand and solve perceived urban problems such as poverty and criminality; these methods were applied to every aspect of social, political, and moral life in the cities.⁴ The widespread adoption of positivism was furthered by a liberal progressive movement that, above all, espoused ideals of modernity and equality. Many cities, under the banner of progress, used positivist methods to combat urban decay, moral corruption, and outbreaks of disease. These problems came to be embodied by the institution of prostitution and were seen as roadblocks to progress in many republican Latin American nations. Nations such as Brazil and Argentina attempted to control prostitution's alleged corrupting influence in a myriad of ways during this period. Buenos Aires, an important port city even before its official inclusion in Argentinean politics in 1880, focused on combating the immoral influence of prostitution while Brazil and its urban center of Rio de Janeiro sought more specifically to decrease the visibility of prostitution in the city; both cities also worked to contain the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Both regions attempted to accomplish these goals through the use of regulatory bodies, although the implementation differed in each country. However, progressivism—with its focus on modernizing and improving the image of the country—and

³ E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 11.

⁴ Burns, *The Poverty of Progress*, 18-19.

positivist, scientific thought were both liberally applied to attempt to curb the widespread incidence of prostitution and related diseases in the teeming cities of late nineteenth and early twentieth century South America.

Brazil's freedom from imperial rule was a long and relatively peaceful process in which social liberalism initially played little part. However, a growing abolitionist movement that achieved manumission for all slaves in 1888 became a symbol of modernity and equality that underscored the rise of other progressive ideals. These ideologies of education, greater equality, and scientific thought began to be seen by the elite as incompatible with Brazil's identity as an imperial possession under Emperor Pedro II, and the Brazilian elites, backed by the military, ousted the emperor in 1889 in a bloodless coup in favor of republicanism.⁵ Elite Brazilians showed their enthusiasm for the principles of positivism and progressivism with the creation of the 1891 constitution, wherein they adopted "Order and Progress" as the defining characteristics of the new republic.⁶ This motto represented Brazil's liberal dedication to modernization under the new regime and bespoke a desire to be competitive with Europe's large, cosmopolitan urban centers.

The republic's ambition to re-make Brazil into a modern, enlightened country was thwarted by demographic and economic changes in the late nineteenth century. Beginning before independence in 1889, Western Europeans and North American Confederates that had immigrated prior to Brazilian manumission joined freed slaves and other Afro-Brazilians to swell the populations of cities like Rio de Janeiro.⁷ These groups together formed a large "urban underclass" comprised of poor immigrants and native Brazilians that heightened elite perceptions of a need to improve conditions in the city to combat overcrowding and fears of runaway

⁵ Levine, *The History of Brazil*, 69-73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

criminality.⁸ Although Rio de Janeiro undertook campaigns to improve urban areas, these programs did not benefit the poor, who became increasingly marginalized as efforts to sanitize and beautify urban areas intensified.⁹ Frequently, these efforts at improving the overcrowding and appearance of urban areas focused on removing non-elites from the city center, forcing many to live in “shantytowns” outside of the city.¹⁰ As progressive modifications to city planning and sanitation in Rio de Janeiro proliferated, elite disdain for the underclass increased.¹¹

Argentina’s independence movement was much more violent and caused significant upheaval in the country as it moved first away from colonial rule and then through several incarnations of republicanism. Even after the constitution of 1853, Argentina’s interior was politically separate from the important city of Buenos Aires; it was not until 1880 that Buenos Aires truly became part of the nation of Argentina. In fact, progressivism in Buenos Aires before 1852 was largely suppressed under Argentinean political leader Juan Manuel de Rosas, but still found some expression in the imitation of European fashions and arts, if not in political and social thought. Demographic changes also stimulated elite discussion of modernization and progress; Buenos Aires, like Rio de Janeiro, experienced massive population growth largely fueled by European immigration in the mid-nineteenth century.¹² Cholera outbreaks, overcrowding, and inadequate housing also plagued Buenos Aires, lending credence to positivist, progressive ideas that the cities needed to be sanitized.¹³ These problems, combined with an increasingly stable political environment and a large elite population, led to a revitalization of

⁸ Ibid., 66, 73-75.

