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The Science of Redemption: Syphilis, Sexual Promiscuity, and Reformism in Revolutionary Mexico City

Katherine Bliss

In a speech he presented to a gathering of public health specialists at the 1926 Pan American Sanitary Congress in Washington, D.C., Mexico's representative, Dr. Bernardo Gastélum, singled out syphilis as the number one health problem confronting the revolutionary government. Gastélum, who was chief of the Departamento de Salubridad Pública in Mexico City, claimed that nearly two-thirds of the Mexican population was afflicted with the intractable venereal disease, which provokes both physical and mental complications. Nine years after the ratification of the Constitution of 1917, Gastélum worried that the capital city and showcase of the revolution's commitment to social welfare had a dismal record with respect to disease diagnosis and treatment. Mexico's largest metropolis, he noted, contained some 50 percent of the nation's population that suffered from the skin lesions, gastrointestinal disorders, and memory loss that marked syphilis's progression.¹ To make matters worse, congenital syphilis

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1. Bernardo J. Gastélum, "La persecución de la sífilis desde el punto de vista de la garantía social," *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* (1926, no. 4): 8. At the same time, he claimed that 60 percent of the country's population suffered from syphilis, as did 18,000 out of the approximately 20,000 prostitutes in the capital city. *Higienistas* may have based their claims that more than half of all Mexicans suffered from syphilis on random studies of blood taken at free venereal disease clinics. Nevertheless, while these blood

accounted for the majority of infant deaths before the age of one and killed many young adults between the ages of twenty-five and thirty. In addition, the disease caused blindness, deafness, and nerve degeneration among all ages of the population.²

Gastélum's statistics were certainly alarming, but to the assembled medical experts his analysis of the roots of the problem must have seemed dire indeed. In his speech, the public health director blamed two of the principal institutions upon which Mexican society was held to be based—the family and the Catholic Church—for promoting a kind of secrecy with respect to intimate physical relations that encouraged both promiscuity and the spread of incurable, sexually transmitted disease. Gastélum argued that Catholic “false modesty” fostered both a “cult of masculinity” and a sexual double standard that encouraged married men to pursue sexual relations with prostitutes in brothels, while their wives remained monogamous at home. Religiosity and prudishness, Gastélum said, further complicated the situation, for the embarrassment that many men and women associated with sexual intercourse prevented them from acknowledging disease symptoms or seeking treatment. Worse, this shame limited parents' willingness to talk to their children about sexual hygiene or teach them how to avoid contracting venereal disease altogether. In his concluding remarks, the *bigienista* urged the Latin American delegates gathered in Washington to follow revolutionary Mexico's example by promoting openness in sexual education and venereal disease treatment and by encouraging men and women to change their sexual behavior. He hoped that the other delegates would enact measures that would dissuade men from seeking the services of prostitutes, admonish all citizens to seek disease treatment, and encourage “fallen women” to heed the call of a different vocation. To halt the continued physical degeneration of the population and to ensure the economic development that Mexico and the other Latin American nations craved, it was necessary, Gastélum said, to strip sexuality of its cloak of privacy and situate it, instead, within the domain of health science.³

samples may have been easy to obtain, they may have also skewed the results by virtue of the self-selecting nature of the client population. In early-twentieth-century Paris and Chicago, health officials estimated that anywhere between 5 and 20 percent of the population carried syphilis. See Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990); and Suzanne Poirier, *Chicago's War on Syphilis, 1937–40: The Times, the Trib, and the Clap Doctor: With an Epilogue on Issues and Attitudes in the Time of AIDS* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995).

2. Gastélum, “Persecución de la sífilis,” 8.

3. Dr. Gastélum's discourse on disease and development was no doubt familiar to the delegates at the conference. If it echoed the Porfirian elite's emphasis on science,

Sexual morality and venereal disease were hardly the reasons rural peasants, urban workers, and other members of the various popular social movements in Mexico took up arms and waged revolution between 1910 and 1917. In fact, the popular image of a soldier was that of a man who enjoyed brothels as much as battlefields.⁴ But if syphilis and promiscuity were neither causes of revolution nor concerns of the average soldier, sexuality nevertheless became intimately associated with revolutionary ideology during the social renovation and state consolidation that characterized the period between 1917 and 1940. In the aftermath of armed conflict, a new class of reformers saw in political reconstruction the opportunity to use public institutions as spaces in which to engineer a revolutionary society redeemed of degenerate behaviors that they believed threatened Mexico's economic potential. Like the members of the popular armies, these reformers surely envisioned a Mexico cleansed of the Porfiriato's authoritarianism, corruption, and reliance on foreign investment. But they were also inspired by the scientific underpinnings of United States and European social legislation and sought to establish a revolutionary administration centered as much around new ideas of progress as around the more well-known popular goals of political participation, no reelection, and agrarian reform. In the aftermath of armed struggle, these reform-minded men and women enlisted in the state's bureaucracies, where they worked to implement the social provisions of the Constitution of 1917 by inaugurating new public assistance agencies to emphasize the revolution's commitment to a redeemed, scientific, and progressive society. In the clinics, reformatories,

modernity, and discipline in matters of political administration, it also recalled the issues public health activists in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay raised. For a discussion of "degeneration" and society, see, for example, William E. French, *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1996); Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996); Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1991); Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890–1940* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1995); and Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

4. See, for example, José Vasconcelos, *La Tormenta, segunda parte de "Ulises Criollo,"* 7th ed. (Mexico City: Ediciones Botas, 1948); and Mariano Azuela, *The Underdogs, a Novel of the Mexican Revolution*, trans. W. E. Munguía (New York: New American Library, 1963). See also Debra A. Castillo, *Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1998); María R. González, *Imagen de la prostituta en la novela mexicana contemporánea* (Madrid: Ed. Pliegos, 1996); and James B. Lynch Jr., "Orozco's 'House of Tears,'" *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 3 (1961).

and vocational schools that served as the new theaters of operation, these *bigienistas*, teachers, social workers, and criminologists became foot soldiers in the state's cultural revolution, constructing public institutions as places in which to sanitize and modernize social, sexual, and family relations in the new moral order.

In the historiography of twentieth-century revolution and social mobilization, the Mexican case has often presented researchers with an analytical dilemma. A violent conflict that mobilized new social groups and promoted such radical measures as land redistribution, the nationalization of natural resources, and the expulsion of the Catholic Church from public life, the revolution in Mexico, some have argued, nevertheless failed to completely change the social base of political power, implement a new method of national economic organization, promote the ascendancy of a left-oriented political party, or even articulate an explicitly feminist agenda, as had occurred in other well-known revolutionary cases.⁵ Therefore, in seeking to categorize the social legislation that public officials implemented during the "reform" phase of the Mexican Revolution between 1917 and 1940, some researchers have suggested that Mexican progressive politics shared more in common with social movements in Argentina, Chile, or the United States than with the acknowledged reform agendas in such venues as revolutionary Russia, China, or Cuba, which sought complete rupture with the past.

By focusing on the politics of gender, sexuality, and culture, this essay on the intersection of science and reformism presents an opportunity to reflect on the nature of revolution. While it may be true that the Mexican Revolution presented the public with a series of mixed signals regarding political and economic agendas, recent research on the cultural dimension of reform in Mexico shows that it is by examining state-society interactions through the lens of public ritual, leisure activities, family relations, and private life that the revolutionary dimension of reformism's goal to redeem the Mexican populace may be seen. Rather than castigating or segregating delinquents, as the Porfirians had done, revolutionary reformers sought to emphasize each Mexican's potential for

5. On theories of revolution, see, for example, Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979). On the debates over the nature of the Mexican Revolution, see Alan Knight, "The Mexican Revolution: Marxist? Nationalist? Or Just a 'Great Rebellion'?" *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 4, no. 2 (1985); see also, Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage: The Failure of Twentieth-Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992).

regeneration and rebirth.⁶ By exploring the goals, assumptions, and accomplishments of public reformers who assumed responsibility for laying the groundwork for this more virtuous cultural landscape, this essay highlights the new models of morality, authority, and social interaction that the revolution sought to impose at the most intimate levels of family and sexual relations.

At the broadest level, the Mexican state's effort to combat sexual promiscuity and venereal disease between 1917 and 1940 provides a lens through which to examine the cultural foundations of revolutionary social policy. This essay maintains that the new revolutionary social agencies that dealt with questions of disease treatment and prophylaxis, as well as with sexual education and moral redemption, provided reformers and revolutionaries alike with spaces in which to learn about and experiment with new models of gender, authority, and morality in a transitional regime. After asking why syphilis became such a source of concern to reformers and offering some explanations for how sexual promiscuity became a central issue around which competing ideas of revolution, class, and gender were debated, this article focuses on three issues: 1) why the idea of redemption came to play a part in the Mexican Revolution; 2) how the educational and medical projects to render sexuality more scientific rested on conflicting ideas about class and gender; and 3) the ways in which female prostitution and the debates over abolishing the legal status of sexual commerce shed light on the revolutionary agendas that reformers articulated. Ultimately, this article shows that Dr. Gastélum's scientific quest to redeem the promiscuous citizens of the revolutionary capital pried open the door through which the Mexican Revolution entered the private homes and bedrooms of Mexican men and women.

Diagnosing Decadence

Syphilis was not the number one cause of death in Mexico, but in 1926 public health specialists put it at the top of their list of concerns for several reasons.

6. Some recent examples include the following works: William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French, eds., *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1994); Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1994); Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1997); and Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995).

As Dr. Gastélum told the Pan American Sanitary Congress, syphilis threatened to clog the engines of the national economy because it debilitated society's most valuable members. Certainly other more infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, measles, and influenza, similarly afflicted young men and women in the prime of their productive and reproductive years.⁷ However, syphilis had unique properties that threatened the revolutionary nation, for it was highly contagious, difficult to diagnose, and almost impossible to treat. Moreover, although a mother could pass the disease to her child during the birth process, it was primarily through sexual intercourse that syphilis spread. In contrast to diseases that traveled through air, water, or food to infect "innocent" victims, syphilis usually moved from body to body through direct and deliberate contact, when one person's infected genital sores contaminated a sexual partner's skin. Among other things, the appearance of symptoms of syphilis demonstrated that the victim had engaged in sexual relations with someone who had more than one sexual partner. Between 1916 and 1925, public health specialists became concerned that the rapid spread of syphilis among the capital's population reflected the promiscuity and decadence of the Mexican people and foreshadowed the nation's economic ruin. Invoking medical, social, and psychological sciences, reformers structured investigations to obtain precise information on the incidence of the disease and to develop strategies for combating this pernicious threat.⁸

By 1926 Dr. Gastélum maintained that despite his department's best efforts, the statistics on syphilis in the capital were inadequate due to the "professional secret," which out of respect for the patient's privacy relieved doctors of the obligation to report syphilis cases to public authorities.⁹ But even assuming the numbers were imprecise, the department had collected enough data to show that the majority of Mexicans infected with *Treponema pallidum*, the bacterium that causes syphilis, lived in the nation's capital.¹⁰ More worri-

7. *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* (1925, no. 2): 248.

