Sex Panics? HIV and the Regulation of Prostitution in Nevada

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Presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meetings, Philadelphia, August 2005

Please cite! Just send us an email and let us know.
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“15 Las Vegas Hookers infected with AIDS”  
Headline, LasVegas Review Journal, July 20, 1989

**Intro**

When news of prostitutes with AIDS hit the press, it could have meant the end of legalized prostitution in Nevada. Disease panics helped institute the criminalization of prostitution in the United States in the years prior to World War I and helped keep prostitutes stigmatized and criminalized “folk devils” for the past 100 years. There has been only one exception to criminalization in the United States. Nevada is the only state that kept a small, informally and ambivalently regulated brothel system in its sparsely populated rural counties. The AIDS panic of the 1980s could have been the death knell for Nevada’s legalized system, and brought it in line with the rest of the country.

Instead, the AIDS panic strengthened the legal prostitution industry in Nevada.

In this draft of this paper we will tell the story of why the panic around AIDS resulted in the strengthening of legalized prostitution. Responses to panics have historically reinforced dominant social values. The AIDS panic reinforced regimes of sexual regulation that supported heterosexual monogamy, female sexual passivity and containment of sex to the private or intimate sphere. In this case, while the policy response did reinforce heterosexuality, it put cracks in the dominance of monogamy and female sexual passivity. It provided health protections rather than stigmatizing female prostitutes. It institutionalized a commodification of sexuality. We believe this story has implications for understanding the role of sex panics, and the ways in which morality, gender and the economy figure in sexual regulation in late capitalist consumer society. We are still struggling to make sense of this story. At the end we will examine a number of themes we think are important. We are anxious to hear responses to this paper to help us think about how to generalize about sex panics in late capitalist culture from this case.

To be sure, Nevada’s policy response to the national HIV panic in the 1980s was contradictory. Nationwide, when prostitutes joined “gays” as “high risk” and hence potential vectors introducing AIDS to the heterosexual population, states and cities passed laws reinforcing
criminalization, containment, and similar punitive approaches to prostitution. Nevada was the first state to enact a strict law mandating felony manslaughter and a maximum of 10 years in jail for anyone convicted of soliciting while knowingly HIV positive.

Yet at the same time, Nevada stood alone nationwide in strengthening regulations on legal prostitution by mandating HIV testing and condom use for prostitutes working in legal brothels. While on the surface, this still controls primarily women’s sexuality and reinforces heterosexuality, it was a stark contrast to laws nationwide that further stigmatized prostitutes. Nevada’s policies functioned to further legitimate commercialized sex by institutionalize and bureaucratize legal prostitution and legitimating brothel owners.

These seemingly contradictory approaches to the regulation of sexuality and prostitution raise a host of questions. What drove the development of these policies? Given that Nevada penned one of the more punitive approaches to HIV and prostitution, why didn’t Nevada also follow the punitive path of the rest of the nation, and the path historically followed, and criminalize prostitution entirely?

**HIV Crisis in the U.S.**

The panic surrounding AIDS epidemic focuses public discourse in ways that reinforced the dominance of heterosexuality. At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, biomedical and social morality discourse focused on gay men, the population in which AIDS was first noticed and was the most virulent (Treichler 1999). AIDS was labeled as a “gay disease.” However, once women and prostitutes began to become infected, they were prioritized for intervention. This was despite the continuing health threat to homosexuals, and despite the evidence that HIV in the prostitute population came through drug use and dirty needles rather than through “promiscuous” sex.

Lipson (1997) observes that state- rather than federal-level interventions dominated the first twenty years of public policy response to HIV/AIDS. “Nearly eighty percent of the states formed an AIDS task force, commission, or other advisory group to review state policies and recommend changes to the governor or the legislature, long before the federal government organized such a
Policy responses that were proposed and/or instituted at the state level were frequently controversial. The issues that states had to resolve in AIDS/HIV policy included the process of establishing screening programs; deciding whether testing should be voluntary, mandatory, and/or directed toward specific groups in the population; developing surveillance programs that maintained individuals’ right to privacy while protecting the public’s health, assuring legal protections for those infected or affected by AIDS/HIV (housing, employment, insurance, and medical care); allotting a budget for care, prevention, and education; and coordinating medical and social service care for infected individuals. Almost every state passed legislation supporting prevention education efforts directed toward the general public, health professionals, and those described as engaging in high risk behaviors. One policy that faced almost universal defeat was premarital testing (Lipson 1997).

Nevada tended to follow national trends in enacting policy regarding blood screening, surveillance, voluntary testing initiatives, prenatal screening, and prisoner testing. Nevada, like the rest of the country, did not institute quarantine procedures (Ziegler 1988). However, Nevada health officials chose to first address prostitution before these other issues.

**Methods**

This paper examines Nevada’s response to the AIDS panic by exploring the policy making process creating HIV policies toward prostitutes in the 1980s. To contextualize this policy, we also examine Nevada’s brothel legislation in two other time periods. The first period covers the role of disease rhetoric in closing quasi legal prostitution in Las Vegas in the 1940s. The second period covers the legalization of brothel prostitution in Nevada in 1971.

Our data includes documents and interviews in the public health, legislative and criminal justice bureaucracies in the state. We analyze legal statutes and codes, health department records, state legislature proceedings, and personal notes from policymakers to determine key actors and policy frames that were most important to the policy making process. We also examine newspaper
articles. We conducted in depth face to face and phone interviews with key policy makers in the three arenas. We draw on these to conduct a close analysis of the primary legislation, its key proponents, and the interest groups who developed Assembly Bill 550, which criminalized HIV positive prostitutes, and the sections of the Nevada Administrative Code (NAC) dealing with testing and condom use in legal brothels.

**Framing prostitution policy**

There are three factors that have framed policy debates around prostitution in Nevada. The first is the fear of prostitutes as vectors of disease. Fears of prostitutes infecting soldiers were key in criminalizing prostitution in the years around World War I. At the same time, the ability of regulated prostitution to prevent disease has also been a key part of the policy debate in favor of keeping it legal. These debates played a key role in the few other cases where prostitution was briefly legalized in the U.S., in St. Louis and in Minnesota (Best 1998; Gilfoyle 1992; Hobson 1990; Luker 1998).

