Brussels Studies

La revue scientifique électronique pour les recherches
sur Bruxelles / Het elektronisch wetenschappelijk
tijdschrift voor onderzoek over Brussel / The e-journal
for academic research on Brussels

Collection générale | 2011

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De handel in blanke slavinnen (1880-1881): een Brussels schandaal?

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/838>

DOI: 10.4000/brussels.838

ISSN: 2031-0293

Publisher

Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles

Electronic reference

Jean-Michel Chaumont, « The white slave trade affair (1880-1881): a scandal specific to Brussels? », *Brussels Studies* [Online], General collection, no 46, Online since 24 February 2011, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/838> ; DOI : 10.4000/brussels.838

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The white slave trade affair (1880-1881) : a scandal specific to Brussels?

Translation: Jane Corrigan

Between 1880 and 1881, Brussels was the scene of the first 'white slave trade' affair, which had international repercussions: approximately fifty Belgian and foreign under-age women – British in particular – had been admitted since 1878 into some of the officially recognised brothels in the city. A handful of them had been brought there against their will. After several trials, fifteen or so shady individuals were sentenced, but those who were truly responsible for the abuse were members of the police. There is no reason to deduce from this that the Brussels police were particularly corrupt: in truth, the system for the regulation of prostitution placed the police in an objective position as the protectors of the brothel keepers' interests. The same effects were invariably seen wherever this system was implemented.

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Brussels Studies is published thanks to the support of the ISRIB (Institute for the encouragement of Scientific Research and Innovation of Brussels - Brussels-Capital Region)

Introduction

For almost two years – between January 1880 and July 1881 – Brussels was accused by certain newspapers – British for the most part – of being the headquarters of an abominable moral scandal. In Belgian courts it was called ‘the white slave trade affair’, and fifteen or so brothel keepers and other shady individuals were finally sentenced for incitement of minors to immoral behaviour. A trial regarding trafficking in women had never had so much international attention. When governments tackled the problem in 1899, it was still referred to by some as *Belgian Traffic* and, fifty years later, when the experts from the League of Nations presented their historical report on the state of trafficking in women throughout the world, they referred to the events in Brussels to mark the beginning of their fight. The Belgian expert Isidore Maus thus reminded his colleagues in February 1927 that ‘in Brussels, there was a terrible dispute. A police commissioner was dismissed. The mayor of Brussels was forced to resign. We cannot imagine the upheaval which took place. We must not undermine these facts and the truly heroic era which they portrayed’ (quoted by Chaumont, 2009, 25). It is especially interesting to note what Isidore Maus remembers first of all, i.e. that a police officer was dismissed and a mayor was forced to resign. His memory was good and his selection was judicious: as we shall see now, the true scandal indeed lay in the action of the authorities much more than in the behaviour of those who were sentenced.

In the collective work which was recently devoted to this memorable affair (Chaumont and Machiels, 2009), the authors tried to get to the bottom of it by considering different points of view: that of the victims, the judicial authorities, militant abolitionists, the British authorities, etc. Here, I shall examine in particular the point of view of the police officers. Secondly, I shall ask the question as to the specificity of the scandal: was it the symptom of a pathology specific to Brussels or, as the expression *Belgian Traffic* suggests, to the country as a whole? We shall see that there are good reasons not to yield to the song of the culturalist (or even ethnicist) sirens and to lay the blame on a *system* instead – that of the regulation of prostitution – which regularly led to the corruption of its agents in Belgium, France and wherever it was applied, and continued to do so for several decades.