8. For an interesting analysis of the way that Mexican gynecologists used sick prostitutes to obtain information about women's bodies and reproductive capabilities, see Cristina Rivera-Garza, "Prostitutes, Sexual Crimes, and Society in Mexico, 1867–1930," paper presented at the conference "The Contested Terrains of Law, Justice, and Repression in Latin America," Yale University, Apr. 1997.

9. Gastélum, "Persecución de la sífilis," 7. In his study of prostitution in Mexico City between 1906 and 1908, Dr. Luís Lara y Pardo similarly complained about the poor data collection of the nation's public agencies. See Luís Lara y Pardo, *La prostitución en México* (Paris and Mexico City: Librería de la vda. de Ch. Bouret, 1908), 30.

10. Gastélum, "Persecución de la sífilis," 6.

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Fig. 1: Doctors recognized syphilis patients' concerns over privacy by announcing that they treated "enfermedades secretas," or "secret illnesses." Image from Juan Manuel Aurrecochea and Armando Bartra, eds., *Puros cuentos: historia de la historieta en México, 1934-1950* (Mexico City: Ed. Grijalbo, 1993), 36.

some to *higienistas*, however, were the results of a study that showed that many of these infections were of recent origin. Over the nearly four hundred years since syphilis had burst onto the medical scene, doctors had determined that the disease had four progressive stages, each characterized by varying degrees of contagiousness, latency, and physical and mental degeneration. Surveys of patients at one of Mexico City's antivenereal disease dispensaries had demonstrated that the vast majority of the 3,700 syphilitics examined there between 1921 and 1925 were in the first or second stages of infection.¹¹ Compounding this bad news was the sobering information that between 1916 and 1920 syphilis was the leading cause of miscarriage and stillbirth in the city.¹² Moreover, children who survived birth to a syphilitic mother often developed the disease symptoms later in life. A test at a local elementary school in the early 1920s, for example, showed that 80 percent of the students had reacted positively to a blood test for syphilis, which they had almost certainly acquired congenitally.¹³ Those who survived to adolescence were both more prone to succumb to infection than nonsyphilitics and more likely to die in their mid-to-late twenties.¹⁴ Amid this discouraging collection of information was the fact that syphilis increasingly claimed *capitalino* lives at all ages; deaths from

11. Adrian de Garay, "Los dispensarios del departamento: los dispensarios venéreo-sifilíticos," *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* (1925, no. 4): 91.

12. "Causas de muerte intrauterina de enero 1916 a la fecha," *ibid.* (1921, no. 1): 83.

13. Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia, Mexico City, Salubridad Pública, Inspección Anti-venérea (hereafter AHSSA-SP-IAV), box 5, file 1, p. 35.

14. Gastélum, "Persecución de la sífilis," 6.

syphilis increased from only 0.82 percent of all deaths in Mexico City in 1916 to 1.82 percent in 1925.¹⁵

That syphilis killed more and more Mexicans each year was a source of concern for health reformers, but most believed that it was the disease's difficulty to diagnose and treat that posed a greater threat to Mexico. Not only did syphilis mimic the symptoms of other diseases, but some patients lived with and exposed others to syphilis for years before seeking medical attention. The most precise means of making a diagnosis was the Wasserman reaction, but this invasive procedure, which required a blood sample, often discouraged patients from going to a doctor for help. And even after diagnosis, the science of treatment was haphazard at best. Since the fifteenth century, doctors had experimented with a wide variety of treatments to alleviate the often painful and embarrassing symptoms, which included virulent skin pustules that covered the body's extremities. For most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, physicians had relied on compounds of mercury bichloride and potassium iodide to treat their patients' sores, although it was not at all clear whether these preparations actually eliminated the disease from the body.¹⁶ In fact, no effective treatment against the disease was found until 1906, when the German immunologist Paul Ehrlich discovered that the compound arsphenamine, later marketed as Salvarsan, seemed to truly suppress the symptoms of syphilis.¹⁷ By the 1920s Mexican antivenereal disease clinics and *sifilicomios* alike used an improved, less potent form of the drug, Neo-Salvarsan, to treat the highly contagious, oozing lesions that characterized syphilis's progression.¹⁸

Beyond the facts that syphilis was difficult to diagnose and treat, an additional source of concern to *higienistas* was the fact that syphilis cases seemed to be concentrated among the capital city's working classes. Careful observation had led Mexican physicians, legislators, and social activists to conclude that in Mexico syphilis was a disease intimately associated with both sexual promiscuity and poverty, a fact that seemed to fly in the face of revolutionary imperatives to redeem the Mexican pueblo from the vices and unjust social conditions

15. Ibid.

16. Charles Clayton Dennie, *A History of Syphilis* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles Thomas Publishers, 1962), 103–26; and John Thomas Crissey and Lawrence Charles Parish, *The Dermatology and Syphilology of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

17. Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880*, expanded ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 40–41.

18. Samuel Villalobos, "Tratamiento de las enfermas sifilíticas en la Sala Armijo del Hospital Morelos," *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* (1925, no. 2): 85–87.



Fig 2: The wide availability of Neo-Salvarsan by the 1930s gave public health specialists the first seemingly successful attack against syphilis. Image from *Asistencia: Organo Oficial de la Benificencia Pública en el Distrito Federal*, año 1, no. 1 (15 Aug. 1934).

that many believed the Porfirian dictatorship had allowed to flourish.¹⁹ Wealthy *capitalinos* contracted syphilis, to be sure, but *higienistas* observed that

19. The concept of the revolution's duty to redeem the Mexican people appeared in reformist discourses between 1916 and 1940. For example, at the Constitutional Congress in 1916, delegate Federico Ibarra, an engineer from Jalisco, proposed deregulating prostitution, proclaiming, "Fellow delegates, I permit myself to ask you, in compliance with the revolutionary promises that we have made, to redeem our people, extricating them from the abject poverty in which they are immersed, fighting these vices"; see "16ª sesión ordinaria celebrada en el Teatro Iturbide la tarde del lunes 16 de diciembre de 1916," cited in Mexico, Comisión Nacional para la Celebración del Sesquicentenario de la Proclamación de la Independencia Nacional y del Cincuentenario de la Revolución Mexicana, *Diario de los debates del Congreso Constituyente* (Mexico City: Ediciones de la Comisión Nacional para la Celebración del Sesquicentenario de la Proclamación de la Independencia Nacional y del Cincuentenario de la Revolución Mexicana, 1960), 1:792. The head of the Campaña Anti-venérea spoke in similar terms in 1937. Regarding eliminating tolerated prostitution, Dr. Enrique Villela remarked: "The Mexican Revolution cannot and will not be detained! Full of accomplishments planted in its breast by dreams filled with promise, it will break fetishes, it will combat extreme prejudices, it will destroy the stronghold of illegally created interests and impregnate them with its own spirit, its dreams, and its goals of justice and dignity for all Mexican people, and once again it will bring light, truth and health to the unredeemed social masses!" See Villela, "La prostitución y las enfermedades venéreas en México," 1937, AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 5, file 1, pp. 57-58.

upper-class men were more likely than members of the city's lower classes to use a condom when having sexual intercourse with a prostitute, and that they were also more likely to seek the most advanced venereal disease treatment methods, such as diathermy, which were available only from high-priced, private doctors.²⁰ In fact, ignorance of symptoms, a failure to utilize prophylactic measures, and a refusal to seek appropriate medical attention characterized the general population's approach to sexually transmitted disease. Recognizing that many people feared that the cost of medical treatment would lead their families to financial ruin, the Departamento de Salubridad Pública had encouraged poor and working class *capitalinos* to seek medical attention by establishing inexpensive, anonymous venereal disease treatment clinics in popular class neighborhoods.²¹ Between 1921 and 1925, thousands of patients were successfully treated in the five public clinics scattered around the center of the city, although doctors referred difficult cases to public hospitals such as the Juárez, General, and Morelos, all of which were equipped to provide inpatient care. In both the clinics and the hospitals, however, physicians followed the same protocol with respect to disease treatment. This involved weekly injections of Neo-Salvarsan over a period of several months until the patient either showed signs of cure or the drug's toxicity caused the patient to develop one of the preparation's more debilitating side effects, which included excessive salivation, diarrhea, cardiac disturbances, and dehydration. In extreme cases, reaction to Neo-Salvarsan could even cause the patient's death.²²

Although the existence of public venereal disease treatment clinics may have alleviated the reluctance of some patients to be treated for such diseases, many reformers felt that a greater obstacle to syphilis eradication was the secrecy and privacy with which many Mexicans regarded sexual matters. Dr. Gastélum had told the gathered sanitary specialists in Washington that he deplored the "professional secret," which made syphilis difficult to track, but he and other health specialists recognized that this medical practice responded

20. Ramón Ojeda Falcón, "Campana Pro-Higiene Social," *Salubridad: Organó del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* 1, no. 1 (1930): 517; and Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN), Administración Pública de la República, Serie Presidentes: Lázaro Cárdenas (hereafter APR-LC), file 425.1/25.

21. Similar concerns over the correlation between syphilis and poverty marked antiveneral disease campaigns in the United States. See Poirier, *Chicago's War on Syphilis*, 140-41.

22. Villalobos, "Tratamiento de las enfermas sifilíticas," 85-87; and Dennie, *History of Syphilis*, 103-26.

to popular beliefs that sexual activity was both shameful and private. Many reformers, such as federal deputy Arturo Higareda of Jalisco, credited the Catholic Church and Porfirian dictatorship with having disseminated antiquated and prudish attitudes about the body and about human sexuality. In a speech he presented to the federal legislature in September 1917, Higareda deplored what he considered to be excessive vice and immorality in Mexico. He advocated education reform measures after first noting that “the majority of the representatives listening know that there are three things that have degenerated our poor classes: first, the clergy, which hides the truth and which exploits the poor; second, the government, which, being tyrannical, deprives them of learning, which is the bread of understanding and fountain of spirit; and in the third place, vices, which keep them from working.”²³

To address these concerns, in 1927 the Departamento de Salubridad Pública embarked on a massive propaganda campaign to educate Mexico City men and women about sexually transmitted diseases. In that year alone, department employees distributed some 630,000 pamphlets on syphilis; 430,000 on gonorrhea; and 251,000 on bodily hygiene. The pamphlets’ promoters hoped that this printed and graphic material would “break old, narrow-minded, and vicious popular customs and destroy the prejudices and beliefs that ignorance has engendered among the popular classes.”²⁴ Doctors reported that women, especially, had little information about sexual matters. Male magazine readers could gain detailed information about human anatomy and sexuality by ordering such privately distributed pamphlets as *Ignorancia Total*, which promised readers current and “scientific” information on sexual practices and pleasures in a language “that will flabbergast you!”²⁵ However, Mexican women rarely counted on accurate information about reproduction or sexual hygiene. In fact, many young women who found themselves seeking a doctor’s attention at the Hospital Morelos confessed that they did not understand how they came to be sick or pregnant, for no one had ever discussed sexuality with them.²⁶ To ensure that the topic of human sexuality would become a matter of open discussion, the Departamento de Salubridad Pública also underwrote and pro-

23. Mexico, Congreso, Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de los debates de la H. Cámara de Diputados*, XXVII Legislature, ordinary session, año 2, no. 3 (4 Sept. 1917).