The second factor framing policy debates is the way commercialized prostitution is embedded in the local economy. The tenacity of prostitution in the mining West until well after World War II had much to do with the role of brothel owners as businessmen and land owners in small mining and ranching towns. While mining has a pattern of boom and bust, brothels may provide a relatively stable base in small towns. Predominantly male labor that supplies ranching and mining provides a reliable customer base. But as tourism has come to small western towns, small brothels have become less central to the economy.

The third is the role of morality politics in sexual regulations. Morality politics has played heavily in nationwide debates. However, the politics of Nevada and much of the west has been infused with a libertarian “morality,” that rejects moral judgments by others as much as it rejects the right to make moral judgments on others.

To understand how these three factors affected Nevada’s response to the AIDS crisis, we examine the debates framing policy decisions at two previous time periods. The first is the closure of Las Vegas prostitution in the 1940s, the second is the “legalization” of brothel prostitution in the
Ending legalized prostitution in Las Vegas – 1940s

Fears of venereal disease among soldiers spurred strict anti prostitution laws during World War I and closed many brothels in the United States. Those that remained in the Western U.S. were ordered closed during World War II by the federal government. Las Vegas and Reno city leaders only reluctantly closed their brothels when the federal government threatened to take over law enforcement. At the end of World War II, however, while rural Nevada enthusiastically reopened their brothels, Las Vegas and Reno governments voted to keep the brothels closed.

The reasons for both the reluctance to close, and the eventual decision to keep them closed revolved around two issues, tourism and venereal disease.

Las Vegas had a vice district known as Block 16 where prostitution occurred in brothels and rooms in the backs of bars. In this area, prostitution was not officially regulated, nor was it illegal. However, city code required prostitutes to live on premises, and prostitutes were regularly tested by local doctors for venereal disease (Washburn 1999:29). At the start of World War II when federal officials were pressing for closure, one of the main reasons city leaders cited for wanting to keep Block 16 open was the idea that the city’s venereal disease problem could be better contained because prostitutes in brothels could be tested. The LV-Boulder City Journal wrote that "the police ... were alarmed and unhappy about the closing [of Block 16]. They knew that streetwalkers would again become a problem, that venereal disease rates would probably go up, and that the city's families would be subject to attacks” (Rocha 13-14 1975, quoted in Henry Benjamin and R.E.L. Masters Prostitution and Morality NY: Julian Press 1964 p. 431). Streetwalkers in this context, just as they would become in the 1980s, were the vectors of disease, but regulated and controlled prostitutes in brothels were not.

But newspaper articles reported an additional reason for keeping brothels open, the tourist economy. The late 1930s and 1940s saw a media fascination with the Old West in dime novels, and popular magazines. Downtown Las Vegas capitalized on the image with a marketing theme “Old
West in Modern Splendor,” and even new casinos were built with old west themes. Brothels were called “Las Vegas’ number two tourist attraction,” by local newspapers (LVERJ, July 9, 1937:2 cited in Washburn 1999:34-35.)

Las Vegas Mayor Howell C. Garrison said, "Closing of Block 16 will bring about an undesirable situation in Las Vegas. Were it within my legal power to do so, I would not approve the closing order" (LVERJ Oct 11, 1941:3 cited in (Washburn 1999):50.)

Just four years later, when the war was over and federal jurisdiction over prostitution ended, the very rhetoric that had supported the brothels prior to World War II was now used against it. On January 4, 1946 the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce and other groups met to discuss closing the brothels. Opponents centered their debate around venereal disease. Dr. S. L. Hardy of the LV Hospital Association claimed that rates of venereal disease “had shown a definite decline since Block 16 had been closed.” Marjorie Gaston of Nevada public health department also argued that “Medical inspection of prostitutes is untrustworthy, inefficient, gives a false sense of security and fails to prevent the spread of infection,” to justify her opposition to the brothels. Maude Frazier, superintendent of schools reported that venereal disease was reported in the schools before the war, and since Block 16’s closure no venereal disease had been reported.(LVERJ Jan 5, 1946:1, cited in Washburn 1999:67-69, Moehring 1989:61). Thus, the fear of disease was key in justifying closing the brothels.

But also, Las Vegas economic situation after World War II, had changed dramatically. Between 1940 and 1950 the greater Las Vegas area population had increased from 14,000 to 46,000 (Nevada State Data Center). Gaming passed mining as Nevada’s number one industry, and the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce changed its marketing from the old west theme to a desert vacation resort with a more seductive, classy set of images of scantily clad women on golf courses, swimming pools, and sexualized images of showgirls.

From the perspective of the gaming industry and their new marketing company, this classy vision did not mesh with open, visible, legalized prostitution. The gaming industry officially came
out against prostitution. Max Kelch, president of Chamber of Commerce said “If prostitution were allowed to return, it would nullify all the good advertising and publicity work the J. Walter Thompson company had done for this area.” (LVERJ Jan 5, 1946:1, cited in Washburn 1999:67-69, Moehring 1989:60). William J. Moore, executive director of Las Frontier Hotel said, “the gambling and liquor interests of Las Vegas and the county [have met] ... and the opinion was unanimous against prostitution.” The Las Vegas Junior Chamber of Commerce, however, had voted to support legalized prostitution, arguing that it could, as it had in the past, draw tourists ((Washburn 1999):69-70).¹

As well, powerful Mormon and Catholic leaders also helped convince county leaders not to reopen block 16. But even then, newspaper articles reported reactions that supported the need to clean up Las Vegas image for tourism. The paper reported prominent Mormon and head of the local Boy Scouts, Bryan Bunker saying that prostitution only gave Las Vegas a “black eye” at just the time when promoters were spending thousands to project a positive image to tourists. (Moehring 1989:61

Even the local newspaper, who had been supportive of legalized prostitution changed its mind. Editorials now came out against re-opening Block 16, stating health and economic reasons. “The economic basis also entered into the picture and was the greatest determining factor in the final decision” (LVERJ Jan 7, 1946 cited in Washburn 1999:69). Block 16 was officially closed, and the arguments were primarily prostitutes as vectors of disease and economic issues and Las Vegas’ image.