⁹ Ibid., 78-79.

¹⁰ Levine, *The History of Brazil*, 79; Sam Adamo, “The Sick and the Dead: Epidemic and Contagious Disease in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil,” in *Cities of Hope: People, Protests, and Progress in Urbanizing Latin America, 1870-1930*. Eds. Ronn Pineo and James A. Baer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 220-222.

¹¹ Levine, *The History of Brazil*, 79-80.

¹² Scobie, *Argentina: A City and Nation*, 88-106, 107, 109-110.

¹³ Scobie, *Argentina: A City and Nation*, 163; James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 2870-1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 58.

Buenos Aires in the 1880's that would continue into the first decade of the twentieth century. Progressive projects were not limited to physical changes such as those enacted to prevent epidemics and to provide potable water; campaigns to improve the moral image of urban areas also arose in the form of legislation intended to control and monitor prostitution.¹⁴

Progressivism often focused on sanitation of bodies and morals as well as of cities, a phenomenon that historian Donna Guy refers to as “a powerful ideology that united science with discriminatory social control.”¹⁵ The urban poor in Buenos Aires were specifically linked to outbreaks of diseases of all kinds, associations established through elite perceptions of the poor in Argentina as lacking in both physical and moral hygiene. Many progressives believed that these deficiencies led to epidemics of physical and social decay. Women, particularly those that habitually engaged in menial tasks, were often blamed by elites and doctors for the spread of diseases; as Guy argues, “women who worked for cash were accused of transmitting diseases.”¹⁶ The high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases prevalent in both Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro led to the adoption of European policies of prostitution legalization and government control.¹⁷ These policies operated under the assumption that by policing and controlling prostitution, the incidence of venereal disease would decrease through mandatory licensing and inspection of sex workers. Attempts to combat disease were directly linked to attempts to morally expunge impurities from society, particularly in Buenos Aires; these progressive ideals were often expressed in displays of government power over prostitution and increasingly heavy-handed treatment of prostitutes. The ideals of public health and progress were strongly weighted

¹⁴ Scobie, *Argentina: A City and Nation*, 163-168.

¹⁵ Donna J. Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead: The Troubled Meeting of Sex, Gender, Public Health, and Progress in Latin America*, *Engendering Latin America*, vol. 5, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁷ Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 18-19.

against the lower classes, and prostitutes often found themselves the targets of campaigns to cleanse cities of disease and moral turpitude.

Poverty was probably the main reason that women in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires became prostitutes.¹⁸ Problems of unemployment and urban overpopulation, combined with rising prices, caused already marginalized people to become unable to pay for basic needs.¹⁹ Women in Buenos Aires had few opportunities for work; those that were employed typically worked as washerwomen, servants, cigar makers, or in small-scale cottage industry making textiles.²⁰ To make matters worse, female unemployment in Argentina vastly outstripped male unemployment, and both male and female immigrants more frequently found employment than native Argentines.²¹ Surveys carried out by medical professionals in Buenos Aires between 1889 and 1934 indicated that a large proportion of prostitutes entered the profession voluntarily to make money, and that many of the respondents supported children or other family members financially.²² This situation was echoed in Rio de Janeiro, which also experienced high prices for housing and transportation during this period, leading families to be unable to find adequate food and shelter—problems that impacted women of the poorest groups the most.²³ The changing economy in Rio after the end of the First World War increased employment opportunities in professions such as clothing production in both factories and cottage industry. However, Brazilian women, especially those of mixed or African heritage, did not benefit from the availability of jobs; most of the high-paying skilled and unskilled work went

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁹ James A. Baer, “Buenos Aires: Housing Reform and the Decline of the Liberal State in Argentina,” in *Cities of Hope: People, Protests, and Progress in Urbanizing Latin America, 1870-1930*, ed. Ronn Pineo and James A. Baer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 129-136; Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 118, 140.

²⁰ Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910*, 212-216; Donna J. Guy, “Women, Peonage, and Industrialization: Argentina, 1810-1914,” *Latin American Research Review* 16 no. 3 (1981):71.