24. AHSSA-SP, Servicio Jurídico (hereafter AHSSA-SP-SJ), box 43, file 1.

25. Advertisement in *Detectives: El Mejor Semanario de México*, 28 Mar. 1932, p. 4.

26. This assessment is based on a survey of several hundred case files regarding juvenile delinquency in Mexico City between 1926 and 1944, in AGN, Consejo Tutelar para Menores Infractores (hereafter AGN-CTMD).

duced radio programs that transmitted a “moralizing tendency of social renovation.” In addition, *higienistas* borrowed from the United States social hygiene movement and preceded mainstream cinema attractions with screenings of such films as the American-made *End of the Road*, which shocked audiences with grotesque images of untreated venereal disease acquired over a lifetime of vice.²⁷ Nurses and doctors, moreover, gave talks in factories, markets, and public gardens to promote open discussion of such issues as sexual hygiene and how to pick a healthy sexual partner.²⁸ And in case anyone missed these notices or meetings, officials placed posters on buildings and in parks that reminded picnickers and pedestrians alike that “syphilis is not a secret illness; if you don’t confess it, your children will show it.”²⁹ Social hygienists hoped that by saturating the city’s public spaces with graphic images and discourses about sexually transmitted diseases, men and women would be more likely to recognize a problem and seek treatment before they infected someone else.

The money and time public agencies devoted to the antisiphilis campaign demonstrates its importance to reformist conceptions of secular revolution and of cultural and economic progress. But although syphilis education, prevention, and treatment concerned Mexico’s *higienistas* and prompted them to action, the greatest obstacle to eliminating syphilis, many believed, was the population’s sexual promiscuity. The importance of making sexuality a scientific issue—and not a moral one—underscored these concerns. Shame and secrecy with respect to sexual matters kept men and women from seeking disease treatment and discussing sexual activity, but these impulses apparently did not discourage premarital or even extramarital affairs, as the rising rates of sexually transmitted infections in the capital attested. Venereal disease, most reformers felt, could be stopped dead in its tracks if Mexican men and women disciplined themselves

27. Mexico, Departamento de Salubridad Pública, Sección de Propaganda e Educación Higiénica, *Memoria de los trabajos realizados por el Departamento de Salubridad Pública, 1925–1928*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Departamento de Salubridad Pública, 1928), 249–50.

28. *Ibid.* Sexual education manuals used by public school teachers also emphasized the importance of selecting healthy sexual partners. Juan Soto, author of *La educación sexual en la escuela mexicana: libro para los padres y los maestros* (Mexico City: Ediciones Patria, 1933), encouraged young men to “avoid those friendly girls who are the most sought after for their youth and attractiveness, who look so fresh, who use all means to attract men to ‘play love,’ who try to pass as serious, married women and who, in reality, are nothing more than semiprostitutes, more dangerous because of the extent of their venereal disease infection than real prostitutes.” See Soto, *Educación sexual*, 152.

29. Advertisement in *Mujer: Revista para la Elevación Moral e Intelectual de la Mujer Mexicana*, 1 Mar. 1927, back cover.

and committed themselves to a judicious program of sexual restraint and prophylaxis. Reformers worried that even if prudishness could be addressed through education and the dissemination of public information, the promiscuity of Mexico's young population was a disease unto itself. In fact, sexual promiscuity became such a matter of concern that it occupied center stage in municipal legislative discussions, where city councilors developed strategies to analyze and regulate the matter. To understand the relationships between youth, sexuality, and social class, the capital's city councilors set up a special commission to explore Mexico City's *pulquerías*, cabarets, and dance halls, where lewd dancing predominated and sexual affairs were initiated.³⁰

Since the turn of the century, health inspectors had kept suspected prostitutes under surveillance and had noted the sexual habits of men who frequented the city's downtown brothels. But in the aftermath of revolution, the city council sought to broaden its base of information regarding the promiscuity of the capital's men and women.³¹ In 1918 the Mexico City ayuntamiento authorized a full investigation of those dance halls, cabarets, and theaters most notorious for the sexual activity that took place inside. Although this investigation was organized as an objective experiment in social science, the ayuntamiento's analysis of *capitalino* nightlife was shaped by male reformers' own ideas about class and decorum. Rather than rely on undercover inspectors, the city councilors themselves volunteered to form a task force to visit the "repugnant" sites. After several councilors declared their inexperience with respect to such venues—city councilor Miguel Gómez Noriega proclaimed, "I never go to a dance of that class!"—this corps of elected representatives joined inspectors from the city's Public Diversions division to report that the capital's popular dance halls were boisterous, unhygienic, and raucous settings in which men and women engaged in "obscene" behavior.³² But if the general public behaved indecorously in these venues, the task force found that greater blame for immorality should be imputed to both registered prostitutes and *clandestinas*. These women, who mastered such alluring moves as the shimmy and the *baile apache* to attract clientele before leading them to darkened corners or nearby

30. Ordinary session of the Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México, 15 Jan. 1918, published in *Boletín Municipal: Órgano del Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México* 3, no. 2 (29 Jan. 1918): 57.

31. Reports of Inspectors Herrera and Galindo to the Inspección de Sanidad, 1907, AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 2, file 27.

32. Ordinary Session of the Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México, 15 Jan. 1918, published in *Boletín Municipal: Órgano del Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México* 3, no. 2 (29 Jan. 1918).

alleyways to transact their business with relative privacy, provided a deplorable example for Mexico's young men and women who attended the dances with their families.³³ Inspectors were particularly worried that with the city's prostitutes as their dance instructors and guides, young girls and boys who visited the cabarets and theaters would form the wrong impressions about appropriate female behavior.

Given this situation, official investigation of vice in Mexico City centered around the figure of the prostitute and her role in both spreading disease and in fomenting sexual activity. A symptom of the disciplinary failures of the Mexican people, the prostitute warranted special scrutiny for her sexual contact with Mexico's youth and future. Reformers advocated using the scientific techniques of sociology, medicine, and psychology to understand and then treat both the adult and the adolescent dimensions of the problem.

The Pathology of Promiscuity

Between 1918 and 1926, city councilors and federal legislators who debated reform legislation remarked on the astonishing presence of prostitutes in the capital's political and commercial center.³⁴ Neighborhood associations and parents groups likewise complained about the presence of prostitutes on city streets.³⁵ Even visitors to the city expressed their concern over the numbers, visibility, and youth of the capital's "fallen women."³⁶ By the time Dr. Gastélum made his dire announcements about syphilis at the 1926 sanitary congress, public officials believed that there were several thousand registered prostitutes in Mexico City, a metropolis of approximately one million people.³⁷ For the men and women who assumed responsibility for reform in Mexico, prostitutes became a ready source of information about the promiscuity epidemic in Mexico, for they were licensed to be sexually active.

33. Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México (hereafter AHCM), *Diversiones Públicas-Bailes*, vol. 823, file 4.

34. For example, see Mexico, Congreso, Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de los debates de la H. Cámara de Diputados*, XXVIII Legislature, ordinary session, año 2, no. 55 (12 Nov. 1919).

35. Junta de obreros y vecinos to Rafael Silva, head of the Departamento de Salubridad Pública, 1929, AHSSA-SP-SJ, box 17, file 19.

36. Ramón Barron (Indiana Harbor, Ind.) to Lázaro Cárdenas, 1940, AGN-APR-LC, file 525.3/1.

37. Gastélum, "Persecución de la sífilis," 6.

Prostitution had been a regulated trade in Mexico since the late nineteenth century. Under the auspices of the federal *Reglamento para el ejercicio de la prostitución*, health authorities licensed nonvirgin women over the age of 18 to engage in sexual commerce within a licensed apartment or brothel.³⁸ Reglamentation had been originally incorporated into Mexican sanitary legislation during the French occupation from 1863 to 1867, when imperial administrators imposed Parisian sanitary codes on Mexico City. After the French abandoned their imperial fantasies to the liberal cause, Mexican officials adopted this legislation, modifying it only slightly as they renewed the rules regarding prostitution in 1879, 1891, 1898, 1904, 1914, and 1926.³⁹ The *Reglamento*, based on the assumption that men were incapable of practicing monogamy, was designed to limit the spread of venereal diseases among Mexico City's population. Because authorities believed that men would inevitably seek out extramarital affairs, they advocated registering the women who catered to this demand for sexual services. Underlying the legislation was the belief that it was appropriate to hold a group of promiscuous women responsible for the health of the larger community. Reglamentation—as opposed to repression, in which sexual commerce was illegal, or abolition, in which it was deregulated, in effect neither legal nor illegal—required that women who regularly had sexual relations with more than one man have their photographs taken, give their names and addresses to sanitary authorities, and undergo periodic gynecological examinations to check for signs of syphilis or other contagious genital afflictions. Women were registered as either *en comunidad*, which meant that they worked in a brothel, or as *aisladas*, which meant that they worked alone. Depending on the location of the brothel or the *aislada's* apartment, women were categorized in one of four classes.⁴⁰ Those who wished to operate brothels as *matronas* did so by licensing their houses with municipal authorities.⁴¹ Women who failed to register with authorities but who nevertheless had sexual relations with several men were considered to be illicit prostitutes and were known as *clandestinas*.

A study conducted at the turn of the century had shown that on the eve of

38. "Proyecto de reglamento de mujeres públicas. Reglamento para la prostitución en México," 1867, AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 1, file 1.

39. Ricardo Franco-Guzmán, "El régimen jurídico de la prostitución en México," *Revista de la Facultad de Derecho en México* 85–86 (1972).

40. Ibid. The prostitutes' registration photographs have been the subject of several analyses. See, for example, Patricia Massé, "Photographs of Mexican Prostitutes in 1865," *History of Photography* 20, no. 3 (1996); and Sergio González Rodríguez, "Cuerpo, control y mercancía: la fotografía prostibularia," *Luna córnea* 4 (1994).

