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Alison M. Parker. *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xii + 286 pp. $21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06625-2; $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02329-3.

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In 1940, the national director of the Department of Radio of the Women's Christian Temperance Union [WCTU] suggested the role members might play in shaping the content of radio broadcasts. Articulating her belief that listeners might expect radio "to be kept clean, to be free from vulgarity and from dangerous propaganda which tends to corrupt the minds and morals of childhood," she hoped that "trained listeners" could act as censors, acknowledging stations worthy of accolades while wielding their "power of protest" against programs "which seem to us in poor taste, harmful, or in any way a violation of radio's own code of excellence" (p. 218). Not content only to censor, the WCTU leadership also encouraged state and local unions to produce their own "pure" programming with the hope of broadcasting this alternative fare on independent stations. In 1938, the California WCTU succeeded in broadcasting 133 such programs.

These efforts to control the radio air waves constituted only the latest chapter in a longstanding campaign in which the WCTU sought to reshape American culture using the dual weapons of censorship and cultural production. In *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933*, Alison M. Parker analyzes this program, and in doing so makes significant contributions not only to our knowledge of the WCTU and of pro-censorship activism, but more broadly to our understanding of progressivism and of the cultural dynamics of gender and class as they intersected with reform efforts in the sixty years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, though Parker's primary focus is the work of the WCTU's pro-censorship and cultural production programs–a topic well-worthy of attention–she also succeeds in broadening the meaning of her study through the inclusion of a comparative investigation of the regulatory work of a professional organization, the American Library Association, as well as through her ability to highlight the significance of her findings and her thoughtful engagement with the work of other scholars.

In 1883, the WCTU organized its Department for the Suppression of Impure Literature (later the Department for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art, and still later the Department of Motion Pictures), formally establishing its crusade to purify American culture through censorship. Beginning these efforts with a campaign against crime-story papers, the WCTU soon targeted other cultural forms as they emerged, eventually focusing on a wide range of publications and productions, including for instance "other forms of 'immoral' literature, art, theater, advertisements, prizefights, living pictures (*tableaux vivants*), the ballet, kinetoscopes, gambling, and patent medicines," as well as movies, dances, comic strips and radio shows (p. 7). While believing in the power of the individual to foment change, and finding strength in the grass-roots efforts of its local unions, the WCTU fought to expand the boundaries of legal censorship beyond what was already legally obscene and advocated governmental intervention at the national, state, county and city levels, a policy in keeping with its calls for governmental activism in other contexts, most obviously its support for the legislated prohibition of alcohol.

The WCTU's pro-censorship work reflected the reformers' belief in the power of culture, in particular its influence on those who consumed it. Of special concern for the censorship advocates was the well-being of children, understood to be especially prone to mimetic reactions to immoral culture. Children, they feared, might act out what they read in a sensational newspaper or saw on the screen, leading to lives of crime and degeneration. This belief in the power of culture influenced the WCTU's decision to complement its censorship work with a program for the production and promotion of cultural alter-

natives. If impure culture had the power to corrupt, more moral cultural forms had the power to uplift, instilling positive values and teaching valuable life lessons to its consumers. In this context, the WCTU sought to put culture to work on the side of morality by producing their own alternative, pure cultural forms. This program, reflected in the radio work described above, was most obviously evidenced in the WCTU's publication, beginning in 1887, of a monthly magazine for children, *Young Crusader*, an effort complemented by another magazine for young women, *Oak and Ivy Leaf*, and by showings of educational films.