1. The scandal: the regulation of prostitution in Brussels

The affair referred to as the white slave trade is unintelligible when taken out of the general context of the regulatory policy adhered to by the Brussels municipal authorities since 1844 in the continuation of the measures adopted on the Belgian territory by France and the Netherlands. Based on the premise according to which prostitution is a necessary evil which should be controlled for reasons of public health and public order, the 'French system' – spread throughout Europe during the Napoleonic Wars – provided for the obligatory registration of prostitutes and their subsequent subjection to the finicky dictates of a regulation whose application in Belgium was entrusted entirely to the municipal police. Whether it was part of the national police as it was in France or of the municipal police as it was in Brussels, the vice squad oversaw compliance with regulations and was the only authority in charge of sanctions in the case of an offence: regardless of the most basic constitutional protection, the police were thus authorised to judge and imprison prostitutes without the slightest intervention on behalf of the judiciary. They also ensured that the prostitutes who were found to be ill during the twice-weekly compulsory medical inspections went to the 'venereal diseases police unit' at Saint Pierre's Hospital and were forced to stay there until the doctors declared them to be fit for work once again. In order for supervision to be as tight as possible from all points of view, the regulatory system strongly encouraged brothels. From the point of view of police officers, brothels also had the major advantage of being a breeding ground of extremely useful information regarding the regular clientele (who were sometimes very anxious not to be discovered, such as clergymen) as well as the underworld. Following his dismissal, no less than two thousand personal records were found in the private home of Lenaers, the Brussels police commissioner (Keunings, 2009, 41).

In Brussels, regulation was even stricter than in Paris, which is why certain historians (Huberty and Keunings, 1987) have used the term 'hyper-regulation' whilst referring to it. It was used as a model by the many medical and police delegations which came from abroad to study it and directly inspired the authorities of the city of Buenos Aires.¹ However, in 1856, whilst those in charge were very pleased with the effectiveness of the system, the situation was different twenty years later: the number of officially recognised brothels continued to decrease, whereas illegal prostitution – the nightmare of those in support of regulating it – increased. According to the calculations made by Sophie de Schaepdrijver (1986, 108), 2nd and 3rd class brothels disappeared by 1867, and in 1876 only a dozen 1st class brothels remained. With all categories considered, there were three quarters less than in 1856.

¹ Since before the independence of Belgium, the *Société des Sciences naturelles et médicales de Bruxelles* played a significant role in the international promotion of regulation. In his preface to the translation of the work by Abraham Flexner in 1919, H. Minod states that 'the effectiveness of the regime was part of the creed of administrators and doctors: regulation was not discussed or studied – one simply believed in it. However, later, it was clear that all was not for the best; but nobody imagined that there could be a remedy other than an intensification of administrative measures. Medical associations attributed the failure of the regime to the lack of uniform provisions, and started a campaign to obtain international regulation. In 1825, the *Société belge des Sciences naturelles et médicales* [in reality the *Société des Sciences naturelles et médicales de Bruxelles*, JMC] tested the ground with the aim to propose the extension of the system to cover all of Europe' (Minod, 1919, VII).

In order to prevent this decline, Lenaers, police commissioner of Brussels, proposed a reform of the regulations to the municipal council, which was adopted in August 1877. According to what was revealed three years later by the scandal, alongside the official modifications aimed at cracking down on illegal prostitution and at lightening the obligations of brothel keepers, certain provisions were introduced *unofficially*. As reported by Lenaers, the owners of officially recognised brothels complained bitterly about unfair competition from illegal brothels: not only did they – by definition – evade the regulations, but they employed underage prostitutes, i.e. young women under 21. Whilst the regulations – and the customs – of 1844 allowed the registration of underage women as prostitutes, they were only authorised to work in the streets (as so-called ‘street girls’) and not as ‘brothel girls’. Lenaers suggested to the municipal councillors to lift this ban – which could legitimately be considered as being rather incoherent – and he obtained their approval. As public prosecutor Janssens declared in 1881 in court, ‘when it has been established that an underage girl makes her living from prostitution, is registered and bears as it were the official stamp, *what does it matter if she does her miserable work in the streets or in the lounges of a brothel?*’ (quoted in Chaumont and Machiels, 2009, p. 63). Indeed, what does it matter? And many big cities – beginning with Paris – therefore authorised not only *the registration* of underage women as prostitutes, but also their *admission* in brothels.

