Pornography is a topic that has engendered a wide variety of reactions, public and private, in American society over the course of the nation’s history. Acceptance, rejection, or acquiescence to pornography as either a legitimate art form, vile social virus that must be expunged, or unfortunate fact of life has often mirrored the moral tone and tenor of public sentiment at a particular point in the nation’s history. Campaigns against the perceived pernicious effects of pornography usually peak during periods of a public crisis of conscience, which often coincide with periods of war. Questions about the morality of warfare, especially the supremely devastating effects of modern combat, usually bring with them broader questions about the sanctity and morality of the society as a whole. For example, the culture war ethos that launched the campaign against pornographers such as Larry Flynt in the 1970s and early 80s can be seen as a reaction to the Vietnam War and the permissive youth culture movement as conservative elements in American society sought to reestablish a public morality that they deemed was lost amidst a sea of long hair, marijuana smoke, and rock music. In *Sex and the Civil War*, historian Judith Ann Giesburg identifies the Civil War as the origin of the effort to use pornography as a sort of scapegoat to represent the perceived broader moral degradation of American society. Giesburg accepts the historiographical trend that identifies the Civil War as a crisis in gender norms and situates the debates over pornography in the second half of the nineteenth century as the battlefield upon which American society sought to reconcile the new racial, class, and gender issues raised by emancipation within an existing paradigm that cherished domesticity, the sanctity of marriage, and the traditional gender roles associated with those concepts.

Giesburg divides her study into four chapters and includes a prologue and an epilogue to bookend the work. The prologue establishes the purpose and scope of the work by introducing some background on the initial federal law, Senate Bill 390, entitled “An Act Relating to the Postal Laws,” that provided the basis for the antipornography campaigns in the later years of the Civil War. This law was specifically designed to limit Union soldiers’ access to printed pornographic materials, including books, magazines, and photos, through the US mail in an effort to curb the perceived moral degeneration within the camps of the Union Army caused by exposure to such materials. She also establishes her thesis, which consists of two main points. The first is that the exploration of the ways that “soldiers’ expanded access to and interactions with obscene materials” through the proliferation of pornography that began in the 1840s and reached a peak in the 1860s through the use of mail order to bypass local anti-obscenity laws can assist in understanding the “sexual culture of the camps” (p. 5). This expanded access led to the infiltration of the camps by pornographic materials which, in turn, led to a legislative reaction that expanded after the Civil War to include all of American society and reveals, according to Giesburg, “how a victorious, resurgent nation-state sought to assert its moral authority first, of course, through emancipation but then also be redefining human relations of the most intimate sort, including sex and reproduction” (p. 5).

Giesburg’s primary source research focuses mainly on select manuscript collections, newspaper archives,
correspondence and diaries of military personnel, and US Army records, including court martial transcripts of officers prosecuted under anti-obscenity directives. Unfortunately, the majority of the books and periodicals deemed pornographic and/or obscene by nineteenth-century mores no longer survive, thanks in no small part to the efforts to eradicate such publications in the second half of the nineteenth century, and those that do are mostly held in private collections, limiting historians’ access to them. However, newspapers of the era often contained advertisements for companies that sold such materials through the mail, and Giesburg makes ample use of these as examples of the types of materials available at the time. She was also able to secure some materials held in private collections and includes images and illustrations in the book to give readers a glimpse of what was considered pornography by nineteenth-century Americans. Her secondary sources largely reflect the historiography of gender studies, particularly the works of feminist historians of nineteenth-century America such as Catherine Clinton, Drew Gilpin Faust, and LeeAnn Whites.

The first chapter, “Lewd, Wicked, and Scandalous,” details the evolution of pornography and the reaction of anti-obscenity legislation from the 1840s until the 1860s. She places pornography’s origins in a transatlantic context, noting that the majority of pornographic materials in the 1840s were European imports and the initial campaigns against them and the resulting legislation were directly influenced by similar campaigns and legislation occurring concurrently in Europe. The first law against pornographic materials was an 1842 customs law that prohibited the import of materials considered obscene. As with most laws in history that seek to criminalize access to anything, the legislation actually had the unintended consequence of encouraging the production and consumption of prohibited materials. Outlawing imported pornography directly spawned the domestic industry in obscene materials as savvy entrepreneurs, particularly in New York City, sought to meet the demand for the popular product. This burgeoning industry in New York City led to the passage of local ordinances against the sale of obscene materials. Again, such laws largely had the opposite effect from their intent as entrepreneurs turned to the US mail, which first allowed shipment of bound publications in 1851, to distribute their materials. This directly resulted in an even greater proliferation of pornography as it shifted from a local concern among the moralists of New York City into a national concern.