**Legalization 1970s**

While Las Vegas and Reno closed their brothels after World War II, the rural areas reopened and clung tenaciously to their brothels. Meanwhile, urban area populations grew. Las Vegas grew from 46,000 in 1950 to 273,000 in 1970, (Nevada State Data Center). The next 30 years saw sometimes rancorous battles between urban and rural lawmakers over the brothels.

By 1969 a rather powerful, charismatic, and controversial brothel owner, Joe Conforte,

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¹ During the post war years organized crime had begun to move to Las Vegas, seizing the opportunity to operate gambling legally. There is good reason to believe mob owners wanted to control prostitution themselves, but thus far we have turned up no evidence that this was a factor in Las Vegas’ prostitution battles.
owner of the Mustang Ranch, was able to lobby two members of his three-person county commission to pass a law licensing his brothel. Conforte began helping other brothel owners lobby county commissions to legalize their brothels. The main reason they were successful was financial. By transforming loosely codified “fees” into legal licensing charges, the monies they collected from brothels became more stable and legal. The $18,000 legal yearly licensing fee Conforte paid in 1971 accounted for one-fifth of the county budget, paying the salary of the sheriff and a few part-time employees (Astor 1971).

In Las Vegas, the Clark County District Attorney and the county commission began to consider legalizing a brothel outside Las Vegas. Supporters argued it would reduce the problem of streetwalkers who were becoming increasingly visible on the Strip. Gaming and convention leaders in Las Vegas organized against it, reportedly arguing that legalized prostitution could hurt their family appeal. LV Convention Authority Chair Wes Howery said,

"One thing we are fighting in booking conventions is the image of Las Vegas. If we legalize it, it would really hurt us."

Responding to a fear that local Las Vegas leaders might cave and allow brothels again in the city, the increasingly powerful gaming interests lobbied state representatives early in 1971 to prepare a statewide law to ban brothels.

The gaming industry in Nevada was in the midst of another major transformation. The state just passed a law allowing public corporations to own and operate casinos. The Howard Hughes corporation was buying casinos from the mob in Las Vegas at a dizzying pace. Newspaper articles in the Las Vegas Review Journal in 1970 and 71 reported a growing convention industry (Galliher p. 71). The concern about Las Vegas “image” was not about exploiting women. It was about image was about open, visible sanctioned prostitution. Many casinos had their own house prostitutes and as one state senator said, “Casino owners want prostitution around but want to control it themselves in their own hotel rooms.” The new corporations were also fighting against the old image of a mob-owned Las Vegas. Gaming and other interests charged that it was the mob-connected Joe Conforte who was behind the brothel proposal and had actually likely bribed the county commission. As the Nevada
Senate majority leader Bill Raggio said, “we were anxious to take care of Clark County and a problem we had with a local racketeer, Joe Conforte” (Galliher p. 71).

Rural legislators fought the brothel ban legislation due to the licensing fees legal brothels brought. One of the more powerful members of the State Assembly represented Lyon and Storey counties outside of Reno with some of the largest brothels in the state and whose county coffers benefited the most from legal fees. The urban legislators did not yet control the legislature. Thus, a compromise bill passed easily in the Senate banning brothels only in counties with populations over 200,000, at that time excluding only Clark County. (Rocha 1975:24  McMillian Nov 15, 1986

“The Brothels: From Public Nuisances to Licensed Businesses.”)

The statute never directly says that counties or incorporated cities can license brothels. Deciding this, in fact, was highly contentious. It was not until 1980, that the Nevada Supreme Court ruled that counties with a population less than 400,000 could actually regulate and license brothels (Kasindorf 1985:29-33), effectively establishing a pattern of “local control” in brothel regulation.

In research on the passage of the 1971 statute, Galliher and Cross state that economics was the main motivation behind the bill. Clark County’s opposition to brothels was not a moral one. It was building Las Vegas as a convention center and maintaining a “family” image. For the rural areas, it was economics as well. Prostitution provided a large revenue for rural counties. They quote a Las Vegas circuit judge who said, “In one sparsely populated county, the red-light house is the biggest employer; in another it is the second biggest employer.” (Galliher and Cross, p. 73). Thus contradictory economic pressures, the rural areas for prostitution and the urban against it came to frame the state’s approach to prostitution.

**Nevada’s response to AIDS**

**HIV Testing for Legal Prostitution**

Therefore, by the time the AIDS epidemic caught the attention of public officials in the early 1980s, the battle lines around brothels had sorted themselves into a delicate balance -- the urban gaming industry opposing brothels, and the rural politicians supporting it. Las Vegas population
again doubled between 1970 and 1980 to 460,000 (Nevada State Data Center). Between 1978 and 1985 Las Vegas and Reno legislators introduced various forms of bills to ban brothels, but these never gained enough support to get out of committees.

In late 1985 the impact of the AIDS epidemic was just beginning to be felt in Nevada. Sagebrush Ranch brothel owner Jim Fondran said business first started dropping off on Oct. 2, 1985, the day Rock Hudson died of AIDS. Fondran told a newspaper reporter in 1987, "Business dropped off in all brothels…In general, people didn't know whether it was safe or unsafe to go to legal houses. With all the publicity that prostitutes can spread AIDS, people assumed that included legal prostitutes in Nevada. They were lumping us with illegal street prostitutes who are intravenous drug users." (Martin 1987)

While the brothels were feeling some impact from the AIDS crisis, it is worth noting that the Nevada legislators who opposed brothels hadn't yet sensed that AIDS was an opportunity to close them. In 1985 Clark County Assemblywoman Barbara Zimmer introduced a bill to ban the brothels, but it never made it out committee. The bill came up late in the session, and the Assembly majority leader killed the bill because, as he told the paper, it would have raised too many controversial issues and stopped other important measures. “The majority of the legislators just didn’t want to bring it up,” Assemblyman Virgil Getto, R-Fallon, said of Zimmer’s bill. “The publicity would have gone nationwide again, focusing on a problem I don’t think exists. The rural legislators feel that prostitution is not a problem in our areas.” There is little evidence that her arguments mentioned AIDS. She had prepared a large report showing that the brothels in fact did not bring in as huge revenues to the counties as proponents stated.