41. AHCM, Sanidad, vol. 3891, file 34.

revolution there were nearly ten thousand women registered as prostitutes in Mexico's capital city.⁴² However, that number had diminished considerably over nearly a decade of political conflict and bureaucratic disorder. But between 1925 and 1927, authorities had reinvigorated the campaign to register promiscuous women, and by 1928 counted nearly five thousand of these women in the capital.⁴³ But revolution did more than merely challenge bureaucratic record keeping, for it also shaped the practice of sexual commerce in important ways. As a result of the conflict's disruption of rural life, thousands of children were orphaned or abandoned, and in the aftermath of revolution many young girls left their villages to join distant relatives in Mexico City or to find work in an urban setting. Some, who had little education, no job skills, and few social contacts in the metropolis, became involved in low-paying work such as waitressing, domestic servitude, or factory apprenticeship, where they encountered the sexual advances of male coworkers and occasionally accepted their money in exchange for sexual intercourse. On their own in a city alive with dance halls, theaters, movie houses, and fiestas, other young girls developed social lives with local men and initiated sexual relations with them, often when as young as 13 or 14 years old. Officials estimated that there were at least 15,000 *clandestinas* in Mexico City, including teenage girls.⁴⁴ These young women served the state as research subjects in its quest to understand the pathology of promiscuity in Mexico, for when they were apprehended they were sent to the public reformatory for delinquent juveniles, where case workers interviewed them, doctors measured them and took blood samples, and psychologists administered intelligence tests to determine their vices and their potential for redemption.

Nowhere did revolutionary concerns over understanding the pathology of promiscuity and the science of redeeming Mexico's young population intersect more directly than in the Mexico City juvenile court and correctional facilities. Founded in 1926, the Tribunal para Menores Infractores was modeled on the city of Chicago's court for adolescent delinquents.⁴⁵ Despite the influence of

42. Lara y Pardo, *Prostitución en México*, 20–21.

43. "Sección de identificación y registro: inscripciones," *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* (1927, no. 3): 87.

44. Gastélum, "Persecución de la sífilis," 6.

45. See the study of the Tribunal para Menores in Carmen Madrigal, *Los menores delincuentes: estudio sobre la situación de los Tribunales para Menores: doctrina y realidad* (Mexico City: Ediciones Botas, 1938). On earlier approaches to the reform of young girls in the United States, see Ruth M. Alexander, *The Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995); Barbara M. Benzel, *Daughters of the*

United States urban progressivism, however, the Mexican court had a nationalistic mission to “regenerate” minors who broke the law and to prepare them for full participation in a revolutionary society. To do so, it employed legions of social workers, psychiatrists, doctors, criminologists, and child development experts to compile information on the social and medical landscapes of deviance in Mexico. In the reform process, the state assumed total authority over the bodies and souls of the city’s sexually active young women.

Funded by the Federal District, the tribunal was administered by the newly formed Departamento de Readaptación y Prevención Social. In accordance with the department’s goals, the Consejo Tutelar para Menores Infractores oversaw the medical and educational agencies that supported the court.⁴⁶ Its mission to redeem and reincorporate delinquents into Mexican society explicitly rejected the tenets of Porfirian criminology, based on the “science” of heredity, that held that delinquents were inherently degenerate and took a pessimistic view of the potential of delinquents for social rehabilitation.⁴⁷ Revolutionary administrators rejected this approach and instead envisioned the Mexico City tribunal as an institution with dual analytical and instructive missions. It was to be a medical and social laboratory in which court employees

State: A Social Portrait of the First Reform School for Girls in North America, 1856–1905 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983); and Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995).

46. The first juvenile court in Mexico was established in 1923 in the state of San Luís Potosí. See Genia Marín Hernández, *Historia de las instituciones de tratamiento para menores infractores en el Distrito Federal* (Mexico City: Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 1991), 21. See also Madrigal, *Menores delinquentes*; and Manuel Ibarguengoytia, “Bosquejo histórico de la delincuencia infantil” (Lic. thesis, Escuela Libre de Derecho, Mexico City, 1941).

47. See, for example, Julio Guerrero, *La génesis del crimen en México* (Paris and Mexico City: Librería de la vda. de Ch. Bouret, 1901); Lara y Pardo, *Prostitución en México*; and Carlos Rougmanac, *Crímenes sexuales y pasionales: estudio de psicología morbosa* (Paris and Mexico City: Librería de la vda. de Ch. Bouret, 1906). The science of hereditarianism was influenced by the work of the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso; see Cesare Lombroso, *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911). For analyses of reform discourses regarding crime and delinquency in Porfirian Mexico, see Robert Buffington, “The Discourse on Mexican Criminality,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 9 (1993); and Pablo Piccato, “El discurso sobre la criminalidad y el alcoholismo hacia el fin del porfiriato,” in *Hábitos, normas y escándalo: prensa, criminalidad y drogas durante el porfiriato tardío*, eds. Ricardo Pérez Montfort, Alberto del Castillo, and Pablo Piccato (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 1997).

could study the cultural and biological origins of sexual delinquency in Mexico, and a school in which reformers could impress the future generation with core revolutionary values of secularism, anticlericalism, and productivity.

The Tribunal para Menores proved to be an ideal laboratory in which to study the most frustrating of revolutionary social problems: sexual promiscuity and its complement, juvenile prostitution.⁴⁸ Girls apprehended as *clandestinas* by Inspección de Sanidad police were sent to the Hospital Morelos for medical treatment before being interned at the Escuela de Corrección in Coyoacán. Although the *Reglamento* made sexual commerce a legal occupation for women over age 18, it mandated that public officials prevent underage prostitutes from continuing in the activity as adults. The *Reglamento* thus required apprehended girls to experience reformatory life. Prostitutes were not the only residents of the girls reformatory, for the law subjected female thieves, murderers, and vagrants to disciplinary action as well. Nevertheless, by the 1930s juvenile prostitutes constituted some 50 percent of the resident population of the Escuela de Corrección.⁴⁹

Among the tribunal's most important tasks was to determine the origins of promiscuous deviance among Mexico City delinquents. Social science and medical science complemented each other in this undertaking, for reformers judged an understanding of Mexican family relations, nutrition, and endocrinology to be essential to evaluating the delinquent's mental state and potential for redemption. Rejecting Porfirian hereditarianism, the court's directors subscribed to the theory that an adolescent's propensity to commit deviant social acts resulted not from inherent immorality but from the peculiar circumstances of the delinquents's social and economic environment. As the pri-

48. Psychiatrists, educators, and criminologists associated with the tribunal also used their research to present analyses of Mexican sexual promiscuity at national and international conferences. See Raúl González Enríquez, "Términos generales para la exploración sexológica en los niños"; Esther Chapa, "Consideraciones acerca de las primeras experiencias sexuales de las niñas proletarias"; and Juan Soto, "La educación sexual antes de la edad escolar," all in Pan American Child Congress, *Memoria del VII Congreso Panamericano del Niño, reunido en la Ciudad de México del 12 al 19 de octubre de 1935*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1937).

49. Madrigal, *Menores delinquentes*, 19–20. The correctional schools for boys and girls were originally institutions designed to house orphans and abandoned children, but they began accepting delinquents in the late nineteenth century. While this practice suggests that school officials had recognized the links between abandonment and delinquency, the institution they ran functioned in the mid-to-late nineteenth century as a holding center, a place that kept abandoned children off the street and segregated delinquents from the public in order to protect society.

Hablan los Números



Los datos anteriores se refieren sólo a asuntos que conocieron los Juzgados de Primera Instancia del país y de ellos se advierte que en 1933 el número de mujeres presuntas delinquentes fue de 2836, reduciéndose tal cifra en 1936 a 3,055. La reducción de 781 personas para 1936, muestra que se ha atenuado la delincuencia en el sexo femenino.

Fig 3: This Mexico City newspaper cartoon demonstrates official efforts to chart fluctuating levels of female delinquency, often equated with promiscuity. Although women could be arrested for theft, murder, and assault, as well as other criminal activities, in the 1920s and '30s criminologists and residents of Mexico City alike tended to associate female delinquency with the prostitute's sexually aggressive posture. Image from *El Nacional* (Mexico City), 19 Feb. 1939.

mary reason the majority of the girls had been interned at the Escuela de Corrección, prostitution gravely concerned the court's directors. The institution's directorship and social workers devoted their efforts to determining the ways in which self-esteem, sexual promiscuity, and abusive male-female relations impacted lower-class women's propensity to engage in sexual commerce.⁵⁰ In a speech she presented to the Sociedad Mexicana de Eugenesia in 1940, Dr. Matilde Rodríguez Cabo, the psychiatrist, socialist, feminist, and head of the Federal District's Departamento de Readaptación y Prevención Social, emphasized the state's special responsibility to redeem adolescent prostitutes. Addressing the issue of capitalism and the prevalence of a double sexual

50. Beatriz González Pérez, "El problema de la prostitución en México" (Lic. thesis, Facultad de Jurisprudencia, Escuela de Trabajo Social, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1940); Madrigal, *Menores delinquentes*, 17; Marín Hernández, *Historia de las instituciones*, 21; Matilde Rodríguez Cabo, "El problema sexual de las menores mujeres y su repercusión en la delincuencia juvenil femenina," *Criminalia* 6, no. 10 (1940); and Mercedes Pons y Galindo, "Protección del menor en México" (Lic. thesis, Facultad de Derecho, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1935), 47-48.

standard in Mexico, Rodríguez Cabo argued that Mexican girls living in poor or working-class neighborhoods suffered in the nation's capitalist, male-dominated society. It was this society, she said, that paid women low wages and subjected girls to sexually violent environments in which acquaintances, relatives, and family friends abused them with impunity.⁵¹ Rodríguez Cabo concluded that it was no wonder so many Mexican girls turned to prostitution, and she justified orienting school programs to meet the needs of these girls while also studying the environmental and social causes of sexual commerce.

The tribunal's fleet of social workers undertook a minute and scientific examination of the origins of crime in Mexico City. Mediating between the inmate population, their families, and the court's judges and teachers, social workers carried out interviews with the families of offenders to compile a social history document that became the core of each inmate's file.⁵² These court employees, men and women who had studied at the national university's new *Escuela de Trabajo Social*, mainly circulated through urban *colonias* and the Federal District's rural outskirts, although they sometimes traveled to the provincial family homes of delinquents to prepare their analysis of a particular client's trouble with the law.⁵³ Mexico's *Escuela de Trabajo Social* had opened shortly after the revolution. Over time the career of social work had attracted primarily young, unmarried, educated women, although this profession also counted some older widows and men among its members.⁵⁴ Once the sanitary police had apprehended the girls, these men and women represented the first line of contact between young women and the state. In her capacity as head of the *Departamento de Readaptación y Prevención Social*, Dr. Matilde Rodríguez Cabo emphasized the secular and nonmoralistic nature of social work, warning social workers against allowing a "bourgeois morality" or "prudish religiosity" to influence their interaction with delinquents accused of sex crimes.