Of course, what was considered obscene was open to debate and remained a question throughout the entire period Giesburg examines. In 1857, Britain passed the Campbell Act, which established as obscene any materials that could “corrupt the morals of the youth” (p. 13). This was open to interpretation based on public opinion and the proclivities of whomever was adjudicating the law. Yet, it identified who needed protection—the youth, so prone to temptation and vice due to ignorance and inexperience. This interpretation was taken up by anti-obscenity reformers in the United States and provided the basis for the Civil War-era anti-obscenity campaigns. Soldiers, mostly young men, were identified as youth that needed protection from the pernicious effects of pornography, which became so rampant in the camps that “soldiers would have been hard-pressed to avoid porn, much less refrain from acquiring it” (p. 26).

Giesburg also explores the connections between the abolitionist and anti-obscenity campaigns of the period. She argues that the lines between abolitionist and pornographic literature were blurred to the point that it was often difficult to tell the difference between the two. Abolitionists reveled in detailed stories of the physical and sexual horrors of enslaved life that often “eroticized pain” and illustrated the ills of interracial sex, titillating the reader with glimpses of the forbidden while also encouraging them to be “disgusted by what they read” (p. 28). Authors of erotica often did the same thing, lamenting the fall from grace of the protagonists engaged in lurid acts while simultaneously reveling in every sordid detail. Some of the language used by abolitionists and antiporn activists was identical, such as the term “human vampires” used both to describe slave owners and publishers of erotica—essentially establishing both on equal immoral grounds. The grey area that separated abolitionist literature from pornographic literature only added to the legal conundrum and “confounded efforts to build a consensus of what constituted the obscene” (p. 30).

Chapter 2, “Storming the Enemy’s Breastworks,” examines the influence of pornography on the lives of the soldiers and the culture of the camps. Army camps were male-dominated domains, united in their masculinity but still divided along class lines, particularly between officers and enlisted men. Pornography, along with other vices such as liquor and prostitutes, “served as social levelers, uniting men in their shared transgression of the social ideal,” and all such vices were part and parcel of the “sexual culture of the camps” (p. 36). This introduces the two central ideas, pornography as a social leveler and as a pushback against the domestic ideal, that
Giesburg explores in this chapter. Using examples of military courts-martial against soldiers found with pornographic materials, easily and readily available in words, illustrations, and photographs through the mail, she details the ways that the sharing of such materials helped to establish and communicate trust, especially across lines of rank as officers and their underlings sought common ground of discourse by sharing pornographic literature and images amongst themselves. This sharing encouraged voyeurism and broke down any expectation of privacy in the camps, which further strengthened bonds among soldiers as the walls between public and private eroded within the confines of the camps.

As much as such social leveling was seen as potentially dangerous, particularly in its erosion of social separation along the chain of command, it was pornography’s effects on the ideals of domesticity that served as the loci of concern among anti-obscenity activists during and after the Civil War. The mid-nineteenth-century ideal of domesticity established firm gender roles, “valued hetero-sociality, assumed women’s sexual difference, and demanded male restraint” (p. 57). Pornography violated these norms by encouraging homosociality, de-meaning women’s place as the symbol of moral virtue, and encouraging male licentiousness. The prevalence of pornography in camps also closely tied it to the act of solicering itself, also seen as antithesis to the domestic ideal. The two together, soldiering and pornography, provided much fodder for anti-obscenity activists who saw both as a threat to a moral society after the war.

