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Prostitution's Positive Role in Society

Courtney Manning
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Throughout time, humans have gathered themselves into groups of social interaction accompanied by food and drink. These groups have taken the form of, clubs, societies, bars, saloons, and lodges. As society has developed, these different forms of human interaction have evolved only slightly, remaining basically the same at their core. Food and drink, especially alcohol, are a large part of this basic core. Ale houses have existed since medieval Europe, evolving into the saloons made familiar in American westerns, and then into the modern bar or club of today.

Alcohol and prostitution have a strong tendency to go hand in hand. The mid nineteenth century madams “relied on a flourishing liquor business in the brothel.”¹ The popularity of these businesses has made them quite profitable, and though some consider it despicable they cannot deny the positive economic effect that it has, expanding and spreading that growth to the community. Prostitution has positively affected society economically and socially, acting as a catalyst for business and empowering women. Brothels and saloons have acted as a place for men to conduct business, as a nice restaurant or golf course does today. But perhaps their most influential role has been in providing opportunity and independence for women.

Madame Alice Cooper of Chattanooga, Tennessee, provides one example of a strong business presence positively affecting her locality. She was quite wealthy, having many employees and business ventures. She also provides an example of brothels acting as a gateway to women’s power in business, as she was a widow with several children. Her business in Chattanooga was successful for several years in the mid nineteenth century, though her newspaper obituaries show that she was not well-liked by the community. Often, she was

¹ Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West 1865-90* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 181.

described in a very coarse and unfeeling manner by the newspapers, which covered many of the incidents involving herself and her employees.

Numerous people have denounced the morality of prostitution and consumption of alcohol based on the religious grounds that they are wicked establishments. In the nineteenth century, religious groups were not alone in expressing opposition to these establishments; the newspapers repeatedly referred to Madame Cooper as “notorious,” acknowledging her as “one of the oldest and most noted courtesans of this country and one of the blackest characters in the procuress line.”² This reflects the state of reformation that the secular world of the nineteenth century was in; almost every aspect of life was scrutinized with intention to improve. Drunkenness was a noted issue that had come to the public’s attention. George R. Knight describes the temperance movement as a “virtual crusade” by those who found them to be “the foundation of crime and pauperism.”³ Though for a time this opinion was quite popular, the temperance movement ultimately failed to abolish the consumption of alcohol.

There is no doubt that abuse of these industries, or any other industry, will have negative repercussions. However, in anything there will be positive and negative effects. Discussion of the morality, immorality, or amorality of these things is a separate issue and outside of the scope of this paper. Their contribution to the shaping of society cannot be ignored, “that their contributions appear less ‘good’ or ‘noble’ does not make them less important.”⁴ These contributions cannot be categorized as entirely good or entirely bad. Whether or not prostitution and alcohol are moral their industries have had positive effects on

² Editorial, “From Ear to Ear: A Famous Courtesan Commits Suicide at Chattanooga,” *Knoxville Journal*, November 29, 1893.

³ George R. Knight, *Ellen White's World* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998), 144.

⁴ Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West 1865-90*, 181.

the world around them. They have contributed to economic and social growth, specifically in the areas of human relationships and women's rights.

Prostitution and alcohol as industries positively impacted nineteenth century Chattanooga in two big economic ways. Growth through the multiplier effect and the introduction of new money were probably the most influential on Chattanooga's economy. The multiplier effect spreads local economic growth from industry to industry; this growth is caused by the introduction of new money.

When an industry is prosperous and operating costs are spent locally, other local businesses reap the benefits. The employees who live locally spend their paycheck locally, also stimulating local business. These businesses may invest in the community in the same manner. This turnover of funds is called the multiplier effect. Its impact is determined by how locally focused a business is; the more focused, the more impact.⁵ However, this is simply a turnover of the same money. The amount in circulation hasn't changed, only the number of times it has been used locally.

Real growth happens with new money. The term "new money" is not used to refer to freshly printed, instead it refers to money that is coming from somewhere outside the already existing local circulation of funds. These come from travelers, businesses whose headquarters are not local, and exports. The biggest contributors of new money to Chattanooga in the nineteenth century were soldiers camped out nearby during the American Civil War.

The soldiers who came to Chattanooga were not paid by anyone locally. Their spending money came from the Confederacy and Union governments. This money was new to

⁵ Richard Erickson, interview by author, Collegedale, April 7, 2014.

Chattanooga's markets, so as soldiers spent it on whores and whiskey they created a boom in Chattanooga's economy. In turn, as brothels and saloons paid their workers, the multiplier effect began its work spreading the new money among other industries. Of course these were not the only places that soldiers spent their money, but most of their other needs such as food and shelter were met by the army.

Being away from home and without the company of their wives many men turned to prostitutes as a sort of comfort. Though the army technically did not allow soldiers to entertain prostitutes, "some officers believed that these women offered a way for their soldiers to vent frustration without imperiling the 'good' girls . . . Without them, it was believed that the soldiers would resort to raping women and bedding each other."⁶ So the industry solved several problems; soldiers were entertained, the "good" girls were protected, and in the process the economy grew.

Soldiers were not the only source of fear Elizabeth Topping states that "society feared that men with strong and uncontrolled passions would assault their pure wives, sisters, and daughters if prostitution were dealt with harshly."⁷ Because of this, prostitution was tolerated and even in some cases considered a necessity, not only for the enjoyment of the men, but also as protection for the innocent and frail women.

