

Review: Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945 by Elizabeth Clement

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Elizabeth Clement's book *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* is an in-depth analysis of working-class sexuality during the first half of the twentieth century, a period of intense social change linked to immigration, involvement in two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the Prohibition. Despite small limitations, particularly related to the difficulty of obtaining primary sources, this book review argues that *Love for Sale* is an important contribution to our understanding of changing sexual mores, with implications for contemporary society.

The social historian, Elizabeth Alice Clement's monograph, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945*, analyzes early twentieth-century sexual mores in New York. As associate professor of American History at the University of Utah, Clement has published several works regarding the history of sexuality and, more particularly, prostitution. These include a 2005 article for the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, "From Sociability to Spectacle: Interracial Sexuality and the Ideological Uses of Space".¹ Clement's book, originally presented as her thesis under a different title, is an in-depth analysis of working-class sexuality during the first half of the twentieth-century, a period of intense social change linked to immigration, involvement in two World Wars, the Great Depression and the Prohibition.

In the first section of the book, spanning the first three chapters, Clement discusses changes in modern courtship and sexual practices at the turn-of-the-century, focusing on the Americanization of immigrants, the rise of so-called 'charity girls' who exchanged sex for small gifts or a night out, and the shifts that were underway in the prostitution trade. In chapter two, for example, she argues that sexual barter, previously thought of as the exclusive domain of the prostitute, was being used by working-class women who defined a new category called 'treating' whereby, for the price of an evening's entertainment, they would exchange a range of sexual favours. This opened up public space to women because 'charity girls', as they were called, very consciously distanced themselves from the monetary exchange of prostitution.²

In the following two chapters, Clement deals with how World War One, through the policing of prostitution and venereal disease, and the idea of patriotism and masculine entitlement, influenced prostitution, treating and courtship cultures of the time. For example, she describes how the repression of prostitution due to fears of the moral and physical infestation of the troops, led to an intense schism between prostitution and charity

1 Elizabeth Alice Clements, "From Sociability to Spectacle: Interracial Sexuality and the Ideological Uses of Space," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 6, no. 2 (June 2005): 24-43.

2 Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 64.

girls.³ Finally in the last two chapters, the author focuses on how the emerging legal sex entertainment industry and a dating culture that was more accepting of premarital sex marginalized prostitution. In chapter six, for example, Clement describes the emergence in the 1920s of taxi dancing as one of the legal forms of the sex trade that led to less demand for prostitution as well as a racialization of certain segments of the industry.⁴

Throughout the wide array of social changes that Clement covers, her main argument remains that working-class New Yorkers were actively engaging with government agencies and vice societies to classify appropriate sexual behaviour on a developing spectrum. From the internal policing of treating, to the commercial partnerships that prostitutes negotiated with hotel owners, to the new demands and expectations of the dating culture, women were involved in public and private debates regarding their economic and sexual options and their use of public spaces.⁵ These negotiations were not only with organizations that tried to police women's bodies but also with men themselves, as Clement notes that both World War One and the Prohibition undermined existing practices in favour of men because of a new sense of entitlement and a rising level of sexual violence.⁶

In other words, Clement is attempting to illuminate working-class women's agency, sexual and otherwise. Within the discipline of women's history, the basic premise that women need to be made visible in the historical record is increasingly perceived as only part of the work that needs to be done. It is now also believed, as Clement clearly demonstrates, that women need to be understood as actors and not only as victims. The women in *Love for Sale* whether 'charity girls', prostitutes or taxi dancers are acknowledged, by Clement, to have rational motivations for their sexual choices. They were not only unfortunate victims of their socio-economic context. These perceptions and discourses about prostitution survive into the present-day landscape because anti-prostitution campaigns continue to portray sex trade workers as unwilling and coerced casualties of a failing system. While it is true that many have limited options, it is important to remember that they remain actors in their own lives. To do this, Clement attempts to reintegrate the women's own narratives, even those filtered through middle-class reformers' writings, into her discussion of their lives.

When dealing with prostitution, Clement argues that there were many different types of prostitution and that different groups of girls and women viewed prostitution in different ways. This seems like a rather commonsensical claim to make but it is important because of who had a negative perception of prostitution. 'Charity girls' were a growing segment of twentieth-century youth who were using sexual favours, or at least the implied promise of sexual favours, to gain access to the cheap entertainments that were newly available to the working-class male culture, but still expensive for working-class women. Treating, it is argued, highlighted men's masculinity as the ones who treated using their wage earnings as opposed to women who remained in the passive role of the desirable object.⁷ As a casual exchange based on assumptions and verbal requests of gifts, however, women were the ones who controlled the bargaining process.⁸ It was 'charity girls' who policed the distinction between the 'evils' of monetary prostitution and the lesser sin of premarital sex, even if it was

3 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 114.

4 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 178.

5 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 89.

6 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 150.

7 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 48.

