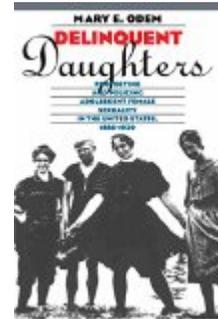


Mary E. Odem. *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xiv + 265 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4528-8; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2215-9.

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## Reform and Sex

During the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, reformers, especially women, of various political and ideological persuasions addressed the dangers posed to young women by an urbanizing and industrializing society. Mary Odem traces the movements that attempted to regulate female behavior—particularly sexual activity—through legislation, law enforcement, and the juvenile justice system. She also examines the motives and backgrounds of the participants in those efforts, as well as the reactions of the adults and adolescents who were the targets of the programs. A fundamental question informs this work—did the concern with managing the social behavior of young women constitute a middle-class attempt to impose values and conduct inappropriate for working-class youth, or did it reflect a concern for the injustices that befell girls in a society based on a double standard of morality?

Odem begins with statements indicating that she intends to follow the class domination point of view. She uses terms like “control,” “monitor,” and “punish” that suggest the use of power to dictate behavior. Yet such an interpretation runs up against the reality that the women who involved themselves in moral reform movements often did so as part of a genuine feminist sensibility. As it turns out, the criticism of activist women implicit early in the book is directed mostly at the late-nineteenth-century generation who advocated legislation raising the age of consent and prosecuting men for statutory rape. Odem is much more positive toward the reformers of the Progressive Era who worked to bring women and

women’s perspectives into the juvenile justice system.

The author successfully synthesizes sources and insights from social history with those from criminal justice. I have been frustrated that much of the work on the juvenile system by those in the field of criminal justice relies on the misogynist and outdated view of Anthony Platt’s *The Child Savers* (1969), which claims that Progressive women became involved in juvenile reform out of a sense of boredom with their privileged lives. On the other hand, until Odem’s book, few studies in women’s history came to grips with the actual impact that feminist attacks on the double standard had on law enforcement, the courts, and juvenile programs. The author brought these themes together in a way that inspires the reader to look further into questions of the association between changing sexual standards and public policy.

Odem also raises issues of the interaction of class and generational conflict. Like Linda Gordon’s works, Odem’s study demonstrates that working-class and minority parents were quite willing to invoke the juvenile justice system to deal with recalcitrant children. That fact alone calls into question a simple class-conflict interpretation. Rather, it suggests that the perception that adolescent girls needed to be protected, diverted, or disciplined away from premature sexual activity transcended class lines. The methods to achieve such “protection” were often misguided, but it is not difficult to see that, faced with a society that had no tolerance for illegitimacy or overt promiscuity, both feminist reformers and working-class

parents acted from solicitous motives. One can only wish that the Progressive attention to the sexual exploitation of women had continued to influence the criminal justice system. Tragically, that perspective was lost in the post-World War I era, only to be rediscovered in a different context by the modern feminist movement.

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