Just one restriction seems to have been observed – at least in France – since the 18th century in accordance with an informal agreement between brothel keepers and police officers: underage women who were not experienced prostitutes would not be allowed into brothels. This is how Louis-Sébastien Mercier described it almost exactly one century before the events in Brussels: ‘There are *tacit police regulations* which forbid all of these brothel keepers to employ virgins: they must be deflowered before entering the place; and if they are not, the detective constable is informed at once. One may laugh at this last sentence, but I am being serious. There was a desire to establish a certain order within the disorder, ward off excessive abuse, protect innocence and weakness, and prevent unbridled debauchery from destroying the civil bond and sacred ties of families. Fathers do not have any complaints to make; the loose behaviour of their daughters never begins in this type of suspicious place’ (quoted by Benabou, 1987, 49). It is precisely these ‘tacit regulations’ – nevertheless renewed by Lenaers – which were not respected in Brussels in the case of a young British woman. We shall examine how and above all why this happened.

According to the many declarations and pieces of information which accompanied the public revelation of the fact that approximately forty underage Belgian and foreign women began working in brothels in Brussels between January 1878 – the date of the implementation of the new regulations – and the eruption of the scandal in January 1880, it is patently obvious that the underage prostitutes who ‘wished’ to be admitted into a brothel had to provide proof of former experience as a prostitute. For young Belgian women or for those from the neighbouring regulatory countries such as France, Germany or the Netherlands, this did not create any particular difficulties: they just had to confirm that they had worked as a registered prostitute, either as a ‘street girl’ or as a ‘brothel girl’, and as it involved an official administrative procedure, there were written traces. But in the case of young British women, the situation was much more complicated: in the United Kingdom – which was gen-

erally not regulatory – there was no official registration of prostitutes. Young British girls were prized by the posh clientele and they came in large numbers with experience from a very young age, as the age of consent at which they could prostitute themselves in the United Kingdom was 12. On the eve of the first trials in December 1880, the editor-in-chief of the Belgian newspaper *La Chronique* wrote: ‘I lived in London; I know that prostitution starts appallingly early there; and most of the time, the girls such as those whom Roger and company have accosted already have many years of experience at eighteen or nineteen. [...] No one would believe that these young hussies – apart from one exception perhaps – were not perfectly aware of what they were going to do in Belgium. Can you imagine a young honest girl letting herself be accosted in the streets of London by a stranger and then going off to the continent with him peacefully, without even notifying her family? People shrug their shoulders at this. It is much easier to imagine that the poor wretches accosted by the London procurers considered the dreadful life in brothels to be an improvement of their lot. I have seen so many of these miserable girls – young and pretty still – hanging about the streets of London, seeking an all-too-rare meal and always uncertain shelter through prostitution? The perspective of having food every day and of having comfortable lodging must have been enough to convince them to follow the procurer who approached them; there was no need for any diplomatic cunning’(quoted by Chaumont, 2009, 29).

The question therefore arises as to how these experienced young British women – desired by the clientele and therefore by the brothel keepers – were admitted into the Brussels brothels where they ‘wished’ – so to speak – to work, without being able to prove that they were already prostitutes. My reconstruction of the reasoning of the stakeholders concerned is hypothetical and there is of course no archival document to support it directly, but the unfolding of events seems to be consistent with it in all respects: given this insurmountable difficulty and the fact that it was, however, disconcertingly easy (one just has to ask the UK administration) to obtain a false birth certificate (i.e. an authentic document issued based on a false declaration), the obstacle could be circumvented by *admitting underage women using the false identity of a person who was of age* (in which case it was no longer necessary to prove that they had any prior experience). This pragmatic solution suited all parties: the girls who wanted to work in Brussels, the brothel keepers who wanted to hire them, the clients who wanted to have sex with them and, finally, the police officers who wanted the brothels to be run as best as possible in the interest of the system and – as we shall see – in their personal interest as well. We can therefore reasonably assume that just as the brothel keepers had been unofficially informed of the fact that they could hire underage women, they were also unofficially told that in the case of underage *British* women, the police officers in charge of the admission would not ask any awkward questions if by any chance there appeared to be a discrepancy between the declared age and the age they appeared to be. Ten underage British women with false papers were thus very discreetly admitted into brothels. But for one of them in particular, Louisa Hennessey, the *consent* was also falsified; police officers and doctors in charge of ensuring that the young women were ‘willing’ to work as prostitutes pretended to be unaware of this.