8 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 63.

sex for gain. With insight and daring, Clement traces this development into modern dating culture, a dating culture that saw an increase in premarital intercourse and sexual violence among adolescents.⁹ In this way, this historical treatise remains pertinent to contemporary discussions on sexual practices, especially among the youth.

Analyzing a different context, the second part of the book examines the effects of the war effort on sexuality. Because of the prevalence of venereal diseases, the government, through official propaganda and organizations such as the Commission on Training Camp Activities, attempted to discourage sexual relations between military men and women, whether they were professional prostitutes or naive charity girls.¹⁰ However, soldiers and the women who had sexual relationships with them were not inactive participants in this process. Men overtly discussed patriotism and the idea of “reciprocal bodily sacrifice” as a justification of their access to women's bodies, and women continued to search out army cantonments for male company.¹¹

To come to these conclusions regarding sexual norms in New York City, Clement mainly uses records from vice societies, the criminal justice system and social work agencies. She augments the discussion with journal articles, such as Du Bois' attack on vice societies for their attempt to close a black-owned club, bringing to the forefront the links between sexual policing and racial segregation.¹² There is also the judicial use of oral interviews and wartime propaganda, of which several posters are included in her book. Using a variety of primary sources from collections such as the New York State Archives and the Women's Prison Association Records, as well as a rich variety of secondary sources such as Allan Brandt's wide-ranging social history of venereal disease, Clement bases her arguments on solid research.

Based on these varied sources, Clement develops an important addition to existing and emerging scholarship on the subject. Other research into this topic includes John Parascandola's article in the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* which analyzes the quarantining measures used against prostitutes during World War II. This work takes up many of the same themes as Clement's book, such as the distrust of promiscuous women who were blamed not only for the spread of venereal diseases but also for not being responsible enough to undergo treatment in outpatient clinics.¹³ Other articles, such as Mary Louise Roberts' "The Price of Discretion: Prostitution, Venereal Disease and the American Military in France, 1944-1946", look at the larger political motivations and consequences of policies regarding prostitution during the war effort.¹⁴

9 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 239.

10 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 116.

11 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 151.

12 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 83.

13 John Parascandola, "Presidential Address: Quarantining Women: Venereal Disease Rapid Treatment Centers in World War II America," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 83, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 431-459, doi: 10.1353/bhm.0.0267.

14 Mary Louise Roberts, "The Price of Discretion: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and the American Military in France, 1944-1946," *American Historical Review*, 115, no. 4 (October 2010): 1002-1030, <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/eds/detail?vid=3&hid=20&sid=229c00ee-eea4-4a4c-9e6e-0479b3b37c4d%40sessionmgr13&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZrZWxpdmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#db=edswah&AN=000283387800004>.

From a different perspective Brian Donovan and Tori Barnes-Brus explore the convergence of narratives of 'white slavery' and prostitution in court records of the pre-war period in New York City. Mirroring Clements' use of trial records, this article focuses on the re-appropriation of the language of forced prostitution by players in the criminal justice system.¹⁵ Even early works on the nature of prostitution and its relationship to the state, such as Willoughby Cyrus Waterman's 1932 book, detail the changing legal practices that led to a more repressive atmosphere in New York City.¹⁶ Clement's research points to this change in policy but also brings up interesting corollaries between the repression of prostitution, the emergence of a new grey area of sexual behaviour, and future developments in American youth and dating culture.

Perhaps in part because of the ambitious range of topics covered by *Love for Sale*, there are some limitations to the work. The sources themselves prove problematic, as Clement herself acknowledges.¹⁷ Seeing as the main primary sources are reports from outside groups, especially middle-class organizations, they have their own biases and agendas in regards to policing and transcribing working-class habits. This means that there is a lack of working-class female voices from the period, a serious limitation for a writer whose very goal is to uncover those voices.

Clement's own background in women's studies also gives her work a particular bent that contrasts sharply with, for example, the social purity movement or many reformers' views. As a consequence, she is often in opposition to their attempts to repress prostitution and views their campaigns to 'save' young girls as patronizing. While her focus on validating working-class women's sexual experiences and choices is commendable, the result is that she is often antagonistic towards the primary sources that are available. She also seems to downplay the structural limitations and resulting victimization that many women, including prostitutes, were faced with when making choices about their sexual lives. It was often immigrants or African American working-class women, especially during the years of the Depression, who were becoming prostitutes or 'charity girls' because their economic options were limited. This was not always a free choice, a fact that Clement does not always readily acknowledge.

Despite these small limitations, *Love for Sale* is an important contribution to research on early twentieth-century shifts in sexual mores. Dealing with a traditionally overlooked segment of the population, working-class women, Clement manages to trace the broad social customs around prostitution, courtship rituals and the unique practice of treating. Interestingly, she also manages to follow this progression into modern day dating culture and the sex trade industry. Overall, Clement's addition to the scholarship is a well-written and researched discussion of the way sexual practices have evolved since the early 1900s.

Bibliography

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16 Willoughby Cyrus Waterman, *Prostitution and its Repression in New York City, 1900-1931* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 20.

17 Clement, *Love for Sale*, 10.

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