Brothels played an important role publicly, operating "at the nexus of social relations in the nineteenth-century city."⁸ Businessmen then, as today, often met out of the office. Today, the meeting place of choice tends to be a nice restaurant or bar. Business in the nineteenth

⁶ Elizabeth A. Topping, *What's a Poor Girl to do? Prostitution in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Thomas Publications, 2001), 72.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York, New York: WW Norton and Company, 1992), 462.

century was handled by “showing clients a good time . . . shared sexual entertainment deepened male fellowship and helped cement business relationships, much like the golf course does for the twentieth century.”⁹ If a man wanted to persuade another man to do business by bestowing upon him some kind of gift, he might pay for a night at Madame Cooper’s.

Mid nineteenth century prostitution was a business dominated by women and allowed them much individual freedom.¹⁰ Though some women were forced into it, many chose it. In need of money for food and family, it has often been the only resource that a woman has at her disposal. Women working in this field have reported “both patterns of exploitation and empowerment.”¹¹ With this empowerment and independence, prostitution has opened doors for women to enter other business fields.

Many times throughout history, women have turned to prostitution out of need. Mid nineteenth century newspapers revealed that most prostitutes “made a conscious decision to enter the life to escape an unhappy home or, most often, to earn a comfortable living.”¹² Destitution and starvation were major factors pushing women into this field.¹³ A woman with no dependents would have required about \$1.34 per week and a good seamstress might earn \$1.08, not allowing for clothes, shoes, or medicine.¹⁴ Prostitutes could “potentially earn more money than most wage workers – women or men,”¹⁵ with an income that varied from \$50 per

⁹ Topping, *What's a Poor Girl to do? Prostitution in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, 72.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Barbara Brents and Kate Hausbeck, *What is Wrong with Prostitution? Assessing Dimensions of Exploitation in Legal Brothels* (American Sociological Association, 2006), 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Carol Faulkner, "Prostitutes and Female Patriots in the Civil War Era," *Reviews in American History* 38, no. 1 (March, 2010), 87.

week in a first class brothel to \$10 for a regular streetwalker.¹⁶ Generally, “a prostitute had better working conditions, more free time, better clothing, food, health, and living quarters than her hard-laboring virtuous shirt-making sister.”¹⁷ It was a very alluring field for women who had nothing to lose. Even today prostitutes make about four times the hourly wage they would make employed elsewhere.¹⁸ Money is often directly related to power, and the heightened monetary status gained from prostituting gave women a sense of empowerment in a time when society was dominated by men.

In the nineteenth century, a woman was dependent upon a man to support her social status. The only way to climb the social ladder without a man was with money. Prostitution provided a relatively quick and easy way to earn money, allowing women to scale the social ladder as well as gain independence from male dominance.¹⁹ Prostitution allowed a woman to provide for herself and her dependents among much better conditions than a wage worker. It gave her independence from a male caregiver, allowing her to exert real control of her own economic standing.

However prostitution had its limits; it was a young woman’s game. The prime years were between about fifteen and thirty, after which women often became a manager of younger women, saloon operator, or abortionist.²⁰ These positions still offered independence and good money for the older madam. The madams who managed brothels undertook a regular business venture, having to deal with employees, finances, and maintenance.²¹ Even

¹⁶ Topping, *What's a Poor Girl to do? Prostitution in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, 72.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Steven D. Levitt and Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *An Empirical Analysis of Street-Level Prostitution*, 2007).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West 1865-90*, 181

²¹ Ibid.

when there was a male head of the business, there are some problems that a man just can't handle when owning a brothel. He would often employ a matriarch to take care of these needs, giving women a "foot in the door" to business.

Some women used this bought independence as a stepping-stone to other business ventures, opening hotels or dress shops. Even today women "go on to careers in medicine, law, and education,"²² funding these ventures with money earned as a prostitute. Coming out of prostitution to run a "legitimate" business helped to cement a woman's status in society without a man behind her. Women no longer required a man to raise her social status, control her life, or give her money. She could do all of these things on her own by her own choice.

Madame Cooper was a widow with children and the head of her own business, being, "at one time . . . extremely wealthy . . . [driving] about in her own carriage, covered with diamonds."²³ She was certainly empowered, dealing with various lawsuits and arrests all the while conducting her business in a very strict manner. Her business was not only in brothels and selling alcohol; she also had a hotel license and testified in court that she was conducting a hotel.²⁴ It is also documented that she made donations to charity, such as giving a cow to the orphans' home in 1881.²⁵ Madame Cooper is an excellent example of a woman choosing to enter prostitution to provide for herself and her children, becoming empowered, and having a successful business venture.

²² PR Newswire, "Bunny Ranch Owner Endorses Former Prostitute for Mayor of Vicksburg, Mississippi," *PR Newswire US* (04/12, 2013).

²³ Editorial, "From Ear to Ear: A Famous Courtesan Commits Suicide at Chattanooga," *Knoxville Journal*, November 29, 1893.

²⁴ Editorial, "Breaking up a Bad House" 1886

²⁵ Editorial, "Donatious to the Orphans' home" 1885

It is undeniable that the industries of prostitution and alcohol have had positive effects on the world around them. Most significantly, positive effects have been seen in the area of women's empowerment. Prostitution has acted as an enabler in gaining independence in the nineteenth century, allowing women to establish their own societal status without the backing of a man.

Though many have fought to eradicate the world of these institutions on the grounds that they are immoral, they have not succeeded. The forms that alcohol and prostitution have taken publicly have evolved through time, but have remained important parts of the business world. It is because of their prominence in this area that they have not been eradicated. If it were simply a form of entertainment the outcome of these attempts would have been vastly different. However business is the backbone and foundation of society. From early bargaining and trade within a local community to the complex world market that exists today, business has been at the core of human survival.

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