Meanwhile, AIDS was becoming an issue in public health circles. During late 1985 and 1986 was a time of confusion in public health. According to one local official, there was no consensus on what the public health response should be. However, health administrators for the state were beginning to feel pressure to address the AIDS issue, and their first fear was its impact for legalized prostitution. The pressure appears to have come from within the public health bureaucracy, in what administrators claim was a desire to protect “the state” from inaction regarding legal brothels, and a desire to forestall a public panic.
The initiative for dealing with the HIV problem came from the Nevada State Health Division. Memos indicate that officials sensed a crisis in the works, with AIDS representing an “increasingly frightening and explosive situation” demanding attention from public personnel (Bentinck 1985:6). Developing an AIDS policy was placed on the agenda of a July 1985 meeting of the State Board of Health. The Board immediately focused exclusively on the brothel industry. The Las Vegas Review Journal reported that one member was convinced that AIDS and HIV would shift its initial trajectory from at-risk populations such as gay men, IV drug users and hemophiliacs to the heterosexual male population through prostitution (LVRJ 7/9/85: 4B). And with state sanctioned legalized prostitution, it was their duty to take action immediately.

Their discussion focused on testing prostitutes, both legal and illegal. The brothels already tested for syphilis, gonorrhea and Chlamydia, and AIDS tests could simply be tacked on to that protocol. And they wanted to involuntarily test other illegal prostitutes.

However, other officials were reluctant to take action. There was not enough evidence that prostitutes were high risk for spreading the disease and the Nevada State Medical Association recommended a pilot study, including voluntary testing, careful confidentiality and no sanctions against those with a positive serologic test, to gather evidence supporting the need for this policy initiative.

The Attorney General’s office was also concerned that the CDC had not classified prostitution as “high risk.” However, it gave the State Board of Health the go ahead to test individual legal prostitutes upon “reasonable suspicion” of being infected under the statutory definition of venereal disease (Nelson 1985). The Attorney General also gave the state the authority to remove a prostitute from working in a locally approved brothel if a positive HTLV III test was confirmed, thus giving the health division a bit of enforcement power should they choose to step in.

However, the Attorney General’s office said non-legal prostitutes and HIV testing were under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system (Nelson 1985: 4, citing NRS 441.220, 230). This jurisdictional separation in part helped legitimize brothel prostitution. A legal business could be
regulated by public health officials, illegal prostitutes were subject to the rules of the criminal justice system. This separation of powers had important implications for the shape of HIV policy.

The Board then approached the Legislature about allocating $139,000 for a pilot testing program on the states’ 400 prostitutes. However, on November 3, 1985 the Interim Finance Committee rejected the proposed health division pilot-testing project stating that the brothels rather than the state should bear the cost of the HIV testing (Hayes LVRJ 11/21/85: 3B). The legislative committee argued that the brothels already tested for syphilis, gonorrhea, and Chlamydia. Because there had been no state sponsored study for that, there was no compelling reason that the state should pay for any further study of HIV testing.

In March of 1986, in spite of still inconclusive evidence linking prostitutes to the spread of AIDS/HIV, the State Board of Health passed regulation, through the Nevada Administrative Code, which required mandatory pre-hire and subsequent monthly HIV testing as a condition for employment and obtaining a county work card (Matheis 1987). HIV positive prostitutes could not get a work card, there were no other penalties.

**Condom policy for Legal Prostitution**

A few months later, by the fall of 1986, pressures began to mount in three areas. Opponents to the brothels were beginning to become more vocal at various levels of state government. Officials reported pressure from some who felt that the testing policy was acquiescing to the brothel industry. Opponents argued the policy was not effectively monitored by the state, it was full of avenues for evasion, there was no monitoring, counties had different rules, and the state had no consistent means of enforcement. And there was no way to monitor prostitutes behavior on the job to prevent contracting the disease. There were rumors that a legal prostitute had tested HIV positive and was still practicing, although this was fairly quickly determined to be a false test report (Matheis). State legislators began to prepare various bills for the coming spring 1987 session to try and shut down the brothels. A group calling themselves the Committee to Abolish Brothels had formed to elect legislators who were anti-brothel (McMillan 1986a). Even a long time supporter of the brothels,
assembly leader Joe Dini (D-Yerington), told the newspaper prior to the start of the session, “This AIDS thing has gotten a lot of people worried.” They anticipated a battle in the coming session (McMillan 1986b).

At the same time, the brothel owners were getting more organized. As a response to the introduction of Zimmer’s bill in 1985 and the initial drop in business from AIDS scares, owners got together for the first time in the spring of 1985 and decided to form the Nevada Brothel Association. By 1986, 22 owners had joined, and they had registered a lobbyist, George Flint, To begin work during the upcoming 1987 legislative session.

Third, San Francisco was in the midst of a divisive battle over closing their bathhouses. State officials feared similar battles over Nevada’s brothels, and feared the affect on Nevada’s tourist industry if the brothels made national headlines.

In this context, in the fall of 1986 a new state health administrator, Larry Matheis, was appointed. Matheis background in public health informed his plan for dealing with the AIDS issue. He felt it necessary to take further actions to both tighten the testing procedures in the brothels and encourage condom use to avert a public health crisis. He framed this in the context of tourism. In making his case to the governor he recalls,

“My argument internally with the governor, the attorney general and others was that we were being irresponsible not to take a look at whether or not there should be a public health oversight of what was going on. At a practical level and political level, if a tourist or a group of tourists visited a legal brothel in Nevada, contracted HIV, went back to another state or went to another country, then reported that they got HIV in a legal brothel in Nevada, it seemed to me that we as a state were partially responsible.

Matheis indicated that the governor was not enthusiastic about opening “a can of worms.” Said Matheis, “I don’t think that I ever got consensus, I don’t know how explicit it was said, ‘if you think you absolutely have to do this go ahead, but if it explodes, you’ll need to resign.’”

He later recounted that he had to walk a fine line between those who wanted to see the industry gone, and those who wanted to keep brothels. There is little evidence that he was a strong supporter of brothels. But he felt his job was to protect the state.

“What I was trying to do was exclusively address the public health issue and what
the state’s responsibility was to public health. I was not engaging in a religious
debate. I was not in the business of judging morality. I was not in the business of
determining if it should be legal in the state. Neither was I in the business of
endorsing behaviors that people chose to engage in. It wasn’t my role to do any of
those things, but it was my role to find a way to get the best possible public health
solution.”