51. Rodríguez Cabo, "Problema sexual de las menores mujeres," 544–45.

52. This activity was carried out under the authority of Art. 16 of the Constitution of 1917, which protected the privacy of an individual in his home. Sanitary and judicial considerations, however, permitted the state to enter the home with written authorization from a judge.

53. The trend toward professionalized social work has been the subject of several studies. See Daniel J. Walkowitz, "The Making of a Professional Identity: Social Workers in the 1920s," *American Historical Review* 95 (1990); and Regina G. Kunzel, "The Professionalization of Benevolence: Evangelicals and Social Workers in the Florence Crittenden Homes, 1915 to 1945," *Journal of Social History* 22 (1988).

54. Robert C. Jones, *Schools of Social Work in Latin America* (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, Division of Labor and Social Information, 1943), 16–17.

Nevertheless, the relationships that social workers maintained with offenders and their families were marked by tension.⁵⁵

Although Rodríguez Cabo emphasized the secular and scientific nature of the social workers' mission, the reports that these workers submitted to judges and court administrators were not immune to bias. As the social workers analyzed the variety of reasons girls became sexually active or entered prostitution, their own gender and class perspectives often came into play. For example, female social workers were more likely than men to focus on conflictive mother-daughter relationships to explain a girl's delinquency, whereas men tended to focus on the public world in which the apprehended prostitutes had lived and worked. Social worker Esperanza Balmaceda de Josefé described one girl's situation in the following way: "I suspect that a situation of conflict was established between her and her mother, aggravated by the poverty that forced the girl to run away."⁵⁶ These comments reflected a sensitivity to the complicated influences of financial difficulties, poor education, and family relations that often led to female delinquency. Regarding Anita Morales, who after being abandoned by her soldier boyfriend began receiving clientele at the centrally located Hotel Santo Domingo, Balmaceda reported that "the girl could not find any other means of earning a living than prostitution, which she practiced for two months."⁵⁷

In contrast to women like Balmaceda, male social workers who dealt with girl prostitutes typically obtained information that related to the public dimension of sexual commerce. Having spent time in Mexico City's brothels to collect precise data about the lifestyle inside, male social workers such as Miguel Haro and Enrique Catalán presented details about girls' sexual practices that female social workers rarely broached in their case study reports. Miguel Haro, for example, frequently discussed the lesbian relationships that girls developed in brothels or on the street.⁵⁸ And in his reports to the Tribunal, social worker Enrique Catalán provided analyses of the sexual proclivities and manners of young prostitutes. After visiting one inmate's brothel, for example, he noted that the girl employed there was "very foul-mouthed," "completely lazy," and "perverted."⁵⁹

55. Rodríguez Cabo, "Problema sexual de las menores mujeres," 544.

56. AGN-CTMI, box 31, file 9018. By agreement with the directors of the AGN and in the interest of preserving the confidentiality of juvenile offenders and their families, I have changed the names of those whose files I have consulted and cited.

57. *Ibid.*, box 2, file 4020.

58. *Ibid.*, box 3, file 5443; box 4, file 6885.

59. *Ibid.*, box 33, file 9560.

The class biases of social workers also informed their analyses of the delinquent's family life. Men and women such as Balmaceda, Catalán, and Haro identified malignant characters and landscapes in the delinquents' worlds in accordance with preconceived notions of "proper" family life—an urban, two-family, multiroom household. They likewise maintained a sense of the city as a dangerous, sophisticated, and corrupt space, arguing that parents living in Michoacán or Oaxaca were not adequately prepared to deal with daughters who had become accustomed to life on the dangerous streets of the national capital. Enrique Catalán noted of one girl that "this environment is completely dangerous, and if she is not already completely perverted, if she stays in it, she will be."⁶⁰ And a female social worker named Elsa Méndez described one girl who had fled her family's home in Morelia by noting that "perhaps she is not a bad girl, but she has become accustomed to freedom and says she wants to look for work; she does not exhibit any repentance for the life she has led."⁶¹ For the most part, social workers believed it was better to place the girl in a state reformatory than return her to her parents, who they believed had often created an unstable domestic environment in the first place. Regarding a girl from Yucatán, who had family in the Federal District, another social worker had commented that the young woman had only a sister and a brother-in-law in the city. These people loved her, but were "incapable of succeeding in reforming her because she's a tough one to deal with and they have neither the education nor the boundless kindness to help her."⁶²

The conviction that the revolutionary state could be a better parent and authority figure than a nontraditional family permeated the "social history" analyses of court workers. In these documents single fathers as well as step-fathers received special scrutiny for their incapacity to raise daughters in a complex urban center. When Enrique Catalán wrote to the secretary general of the Tribunal para Menores regarding a particular case, he blamed the father for the prostitution of his street-vendor daughter in hotels and on the street. Catalán complained that

the father of the girl, an individual without scruples or any concern for the education of his children, came to this court by previous appointment, and when we told him the reason his daughter was here, he said, without demonstrating any concern, that the girl was indebted to him, that she was a disobedient, whimsical girl with tendencies toward

60. *Ibid.*, box 34, file 9827.

61. *Ibid.*, box 33, file 9451.

62. *Ibid.*, box 32, file 9467.

vagrancy. But in my thinking the only person to blame for what has happened is the father, who lacks not only character but, more than anything, interest in the education of his children. He has abandoned them within the home environment, point of proof being that the siblings of the girl are also delinquent and are now at the Escuela de Orientación.⁶³

Carmen García, another social worker, wrote of a different case that

the girl has lived a libertine life. After the death of her mother she fought constantly with her father; part of this was her fault but part of it was brought about by his lack of caring for his children and his low morality, exemplified by the fact that he brought different women home with him and basically authorized the girl to have sexual partners and to bring them to the house.⁶⁴

But if nontraditional families were of concern to tribunal social workers, the spatial organization of the lower-class Mexican home was the greatest source of anxiety. Court documents from the 1920s and '30s fixated on the bedroom and on the courtyard of the *vecindad* as spaces in which suspected "secret," "immoral," and dangerous activities took place. By the twentieth century, the *vecindad*, or tenement house, had become a convenient form of urban living, as it provided families with private rooms as well as access to common resources such as water. In 1900 *vecindades* were located in all sectors of the city, though tenement-style residences were concentrated in the metropolitan center and in the migrant and working-class neighborhoods such as Cuauhtemotzin and the Colonia Guerrero, which most prostitutes called home.⁶⁵ Some of these apartment settings had been expressly built for the purpose of providing compact housing, but others had been established in converted colonial hospitals, convents, and palaces. With a wall and one door to the street, the *vecindad* opened onto a common courtyard and the private apartments all opened onto this common space.

Social workers understood that these courtyards were spots that blended the private and public nature of domestic life in potentially explosive combina-

63. *Ibid.*, box 24, file 7326.

64. *Ibid.*, box 24, file 7348.

65. Mexico, Secretaría de Fomento, Colonización e Industria, *Censo y división territorial del Distrito Federal verificados en 1900* (Mexico City: Oficina Tip. de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1901), 5–9.

tions. Public patios might provide common resources for struggling urban families, but social workers suspected that *vecindad* janitors, who tended to be widows, took advantage of the public dimension of residential life to corrupt the morals of young local girls, recruit them into prostitution, and call clientele in from the street while parents were away.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, it was the private spaces of the *vecindades* that most concerned Mexican social workers. The least expensive apartments had only one room, and Catalán, Balmaceda, Haro, and Rodríguez Cabo all worried that this secluded space served as a delinquent venue. Hot and poorly lit areas that allowed little air to filter through, these spaces provided crucial privacy to families comprised of parents, children, and relatives who shared blankets and sleeping accommodations. Social workers worried that it was in these rooms that minors observed their elders engaging in sexual intercourse and performed these same activities with their friends. The student of social work Gustavo Vázquez noted that

given the number of people who out of necessity are compelled to sleep in these rooms, it is easy to understand how they become spaces in which people present themselves with all their passions and defects; in them we have seen the most terrible crimes committed, the murders of good and uninvolved bystanders, the most disgraceful sexual relationships . . . as well as hatred, vengeance, and intrigue.⁶⁷

In his own thesis, a fellow student corroborated Vázquez's opinion. Social worker Jesús Martínez Castro wrote that "I cannot comprehend, because I ask myself if it is even possible to think, never mind ascertain, how people can live in the conditions in which this group of people with whom we are concerned live."⁶⁸

For social workers and criminologists, the lower-class Mexican home was an untrustworthy social and political unit that exposed the nation's young citizens to the very vices and behaviors that the revolution had promised to remedy. It was the state's duty, therefore, to develop a prescription not only to

66. AGN-CTMI, box 2, file 1806.

67. Gustavo Vázquez, "Etiología de la delincuencia infantil en México: ideología que debe sostener el órgano que conozca de las faltas cometidas por menores" (Lic. thesis, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1940), 11.

68. Jesús Martínez Castro, "Delincuencia juvenil" (Lic. thesis, Facultad de Derecho, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1936), 9.

redeem delinquents but also to reform the authority figures and social landscapes that had shaped them.

Prescription for Redemption

Sanitary and penal law made adolescent girls the easiest group of sexually promiscuous *capitalinos* for reformers to study because by engaging in a practice for which they were legally underage, they risked apprehension and becoming wards of the state. Whether or not a young girl had ever set foot in a brothel or accepted money in exchange for sexual intercourse, her sexual experience subjected her to state intervention, and her social, economic, sexual, and family history provided the revolution's foot soldiers with a wealth of information regarding metropolitan venues that harbored vice. The legality of female prostitution made gender, like social class, a critical factor in the development of reform strategies; it meant that the state could either assume custody of underage girls or regulate the behavior of women. Nevertheless, if educators and doctors could determine "remedies" for "wayward femininity" by virtue of the fact that prostitutes were their captive research subjects, they failed to fully analyze the components of male sexual deviance in the same manner. In fact, if female sexual promiscuity was seen as the product of a deviant society, male sexual promiscuity was seen as natural, if disagreeable. Educators, legislators, and criminologists based their prescription for redemption on these gendered understandings of deviance and sexuality.