²¹ Guy, “Women, Peonage, and Industrialization,” 72-80.

²² Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 71-72.

²³ Adamo, “The Sick and the Dead,” 222-223.

first to immigrant European or American workers. Lingering racist associations of Afro-Brazilians with unskilled labor contributed to their exclusion from this type of employment.²⁴ It is possible that some Brazilian women, unable to find skilled labor jobs that paid adequate wages to support their families, turned to prostitution at least occasionally or part-time.

Not all women who sold sex considered it to be their full-time profession; some women worked part-time or sporadically as prostitutes only when it became necessary to make ends meet.²⁵ In Rio de Janeiro at the end of the nineteenth century, many women were thought to spend their days engaged in respectable, skilled occupations and their nights earning higher wages as prostitutes. This sort of accusation, particularly against French emigrant women, even found its way into the popular literature of the time, as well as being frequently denounced as a shameful fact in the Rio newspapers.²⁶ *Porteñas* in Buenos Aires who worked in the public eye, particularly laundresses, were also often assumed to be prostitutes after they closed their “legitimate” businesses for the day.²⁷ Although many of them did, in fact, “supplement their incomes” with occasional prostitution, the association of subaltern women that worked in the city with sex work was far more prevalent than the actual incidences.²⁸ Legal decrees began to be issued in some areas—notably, by the government of Buenos Aires—out of a pervasive fear that women were luring men into houses of prostitution by conducting their “detestable” business out of apparently mundane storefronts.²⁹ The connection of laundresses in Buenos Aires and seamstresses in Rio de Janeiro with prostitution stemmed from the popular equation of lower

²⁴ Levine, *The History of Brazil*, 85.

²⁵ Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 118.

²⁶ Luís Carlos Soares, *Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, Occasional papers (University of London, Institute of Latin American Studies), 17, (London: University of London, Institute of Latin American Studies, 1989), 8-9, 18-19.

²⁷ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 45.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

class women with disease that extended to prostitutes and was presumed to be a result of moral decay.³⁰

Of course, many prostitutes worked in the trade full time, and brothels of various types were their typical workplaces. Brazil's republican leadership in Rio de Janeiro was eager to present a modern visage to the world, an attitude that led to the concentration of prostitutes in red light districts. The most notorious of these new zones of tolerance was called Manguê. Efforts to concentrate lower class prostitutes in this region intensified after universal manumission in 1888, an indication of both racist and classist attitudes by Brazil's progressive elite to sweep both poverty-stricken and free Afro-Brazilians into segregated areas.³¹ It is possible that not all prostitution was limited to those areas, despite strict police control; a Brazilian doctor, Dr. Almeida, wrote in 1906 that ethnically African prostitutes frequently worked out of places of worship such as *candomblés* or *casas de dar fortuna*.³² While it is possible that sexual transactions did occur in these locations, it is probable that fears of African traditional religion that arose with progressive, positivist thought in the late nineteenth century associated "witchcraft" with prostitution—a general fear of free, Afro-Brazilian women taking part in the local economy.³³ Additionally, many of the most marginal, poor prostitutes in Rio de Janeiro

³⁰ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 67. Women that worked in the public eye were often accused of prostitution. Not only laundresses but also waitresses in Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century were so strongly linked with prostitution that they were required to have the same venereal disease examinations that prostitutes did; this movement to sexualize working class women reduced small restaurants to adult-only venues, and by 1910 women were legally discouraged from becoming waitresses altogether.

³¹ Sueann Caulfield "The Birth of Manguê: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Prostitution in Rio de Janeiro, 1850-1942," in *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*, ed. Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy, (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 86-87. Ibid., 86-88.

³² Soares, *Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, 14-15.