He described negotiating between two factions. On the one hand, he said, “the industry was
the first problem, they were afraid that I was really trying to shut them down…. " On the other hand,
Matheis said opponents wanted to use the AIDS panic to justify closing the brothels.

“...In fact those who wanted us to use this as a rationale for changing the state law
and prohibiting it everywhere, they have a bit of a case. We were not going to be
able at any time to be a 100 % confident of 100% coverage. There was always a
possibility of a test that missed a positive or a false negative, or it didn’t pick up a
latency issue...”

In order to walk that line, Matheis did two things. Matheis appointed a Mormon medical
officer to be second in command, Dr. Joe Jarvis. Jarvis was a staunch opponent of the brothels, but
Matheis was able to convince him to support his efforts to strengthen brothel regulations. Matheis
argued the case this way,

“once we accept that Nevada’s allowed it legally to be engaged in large parts of the
state, we can’t bring certain safety, but we can certainly bring safety within some
predictable level.”

Matheis also began working very closely with the Nevada brothel association.

“They were a hard sell, in the end they became very strong supporters of what we
had done. They were the most skeptical. In the end they saw that this could actually
save the industry, probably from the one thing that scared them the most. I think
they’ve always thought that they could beat moral arguments, but they couldn’t beat
a public health argument.”

Matheis convinced brothel owners to enact a voluntary condom policy. While a few owners
joined in, others were reluctant. A few owners realized that condom use was a wise business move
to reassure the public, but they could not enforce universal adoption of a condom policy. In January
of 1987, appearing with the Nevada Brothel Association, Matheis introduced a policy requiring
mandatory condoms to the state board of health. Several months later, this became part of the state
administrative code as well. (Evensen, LVRJ, 2/23/86: A1; Matheis, Board of Health minutes
1/21/87: 7). Several owners agreed to voluntarily cooperate with the state law requiring condoms
before it went into effect Jan. 1, 1988

Matheis also went to the Nevada legislature and reported on AIDS in the brothels. He told
them tat although Nevada had nearly 100 cases of AIDS, none had been traced to the brothels (Reuters, June 18, 1987).

There is no evidence that the state board of health itself ever seriously considered closing the brothels. Memos indicate that the board of health did not define it as their duty to get rid of the brothel industry. “Nevada is unique among the states in having legalized prostitution. This creates unique responsibilities for the state through the health division” (Bentinck, 1985:3). It is also clear that the governor and powerful state politicians did not want to see the brothels closed.

In later interviews, public health policy makers admitted they chose to address brothels before other risky behaviors. And that they chose to institute testing of prostitutes before other policies. Larry Matheis’ argued that state had to have an immediate visible response even if it was largely ineffective in stemming the spread of AIDS. They perceived the need to act to preclude public fears from draining valuable state time, resources and personnel from other aspects of the epidemic. Said Matheis

“Dealing with HIV/AIDS, we had to take off the table something that was not a big part of the issue. Brothels were not a major source of risk to the public, but it was the kind of issue that could get in the way of dealing with it. ...Especially when people are afraid, when they are uncertain, they try to find a way to re-characterize the subject into something they are comfortable with.”

Matheis repeatedly noted the symbolic nature of the AIDS testing policy, pointing out that while brothels were probably not the source of transmission of AIDS to heterosexuals; this response fit the public's historical perception of disease spreading prostitutes. By playing on the public's perception, the state lowers both its fiscal and political accountability. Said Matheis:

“If we hadn't responded, I think we would have had this huge public campaign issue about legal brothels in Nevada and their tremendous risk to the public as a diversion from addressing the issues of HIV and AIDS.”

At least in passing the initial testing policy, health officials seemed to be acting on their own, without influence by an organized brothel industry. In their desire to avert a panic, they shielded the brothel industry from attack during the AIDS panic. The testing policy was, by all accounts, ineffectual and merely symbolic at first. Subsequent policy changes, including the condom policy, made the approach to preventing the spread of AIDS more effective. Since then, no employed
prostitute has turned up HIV positive. The condom policy was actually made with the assistance of the brothel industry. While the policy was against their short term interests by potentially driving customers away, it was in the long term interests of the industry. This signaled a significant shift in the orientation of brothel owners, their relationship with government, their own organization, and their political power as a group.

**Illegal prostitution policy**

These efforts in the fall of 1986 and early 1987 seemed to quell any growing opposition to the brothels in the Nevada legislature, and though legislators feared a battle opponents got nowhere. In a last minute attempt to get something passed, long time brothel opponent Bill Raggio tried to attach an amendment to another bill charging a $100,000 tax to each brothel. That, as well, went nowhere.

However, the AIDS panic nationwide was increasingly targeting prostitutes, and legislators felt the need to take some kind of action to prove to the rest of the nation that Nevada's playground was safe for tourists. Illegal urban prostitution was an easy target. Prostitution in the urban areas was governed by the criminal justice institutions. There was no organized lobby, no protective legislators, no overt economic interests to be protected in taking actions against illegal prostitutes. Las Vegas Assemblyman, John DuBois, R- Las Vegas teamed with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department to introduce a bill that would impose second degree murder charges if prostitutes tested positive for AIDS and continued to solicit. Both brothel operators and pimps could be charged with accessory to a crime if they knowingly employed prostitutes who tested positive.

AB 550 passed in May 1987 practically without opposition. It formally mandated HIV testing upon arrest for solicitation and raised the charge for solicitation while knowing one's positive HIV status to felony manslaughter, carrying a 2-10 year sentence. Nevada became the first state to pass legislation criminalizing HIV status of prostitutes, followed by Idaho and Florida. There were several reasons policy in 1987 took a punitive approach to illegal prostitutes.

First, the criminal justice system had jurisdiction over illegal prostitution, and its officials
had a longstanding desire to curtail prostitution in Las Vegas and Reno. In legitimating its gaming industry Nevada officials were always eager to rid themselves of any image of vice detrimental to that of a resort destination. Between 1982 and 1985, Las Vegas Sheriff John Moran's launched an intensive effort to clear prostitutes from the streets of Las Vegas. The numbers of prostitutes arrested in Las Vegas in the early eighties was staggering (November 1996, the Reno Gazette Journal). Prior to 1987, prostitution statutes, at most allowed police to charge someone with misdemeanor solicitation. They were eager for more power to control the problem of streetwalkers.

