

Title—Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Diseases in the British Empire

Author—Philippa Levine

Year—2003

Categories: Gender, Sex/Sexuality, Empire, Colonialism

Place: British Empire

Time: 1840-1918

Argument Synopsis:

Philippa Levine's *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Diseases in the British Empire* provides an archival case study of colonial policy regarding prostitution and venereal disease before 1918, as well as a discussion of the relationship between colonialism, gender, and race. Her book is not organized chronologically, and attempts to make use of various historical approaches, including: political, administrative, military, cultural, and social history. To achieve this, Levine attempts primarily to craft a comparative work, focusing on four colonies, **India, Hong Kong, Queensland, and the Straits Settlements**. Levine notes that policies varied dramatically across colonies, and were profoundly shaped by how local government and military officials understood the local culture and customs.

Levine highlights prostitution control in the British colonies, where female prostitutes were identified as the principle source of disease; control of prostitution was implemented for the benefit of the British soldiers. She argues that control of prostitution and venereal diseases through colonial medicine was a central mechanism in the imposition of colonial power; colonial medicine served as an expression of the **project of modernity**. In her discussion of the laws put in place, she notes that only women were required to submit themselves for medical surveillance, as women were believed to be the source of the diseases; this underscores the role gender played in the colonial understanding of prostitution and venereal diseases. One of Levine's central arguments is the key role that sexuality played in politics prior to the twentieth century, which is demonstrated by the various public debates surrounding the venereal disease laws and regulated prostitution. The historical assumption, according to Levine, is that sexuality did not play a significant role in politics until the twentieth century, as it was improper to discuss sexuality in the public sphere. She counters this through documenting the routine flare-ups of debate in the metropole surrounding regulated prostitution and contagious disease laws; she also notes to irony in the need to publicly legislate issues that supposedly belonged in the private sphere.

Levine focuses on the effects of assumptions that racial difference existed and mattered, found amongst supporters and enemies of regulated prostitution. She posits that white racial superiority was fundamental to British colonial and national identity, and the British projected their civilizational superiority over the colonized. The continued practice of prostitution in the colonies became representative of their inferior status, according to Levine. Though the British may have held lofty claims of aiding colonial women, the net result of the colonial presence tended to be an exacerbation of existing inequalities. In the colonies, racial and sexual difference allowed for broader and more thorough regulation and sexual surveillance than in the metropole

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Sexuality played a key role in the politics of colonial Britain, not just in twentieth century
- Negative perception of female promiscuity contrasted against beneficial perception of male sexual desires