³³ Soares, *Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, 14; Dain Borges, "Healing and Mischief: Witchcraft in Brazilian Law and Literature, 1890-1922," in *Crime and Punishment in Latin America*, ed. Ricardo D. Salvatore, Carlos Aguirre, and Gilbert M. Joseph, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 181-184.

saved money on operating costs by working out of overcrowded “hostels” that doubled as gambling hells.³⁴

In contrast, prostitutes in Buenos Aires were not confined to designated red light districts, although some neighborhoods were strongly associated with the trade. In fact, Argentina attempted to diffuse the presence of prostitution rather than segregate it in a series of regulations and civil codes that kept prostitutes from congregating in any one house, much less any one neighborhood. These zones of restriction were only the beginning, and further civil codes increased limitations on the trade in later years. In 1894 regulations restricted where brothels could be located, and 1903 legislation reduced the number of prostitutes that could work in the same brothel to two. In 1908, further steps were taken to distribute prostitutes throughout outlying areas of the city by excluding them from the downtown area entirely, while increasing the number of women allowed to work out of a single brothel to five.³⁵

Wherever they practiced in the urban centers of Brazil and Argentina, progressive and positivist ideals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to the marginalization of prostitutes; many criminologists and social scientists pronounced prostitutes, a group that “comprised the despised poor,” as fundamentally both morally and physically degenerate.³⁶ There was heated debate about the reason for the rise in prostitution in the late nineteenth century in Rio de Janeiro; some blamed the recent abolition of slavery, assuming a racist idea that freed slaves would have no other skills but those of the brothel, whereas others blamed the importation of European prostitutes—the so-called “white slavery” that Europeans

³⁴ Adamo, “The Sick and the Dead,” 221.

³⁵ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 58-61.

³⁶ Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 20-21.

railed against while continuing to immigrate to Latin America in huge numbers.³⁷ Brazil hosted many newly-arrived European prostitutes, and Rio de Janeiro was named one of the main destinations for the purported “white slavery” trade by The National Vigilance Association in 1899.³⁸ Poor women from Western European countries immigrated in large numbers to seek improved employment opportunities.³⁹ Although the idea was abhorrent to Brazilian and Argentinean elites, the majority of European immigrant women that arrived in the urban centers of Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro had immigrated with the express intention of working as prostitutes.⁴⁰

The toleration of prostitution in Rio was largely based upon class and racial status. Brazilian and European prostitutes of every ethnicity competed for clientele, but the wealthiest, best-paid prostitutes with the most personal status were never those of African or otherwise non-white heritage.⁴¹ The elites of Rio de Janeiro idolized European—and especially Parisian—values, an attitude that caused Brazilians to consider a “certain class” of prostitute tolerable. Essentially, *francesas*, or Western European prostitutes, and *mulatas*, women of partially African descent that were arbitrarily deemed especially “sexual[ly] desirab[le],” were better tolerated by police and elite society than the Eastern European *polacas* and Afro-Brazilian *pretas*.⁴² This idealization of Europeans—in particular, those from Paris, London, Lisbon, Madrid, or other Western cultural centers—stemmed from the contemporaneous viewpoint that

³⁷ Soares, *Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, 13-14; Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 24.

³⁸ Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 24.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

⁴⁰ Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 73-74.

⁴¹ Soares, *Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, 18-19.

⁴² Caulfield “The Birth of Mangué,” 89.

Western Europe in general represented the pinnacle of modern achievement as the birthplace of both Enlightenment ideas and urban progressive movements.⁴³

Most of the prostitutes in Buenos Aires before the late-century immigration boom were either mixed-race women or white native Argentines; this changed as European prostitutes began to flood into the city near the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ However, the tolerance of prostitution did not appear to be racially based in the same way that it was in Rio de Janeiro; legislation applied to all women engaged in prostitution, regardless of their country of origin or their perceived racial background. Of course, most of the working prostitutes in Buenos Aires during this period were either of European descent or were *mestizas* (of both indigenous and European ethnic background). It is important to note as well that not only prostitutes but also all people of the subaltern classes came under stricter government control in Argentina during this period. More than the perception of the spread of disease, a desire to control the popular classes inspired anti-vagrancy laws and labor registration laws for those employed in other occupations as well.⁴⁵ Part of this movement to increase control over the lower classes included controlling prostitution, as evidenced by the institution of registration requirements in Buenos Aires in 1875.⁴⁶ These new regulations that gave the government control over prostitutes and prostitution sharply contrasted with those instituted in Rio de Janeiro. Brazil actually preceded Argentina in its creation of legislation regulating prostitution, with codified requirements concerning brothels and prostitutes emerging in 1845—thirty years before similar implementation in Argentina.⁴⁷

⁴³ Scobie, *Argentina: A City and Nation*, 98-103.