Louisa Hennessey was fatherless; she worked as a servant in London, and was misled by the promise of a more lucrative job as a receptionist in a hotel in France. The day after her arrival in Brussels, before bringing her to the medical clinic to be-

gin the registration procedure, Mrs Paradis, a brothel keeper in the Rue du Persil, examined her herself and realised that she was a virgin. She then decided to get rid of her and went to see some colleagues in Ghent who had her examined by a doctor: the latter also confirmed her virginity and advised the couple from Ghent not to burden themselves with Louisa. Mr and Mrs Paradis were greatly frustrated and returned to Brussels with her. They called on Dr Corten, a civil servant who was one of the doctors in charge of examining prostitutes. Given that Mr and Mrs Paradis knew perfectly well what to expect regarding the young girl's virginity, I suppose that they got him to come to their home – which was against regulations – in order to seek his advice. Was this of their own initiative or had they followed his suggestion? The fact remains that the poor girl was sent to a brothel in Antwerp and returned, deflowered, two weeks later. She had well and truly been raped. Mrs Paradis then brought her back officially to Dr Corten who declared that she was fit for work and made no further remarks. She then brought Louisa under a false name to Schröder – the vice squad chief who did not speak English and whose mistress worked in the brothel run by Mrs Paradis – with a residency certificate proving that she came from a brothel in Antwerp. Everything was therefore in order and Louisa was admitted into the Paradis brothel without further ado. She lived there and was forced to prostitute herself from May 1879 to March 1880. When Scotland Yard sent two police inspectors following a first British press campaign denouncing the trafficking of young British girls in Brussels, Schröder rushed to see Mrs Paradis to urge her to get rid of Louisa, who was then sent to a brothel in The Hague. Thankfully, the case of Louisa is an exception. It is, however, very important to remember that if doctors and police officers had done their work properly, nothing unfortunate would have happened to her: if Corten had denounced the presence of a young virgin girl in the Paradis brothel at the time of his first visit, Louisa would have got off with a fright; if Schröder had seriously enquired about her consent three weeks later, he would have saved her from 10 months of forced prostitution. We must therefore conclude that on several occasions, the process of victimisation of the young woman could have been halted by civil servants whose job it was to do so, and that they preferred to take sides with the brothel keepers.

The story of Louisa Hennessey was without a doubt the most shocking, but it was not the only one to come before the court; in fact, the police had hushed up the case so well it almost escaped a trial altogether. The first trial concerned six other underage British women whose brothel keepers and procurers were prosecuted mainly for the incitement of underage women to immoral behaviour. As the only ones prosecuted and sentenced, they were the scapegoats of the public prosecutor's office, which one might criticise – according to the astute presentiment of one of the magistrates in charge of the affair – 'for having double standards, prosecuting the brothel keepers in strict compliance with article 379 of the penal code, and at the same time doing nothing about the police officers who were guilty of the offence committed by the former' (public prosecutor Willemaers quoted in Chaumont and Machiels, 2009, p. 63). Neither the police officers, whose regulatory innovation had been approved by the municipal council, nor the doctors were worried about these trials in which they intervened only as witnesses. If Lenaers and Schröder had not unwisely brought an action against a journalist for libel – a trial which they could have won had it not been for the spectacular reversal which occurred at the end, when the police commissioner was convicted of having extorted false testimonies –

nothing would have happened to them. But the trial revealed that Lenaers, using his son as a man of straw, had assumed the monopoly of the sale of spirits in the officially recognised brothels of Brussels. It was this fact rather than his suggestion to admit underage women into brothels which led Charles Buls to dismiss him in July 1881. In the same way, it was the revelation of the existence of his prostitute mistress which led the municipal council to demand Schröder's resignation and not his more than suspicious role in the admission of underage British women – Hennessey in particular. As regards Félix Vanderstraeten – mayor since 1879 – his discreet resignation in February 1881 followed the revelation that he had sold his father's pub to a brothel keeper who had made it the biggest brothel in Brussels.