A second reason for the policies is that while HIV testing policy for legal prostitutes was passed in an era of relative uncertainty in communicability of HIV, by 1987 the issue of prostitutes as vectors of disease was becoming highly publicized. First, the CDC began to publish major studies on the incidence of seropositivity in prostitutes. None of these definitively concluded a causal link between infected prostitutes and the general public, yet Nevada policy makers cited a statistic estimating "the rate of HIV infection among prostitutes nationally is eleven percent, although that figure can be as high as 57% in some areas" (1987:12).

Third, the media was focusing increasing attention on prostitution. Both police and Nevada legislators pointed to an episode of Sixty Minutes that caught their attention. This broadcast featured law enforcement confusion in dealing with an HIV infected prostitute in a small town.

AB 550 passed practically without opposition. Police justified the policy by identifying the prostitute as the vector of disease, preying on innocent victims. Deputy Chief Bill Young said:

"We felt it gave us a tool. It's one of our primary missions, the safety of the public. So a person who has a fatal disease and can transmit it to an unsuspecting customer [and] there was nothing in the prostitution statutes with any teeth to fix this unique and emerging and danger to society of HIV, quite honestly, in those days."

Assemblyman John DuBois,26 the sponsor of AB 550, made this association explicit in his remarks for the first reading of the bill when he exclaimed, "this bill is directed at prostitutes who are carriers of the AIDS disease" (DuBois Personal File). In DuBois' introductory remarks he says, "Thus they [prostitutes] continued their practices on the street and remained in a position to infect literally hundreds of unsuspecting victims" (DuBois personal file). DuBois later reflected:
"It hasn't gotten prostitutes off the street or anything. But lives-literally-lives may have been saved in Nevada from a bill like this that prevented innocent people from getting the disease. And you know, prostitutes, I guess they might have 2 or 3 customers a night. That IV show I saw, originally on "Sixty Minutes," talking about this and tracing one prostitute woman that had HIV and you know they had to trace it to hundreds of people from that one person."

The brothel industry did not oppose the legislation, and in fact, they supported the initiative.

A representative of the Brothel Association was present and testified in the legislative hearings. Brothel managers and owners saw the legislation as beneficial in curtailing, competition from illegal workers, culling from its ranks rogue owners, and further legitimizing the industry.

It is worth noting here that in the 17 years this policy has been in affect, out of 10,000 tests, only 374 have tested positive, and of these 127 have been charged under the law. Recently lawmakers changed the mandatory sentence to a probational offence to allow judges discretion in dealing with HIV positive prostitutes (Doug Herndon, Chief Deputy District Attorney for Clark County, KNPR interview 21 January, 2005).

Solidifying Brothel Legitimacy

The AIDS crisis legitimated the brothel industry in Nevada in a number of ways. First, it forced the brothel industry to become more politically astute, first by forming a professional association, second by putting on a more legitimate, businesslike face. Second, it bureaucratized and rationalized oversight of the brothels in a way that quelled public fears about the spread of disease. Owners began to change the image of the "pimp," unscrupulous brothel owner to that of a modem businessman. From World War II until the 1980s the brothels had mostly been run by former madams or men well schooled in running vice and illegal prostitution. Brothel opponents would often bring up information ~ about murders, bribes, bomb threats, burglaries, holdups all emanating from "criminal element" in the brothels. (McMillan 1986b). Joe Conforte, owner of the Mustang Ranch in many ways epitomized the old school, whose methods of lobbying earned him labels of being "mob connected," and "racketeer." In the early 1980s he had fled to Brazil to escape various charges, including tax evasion by the federal government, briefly flexing his muscle in 1984 by testifying to bribing a federal district judge Harry Claiborne in exchange for a reduced sentence for...
tax evasion. While Conforte's days as official owner of the Mustang Ranch were long over, his public face to the industry was increasingly seen as a bane to prostitution in the state, even by Conforte himself (McMillian 1986:Raggio). By the mid 1980s more mainstream businessmen with experience in construction or real estate were beginning to buy brothels as investments, creating partnerships. In response to the attempt to ban brothels in the spring of 1985, it was Joe Conforte himself who asked a wedding chapel lobbyist George Flint, to help form the Nevada Brothel Association to add an air of legitimacy to the business (Flint, 1997, 1998, Flint Info Phone Conversation 2/26/02).

Flint was easily able to convince especially newer owners of the largest brothels that they needed lobbying power. When brothel owners got together in 1985 and created the Nevada Brothel Association, they elected as president and spokesperson the relatively new owner of the large Chicken Ranch outside Las Vegas, Russ Reade. The fact that Reade was a former school teacher added a much more legitimate face to the industry.

Reade himself took a proactive stance toward the AIDS crisis. In February of 1986 he became the first brothel owner to require condoms in his own brothel, and he convinced several of the other large owners to follow suit. His public face, and these "good faith" efforts on the part of some business owners helped take the wind out of opponents sails in the crucial 1987 legislative session.

Reade allowed the Center for Disease Control to test his brothel prostitutes as part of a study beginning in 1986 on sero-prevalence and risk factors for HIV in prostitutes (Darrow 1990:4). In July 1987, just in time for the conclusion of the 1987 legislative session, these results were released. Reade also got brothel owners to help fund a UCLA study of STD's to be conducted at the Chicken Ranch, examining records of STD test results starting in 1982. In August of 1990, Reade appeared with Dr. Gary Richwald of UCLA’s School of Public Health on CNN’s Larry King Live to publicize results of this study (Larry King Live, Aug 21, 1990, Transcript #112-2, “Legalized Prostitution Debate”).

This move successfully captured the AIDS issue for the brothels. The contrast between the
legal brothels, where tourists were "safe" and illegal prostitutes who were the real "murderers" portrayed in AB 550 left the brothel industry in an extremely good position. Between 1987 and 1989, there were further attempts to close the brothels. But they did not publicly use the AIDS panic as a justification.

In late 1987, after the legislative session ended, newspapers reported an effort on the part of the gaming industry to lobby legislators to shut down the brothels. The rationale: brothels hurt Nevada's image. Lobbyist James Joyce and Sig Rogich, powerful lobbyists for the gaming industry, said that brothels were hurting efforts to diversify the economy. But the state's governor replied, "To be perfectly honest, I have never heard any concerns on any of my trips...There is no question that prostitution invites considerable commentary by the national media as far as Nevada goes." The state's Economic Development Director was more circumspect in explaining the image problem.