⁴⁴ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 46-47.

⁴⁵ Guy, "Women, Peonage, and Industrialization," 72-75.

⁴⁶ Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 19.

⁴⁷ Soares, *Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, 34.

This early regulation did not last after Brazilian self-determination, however, and Brazilian law after 1890 actually largely relaxed even the minor regulations in place for prostitution.⁴⁸

Prostitution was legalized in Brazil from independence through the early twentieth century and was regulated by civil codes that monitored the behavior, location, and medical health of registered prostitutes and was under the sole direction and discretion of the police force.⁴⁹ After 1890, regulation of prostitution was not mandated, and the only criminal act associated with prostitution was procurement. Positivist doctors in Rio de Janeiro implemented anti-syphilis measures, but the services were voluntary, not mandatory, and were constantly available to prostitutes from 1890 until the beginning of the Vargas regime in 1930.⁵⁰ Registration of prostitutes was not required by law in the republican period, either; however, the police force that monitored prostitutes in the red light districts did require registration, and they had unrestricted authority to detain, imprison, evict, or otherwise harass them without pretext.⁵¹ It is probable that large numbers of prostitutes registered with the police in Rio de Janeiro due to the microcosmic atmosphere in which they practiced. Consolidation of prostitutes into red light districts facilitated police involvement in the trade, and socially regulated caste distinctions between districts further aided in regulation.⁵² For example, Brazilian police frequently raided Mangue, the infamous “lower-class” red light district, while the madams and prostitutes in the “higher-income markets” of the Lapa and Glória districts frequently had arrangements with the police and thus avoided persecution.⁵³

⁴⁸ Caulfield, “The Birth of Mangue,” 90.

⁴⁹ Soares, *Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, 34; Caulfield “The Birth of Mangue,” 90.

⁵⁰ Caulfield “The Birth of Mangue,” 90, 94.

⁵¹ Caulfield “The Birth of Mangue,” 91-92.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

In contrast, all registered prostitutes in Buenos Aires were subjected to incredibly tight controls. They had to carry identification, adhere to curfews, and submit to twice weekly medical exams that wrested control of their bodies from them and gave it to the progressive government and the positivist medical establishment.⁵⁴ Medical doctors were at the forefront of the progressive movement to control prostitutes and prostitution in Argentina, and these *higienistas* focused not only on disease and public health but also on morality. Some progressive doctors such as Emilio Coni disseminated ideas that women spread diseases such as syphilis to men, but that men did not spread them to other women. This bizarre logic led to some of the more draconian measures taken against prostitutes to curb the high incidence of venereal disease in populous Buenos Aires; these included but were not limited to forced inspections and near-imprisonment in bordellos or special hospitals.⁵⁵ After 1875, registered prostitutes could work only in government inspected and “approved” houses of prostitution where they submitted to regular medical inspections.⁵⁶ In 1889, Buenos Aires opened a treatment center specifically for venereal diseases called the *Sifilcomio*; prostitutes that either failed their routine medical examinations or otherwise ran afoul of the inspectors—morally or physically—were incarcerated there.⁵⁷ Prostitutes that were subjected to this treatment remained in the hospital until the hospital’s physicians found them to be free of disease, a daunting prospect twenty years before the advent of salvarsan.⁵⁸ The stigma that prostitutes in Buenos Aires experienced under progressive attitudes at the time were obvious in the hospital’s admission policy; rather than

⁵⁴ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 49-51.

⁵⁵ Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 50, 126, 144-145.

⁵⁶ Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 126.

⁵⁷ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 56; Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 134.