For juvenile girls, the medical report, like the social case history, was an essential component of the court's analysis of the etiology of deviance in Mexico. Interviewers like Enrique Catalán and Esperanza Balmaceda speculated about a girl's "repentance" or potential for "redemption," but it was the court doctor's medical assessment that truly determined whether or not a young prostitute could be "cured" of her promiscuity. If social workers noted family vices, court doctors noted the medical problems that could explain the girls' delinquent tendencies. Insofar as doctors and social workers communicated about particular inmates, they reflected distinct understandings of the relationship between heredity, the biological basis of disease, and criminal vice.⁶⁹ For example, the fact that a prostitute's mother had herself been a prostitute, had been hospitalized for syphilis treatment, or had lived with several different lovers, was taken by social workers to indicate the hereditary implications of

69. Pons y Galindo, "Protección del menor en México," 50.

sexual deviancy. Catalán, for example, pointed to the fact that a certain girl's mother had children with several different men to explain the daughter's "great affection for the masculine sex."⁷⁰

Medical doctors, however, concerned themselves with the psychological and even chemical abnormalities of prostitutes. A faith in the explanatory powers of endocrinology underpinned their analyses of Mexican delinquency, for doctors believed that the thyroid and sex hormones, in particular, had strong implications for female criminality in general, and for prostitution in particular. In a revision of nineteenth-century ideas that the prostitute's body was inherently degenerate, Dr. Alberto Saavedra, director of the Sociedad Mexicana de Eugenesia, noted that much of the nation's female delinquency could be attributed to "hyperovarian function"—a malady in which a girl's body produced too much estrogen and progesterone, causing her to be more sexually inclined than the normal woman. Medical practice further held that this problem could be easily cured through pharmaceutical intervention.⁷¹ Doctors treated prostitutes' diseases that were evidence of poverty and malnutrition, such as gingivitis, cavities, and gastrointestinal infections, but they also worked to determine the hereditary and biological components of vice that might be remedied through medical intervention. According to Dr. Raggi Ageo, a criminologist popular in Mexican penal circles, endocrine studies opened up new scientific and "modern" explanatory avenues for specialists in the sociology and biology of female delinquency. According to him, "certain female behavior . . . incomprehensible to our grandparents, were attributed to evil spirits, but now there is a therapy for femininity that seeks to regulate and normalize a woman's psyche, altered in many cases by purely biological factors, previously attributed to bad upbringing or whimsy and justified with the familiar diagnosis of hysteria."⁷² In this spirit doctors frequently diagnosed prostitutes as suffering from "hyperovarian function," which explained their sexual behavior, and from hypothyroidism, which explained their "laziness" and disinclination to find honorable work; they prescribed surgeries and pharmaceutical preparations to remedy these conditions and to cure young Mexican women's bodies of wayward sexual tendencies.

The understanding that poverty and poor education were correlated with

70. AGN-CTMI, box 29, file 8213.

71. "Síntesis del curso de eugenesia dedicado a trabajadores sociales," *Eugenesia* (Mexico City) n.s. 1, no. 2 (Dec. 1939): 9. *Eugenesia* was published by the Sociedad Mexicana de Eugenesia.

72. Armando Raggi Ageo, "La mujer y el delito," *Criminalia* año 7, no. 7 (1 Mar. 1941): 444–45.

precocious sexual activity that led to prostitution shaped reform efforts for women both over and under eighteen. After they had performed social, medical, and psychological evaluations on juvenile girls, for example, court administrators removed girls who showed a potential for reform from “infected” family or occupational situations and placed them in the Escuela de Corrección, where the curative work of revolutionary redemption could be carried out.⁷³ A sense that these girls could and should be molded into virtuous revolutionary citizens permeated the reformatory. The science of redeeming young, sexually active girls included the architectural, educational, and vocational components of this institution.

Revolutionary theories of justice emphasized the state’s duty to redeem delinquents by placing them in moral settings that emphasized education over punishment; the tribunal laid the groundwork for this cultural revolution by putting this theory into architectural and institutional practice.⁷⁴ At the main offices of the Escuela Correccional para Mujeres, officials worked to reconfigure the internal spaces of the reformatory so that they would better inculcate a sense of community, nationalism, and faith in the secular state.⁷⁵ By renovating the central courtyard and planting rose bushes among colorful tiles and sparkling fountains, the authorities hoped to provide the girls with a pleasant space for contemplation and reflection. New classrooms gave teachers and students alike the inspiration to pursue training in civics and literacy. A pool and volleyball courts provided inmates with an opportunity to develop strength and team skills, and after classes inmates practiced patriotic theater presentations in an auditorium that held up to 450 people. In addition, the new dormitories reflected an emphasis on communal living. Prior to the revolution, dormitories had segregated young delinquents. The newly renovated building, however, had long wards with beds running down the middle. The idea of these new common sleeping quarters was that they would help delinquent girls attain the

73. Hermelinda Gutiérrez H. de García Escamilla, “El hogar colectivo como tratamiento en la prevención y solución de la delincuencia infantil” (Lic. thesis, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1945).

74. Art. 18 of the Constitution of 1917 stated that “the Federal Government and the states will organize their penal systems in their respective jurisdictions around the idea of work, qualifications for work, and the use of education as a means of socially readapting the delinquent.”

75. Madrigal, *Menores delincuentes*. For an analysis of architectural reforms in revolutionary Mexico, see Antonio E. Méndez-Vigatá, “Politics and Architectural Language: Post-Revolutionary Regimes in Mexico and their Influence on Mexican Public Architecture, 1921–1952,” in *Modernity and the Architecture of Mexico*, ed. Edward R. Burian (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1997).

discipline necessary to live in a group, gain a sense of community, and support each other in the endeavor to become young revolutionaries. However, the plan often went awry insofar as some prostitutes plotted escape plans in the common room at night, others formed sexual relationships with fellow inmates, and still other girls, particularly those who had cabaret experience, performed strip shows for male pedestrians in front of the second floor windows.⁷⁶

If the architecture of the reformatories emphasized revolutionary cooperation, the cultural activities the directors planned for delinquent girls emphasized revolutionary anticlerical values. Between 1921 and 1926, Catholics had been the most ardent advocates of programs to reform prostitutes. The Unión de Damas Católicas had long worked to recruit young prostitutes at the Hospital Morelos, encouraging them to be baptized, accept Jesus, and abandon their sinful ways.⁷⁷ By 1926 the Consejo Tutelar para Menores Infractores countered this religious project by struggling to make the public reformatory a more appealing alternative to underage prostitutes than the Ejército de Defensa de la Mujer, the private reformatory run by the Unión de Damas Católicas. Instead of emphasizing catechism and confession, activities at the state-run Escuela Correccional para Mujeres emphasized the secular nature of Mexican society. Reformatory administrators took advantage of the inmate population's interest in religious holidays to gather the families of delinquents together under the supervision of social workers in the reformatory's common room. In this setting they organized group activities that would foster respect for Mexico's diverse regional cultures rather than religious sentiment. For instance, on religious holidays the reformatory's dining staff prepared meals designed to inculcate a sense of pride in national diversity. Thus around

76. AGN-CTMI, box 4, file 6539. In his discussion of the "internal discourse" of nineteenth-century French secondary schools, Michel Foucault argues that the entire architecture of the school reflected concerns about the sexuality of the students. He writes: "What one might call the internal discourse of the institutions—the one it emphasized to address itself, and which circulated among those who made it function—was largely based on the assumption that this sexuality existed, that it was precocious and active, ever present." Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 27–28.

At the Mexico City Consejo Tutelar para Menores Infractores, social workers worried that the proximity of the beds among the female inmates fostered same-sex relationships among them; AGN-CTMI, box 4, file 6885; box 3, file 5813; box 27, file 7812. Social worker Miguel León wrote about one inmate that "E. M. is very loving with the minor, C. P.; she kisses and feeds her and has promised here that when they flee, she will take her to some dances, where they will have a good time"; AGN-CTMI, box 3, file 5707.

77. "Ejército de Defensa de la Mujer," *La Dama Católica*, 31 Aug. 1921.

Easter, in a mix of pious and patriotic devotions, they served meals such as *mole poblano* or fish in a Veracruz sauce.⁷⁸

At Mexico City's reformatory for girls, the inmates' creative, artistic, and culinary activities not only provided crucial job training but also helped support the institution financially. Upon their arrival at the reformatory, delinquent girls were given intelligence and achievement tests to determine their levels of literacy and potential for logical reasoning; those who were not judged to be "mentally deficient" were placed in math, civics, and literacy classes.⁷⁹ Those girls whom the teachers deemed to be mentally challenged studied "domestic arts" and learned how to clean house and wash clothes; the social workers hoped to place these girls as servants once they had been released from the reformatory. Prostitutes who showed intellectual promise studied the more complicated "home industries," in addition to reading, writing, and Mexican history.⁸⁰ For young women who had little vocational experience, cooking and sewing clothes for fellow inmates gave them the survival skills that reformers judged appropriate to their sex and class. Although some girls moved through the court in a matter of weeks, it was more common for them to live under the state's tutelage until they were eighteen. This practice reflected the reform community's conviction that only in rare circumstances could the family be trusted to inculcate young Mexican women with progressive revolutionary virtues. In fact, parents' requests to resume custody of their daughters were often rejected, reflecting the revolutionary institution's implicit belief that public internment represented the only way to combat the vices the Mexican family practiced in private. Nevertheless, the court occasionally entertained requests from the public for domestic servants from among their clientele. For example, Gloria Mendoza petitioned to have a girl who had been in her employ released to her only a few months after social workers had placed her at the reformatory. Mendoza remembered the girl's kindness to her family and sought to return the favor by inviting her to join the Mendoza household, where she would perform janitorial duties in exchange for clothes, food, a place to sleep, and supervision. The court eventually granted Mendoza's petition, noting that "she is of average

78. "Vacaciones en el Tribunal para Menores," *Mujer: Revista para la Elevación Moral e Intelectual de la Mujer Mexicana*, 1 Apr. 1929, p. 13.

79. Ibarguengoytia, "Bosquejo histórico de la delincuencia infantil," 66; and "Reglamento del Tribunal Para Menores del Distrito Federal," *Mujer: Revista para la Elevación Moral de la Mujer Mexicana*, 1 Jan. 1929.

