

Bettie Page, And the Rage of All Flesh

In the latest issue of *Society* (March/April 2006), sociologist Ronald Weitzer writes about the current moral crusade against prostitution that has joined conservative Christians and radical feminists in common cause. In April, *The Notorious Bettie Page* will be released in theaters, a film about the famous 1950s sexy pin-up model who disappeared at the height of her fame in 1957, became religious, went insane, and stabbed a married couple who lived next door to her trailer in 1979, and, after being released from a mental institution, stabbed an elderly woman for whom she was working as a housekeeper. The second attack kept in her in a mental institution until the early 1990s. It is theorized that these attacks, clearly the work of a paranoid schizophrenic, was generated by repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her father. The current crusade against “sex slavery,” as the reformers call it, and the Page biopic represent the Janus-faced attitude our society has about commercial sex. This is true even if the Page movie is a cautionary tale of some sort. After all, like all exploitation movies, both high brow and low class, sensationalism precedes the lesson; indeed, sensationalism is necessary to get an audience for the lesson.

Weitzer has his doubts about the global crusade, spearheaded by American reformers and a conservative, Republican-dominated U.S. government. He feels that attempts to stamp out prostitution, Prohibition-style, is wrong-headed because it disregards the fact that many women volunteer for this sort of work (the radical feminists insist that volunteering for this work is not cognitively or psychologically possible), actually prefer it to other forms of work that may be available to them, and can be safeguarded in this profession through legalization. He cites the examples of the Netherlands, Nevada, Australia, and New Zealand as places where legalization seems to safeguard the women and, in fact, discourages trafficking. He also writes that the alarming statistics used by the reformers are largely unsubstantiated and probably fictitious, made to create public outrage in order to raise funds: “The reality is that *there are no reliable statistics on the scope of the problem*. Even ballpark estimates are problematic, given the hidden nature of the illegal sex trade” (italics original).

I have no idea if Weitzer is right about dealing with the problem of prostitution; although, after having spent a year working in the municipal court system in Philadelphia about thirty years ago and meeting a number of prostitutes as well as reading a ton of vice cop reports, I became convinced that legalization was the only sensible alternative. Catching people in sex crimes requires virtually that vice cops must entice the person to do it. Moreover, most of the women who were prostitutes *who were arrested* worked the streets. They were mostly drug addicts, diseased, and did not constitute the majority of women who did this for a living, most of whom worked in houses, massage parlors, and the like. Prostitution is a crime that can only be, at best, poorly policed, and usually at a disadvantage to the women themselves. If one were to have a rigidly enforced Prohibition of prostitution, it would involve not only great expense in augmenting police forces but a huge government intervention in the private lives of citizens.

Read a classic work like Josie Washburn's *The Underworld Sewer: A Prostitute Reflects on Life in the Trade, 1871–1909*, where she points out that the two biggest scourges for her were the police, who blackmailed her, and Anthony Comstock-like reformers, who used and patronized her for their own political ends. In the nineteenth century, the result of the anti prostitution zeal—the stories of poor white girls, new to the city, being raped in opium dens and sent out to turn tricks by sinister Chinese pimps were always the headlines in the *National Police Gazette*—was the White Slavery Act, also known as the Mann Act, passed by Congress in 1910, which made it a federal crime to take a woman across state lines for immoral purposes. The “immoral purposes” did not have to be sexual intercourse; it could be just for the intention of sexual intercourse or for a number of other things, including taking nonpornographic pictures. This law was started by reformers, who like today's reformers believed the men who solicited prostitutes were the evildoers and the women the passive, pure victims. Yet women were prosecuted for taking other women across state lines and were prosecuted in the company of their boyfriends. Indeed, there were few cases of coercion with the Mann Act, if we choose to understand *coercion* in the normal sense of the word and not in the politicized realm of radical feminism, where all is coercion between men and women. The Mann Act was a bad law that did little to stop prostitution or protect women. The government did use it as a way to police interracial sex.

Besides, I have always been suspicious of reformers. (I don't doubt that they have done good. After all, I do not oppose the abolition of slavery but I do oppose every problem of inequality being defined as and made metaphorically the same as slavery. And I have never liked the self-righteousness and single-minded morality of reformers, the fact that they not only politicize a problem but, worse, moralize it. This does not lead to understanding but only to panic and irrationality on the part of the public in addressing the problem.) I generally agree with H. L. Mencken's law: Whenever A annoys or injures B on the pretense of saving or improving X, A is a scoundrel.