All of this work, Parker suggests, illustrates the WCTU's determination to establish a new cultural hierarchy. Parker makes clear that the WCTU's work cannot be classified as simply elitist, noting that the WCTU activists rejected elites' aesthetic standard for measuring culture and sought instead a new, moral measuring-stick. Finding both "high" and "low" culture problematic, the WCTU sought to create a new "middlebrow" culture in which the measure of quality would be a moral one. This new cultural direction did not constitute a rejection of all things modern, according to Parker. As she explains, "As producers of culture, WCTU members demonstrated a flexibility that belies stereotypes about close-minded and reactionary censors. WCTU members were not retreating from modern entertainments such as film so much as proposing alternative formulations of them" (p. 227). The WCTU sought not to eliminate new media but to influence their contents, replacing objectionable materials with more moral subject matter. How, exactly, did the WCTU define immoral culture? Parker points out the difficulty of "pinning down the WCTU's definition of 'immoral,' " noting the multitude of terms reformers used interchangeably to define their target. "The word's lack of specificity," she notes, "served pro-censorship activists' needs well," permitting an inclusive definition of their interests (p. 22). The WCTU's activism reflected, in part, a reaction to what they understood to be the negative influences wielded by changes in American life, including for instance the arrival of vast numbers of immigrants, the increasing popularity of working-class entertainments, and increasing acceptance of art forms associated with the European avant-garde, and yet the targets of their reform efforts were substantially broader. The WCTU pro-censorship forces concerned themselves with immoralities ranging from alcohol use to degrading images of women, from the disruption of social norms to tobacco advertising.

Parker suggests that the reformers' concern about the content of culture, reflected both in the advocacy of legal censorship and in the production and promotion of cultural alternatives, did not isolate WCTU members from their contemporaries. Countless organizations supported a pro-censorship position at various times, including for instance the Young Men's Christian Association, the Catholic Church, the National Congress of Mothers (later the Parent-Teacher Association), and the National Association of Colored Women, and the WCTU occasionally found opportunities for cooperation in their work. As Parker suggests, "For a more accurate historical understanding of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, it is important to establish how average these women and their ideas were within American society during the period from 1880 to about 1930" (p. 229).

Parker's in-depth investigation of the American Library Association [ALA] helps illustrate this point. Devoting more than a full chapter to an exploration of the ALA's approach to the regulation of reading, Parker highlights both the differences and the similarities between the professionals in the ALA and the laywomen of the WCTU. Though struggling with the issue of censorship and rejecting outright legislated censorship, the ALA nevertheless shared the WCTU's concern about the impact of "immoral" literature on children and accepted the need for some regulation of children's reading. Not surprisingly, the ALA maintained that professional librarians were best equipped to play this regulatory role, monitoring the purchase of books and guiding the reading of young library patrons. Placing the women of the WCTU among their contemporaries, Parker convinces us that they lived in the cultural mainstream of their time.

One of the great strengths of this work is, in fact, Parker's ability to present a complex and nuanced WCTU. While appreciating the source of some dismissals of purity reformers and censorship advocates, Parker maintains the importance of "fully analyzing and understanding past reformers' goals and concerns" and approaches her subject with the care it deserves. The result is a three-dimensional portrait of the laywomen of the WCTU, a picture fascinating in its complexity. The WCTU censorship advocates regarded themselves as mothers, acting to protect not only their own children, but all children. Though defining themselves in traditional maternalist terms, in their forays into the politics of censorship they entered new territory, seeking power in the sphere of public politics. The pro-censorship campaign, then, became "both a tool for women's political empowerment–inviting a concerted involvement in governmental affairs" and a way to fulfill their most tradi-

tional responsibilities to the nation's children. "The pro-censorship movement," Parker suggests, "thus melded women's increasing interest in participating in the political sphere with their strong identification of themselves as maternal/nurturing beings" (p. 224).

WCTU members also brought new tactics to their efforts to act as protective mothers. As Parker notes, "Reformers were willing to experiment with new media, to adopt the vocabulary and emphases of progressive reform movements, and to accept the advice of social science experts and support their points of view" (p. 227). Members of the WCTU also advocated an activist and interventionist role for government, a position commonly associated with the progressive movement. And Parker points out that though "repressive and conservative tendencies sometimes characterized the WCTU's political and social activism," WCTU members were nevertheless "well within the progressive cohort" (p. 9). Indeed, the WCTU as presented here represents an excellent case study of progressive reform, illustrating the uneasy alliance of traditional morality and modern methods, of conservative views and innovative approaches, common among many progressives.

