Progressives, Power, and Sex Education

Published in 2015, Courtney Shah’s *Sex Ed, Segregated: The Quest for Sexual Knowledge in Progressive-Era America* is the latest addition to the University of Rochester Press series Gender and Race in American History. Shah analyzes the debates over sex education in the early twentieth century to illuminate how identity—race, class, and gender—shaped and was shaped by “power relationships” between “reformers and conservatives, whites and nonwhites, [and] men and women” (p. x). Like other controversial topics, sex education is ideally suited to reveal conflict. Shah writes convincingly about the roles that identity and power played in the conflicts over the message (and appropriate messenger) of sex education.

Shah defines sex education broadly. Similar to Robin Jensen’s *Dirty Words: The Rhetoric of Public Sex Education, 1870-1924* (2010), Shah’s work encompasses information about venereal diseases, physiology, anatomy, and sexual behavior delivered to young people in schools, via character-building organizations such as the YMCA, in popular literature, and in military training camps during World War I. Her analysis reveals a rigidly segregated approach that divided Americans by gender, race, and class and reinforced white, male power.

In the first three chapters, Shah focuses on the efforts of white, middle-class reformers to bring sex education to American young people. For these progressives, the main obstacles to frank discussions about venereal disease and sexual behavior were the Victorian double standard that tolerated male transgressions and the notion that innocence was best protected with silence. Since parents and religious leaders had, in reformers’ estimation, failed to deliver adequate information about sex, reformers sought to bring the expertise of physicians and social hygienists to sex education. Joining forces with social purity advocates, social hygienists created the highly influential American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) in 1914 to promote improved access to information about sexual health and an end to venereal disease. Although readers of Jensen or Jeffrey Moran’s *Teaching Sex* (2000) will find much that is familiar in this section, Shah’s focus on identity provides a particularly effective lens through which racial and gender hierarchies, and class to a lesser extent, can be understood. She concludes that the early social hygiene movement focused on preserving and developing white youths, particularly boys, for the future of the white race (replete with the complications of defining who was white), thus perpetuating racial and gendered assumptions.

Shah emphasizes the conservatism of influential reformers like Prince Morrow, whose progressive faith in scientific expertise was moderated by his rather Victorian views on female sexuality. Assuming women did not possess strong sexual passions, Morrow and many other reformers focused on providing substantive sex education for boys alone. Boys were to be taught abstinence to eliminate the double standard, while girls were told to
rely on their families for protection from male desires. White reformers like Morrow also largely accepted assumptions about the moral superiority of middle-class, white, native-born Americans. Not coincidentally, the early social hygiene movement evolved amid native-born white anxiety over “race suicide” and the emerging eugenics movement. Shah convincingly argues that against this backdrop, sex education was more reforming than revolutionary.

A further impediment for reformers, even with this relatively conservative program, was how to reach African American youth. After parents and community religious leaders in Chicago rejected sex education as part of high school curriculum in 1913, reformers turned to “morally acceptable agents,” such as the Boy Scouts and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), to mediate between experts and adolescents (p. 12). By partnering with character-building youth organizations, ASHA accepted a highly modified program of sex education that emphasized a religious message of purity. As Shah demonstrates, neither the Scouts nor the YMCA provided boys with a systematic sex education before World War I. For girls, Girl Scout and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) leaders emphasized some basic knowledge about puberty but, as with the boys, stressed purity and character over sexual knowledge. Shah’s analysis of this cautious mediation reveals that the message of sex education changed in the negotiation between social hygienists and mediators.

Shah next investigates the debates surrounding sex education efforts for and by African Americans, employing a wealth of evidence from medical journals, popular magazines, and advice literature. Here Shah is at her best, delving deeply into the complex roles race and gender played in shaping sex education for African Americans in the Progressive Era. Many white experts, especially white southern physicians, argued that sex education for black youths was a waste of resources due to purportedly rampant venereal disease among African Americans and racist stereotypes of limited intellectual and moral development. Black reformers thereby found themselves battling two fronts: white prejudice on the one hand and the dangers of venereal disease and undesirable sexual behaviors on the other. For black elites, this entailed constantly stressing propriety and self-control to promote sexual respectability.

Shah notes that the debates over sex education were not only divided by race, but also that within the community of African American reformers, men and women had different constraints. While black male physicians debated the merits of sex education for girls in the pages of the *Journal of the National Medical Association*, they unanimously opposed birth control and abortion as dangerous for the future of African Americans. They used these debates to distinguish themselves as experts to provide blacks with reliable advice. For middle- and upper-class black women, speaking openly about sex in a culture that viewed them, regardless of their behavior, as sexually degraded was impossible. Here Shah draws heavily on the cultural practice of “dissemblance” as described by Darlene Clark Hine and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s politics of respectability to explain how African American women covertly discussed sex and sexuality.[1] Ultimately, black reformers created their own sex education curriculum within the constraints of segregation and American racial hierarchies, emphasizing character and middle-class virtues of self-control as a path to racial uplift.

In the final chapters of the book, Shah describes the impact of the First World War on sex education as wartime necessity trumped reticence. She deftly analyzes YMCA and ASHA papers, the *Journal of Social Hygiene*, newspapers, and government reports to paint a picture of an effective and progressive strategy. Alongside medical treatment and prophylaxis, American servicemen received comprehensive sex education that was both moral and practical in an effort to reduce the alarmingly high rates of venereal disease. Recognizing that they would also have to deal with the young women who worked and lived in the vicinity of the training camps, the War Department’s Committee on Protective Work for Girls also offered educational programs for girls and their mothers. Shah notes that in this context, reformers began to acknowledge that women and girls, of all races and classes, had the potential for sexual desire. If not properly managed, young women could contract “khaki fever” and become a threat to the war effort. Lessons emphasized honor and patriotic virtue alongside sexual virtue. Reformers urged mothers to teach their daughters about menstruation, sex, and pregnancy and to prepare them for traditional motherhood within marriage.

Wartime sex education and disease prevention was progressive; however, its execution continued to support racial and gendered hierarchies. Cities expanded their detention homes for wayward girls to confine women who were suspected of spreading venereal disease, and women of color and working-class women were far more likely to be punished for real or perceived sexual aberrance. Black soldiers, likewise, faced more repressive
policies and were less likely to receive effective medical treatment than white soldiers.

After the war, federal funding for sex education was largely withdrawn, excepting the US Public Health Service, and detention centers and prophylactic stations were eventually discontinued. Sex education, however, did not end with the war. It moved into the burgeoning consumer culture of women’s magazines, film, popular music, and advice literature. In an attempt to “domesticate sex education” (p. 109), social hygienists turned their attention to preparing young people for a healthy and satisfying marital sex life, which could best be realized by premarital abstinence. Despite broader cultural changes, reformers’ efforts reveal more continuity than revolution.

Shah’s compact volume (only 185 pages, including 36 pages of notes) is well written and is ideally suited for undergraduates seeking a broad synthesis of the role race, gender, and class played not only in the development of sex education but also in the Progressive Era more generally.

Note


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