80. See *Boletín Psicotécnica: Órgano del Departamento de Psicotecnia e Higiene Mental del Gobierno del Departamento del Distrito Federal* 1 (1923).

culture, worries about her children's instruction, and expresses herself easily and correctly.⁸¹

Finally, the state also claimed the authority to shape the formation of new families. Social workers assumed the task of molding the families of Mexico's future by having the final say over marriages between boyfriends and pregnant inmates. For example, one girl had turned to prostitution after she left her boyfriend, who had beaten her when she plucked her eyebrows and went to a public dance without him. The 17-year-old told social workers that she had eloped with her boyfriend when she was 13 and that although she did not love him, she liked him well enough to marry him. Concerned that the relationship between the two adolescents was not a nurturing one, social workers recommended that she stay at the Escuela de Orientación. While she was interned, they eventually located the girl's family in Puebla and sent her home to carry her pregnancy to term under her mother's care.⁸²

Juvenile law facilitated the state's control over promiscuous young women, but the task of redeeming older prostitutes was a more difficult matter, for women over eighteen who engaged in sexual commerce were not delinquents and could not be subjected to laws that placed them under state custody. The prostitution of older women, however, was a source of concern. Like juveniles, older prostitutes in the capital tended to be rural migrants and poorly educated; they often suffered from syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections. They were also often mothers, and *higienistas* worried that it was their children who would form the next front of the syphilis epidemic by virtue of the fact that they were likely to imitate their mothers' behavior.⁸³ Between 1918 and 1921, the city had worked to limit legal prostitution by raising the fees *matronas* had to pay in order to license a house or apartment for prostitution and by sending public agents to popular dance halls to repress provocative dances such as the shimmy.⁸⁴ And they had consistently raised the monthly fees prostitutes themselves had to pay in order to remain legally registered. It quickly became clear, however, that these strategies were having negative consequences, as the steeper fees only pushed the women underground and exacerbated the number of *clandestinas* operating in the capital. In 1926 President Plutarco Elías Calles signaled a shift in strategy when he signed a new

81. AGN-CTMI, box 2, file 1806.

82. *Ibid.*, box 4, file 7213.

83. Internal memo, AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 3, file 4.

84. AHCM, Sanidad, vols. 2891-94. See also, AHCM, Diversiones Públicas-Bailes, vol. 823, file 4.

Reglamento para el ejercicio de la prostitución, which formalized a reform program for prostitutes interned at the Hospital Morelos.⁸⁵

Doctors and Inspección de Sanidad agents sent prostitutes they apprehended for *clandestinaje* and those who suffered from serious diseases to the municipal syphilis treatment facility, the Hospital Morelos, for further examination. Located on the northern side of Alameda Park on Avenida Hidalgo near the *centro histórico*, the hospital had been a colonial granary. It was acquired by a religious order before being converted into the public *sifilicomio* for women in the late nineteenth century. By 1926 the hospital received about 300 women a month and had, on the average, nearly 600 patients in its wards. Most of these were receiving treatment for venereal disease infections, but others came to give birth or to undergo surgical procedures such as hysterectomies and minor gynecological operations.⁸⁶

Like that of the correctional schools and dispensaries, the architecture of the Hospital Morelos was renovated to reflect the revolution's emphasis on secular social assistance, regeneration, social integration, and the participation of all Mexicans in social life.⁸⁷ In 1921 the old colonial structure was apportioned with new beds and new operating rooms. While the institution served as a maternity hospital as well as an asylum for syphilitics who could foot the bill, the majority of interns were prostitutes, who were confined against their will.⁸⁸ The most important innovation was an annex called the Escuela Morelos, a series of new classrooms where prostitutes studied reading and writing, as well as such trades as sewing, leatherwork, and cooking.⁸⁹ School directors emphasized their efforts to "awaken in . . . [the prostitute patients] moral sensibilities and give them a more honorable means of earning a living." The goal was to help these women reintegrate themselves into society with honorable professions, instead of forcing them to remain secluded in a private reformatory the rest of their lives, as had occurred under prior regimes.⁹⁰

85. *Reglamento para el ejercicio de la prostitución en el Distrito Federal*, 1926, AHSSA-SP-SJ, box 17, file 19, also box 7, file 14.

86. "Hospital Morelos: informe de las labores ejecutadas durante los meses de enero, febrero y marzo de 1926," *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* (1926, no. 2): 304.

87. "En el Hospital Morelos," *ibid.* (1925, no. 4): 8.

88. "Datos históricos acerca del hoy Hospital Morelos," *ibid.* (1925, no. 4): 40.

89. José Álvarez Amézquita et al., *Historia de la salubridad y la asistencia en México*, 4 vols. (Mexico City: Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia, 1960), 2:263.

90. "En el Hospital Morelos," *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* (1925, no. 3): 8. See also AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 3, file 1, and box 15, file 1.

The Sanitary Code of 1926 made any woman who had sexual relations with more than one man—whether or not it was for money—subject to the *Reglamento*, and health inspectors forcibly apprehended thousands of *clandestinas* each year.⁹¹ The reform prescriptions for women centered around the belief that the normal Mexican female was not sexually adventuresome. If she chose to engage in sexual activity with several male partners, she risked being remanded to the state's custody for medical assessment, education, and reform. But although delinquent women were targeted for redemption under the revolutionary state's authority, sexually promiscuous men did not receive the same treatment. In fact, reformers' ideas about redemption rested on the apparent consensus that men were naturally promiscuous and that this behavior might be impossible to change. Federal deputy Modesto González Galindo from Tlaxcala presented a dim view of male sexual discipline in an address to the 28th Legislature on whether or not women should be allowed to work in bars. Men, González Galindo said, drank to excess in *cantinas* because they were lured in by the presence of sexually available women. He noted, "I can assure you, fellow deputies, that if many men enter bars it is not because they want to go there to imbibe alcohol nor because they have a habit of drinking spirits; they do it because they see, as I said earlier, the silhouette of a woman, and they go in to spend money that should instead buy their family's food or be used to purchase some other object of utility."⁹² After all, it was the conviction that men had no sexual discipline that underpinned the *Reglamento*.

Reformers readily blamed Catholicism, as opposed to the family or the urban landscape, for men's sexual habits. Some, like the outspoken radical legislator Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama, blamed the Catholic Church for prohibiting divorce and creating situations that induced men to seek out additional sexual partners.⁹³ Others, like Dr. Eliseo Ramírez, a public health expert who published his research and opinions in the *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública*, credited the double standard with creating an ideal of female marital sexuality that bored men and forced them to go to brothels to "satisfy their sexual appetites."⁹⁴ *Higienistas* such as Dr. Enrique Villela, head of the Cam-

91. "Informe del movimiento habido en la Inspección de Sanidad durante el trimestre de julio a septiembre de 1925," *Boletín del Departamento de Salubridad Pública* (1925, no. 4): 134.

92. Mexico, Congreso, Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de los debates de la H. Cámara de Diputados*, XXVIII Legislature, extraordinary session, año 1, no. 12 (12 May 1919).

93. Mexico, Soberana Convención Revolucionaria, *Crónicas y debates*, vol. 3: *Sesiones celebradas . . .*, 548–49.

94. Eliseo Ramírez, "Dictámen acerca de la reglamentación de la prostitución," AHSSA-SP-SJ, unclassified.

pañña Anti-venérea, pointed out that “we men have been taught that our vitality must be converted into a career of violence, in which feminine purity is trampled.”⁹⁵ And Juan Soto, a reformer and specialist in childhood sexual education, called the Mexican male “a beast-like man who is dominated by his instincts without thinking of his social responsibilities . . . he obeys his zoological instincts.”⁹⁶

But if Catholicism was to blame for prostitution, it also seemed clear that the revolution shared some responsibility, for the recent social upheaval had also shaped ideas about authority and masculine prowess. This is illustrated by a public letter of one “patriot,” as he signed his complaint. Upset by the nature of personal advertisements in the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*, the patriot singled out one in particular for discussion. The ad read: “young man, 32 years old, decent looks, educated, good character, formal, desires to form a home with a young woman.” The patriot sent his comments to the press, to public officials, and to the man who had placed the ad. The young man’s inability to secure female companionship through courtship or seduction offended the patriot, who questioned the supplicant’s masculinity, productivity, nationality, and patriotism, as well as his commitment to the revolution:

You are not a man. You are only a drain on the Nation, and out of convenience this is what we are going to do: If you are a Mexican, we will put you in the army to make you a man, and if you are a foreigner, we will put you on a boat, and you will be the one who pays your passage back to your country, as you did when you came here. I have given you this warning so that you will not be unaware of the work of the Government of the Revolution. Do you understand?⁹⁷

An even more important problem was whether male political leaders themselves could provide an example of restraint for Mexico’s promiscuous men. The place of the brothel in male political life, reformers discovered, was a complex matter, because in addition to providing access to sexually available women, the brothel also served as a social venue in which friends gathered to discuss business or merely drink and relax. Education reformer and politician José Vasconcelos noted the dominantly social nature of brothel-going among

95. AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 5, file 1.

96. Soto, *Educación sexual*, 145.

97. Letter from “un mexicano, patriota de verdad,” regarding personal advertisements in *El Universal*, 1930–1931; AGN, Departamento de Gobernación General, series 2.014(24)10, box 2, file 2.

Fig 4: Official concerns over sexually transmitted disease and promiscuity in the revolutionary capital did not keep pharmaceutical manufacturers from marketing aphrodisiacs and other medicines designed to enhance male sexual performance. Image from Aurrecoechea and Bartra, *Puros cuentos*, 36.



politicians. He wrote that during the height of revolutionary activity, one politician with whom he was acquainted had invited him

to go on a nightly round of brothels in the capital. All of the clientele were *militares* in the new order. The women were the permanent fixtures in this scenario who, without even blushing at having been the woman of some colonel or Huertista captain, now, on the knees of the new rulers, sang songs in which they vilified their old friends. In general, they were so ugly and vulgar that they inspired more pity than desire, and not even one man sought intimacy with them. The majority of the clients were there to drink and converse with friends.⁹⁸

98. Vasconcelos, *La Tormenta*, quoted in Sergio González Rodríguez, *Los bajos fondos: el antro, la bohemia y el café* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1990), graphic appendix (no page number).

To reformers' chagrin, the association between leading political figures and prostitutes continued after the revolution. The Communist party newspaper, *El Machete*, accused President Calles and his cronies of associating with prostitutes at a popular nightclub.⁹⁹ Other politicians used their connections to secure help for *matronas* and prostitutes with whom they associated. For example, through the 1920s and '30s, whenever the Departamento de Salubridad Pública tried to shut down the *matrona* Augustina de la Vega's illegal brothel, inspectors reported that "a higher authority always intervened on her behalf."¹⁰⁰ More telling, perhaps, was the fact that brothel clients felt perfectly comfortable writing to high political figures about their experiences with prostitutes. Ramón Barron, a Mexican living in the United States Midwest, brought some American friends to a Mexico City brothel as a quintessential *capitalino* experience. Disconcerted that they had become sick, he wrote to Lázaro Cárdenas to complain about the matter.¹⁰¹

Because promiscuous men could not, like women, be regulated or subjected to state custody, reformers considered that it was time for a new penal code. Based on observation and surveys of syphilitic men at the city's antivenereal disease dispensaries, many *higienistas* became convinced that the *Reglamento* did not protect Mexico's citizens from disease.¹⁰² Others believed that the persistence of regulations in a revolutionary regime was ludicrous and that the best way to rectify antiquated morals was to eliminate any attempt to proscribe or regulate prostitution and to establish a new set of laws regarding contagious diseases. Over the course of the 1920s, abolitionism, which held that it was immoral for the state to be involved in the regulation or taxation of female prostitution, came to dominate Mexican discussions about prostitution and

99. "Nuestra posición en el congreso contra la prostitución," *El Machete*, 20 June 1934.

100. AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 3, file 8; and AHCM, Sanidad, vol. 3891, file 49.

101. Ramón Barron (Indiana Harbor, Ind.) to Lázaro Cárdenas, 15 Oct. 1940, AGN-APR-LC, file 525.3/1. Barron wrote Cárdenas that, "In the last three years I have visited this city in the company of friends from our neighbor to the north who are involved in different activities, and on three occasions all of them have come away with the worst impressions with respect to the little or no intervention of the Oficina de Salubridad regarding prostitution in this city that deserves a better fate, and being for the most part young, my friends had the opportunity to see the worst of Mexico, with the shameful consequence that 90% of them came down with a venereal disease. . . . In the good name of my country, and your good name, I beg you to kindly turn your attention to the matter that I have mentioned."

102. Mexico, Congreso, Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de los debates de la H. Cámara de Diputados*, XXXVII Legislature, extraordinary session, año 1, no. 7 (27 Apr. 1938).

sexually transmitted infection. If the previous regulations regarding prostitution had not explicitly addressed the potential deregulation of the sex trade, the new regulation that President Calles signed in 1926 adumbrated the end of a system that registered and periodically inspected prostitutes for venereal diseases.¹⁰³ Rather than support this system, in which a specific group of women was held responsible for the health of the nation, henceforth men and women alike would be penalized for intentionally or knowingly passing a disease to a sexual partner. These diseases included syphilis, gonorrhea, Nicolas-Farve disease, and vulvar tuberculosis.¹⁰⁴ The infraction was known as the *delito de contagio*.¹⁰⁵

The abolitionist ideology, which proposed to deregulate prostitution and eventually eliminate sexual commerce by educating women, proscribing procurement, and criminalizing venereal disease transmission, was not a new position in Mexico. As early as 1908, Dr. Lu s Lara y Pardo, a prominent *higienista* who later joined the constitutionalist movement, had discussed the policies and the pros and cons of eliminating tolerated sexual commerce in Mexico. But he concluded that the D az administration was not interested in a policy that promoted greater freedom for supposed deviant social groups.¹⁰⁶ Abolitionism was a European concept that had emerged in Britain after public pressure had mounted for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, which in the 1860s had brought a limited version of the French prostitution regulation system to British cities. The men and women who made up the abolition movement subscribed to an older reform tendency that had advocated temperance and the abolition of African slavery in the West Indies and South America. Drawing parallels between the enslavement of Africans and the victimization of prostitutes that was tolerated under “white slavery,” they called themselves “new abolitionists” and formed an international congress to study the possibility of implementing the new abolitionist policy throughout the world.¹⁰⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, the International Abolitionist Federation had a base of members in England, France, and the United States, with some adherents in Asia and

103. *Reglamento para el ejercicio de la prostituci n*, 1926, AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 17, file 19.

104. AHSSA-SP-SJ, box 43, file 1.

105. Alvarez Am zquita et al., *Historia de la salubridad y la asistencia*, 2:268.

106. Lara y Pardo, *Prostituci n en M xico*, 225.

107. Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), 90–148; and Glen Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity: The Campaigns of Josephine Butler* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 97–98.

Latin America.¹⁰⁸ The group held periodic meetings to discuss the system of tolerated houses, or brothels, and to encourage members to pressure their governments to totally proscribe prostitution (where it was a registered and inspected trade, as in Mexico) by eliminating the regulated and legal commerce in sex. After World War I, members worked with the League of Nations to document the precise movements of prostitutes from country to country and to understand the peculiar national contexts in which prostitution flourished.¹⁰⁹

Mexican public health experts were divided over the utility of an abolitionist approach in the revolutionary nation, but most supported the measure for several reasons. First, proabolitionists anticipated that eliminating the sanitary regulations that authorized prostitution would complement penal legislation that criminalized procurement, which had been progressively restricted in the penal code reforms of 1929 and 1931.¹¹⁰ More importantly, abolitionism's proponents linked this emerging policy with ideas about modernity and civilization. As a delegate from Yucatán told a gathering of the federal legislature, "regulated prostitution is the greatest shame of all modern societies. The official prostitute is exploited by the madam, the client, the doctor, and the government. It seems incredible that one female organ should bring food to so many people. Women have just as much right to free love and to attempt to find happiness as men."¹¹¹ And finally, advo-

108. Corbin, *Women for Hire*, 311–12; and Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change*, 269.

109. League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children*, pt. 1 (Geneva: League of Nations, 1927), 119–21.

110. Carlos Soto, "El problema jurídico de la prostitución" (Lic. thesis, Facultad de Derecho, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1942), 40. According to Soto, the 1871 penal code punished only those men and women who "habitually" exploited women without authorization. In 1929 legislators criminalized the "intent" of pimps (*lenónes*) to make money off the bodily exploitation of another person. By 1931 the issue had become that of "authorization," and only those people who ran brothels without a license were penalized. Villela, "Prostitución y las enfermedades venéreas," 1937, AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 5, file 1, p. 1.

111. Mexico, Congreso, Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de los debates de la H. Cámara de Diputados*, XXIX Legislature, ordinary session, año 1, no. 97 (24 Dec. 1920). Abolitionism's detractors included Dr. Manuel Martínez Báez, who echoed Porfirian-era social critics in pointing out that prostitutes were already degenerate and best kept separate from the rest of the population. Martínez, who had worked with Gastélum and Villela at the Departamento de Salubridad, saw prostitution as originating out of the "human sexual

cates of penal reform argued that the elimination of legally regulated prostitution was consistent with the revolution's emphasis on collective over particular interests. Health experts such as Enrique Villela and Eliseo Ramírez argued that abolitionism would further the revolution's commitment to improving national health care and to implementing policies that benefited the community and not just men and certain women.¹¹² Abolitionism's proponents also argued that deregulating the sex trade would prevent prostitutes and those who associated with them from participating in criminal or "anti-social" activities in order to skirt the law. In fact, public officials worried that keeping the regulations in place would force prostitutes to lose faith in the revolution's potential to redeem them from their misery: they said that regulation only hastened prostitutes' "progressive degradation, facilitating their exploitation by pimps and *matronas*."¹¹³

By the late 1930s the state had taken several steps toward dismantling the *Reglamento*. The legislature had refined criminal law to penalize the *lenón* (a polite word for a pimp).¹¹⁴ The *zona de tolerancia* had been suspended.¹¹⁵ And in 1937 President Lázaro Cárdenas himself had proposed the new *delito de contagio*, which was ratified in 1939. In his speech, Cárdenas noted that

the question of contagion has been the object of authorities' attention for a long time, and to prevent infections of this type they have presented measures that constitute the central objective of the regulations concerning prostitution. Even so, over 75 years of statistics and experience has demonstrated that this system is not only inefficient for achieving the goals it has set, but in many cases it has been counterproductive. This has promoted discussions to replace it with another, more adequate system that would resonate with the concept of social life that is evolving in this

impulse" and not social conditions; Manuel Martínez Báez, "La reglamentación de la prostitución no debe ser abolida," AHSSA-SP-SJ, unclassified. Juan Soto pointed out that Mexico was not prepared to take the "civilized" step of deregulating prostitution, saying that "it [abolition] is linked to the acquisition of a high level of cultural attainments, which for us are still quite distant"; Soto, *Educación sexual*, 145.

112. *Ibid.*, 1.

113. AHSSA-SP-IAV, box 5, file 1.

114. Mexico, Congreso, Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de los debates de la H. Cámara de Diputados*, XXXVII Legislature, extraordinary session, vol. 1, no. 7 (27 Apr. 1938).

115. "Supresión de las zonas de tolerancia: fueron clausuradas las accesorias a todos los habitantes en los barrios más populosas y tradicionales de la ciudad de México," *El Nacional* (Mexico City), 19 May 1939.

country, in accordance with the new course adopted as governmental norms by the most recent revolutionary administrations.¹¹⁶

When the legislators voted on Cardenas's initiative in 1939, they declared it a matter of justice, a matter of the reputation of Mexico, and a matter of revolutionary morality. Ultimately the penal code was changed so that "anyone who knows that he or she is sick from syphilis, or has a venereal disease in its infectious stage, or is suffering from a grave and easily transmittable disease, and who has sexual relations, or nurses children, or in any other manner threatens to infect the health of another, will be sanctioned with prison of up to six years and a fine of up to 10,000 pesos."¹¹⁷ If the state's reformatories could redeem prostitutes and sexually promiscuous young girls, the reform community had faith that new penal and sanitary codes could shape the behavior of Mexican men. In the Federal District, that hotbed of vice and immorality, the state assumed the authority to judge and intervene in the lives of any sexually active citizen for the purpose of protecting public health and the nation's future.

Revolutionary Science

In the 1920s and '30s, social service agencies dedicated to criminal justice, public education, and personal health increasingly intervened in the private, intimate lives of the Mexican population. Ostensibly, this action was designed to inculcate the revolutionary goals of anticlericalism, bodily discipline, nationalism, and interest in economic progress among both young and adult members of society. But as this examination of reform analyses and initiatives regarding syphilis and sexual behavior has shown, this convergence of social legislation, medical science, and cultural reform at the nexus of family life and sexuality reflected class- and gender-based conceptualizations of behavior. This brought about tensions between reformers, on the one hand, and Mexican men and women, on the other, even as bureaucrats worked to engineer a new social order that rejected the corruption and bankrupt moral authority of the ancien régime.

The revolution's concern over syphilis and its obsession with promiscuity reflected the reform community's conviction that the state possessed the power to redeem Mexican women and men. This conviction facilitated public efforts to diagnose decadence, probe the pathology of promiscuity, and prescribe

116. Mexico, Congreso, Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de los debates de la H. Cámara de Diputados*, XXXVIII Legislature, ordinary session, año 1, no. 13 (28 Sept. 1937).

117. *Ibid.*, XXXVII Legislature, extraordinary session, año 1, no. 7 (27 Apr. 1938).

methods of reform. In this legal context, the private dilemmas of *capitalinos* became the state's business in the public arenas of the clinic, the school, and the reformatory. As he spoke to the Pan American sanitary experts in 1926, Dr. Gastélum urged the health ministers of Latin American republics to reduce the spread of syphilis by adopting legislation to restrict the activities of prostitutes and to medicalize a sexual morality that he considered to be warped by secrecy. In the years that followed Dr. Gastélum's speech, a corps of Mexican welfare agency bureaucrats sought to implement this science of redemption and to sanitize Mexican moral, social, and domestic relations by ensuring the state's authority over private lives and family matters.