"There is no way anybody can say it helps, and I think any rational person would see, that in terms of attracting the new businesses that we are seeking, that it hurts... We are left with that one uniqueness in all the country. It has all sorts of prurient attributes to it that make it a high visibility kind of issue...I make no moral judgments on it. There are very good arguments for legalized prostitution. But the point is that no state in this nation has it, except us. And it's not like we are California. It is not likely we are seen as trend setters. We're seen as an anachronism." Nov 12, 1987 Regional Newswire UPI Carson City, Nev (1987)

In May of 1988 Steve Wynn, owner of several large casino projects and a huge force in gaming politics wrote a letter to the governor saying simply,

"We have outgrown legalized prostitution. The existence of brothels in Nevada is just on more item that out of state media people use to denigrate the quality of life in Nevada. Although we could engage in a lofty dialogue about how prostitution is going to be with us anyway, I think the argument misses the point altogether. The point is that it is not good for Nevada's image to have wide open, legalized "cathouses" and the sooner we put that image behind us the better we will be."

The governor replied

"As you know, this is an issue that has been debated for years. The six counties that have legalized prostitution support the right of local control and cite prostitution as a source of revenue vital to the health of their economies. The issue of outlawing prostitution has arisen in several past legislative sessions. Each time it was defeated. As you may have read in recent news, the legislature does not appear to be expressing much of an appetite to outlaw prostitution in the 1989 session. Until the legislature sees fit to act on the matter Nevada counties with legal prostitution will still have the option of local control."

In late 1988 Joe Jarvis, the state health officer who was an opponent of the brothels received
some press for releasing data on the incidence of gonorrhea in the brothels, sparking charges among both brothel industry representatives and Clark County health officials that he was trying to "over regulate the brothels-possibly to the point of extinction." Jarvis reportedly said that the "public has been hoodwinked by brothel owners into thinking the legal houses are virtually risk- free." However, proponents argued that brothel prostitutes have been tested weekly for HIV for 2 years, and none have tested positive. (AP 1988)

Finally, in 1989 Senator Bill O'Donnell couldn't get his bill to shut down legal brothels out of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Newspaper articles cite the two arguments he made for wanting them closed, the legal abuse of women and the image it projects outside of Nevada (Harrison 1989). Other Senators again argued there were more important battles to fight. Senator Sen. Dina Titus, D Las Vegas, said she doesn't support a brothel ban because she believes in local control. "Besides, there are bigger battles to fight," she said. "Where does O'Donnell stand on day care and child support?"

Since then, there have been no attempts to introduce legislation to ban brothels. In 2005 the legislature briefly considered an entertainment tax on brothels, a move supported by the brothel industry. This did not pass as legislators were advised that if the state taxes brothels, that provides an even greater legal foundation for their existence. Nevada's stalemate in some ways continues.

**Conclusions**

Just as with prior disease panics, Nevada’s policies on the one hand reinforced a regime of sexual regulation supporting the control of women and reinforcing heterosexuality by targeting female prostitutes as vectors of disease. However, it also passed policy which legitimated prostitution as an industry and protected their political economic status, and with that, health protections for female workers. Why? We see two primary reasons. First, because brothels were already legal meant the industry was regulated by a different set of agencies than illegal prostitution. Bureaucrats operated to refine and rationalize controls to make the industry safer, as their mandate directed. Second, the state acted to protect longer term economic interests of tourism, in some cases
against the desires of particular businesses. Policies reflected the balance of power in the state between often competing economic interests. Disease and moral arguments were framed in ways that supported the configuration of power among various economic actors and interests. Brothels represent an important income to many rural Nevada towns, and legislators have a voting constituency very supportive of prostitution. Testing and condom policies prevented a public panic that might threaten tourism generally and hold the state liable for not protecting public health. The criminal justice system responded just as the rest of the nation in instituting punitive policies toward prostitutes, but it also did so to protect tourists.

We find several interesting implications from the story we have just told.

**Policy making**

This story has implications for understanding the policy making process. State centered/neo institutional theories focus on the institutional dynamics that frame the policy making process. Certainly the fact that brothels were already legal had set up a nascent but nonetheless existing administrative apparatus from which policy makers built. The brothels were already institutionally legitimate, although tentatively so in ways that go beyond the narrative just explained. Nonetheless, the brothels had an institutional base with important administrative and legal implications. The governing philosophies of public health officials were different than that of the criminal justice system. This played itself out in two different policies, one, less punitive policy toward brothel prostitutes and another more punitive policy toward illegal street prostitutes. The ways the criminal justice system responded to the AIDS crisis did reflect sexual and gendered stereotypes reinforcing the control of female sexual commerce.

However, this might have all been a moot point had the mood been for eliminating brothels. Economic dynamics played themselves out in three ways. First, because brothels were legal, they were legitimate businesses. Regardless of the stigma attached to them, they had certain institutional rights. The AIDS panic forced them to recognize that they had to organize and put a more legitimate face to influence policy. Because a legitimate business organization began to be active in
lobbying, the interests of the brothels were maintained, and legalized prostitution continued. There was no legitimate organization arguing on behalf of non-brothel prostitutes. A stigmatized and criminalized class of individuals, prostitutes, cannot appear legitimate in arguing for policies on their behalf.

Second, the relative economic power of brothels in key rural counties allowed them to withstand attacks. Brothels contributed a significant portion of county revenues in the rural counties closest to Reno and Nevada. These counties also had some of the more powerful legislators in the state, which is the only thing that allowed them to withstand attacks from the urban gaming industry. When the economic power of brothels declined relative to gaming in the urban areas of Las Vegas and Reno in the 1940s, then moral/disease arguments were mobilized and brothels were closed. As long as rural Nevadans maintain power in the legislature, brothels will remain.

Third, the broader question of the sexual tourist economy on which Nevada’s growth is based relevant. Nevada’s economy is and has been, to a certain extent, been based on a commodification of sexuality as an experience to be bought and sold. The late capitalist pornographication of culture expands sexuality into the public sphere, expands the bounds of acceptable pleasures and even expands women’s legitimate experiences of sexuality (Agger 1993:13) (Jameson 1991, Mandel 1975). The impact of the commodification and marketing of sexuality, especially within the tourist and leisure industry in Nevada, emerged as a major force in the development of the state’s responses to the AIDS crisis.

Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens (1999) posit that Las Vegas’ exponential growth as a tourist destination was in large measure built on its association with accessible sexuality.

Sex is formidable tied to the representation of the city in all its dimensions, from the old days of sleazy sidewalk hookers and lowlife men handing out literature pitching “escort” services to tourists on the streets, to the ultra-glamour and sophistication of topless revues and nude extravaganzas imported to Las Vegas showrooms from Europe. While some of the activity has faded over the years, especially since the mega-resorts in the 1990s, taxis still sport large signs advertising sexual enticements … with a telephone number for strippers and escorts … thus sex or at least the promise of it, remains a powerful signifier of the Las Vegas scene. (p. 79) Not only is it a signifier for the city, but sexuality is part and parcel of the fundamental
economic life of the city and its citizens. Both licit and illicit sexuality, from street corners to resort penthouses, are crucial contributors to Las Vegas’ economic viability. Regulating sexuality is a delicate political affair that gives the appearance of “cleaning up the town” while simultaneously preserving a sinful image complementary to casino gambling. Health authorities, the state bureaucracy, and the brothel industry enacted administrative code that made legal prostitution “safe” and perhaps unintentionally on the part of at least some, ensured the longevity of legal prostitution. Law enforcement and state legislators furthered criminal sanctions against infected prostitutes, thereby reassuring tourists and residents alike that their carnal consumption was relatively risk-free.

Hence, these policies further demonstrated to the rest of the “outside world” (outside of Nevada) that buying the sexual experience is a safe and rational endeavor.

Moral Panics

There is another interesting implication for this story relevant to broader discussions of morality and moral panics. This case can add much to moral theory literature precisely because it represents the containment or “lack” of moral panic. Moral panics are characterized by explosions of fear and concern at a time and place about a specific perceived threat to societal values and interests (Cohen, 1972; Goode and Ben Yahuda 1994). It has been argued that the AIDS crisis spurred a moral panic that resulted in scapegoating of sexual deviants, including homosexuals and prostitutes, using a disease framework. It fostered a set of policies that reinforced traditional sexual values highlighting heterosexual monogamy, female sexual passivity and containment of sex to the private sphere. Nevada’s policy for illegal prostitutes played into this moral panic, expressing outrage at disease carrying, murdering prostitutes preying on innocent and unsuspecting victims and enacting punitive policies. However, it also averted a moral panic against legalized prostitution, and strengthened the framing of legal prostitution in Nevada to its more “practical” implications, public health and economics. It diverted a morals argument away from Nevada’s prostitution. In this case actors who stood to lose something of value (jobs, resources, legitimacy, etc.) if it became an issue acted to forestall a panic through policy.
Nevada as progressive?

Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens (1999) posit that rather than being an anachronism, Las Vegas actually sits at the forefront of important trends in contemporary American society.

“In this sense, we argue that Las Vegas is more avant-garde than aberrant, albeit in ways that are not always particularly positive, but which nonetheless demand serious study by scholars of contemporary urban life” (1999:xi)

Significant shifts in sexual norms have occurred in late capitalism, including more liberal views of women’s active sexuality and sexual agency, a declining significance of monogamy, increasing acceptance of homosexuality, and a widespread commodification of sexuality bringing sexual commerce into the public sphere (Giddens 1992, Hawkes 1996). While it seems policy responses to late 20th century panics, such as the AIDS epidemic, have overall reinforced conservative traditions, reacting against these trends, Nevada’s case is an instance where, at least on the surface, policy reflected the front end of late capitalist relationships. Nevada’s commercial sex industry reflects more liberal views of women’s sexual agency, the declining significance of monogamy and sexuality in the public sphere. This case says much about how the regulation of prostitution, and hence the sexual landscape itself, is currently and may in the future shift.

The shifting character of relationships in late capitalism has spurred a new “morality” whose central tenet is the primacy of consumer choice, the rightness of the ability to make any consumer choice in a consumer market. To many, in this new context, the components of complicated personal relationships are “better” when they can be bought and sold in the much cleaner, less ambiguous, contractual arrangements of the market (Bernstein 2001). The ability to freely purchase all kinds of goods and services has pushed a free-market liberalism into our personal morality as well as political practice. Prostitution debates are increasingly framed in this rhetoric. Rather than seeing the meaning of sex, spiritual, moral, ultimately intimate destroyed when it enters the public market, sex is best when seen as one more consumer option, governed by the rules of the market. Research on johns shows that they see prostitution as similar to most market exchanges today, which uphold
In reviewing recent poll data and newspaper articles on opponents of prostitution, sociologist Ron Weitzer argues that while the public is still predominantly opposed to prostitution, the majority of attacks are not from traditional morality. When prostitution is attacked, it is largely under the guise of secondary effects that affect neighborhood image, reputation and property values. Disorderly conduct, health risks, visible drug use, violence, and public sexual displays to heterosexual families and children are what advocates attack. It is defined as a quality of life crime. Further, the objection is largely to more public and visible forms of street prostitution. Commercial sex in private, as long as it has no spillover in public is acceptable.

In this vein, the libertarian morality that has governed Nevada’s approach to prostitution is less anachronistic, and more representative of late capitalist morality. Nevada, and much of the west, is known for its libertarian values. Nevada’s cultural history in dealing with late settlement, the role of the federal government controlling land, and Nevada’s relations with religious neighbor Utah and Mormonism have set up a different set of battle lines regarding morality. Nevada morals revolve more around a neo libertarian morality that means citizens don’t want others to judge them by their standards, and neither will they judge others. The citizens of rural areas are especially eloquent in saying they don’t want city moralists telling them what to do. We would argue that perhaps the “anti” moral language of defenders of prostitution is one that embraces the rights to sell sex in a market exchange.

In any case, Nevada’s regulatory approach to the AIDS panic in strengthening legal prostitution is an interesting case to examine. It sits at the intersection of many questions about the role of panics in late capitalist culture, and the regulation of sexuality.

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2 See Gail Hawkes, Bernstein
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