⁵⁸ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 56; Claude Quézel, *The History of Syphilis*, trans. Judith Braddock and Brian Pike (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 142. Salvarsan, an arsenic-based treatment for syphilis, was introduced to widespread acclaim in 1909 and was considered the standard treatment until the introduction of penicillin mid-century.

treating venereal disease for all *porteños*, the *Sifilcomio* only examined and admitted prostitutes.⁵⁹

Many Latin American countries in the progressive age worked hard to combat disease, and prostitution was merely one of many perceived social illnesses that led to the spread of physical ailments like syphilis. Brazil's campaigns to reduce the high mortality rate in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the twentieth century included but did not concentrate on prostitutes; the city's goal was a reduction of mortality, not a moral imperative—the result of positivist, not merely progressive thought.⁶⁰ The image that Rio sought to project was one of urbanity, and elite Brazilians felt that prostitution was a necessary evil stemming from a shortage of eligible women for the upper classes to marry or otherwise enter into sexual relationships with, due to population disparities between the sexes of the middle and upper classes.⁶¹ However, the rhetoric of equality that wealthy Brazilians used to argue against the kind of regulation of prostitution that occurred in Buenos Aires was misleading, and confining prostitutes to certain districts and allowing the police to determine the success or failure of various groups based on wealth and ethnicity belied those progressive ideals. Attempts to quarantine prostitutes in certain areas and their utter subjugation to a corrupt police force did not improve the lives of the women thus employed, but rather served to increase the gap between elites and the popular class. The quarantine of prostitutes into specific red light districts resulted from an elite fear of the free Afro-Brazilian population post-emancipation, a fear that played out in the brothels and in the total segregation of prostitutes into zones of tolerance.

Furthermore, the sanitation campaigns in Argentina that regulated prostitutes' working conditions probably did little to stem the flood of venereal disease that overwhelmed late-

⁵⁹ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 56.

⁶⁰ Adamo, "The Sick and the Dead," 218-219.

⁶¹ Soares, *Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, 7-9.

nineteenth and early-twentieth century Buenos Aires. Medical progressives focused largely on moral, not physical, corruption and ignored health inspections or treatment of non-prostitutes—a mistake in the face of the incredible virulence of sexually transmitted diseases.⁶² Regulation in the form of high taxes placed on registered prostitutes in Buenos Aires after 1875 and the even higher fines levied on unregistered prostitutes failed to reduce either the number of working prostitutes or the incidence of sexually transmitted disease; syphilis deaths rose steadily between 1872 and 1884.⁶³ In reality, the laws in Argentina did more to stigmatize and subvert subaltern women than to lessen the prevalence of disease; the true aim of progressivism, then, seemed to be to stultify the growth of the working middle class and to maintain the gap between the “moral” elite and the “immoral” popular classes.⁶⁴

Overall, progressive attitudes in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Latin America were often contradictory. While positivist thought regarding medicine and sanitation demanded changes in city infrastructure and daily life for its citizens, moral progressivism remanded many of these ideals by demonizing the greatest percentage of the population—the urban poor. Essentially, as late historian E. Bradford Burns argues, the ideals of progressivism were for the elites, not the popular classes; he states that “the majority... were no better off at the end of the [nineteenth] century than they had been at the beginning.”⁶⁵ The regulation of prostitution was an idea borrowed from Europe, but the focus on control of deadly sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis came to represent moral, not physical, corruption and control. This fixation on morality manifested in a quarantine of prostitutes into tolerance zones in Rio de

⁶² Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*, 126.

⁶³ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 49.

⁶⁴ Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, 53.

⁶⁵ Burns, *The Poverty of Progress*, 11.

Janeiro and in authoritarian controls and exclusionary policies in Buenos Aires.⁶⁶ Both cities underwent significant demographic changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, changes that frightened elites with a highly visible and under-employed underclass; this fear, combined with Enlightenment thought, caused progressives to attempt to gain control over society by targeting prostitution as a symbol of urban blight. Ultimately, the many attempts at social control that emerged in this time period failed. Neither Rio's attempts to isolate prostitutes and to place them entirely in the care of the corrupt police force nor Buenos Aires' urban exclusion and overt control of prostitutes served to contain either the real threat of epidemic venereal disease or the perceived threat of moral backwardness that prostitution represented to progressive Latin America.

⁶⁶ Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 47-48.

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