Of Morals, Sex, and Theory
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Last June, the New York Times, ran a blurb on the magazine cover for an article about "AIDS, Africa and Monogamy." The article argues that in southern Africa, people who are unfaithful to their partners are likely to have ongoing, concurrent relationships that might contribute more to spreading HIV than one-night stands, which people in the U.S. tend to have when they are cheating. There's no particular data to uphold either side of this claim about cross-cultural differences in infidelity, only impressions from a small sample of people with AIDS. This unrevealing article, which wouldn't pass critical muster if anyone were skeptical of its assumptions, together with the lurid tag line (referring to the entire continent as if it were a singular place, where AIDS and sex are exotic) suggests something of the absurdities of what it is still possible to say in a serious news source about race, sexuality, and disease in the former British Empire—"they" are a homogenous mass, with different morality than "ours," in need of help.

Philippa Levine's Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire provides a thoughtful account of how this state of affairs came to be. From the second half of the nineteenth century on, she writes, "the assumption of a direct link between promiscuity and disease, between sexual desire and racial characteristics, remained stable. Doctors writing early in the twentieth century were just as likely to blame the filth and loose morals of natives for the spread of disease as were their counterparts sixty and seventy years earlier. The sexual fecundity of the tropics, the fear of contagion, the associations between race and sex changed very little..." (323) up to the present, as she says several pages later, when these anxieties are translated into the discourse of AIDS. In itself, this insight is not entirely earthshaking, although Levine says it with more authority and with more research than many previous monographs. What makes this book particularly helpful, though, is that she explores this attribution of exotic sex and disease across a significant period of time and multiple colonies—India, Australia, Hong Kong, and the Straits Settlements—and in relation to specific histories of politics, governance, labor, and migration.

Prostitution, Race, and Politics is divided into two parts. The first is a chronological study of the fate of the Contagious Diseases (CD) acts in the four colonies, with some discussion of their stories in England and in other possessions, including South Africa, Egypt, and Malta. The second part is organized thematically, exploring topics like masculinities, racialization, the geographies of sex, and the "problem" of white prostitutes in the colonies. The first half expands what we know from others' work primarily as an Indian and English story, the fight between regulationists, repealers, colonial officials, and the military to regulate venereal disease through medical examination of

prostitutes—their segregation, if healthy, into licensed brothels or barracks, generally for commerce with British soldiers; and if ill, into lock hospitals. Levine's extensive archival research adds tremendous detail and depth to this account. The addition of material from Australia (particularly Queensland), the Straits, and Hong Kong suggests both continuities and discontinuities--sometimes reiterating the India story, and sometimes veering off wildly in another direction. In one riveting chapter, "Diplomacy, Disease, and Dissent," Levine narrates the outcome of the repeal of the CD Acts in the metropole in the 1880s. First, efforts in London to repeal the Indian version of the CD Acts provoked stiff resistance from the colonial government in India, to the point where it very nearly engendered a constitutional crisis. Even in the face of outright repeal, however, regulationists in India (and Hong Kong and the Straits) changed their practices but little. This provided considerable fodder for English repealers, who were able to embarrass a government that claimed to have repealed its endorsement of "vice," with reports from the field of ongoing inspection and regulation. "The fact that public opinion about empire could be shaped by sex was an extraordinary development that repealers used to their advantage," writes Levine. (91) In Queensland, in contrast, "a settler colony enjoying the privileges of responsible self-government," (211) the repeal of regulation in the metropole had no effect; regulation continued unchanged. Together, these narratives point to one of Levine's broadest themes in the book, "the deep and inextricable relation between metropolitan and colonial politics, and the centrality within that politics of topics routinely excluded from the public sphere—sexuality, especially female sexuality, and sexually transmissible diseases." (91)

This last point deserves sustained attention from scholars of colonialism, in part because it seems exactly right, not only eighty years ago but in the present--think of the photos from Abu Ghraib—but also because it is so very far from the usual historiographical practice, of siting colonialism in relationship to diplomacy, militaries, and economies. For studies of colonialism, this is the book's substantial challenge. It also intervenes in other fields. It is, first and most obviously, an extensive compendium of new research on prostitution and venereal disease policies in a variety of British colonies between the mid-nineteenth century and the end of the First World War, joining studies like Kenneth Ballhatchet's and David Arnold's, among others. In this company, it emerges as illuminatingly feminist in analytics, and contributes a wealth of new detail. It is also self-consciously a contribution to the political history of Britain and the British Empire, refusing the niche of particularity that is offered the history of things like race, gender, and sexuality, and, importantly, claiming the mantle of broad significance quite successfully.

For studies of racialization, the book's exploration of how conceptualizations of filth, sex, and venereal disease were produced as different in relationship to "race" is particularly revealing, because rather than relying on the difference between broad groups of "colonizers" and "colonists," Prostitution, Race, and Politics examines how the divergent niches occupied by different national groups—Chinese, Indians (Hindu and Muslim, as well as different language other groups), Malay, Japanese, non-English Europeans and so forth. These groups were understood to contribute to the problem of venereal disease in very different ways. Japanese women were understood as very clean

and essentially self-regulating; Chinese women were both dirty and abject, victims of kidnapping and slavery; Hindu prostitutes were seen as low-caste and said to "live in great squalor," so "it is not surprising that venereal disease is extremely common," according to a colonial police chief. (208) These differences, of course, corresponded to broader censuses and categories of colonial difference, in the case of caste in India, or categories of free (Japanese) and unfree or "coolie" (Chinese) labor. In this, Levine follows and expands an emergent thematic in studies of colonialism, exploring how colonial knowledge could create both homogeneous categories of the difference of colonized people from colonizers (as immoral, for example), while simultaneously relying on the production of differences among the colonized to create kinds of labor, for example, or indices of tractability that resulted in divergent political classes among the colonized.

As the above discussion would suggest, this book relies in sophisticated ways on insights drawn from postcolonial studies, theories of race, and a certain Foucauldian sensibility. Something that gets called "theory" is still a disputed category in historiography, and the book bears the marks of that controversy. One could say, with only some exaggeration, that the two halves of the book are in some sense two books: the first, a fairly straightforward, chronological account for those who hate "theory"; the second, an exploration of racialization, gendering, and the politics of space of those who like it. While this seems symptomatic and an entirely understandable response to the contemporary politics of history-writing, it is, finally, my only real dissatisfaction with the book. Separating chronological narrative from analysis makes them seem oddly dissociated from each other in a way that I suspect Levine herself doesn't believe them to be. Couldn't we fruitfully ask, for example, what difference it makes to the governance of India, say, in the relationship of colonial officials to their metropolitan counterparts to produce white femininity in one way and low caste Hindu femininity in another? Or conversely, how does the rather dry correspondence about the running of an empire rely on ways of conceiving masculinity? Perhaps, as Levine's organization implies, these things don't really relate in clear ways to each other, and they are quite different kinds of questions. But I doubt it. The force of this book—what makes it compelling and important—is its insistence on the centrality of race, sexuality, gender, and indeed the colonies themselves to all kinds of politics in Britain. The challenge, I think, for those who would follow her lead into a "theoretical" writing of the history of colonialism, a colonial writing of British politics, a racialized writing of gender, is to wade into the thicket and show how these levels of analysis interact with each other, and how chronology and theory are inextricably interrelated.

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