

Review on:

Dominika Kleinová: *Dcéry nočných ulíc: Fenomén prostitúcie na Slovensku v rokoch 1918-1938 / Daughters of Night Streets: The Phenomenon of Prostitution in Slovakia in the Years 1918-1938*
PhD Dissertation, University of Pardubice

Dominika Kleinová presents a pioneering study with “Daughters of Night Streets,” her doctoral thesis. Kleinová’s work is the first comprehensive scientific study of prostitution in interwar Slovakia (1918–1938). A combination of approaches allows her to combine a historical overview with an in-depth analysis of individual aspects of her subject. In doing so, she delivers an important contribution to European prostitution research, a field that has grown dynamically in recent years.

The work follows a clear structure: the introduction presents methods, sources, and an overview of scholarship on the topic. Here, one can see that Kleinová is familiar with international research.

The first part of the thesis also includes a chapter on the image of prostitution since ancient times. I sympathize with the idea of presenting prostitution as something that has always attracted people’s attention and promoted fantasies—and still does. Thus, I find the preface “Excursion into the Future” both smart and funny. While this small journey in time plays with imagination, perceptions, and commercial sex as a subject through which other issues are negotiated, the chapter “Images of Prostitution” presents instead a (well-known) history of



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prostitution. With regard to the focus of the study and the author's questions, I believe this chapter could be deleted without impact.

In contrast, the following chapter (Prostitúcia, prostitútky, pohlavné choroby a dobová literatúra) is of central meaning. Here, Kleinová presents the major issues associated with prostitution—health, crime, and the 'national body' — and the scientific explanations for those issues since the 19th century. Modes of argumentation from several disciplines developed were effective in variations throughout the 20th century (and some still are today). They also played an important role in the understanding of and policies toward prostitution in Austria-Hungary and in Czechoslovakia, which was founded in 1918.

Chapter two (Prostitúcia v medzivojnovom Československu) sets the political framework and leads to the turning point in Czechoslovakian legislation relating to prostitution, the 1922 Law on the "Prevention of Venereal Diseases." This law introduced an abolitionist approach to prostitution in Czechoslovakia. Kleinová appreciates the ambitious social and humanistic program that lay behind this law. However, like others before her (in the case of Czechoslovakia, Lenderová), she concludes that the goals of the law were not achieved. Above all, she emphasizes that the social promises associated with the end of regulation of prostitution were not—and could not be—fulfilled. Women in prostitution were left more or less empty-handed. In her dissertation, Kleinová measures the gap between the 1922 law and the existing reality using two local examples. These studies on Bratislava and Košice are revealing, showing that both cities resorted to regulatory measures to keep prostitution under control and contained.

I consider the best part of the work to be Chapter 3 (Prostitúcia v kontexte sociálneho vylúčenia), in which Kleinová interprets prostitution as a phenomenon of social exclusion. Here she justifies her explanations in the introductory theoretical/methodological chapter. Kleinová depicts prostitution as a system of multiple, mutually reinforcing exclusions: exclusion that is a consequence of disadvantages due to origin, that is enhanced in working life by gender inequality, and that also expresses itself in spatial segregation. It can be concluded that there is hardly any way out of the milieu in which people survive through prostitution, even if this way of making money was often a temporary one. In this

subchapter, Kleinová also introduces the actors who want to help women in prostitution, who take care of their health (understanding it as everyone's health), and who provide social support.

These actors form the transition to a chapter on discourses, in which contemporary debates about prostitution and women in prostitution are examined according to different subjects. Political responses to prostitution were formulated based on how women who earned their money through sex work were perceived—whether as victims or perpetrators, weak or dangerous. Finally, Kleinová does not forget to show that prostitutes have also always been the object of sensationalism and that the discourse on women in prostitution generated social practices that promoted and reinforced their social exclusion.

The last chapter is devoted to artistic reflections on prostitution. It deals with paintings, then with novels and films; there also follows a small excursus on homosexual prostitution. In this rather short section, Kleinová proceeds quite descriptively.

Dominika Kleinová has presented an impressive achievement with her doctoral dissertation. On the basis of archival material and contemporary publications, she has opened up a significant research topic that has remained largely unaddressed so far. In addition, she has integrated international research into her reflections and confidently applied approaches such as discourse theory and the concept of exclusion to her own research question. By taking different perspectives and not limiting herself to political history—to the administration and policing of prostitution—she succeeds in grasping prostitution as a phenomenon with many facets.

Kleinová herself emphasizes the difficulty of approaching the everyday experiences of women who earn their living providing sexual services. Since Timothy J. Gilfoye's "Prostitutes in the Archives," we are aware of the fact that their voices always remain the weakest and that we run the risk of reproducing the views of state institutions, "respectable society," or men regarding women in prostitution because we have no first-person documents at our disposal. Kleinová tries to compensate for this shortcoming by describing some everyday problems of women. Thus, she writes about dealing with unwanted pregnancy (contraception,

abortion) and—it seems to me—somewhat speculatively about prostitutes as mothers.

When I consider ways this dissertation could become a published book—and this book would certainly be met with great interest—then I can think of two aspects in particular that should be added. The first is the Slovak-Czech dimension: in the years Kleinová deals with, Slovakia was part of a state in the making, and this state-building process was also accompanied by conflicts that have their roots in cultural differences. This begs the question of whether these differences come to life in the implementation of the 1922 law. Can differences between the two parts of the republic be identified in discourses and practical policies? Finally, I wonder about the impact of the Slovak Catholic Church on prostitution politics.

The second point follows the same line of thinking. A published version of the text should feature a discussion of whether there was anything particular about Slovakia, in its time, that led to its treatment of prostitution. Or can we conclude that the failure of abolitionist hopes here was just one of many such failures during the interwar period? This discussion could well be based on the available literature, namely the 2022 special issue of *European Review of History* “Prostitution in Twentieth-Century Europe,” edited by Sonja Dolinsek and Siobhán Hearne. Last but not least, I would advise checking in the printed version whether terms originating from the sources are consistently used only in quotations and/or quotation marks.

However, these minor points of criticism and suggestions for publishing the manuscript do not change the overall positive impression of the work. Without a doubt, with “*Daughters of Night Streets: The Phenomenon of Prostitution in Slovakia in the Years 1918-1938*,” Dominka Kleinová has presented excellent scientific work on the level of a dissertation. Therefore, I strongly recommend that the University of Pardubice accept this work for defense and as a dissertation.

Munich, May 2023,

Christiane Brenner