In other words, except to the militant abolitionists who were very much a minority at the time, neither the prostitution of underage women in brothels nor – and much less so – the prostitution of underage women in general was truly shocking. With varying regrets, almost all of the authorities concerned (police, medical profession, municipal councillors, etc.) considered it to be inevitable. The majority agreed with what the municipal council of Brussels had written in defence of its police service: 'There is good reason to fear that police surveillance could become quite ineffective if the administration which conforms to the views of the public prosecutor's office prevents underage prostitutes from working in brothels' (quoted in Chaumont and Machiels, 2009, 62).

However, it was shocking to the public that police officers and – to a lesser extent – other people who were responsible for regulations (doctors, local councillors) had close ties with the shady world in general and brothel keepers in particular. In this case, everything does indeed lead one to believe that the privileged relationship with brothel keepers explains the indifference of the police with respect to the lot of a few young women – both underage girls and women of age, Belgian and foreign – who were entitled to expect a minimum amount of protection on behalf of police officers. One may therefore wonder whether the Brussels police were *particularly* corrupt.

2. Police corruption: a cultural specificity in Brussels or a result of the system?

It is not hard to see that the scandals associated with the police officers responsible for the regulation of prostitution were not at all limited to Brussels. In neighbouring France, two prostitutes committed suicide in Lyon in 1876 a few weeks apart in order to escape the hold of the local vice squad, whilst in Paris a young actress was attacked in the street by a man who convinced her that he was a vice squad officer. This event led to the launching of a 'true crusade against the vice squad' (Berlière, 1992, 8) and a first commission of inquiry. In March 1881, whilst the case of Louisa Hennessey was before the court in Belgium, a groundless accusation was made against a mother for soliciting and she was imprisoned for four days: new scandal, new resignations. And this went on until 1903, following the nth blunder and the nth false testimony from police officers, when a second commission of inquiry was established and whose work continued until 1906, ending in an indictment of the very existence of the vice squad.

Why were there so many scandals? The regulation supporters would only ever see individual shortcomings and therefore let all of the responsibility fall on the police officers concerned. At the very most they admitted that regular frequent contact with prostitutes was a constant source of temptation and that it was therefore necessary to choose men of exemplary integrity and to transfer them regularly. But in truth, the problem was much more serious and lay in the system itself. As we have seen, because the regulation advocated the practising of prostitution in brothels, it transformed the vice squad agents into the objective *allies* of the brothel keepers. As Berlière wrote, 'one cannot help but be struck by the curious role of accomplice/go-between played by the police who, through an unrelenting hunt and the bothersome aspects involved in their pursuit of 'free' prostitution, not only push women to work in brothels, but contribute to keeping them prisoners there by pursuing those who try to escape: in the case of an escape, the objective role of the police well and truly consists in getting the woman to return to the brothel or to agree to be sold to another brothel keeper as a reimbursement of the "debt"' (Berlière, 1992, 67). But an *ally* in the commercial register is called an *associate* and, in the criminal register, an *accomplice*. In Brussels, the public prosecutor's office did not dare to consider them openly as such in the end and they were therefore not *co-accused*, yet if it had not decided to have double standards, brothel keepers and police officers should have appeared together in the defendants' box. These long-forgotten decisions do not matter to us today; it is important however to remember that when a system brings those who enforce the regulations and some of those who are targeted by the regulations together as allies, the pressure for the objective alliance to transform into a subjective collusion soon becomes irrepressible. It does not take long for those involved to realise that it is in their best interest to develop their win-win relationship to its full potential. In Hegelian language, one might say that those involved become aware of the true nature of their ties and ascribe their subjectivities to the objectivity of their positions. The brothel keepers were able to maximise the exploitation of their staff, and the police officers – the big winners – were not only able to maximise the amount of information gathered about the clients, but also enjoyed financial advantages and perhaps benefits in kind. Indeed, 'the temptation for police officers to take the interests of the brothels or their residents in hand and to become their self-interested protectors was so great that very few were able to resist' (Berlière, 1992, 111). It is not surprising that after conducting his European study on the regulation of prostitution just before World War I, Abraham Flexner recommended to his sponsor John D. Rockefeller, to finance a complementary study on European police. As regards this particular point, the abolitionist quoted by Berlière (1992, 112) was right at the time when he wrote that 'the vice squad agents are in the front line in the world of procurers' and that if there is only one thing which the abolitionist movement may be credited with, it is that they understood, denounced and finally brought down this perverse system in which police officers became the main beneficiaries of regulated prostitution.