In the case of the WCTU, this coupling may have had significant consequences. As Parker points out, the WCTU's commitment to federal regulation and government activism in their cause of maternal protection meant that the WCTU reformers would in some cases find their authority in cultural decision-making replaced by that of governmental actors. She explains, "The irony, or double-edged nature, of this maternalist ideology is that women gave up as much or more than they gained, as experts and governmental agencies or regulation took over the tasks outlined and fought for by laywomen reformers" (p. 157). This was a consequence the WCTU women had not anticipated. Though their continued engagement with the production of culture likely allowed the WCTU women to retain much greater control over their programs than was true for other censorship advocates, the reality that government agencies and experts sometimes replaced the maternalist reformers seems significant and potentially suggestive of one of the frustrations faced by certain progressive activists.

Parker's account of the pro-censorship work of the WCTU also prompts comparisons to today's debates over censorship, and Parker considers this link in both her introduction and her conclusion. In intriguing discussions, Parker fulfills her promise that her work can provide us with "an historical perspective on current controversies over pornography, art funding, and 'obscenity' " (p. 16). While noting differences across time on both sides of this debate, Parker also identifies some important similarities. For instance, the cultural productions of Christian evangelicals, seemingly unprecedented, have a clear predecessor in the WCTU's programs for the production and promotion of moral culture. Of even greater interest is Parker's discussion of today's pro-censorship alliance. Parker notes that contemporary forces have reached beyond their earlier conservative roots to include anti-pornography feminists. Though an almost inconceivable alliance today, this congruence between the New Right and some feminists is perhaps less surprising in light of the WCTU's story, a conservative group whose pro-censorship work nevertheless often resonated with feminist implications.

Of interest, too, are the consequences of all of this pro-censorship activity by the WCTU. More precisely, how did those targeted for protection, and those targeted for censorship, react to the reformers' activities? Having provided us with a rich and insightful exploration of the WCTU's censorship programs, Parker's work might invite future scholars to investigate the subjects of the WCTU's activism. A fuller detailing of these players might deepen still further our understanding of the WCTU's relationship to its contemporaries, while also providing us with new ideas about the meaning of progressive reform.

An engaging, enjoyable read, Alison M. Parker's *Purifying America* is also a very substantial book. Making extensive use of the records of the WCTU, both published and unpublished, she provides a deeply detailed study of the WCTU's efforts to clean up American culture through censorship and cultural production, deepening our understanding of both the pro-censorship movement and of the WCTU itself. Engaging in a careful comparison to the regulatory work of the American Library Association, again based in comprehensive research, Parker heightens our understanding of the mainstream quality of the pro-censorship position, even as she illustrates the distinctness of both organizations' programs through the comparison. The organization of the text heightens Parker's effectiveness. A thoughtful introduction provides significant background while also suggesting the thematic emphases around which the text is built. Chapters take on distinct and significant topics that also serve to highlight various thematic threads. For instance, in her chapter on the WCTU's efforts to control various forms of art, Parker illuminates the reformers' determination to establish their alternative cultural hierarchy.

A powerful concluding chapter closes the text, reinforcing its historiographical contributions and leaving the reader convinced that this is an important work. Throughout the book, in fact, Parker makes extensive and always thoughtful use of a vast array of secondary literature, and she succeeds in positioning her work in relation to other historians. For instance, early on Parker makes the case for the importance of studying the WCTU's pro-censorship work, pointing out that most histories of censorship in this period have emphasized the work of Anthony Comstock and his elite supporters, while most histories of the WCTU have neglected its pro-censorship efforts. An exploration of the WCTU's censorship programs forces us to acknowledge the complex role played by female reformers in this cause, the broad public acceptance of censorship in this period, and the breadth of the WCTU's efforts to remake American culture. Extensive and informative endnotes heighten still further the usefulness of this text. Parker's constructive and sophisticated engagement with other historians enhances her contribution and makes clear the wide range of scholars who will find this work meaningful. Parker should find a ready readership among historians with an interest in cultural, social, and women's history, as well as scholars interested in subjects ranging from purity crusades to progressivism, from censorship to library studies. Indeed, any historian hoping to understand American society and culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should appreciate this exemplary work.

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