Turn out the red lights: change comes to Amsterdam's best-known tourist attraction

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The conspicuous inattention given today to Veblen’s criticism of business can’t conceal his broad relevance. The corporation, he said, burst into the 19th century as nothing more creative than a collective credit transaction; it was an institution mobilized by the business class for the purpose of seizing control of the industrial process from workers, farmers and engineers.

Business enterprise was “a competitive endeavor to realize the largest net gain in terms of price.” The point was to manipulate markets, to maximize profits, using methods of chicanery and prevarication against consumers. “Its end and aim is not productive work,” he wrote, “but profitable business; and its corporate activities are not in the nature of workmanship but of salesmanship.” Joseph Schumpeter famously said business entrepreneurs practiced “creative destruction.” Veblen said they were just destructive.

Even Karl Marx, who marveled at the productive capacities of modern capitalism, turned businessmen into heroes. Veblen called them saboteurs in pursuit of “the right to get something for nothing.” Their network of credits, liabilities, collateral and other make-believe schemes of capitalization operated on the medieval principles of force and fraud.


Veblen’s distinction between industry and business reads like a modern-day version of Thorstein Veblen: doubter. Veblen’s distinction between industry and business reads like an advanced memorandum on the follies of “growth” as the tonic for our malaise. Against the barrage of pecuniary language directed our way by consultants, management theorists, self-help gurus, venture capitalists, financial journalists and other vested interests, he said America’s enormous productive capacity suffered from a corporate form designed to make money, whatever the cost, while denying workers a chance at meaningful participation.

Business’s destruction of farming, handicrafts and small-scale production, combined with its plunder of natural resources, has left us—just as Veblen warned—with ancestral memories of craftsmanship, and a food fetish. The best we can hope for, while our politicians wrangle with their natural enemies—libertarians—in the Tea Party, America, left and right, remains in thrall to what Veblen called the “business metaphysics.” The market is not an impersonal, fallible mechanism for distributing resources. It’s a source of spiritual values, and it’s never wrong. The invisible hand distributes virtue and honor along with wealth. God wants you to be rich. But rich or poor, you have what you deserve. Such is their message in this time of despair. Which proves that orthodoxy in the service of business, and business armed with religious purpose, cannot be killed by ideas alone.
opened her door to chat. “You can come in,” I heard her say with a Polish accent.

The tiny rooms behind the windows feature a panic button that a prostitute can press to ring an alarm. Even when the red velvet curtains are closed, Amsterdam’s sex workers feel the police are working with them, not against them.

The legal situation makes for a thriving economy. Not only do prostitutes work as independent contractors, the room rental agents who manage the leases for their eight-hour shifts and the building owners earn a ton of money. On Saturday nights, when young male tourists roam the streets, they throng the bars, sex shops and coffeehouses that legally sell small amounts of marijuana and hashish. Although the government says many of them are tied to organized crime, these establishments own a lot of real estate in the district.

Legalizing window prostitutes gives the government a way to control the sex business. Human traffickers who force women, especially foreigners, to do sex work are supposedly stymied by legal registration. The room rental agents must check the women’s passports to see that they are citizens of countries in the European Union. Legalization also allows the government to tax prostitutes’ income.

But legalizing prostitution doesn’t change the in-your-face display of bodies for sale. Though Amsterdam residents say the windows have been a part of the city’s culture for 50 years, the frontal view of near-naked bodies can be hard for Americans, especially women, to take. Nor does legalization eliminate marijuana fumes or the trashy neon lights of coffeehouses, sex shops and bars. The red-light district—where everything is allowed—looks less like a dream and more like a dump.

Shortly after prostitution was made legal, the Dutch government came up with a law to make the red-light district smaller and reduce the number of windows. The government can deny a business license to anyone suspected of criminal activity. Applied to the red-light district, it has forced brothel owners like “Fat” Charlie Geerts to sell their buildings to the social housing corporations that already own two thirds of the city’s rental apartments.

Between 2007 and 2010, these forced sales reduced the number of prostitution windows from almost 500 to about 400. Now the city government aims to cut the number to fewer than 300 and concentrate them in fewer blocks. This will free historic buildings—many classified as national monuments—for renovation and new use.

Politicians want to stamp out crime and defuse charges of human trafficking. In this case they have been joined by luxury hotels and stores that will benefit if the city sweeps the open sex trade away from their properties. For the housing corporations, benefits will come from renovating historic buildings, many with canal views, into expensive apartments.

Most Amsterdammers cannot afford to buy an apartment in the center, and they resent what they see as government-sponsored gentrification. Some local residents, moreover, say they want the area to retain its randy charm—especially since an expanded police presence and closed-circuit television cameras have greatly reduced crime. For now, Project 1012 is stalled because the city government cannot afford to buy more buildings. But it still encourages upscale restaurants to take the place of tawdry coffeehouses. The enigma of redevelopment is that the government is spreading gentrification.

I don’t like to see gentrification come to any low-rent neighborhood, but this isn’t a low-rent area. Prostitutes pay 85 to 180 euros per eight-hour shift to rent a ground-floor room with a single bed and a window. A building owner earns $36,000 a month in rent for the continuous use of his windows—and most building owners in the red-light district have multiple business interests. Which is better: window prostitution or family-style gentrification?

Fantasy and anonymous sex play an important social role in cities—but where is their place? Since the 1960s many ports have lost their economic value, requiring a shift from traditional pleasures offered to sailors on shore to different kinds of entertainment. Amsterdam should not be Disneyfied, but it’s hard to see why the city should continue to devote such a prominent place to prostitution.

At the end of the PIC tour, my guide offers to take a photo of me sitting on a red plush chair in the storefront window. I remove my jacket and fantasize that I have a price tag on my breasts and thighs. It’s not a pleasant feeling.

Then it is nearly dark and the crowd slowly shifts from a mix of casual shoppers to groups of men. By nine o’clock the only women on the streets here will be standing behind plate glass.

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