But if America is currently seized by a paroxysm of Puritanism in an attempt to save the women and children of the Third World and Eastern Europe from prostitution and child pornography, we Americans also rear our voyeuristic little heads to enjoy someone like Bettie Page, who has become something like a heroine of the commercial sex industry. Page's heyday as a model was between 1951 and 1957, which means she came along at the time of emergence of *Playboy* magazine, as well as cheaper versions of men's publications like *Whirl*, *Gaze*, *Eyeful*, *Stare*, *Cabaret*, *Wink*, and other such items that featured photos of strippers like Candy Barr and Tempest Storm. Page came along with the rise of sexploitation films, particularly the emergence of Russ Meyers, who started out photographing for “unclad cutie” magazines. Meyers's 1959 film, *The Immoral Mr. Teas*, was to change both the American film industry and the commercialization of sex. Page, in fact, posed for the centerfold of *Playboy* in 1955, in photos taken by Bunny Yeager, one of the few women in the business of taking sexy photos (she had been a model once herself), and who, for a time, was close to Page. Page was popular as a model in her day but there were other models like June Wilkinson who were just as popular and arguably better looking. Page did both nude photos and exotic fare where she dressed in leopard skin, posed in high heels and black stockings holding a whip, posed spanking

another woman, and things of this sort. She was a very attractive and sexy model. She never did any pornography in the sense that we understand it today, was never a prostitute, but she became a sex icon. She was to become more of a sex icon in the 1980s and beyond, when there was a Bettie Page revival. Suddenly, there were Bettie Page dolls, Bettie Page comics, film clips of Bettie Page posing in some cheesy Irving Klaw "Striporamas," Bettie Page books. Bettie Page symbolized a sort of new, sexualized, naughty Gibson Girl, a fantasy of power and submission, domination and obedience, camouflaged by innocence and the pretense of being undefiled. No Bettie Page picture shows her having sex or even being romantically connected with a man. The spanking pictures titillate with a sort of soft-core lesbianism, but lesbianism in American popular culture is largely a male fantasy, not a real relationship between and about women. So, for a time, America almost seemed to be turning into and still is becoming a Bettie Page Land. She was and is a million-dollar enterprise, as hot as Marilyn Monroe. While she was institutionalized, she was too crazy and isolated to even know this was happening. I have no idea if she has managed to make any money from this. For most of her life, after she left modeling, she struggled in poverty. Perhaps this new movie will bring her renewed fame and money.

What I dislike about the United States is our hypocrisy about sex. We deplore it and yet cannot sell anything without it. We see it as sin and as liberation, dirt and fulfillment. We have had several autobiographies by female porn stars come out in the last few years, by Traci Lords, Jenna Jameson, and others. Perhaps looking back over the years of the publication of such books tells us something about the various conflicting attitudes we take about sex and women: Tina Russell, a porn star of the 1970s, is credited with the first autobiography by someone in that line of work, called *Porno Star*, a loopy narrative about the early days of the porn industry when free love was good for a failed repressive society. Linda Lovelace, probably the most famous porn star before Jameson, wrote *Ordeal* in the early 1980s, a feminist exposé of the industry that was filled with violent male creeps that forced women to be raped by dogs (as she claimed she was), among other things. Finally, last year, Jameson published the longest, most detailed look at the life of a porn star, entitled *How To...Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale*. Among the bull-slinging here is gossip about Hollywood and rock stars, an inside look at the stripper and nude-photo industries (apparently feeders for porn), an inside look at the porn film industry, tips about stripping, and having anal and oral sex. But beneath it all is a woman who wants true love (the book ends with her marriage) and who wants to control her business interests. Jameson, in the book, becomes a kind of meta-woman: bitch, whore, victim (she was raped when young and she was also a meth addict), dominatrix, feminist, traditionalist, survivor. The range and nature of these books sum up our attitude of fascination and disgust with sex vividly and compellingly. I suppose in the end the only thing that we can say about sex is that we've gotta have it because we love it, but we hate that we do.

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2/25/2006