3. The persistence of the system and its effects during the inter-war period

In Brussels as well as in Paris, despite the validity of the denunciations of abuse perpetrated by the vice squad, the system remained practically unchanged until the end of the 1940s. This was because the concern for the basic rights of prostitutes mattered little in the face of the threatened disappearance of the human race brandished by regulatory doctors. The fact that the number of brothels continued to decrease inexorably throughout the world was apparently in line with a generalised change in the needs of men, which had already precipitated the disappearance of 2nd and 3rd class brothels in Brussels. Nevertheless, perhaps precisely because there were less of them, in certain countries brothels continued to function well with the more or less discreet protection of the police. The international inquiry conducted under the aegis of the League of Nations between 1924 and 1926 contains some interesting observations from this point of view.

When an undercover American police officer went to Brussels for two days at the end of November 1924, none of his unsuspecting informants mentioned any occurrences of corruption, but in France however, they were abundant: 'Here in Paris you can get anything you want from the cops for money' (League of Nations Archives, Paris, 5-6 December 1924, p. 49), said one of his most reliable informants; in Marseille, the madams told him of an arrangement with the police which was exactly the same as the one which had caused a scandal in Brussels: 'The madams contended, however, that although 21 years of age is the minimum prescribed by the Municipal Regulations, arrangements can be made with the police to allow minors to work in the houses. This arrangement, all admitted, is clandestine, and necessitates falsifying the inmate's [sic] age' (League of Nations Archives, Marseille, Summary, 1-14 January 1925, p. 24). In Lisbon, an American prostitute told him that if she tried to escape from the brothel, the madam would only have to inform the vice squad which would bring her back immediately: 'You don't know Lisbon! A girl in a house here has a hard time to get away. If I had money enough to leave and she (madam) wanted me to stay, all she would do [sic] is to tell one of the police and he would arrest me' (League of Nations Archives, Lisbon, 28-29 January 1925, p. 10). Finally, at the other end of the continent in the city of Constantinople, the members of the vice squad were also procurers or even brothel owners: 'In these districts practically every policeman on the beat has a prostitute who is giving him money and whose mistress she is [sic]. He gives her protection against other women [sic] and sometimes against official action. A high police official (...) has a woman [sic] and at the same time is part owner of two houses of prostitution [sic]. Many officials receive graft [sic] regularly from owners and inmates [sic] of houses of prostitution [sic]' (League of Nations Archives, Turkey, Appendix 18, 'Police Corruption').

After wondering whether police corruption was specific to Brussels, based on these statements, one may wonder whether it was specific to *Europe*. But no: there are identical examples in the police reports on the countries visited in Latin America.² One may safely conclude that national traditions do not count for much in the face of a systemic approach.

² Cf. MARQUIS Nicolas and CHAUMONT J-M., 'La police des mœurs comme maillon fort de l'appareil prostitutionnel en régime réglementariste. Essai d'application d'une analyse stratégique de réseau', forthcoming, 2011.

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