The third chapter, “True Courage: Anthony Comstock and the Crisis of War,” examines the wartime experiences of Anthony Comstock, who after the war became the most active crusader against pornography in the country. Giesburg contends that it was precisely the nature of the sexual culture of the camps, and Comstock’s discomfiture with it, that led to his postwar crusade against obscenity. Comstock, like many of his comrades-in-arms, was a mere teenager when he signed up for the army and was thus squarely within that period of life when ideas of self and place within society are reconciled and solidified. War was where boys learned “what it meant to be a man and how boys should go about becoming men” (p. 64). This was usually done through demonstrations of courage and fortitude on the battlefield, but Comstock was denied this chance by his posting in Florida, far away from any real action. Comstock desired nothing more than to demonstrate his manhood through combat and to become a good soldier, but the camp he found himself in was one where leisure time dominated the daily activities and manhood was determined more by becoming acculturated to the masculine culture of the camp than by exploits in battle. A devout Christian, Comstock found the sexual culture of the camps simultaneously revolting and tempting, a dichotomy that followed him throughout his life in his campaigns to eradicate obscenity from American public life. The temptation provided by pornography caused in Comstock a crisis in conscience and left him questioning his own moral compass. His rejection of the camp culture left Comstock isolated and ostracized, often the victim of cruel pranks, and further solidified his disdain for obscene materials he viewed as responsible for the moral degradation of the men around him.

The fourth and last chapter, “Outraged Manhood of Our Age: The Postwar Antipornography Campaign,” explores the development of anti-obscenity campaigns after the Civil War. The most vocal and energetic activist was Anthony Comstock, who remained active into the twentieth century, and Giesburg examines his crusade against pornography in detail. Giesburg places postwar anti-obscenity legislation and activism squarely within the wider context of emancipation and the ways that development potentially undermined the institution of marriage and male sovereignty over women. Much of the debate over emancipation, contends Giesburg, revolved around questions of “how to retain the prerogatives of one inequality while legislating away another” (p. 84). Antipornography laws, she argues, were promulgated in the context of the postwar stabilization of gender and marriage roles, precisely the social institutions that pornography was thought to undermine. As an addendum to many of these laws at the local, state, and federal level, in the context of the attempts to reorient traditional gender roles within the framework of marriage, were stipulations that regulated things like contraception, abortion, and same-sex relations. These issues fell within the confines of a broader categorization of the obscene and reveal in the aftermath of the Civil War evidence of the power of government action to “purge the nation of sin” of all sorts (p. 95).

Throughout the work, Giesburg ties anti-obscenity legislation to wider campaigns of morality that were spawned from the efforts of abolitionists in the first half of the nineteenth century. After emancipation demonstrated that the federal government could attempt to legislate morality, the groundwork was laid for reformers to seek direct government intervention to address other issues of public morality, which not only included campaigns against pornography, but also movements such
as women’s suffrage and prohibition. These campaigns gradually built steam in the second half of the nineteenth century and were the foundation of the Progressive movement that gripped much of the nation at the turn of the twentieth century. Arguably, the biggest oversight in this study is Giesburg’s failure to directly connect her work to the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century, a connection that seems clear and ripe for further analysis to anyone familiar with the ideals and methods of turn-of-the-century Progressives. This oversight undermines the strength of Giesburg’s arguments for the influence of anti-obscenity campaigns in the sociopolitical milieu of the second half of the nineteenth century. By failing to make this connection, she leaves a historiographical hole that future historians will have to fill in order to more fully articulate the genesis of the Progressive movement in the United States.

Another significant weakness of the work is its brevity. At only slightly over one hundred pages, Sex and the Civil War merely scratches the surface of an issue that has been overlooked in the historiography of the Civil War and of nineteenth-century moral reform movements. Giesburg does an outstanding job of identifying pornography as a salient issue that can reveal much about both the social life of soldiers and the reform movements of the second half of the nineteenth century, but she does not fully explore either aspect and leaves much on the table for future scholarship.

Giesburg’s work therefore serves as an introduction to a topic that deserves much more exploration. She has laid a solid foundation, revealing many clues and pointing out many connections that have not previously been made, but stops well short of a comprehensive and fully articulated study. From the sexual culture of the army camp to the connections between abolitionist and pornographic literature, to the proliferation and enforcement of anti-obscenity laws nationwide, to the insertion of anticontraception and antiabortion stipulations into anti-obscenity legislation, Giesburg’s research reveals just enough to support her thesis and foster curiosity before she hastily moves on to her next point. Perhaps her intention was simply to provide an opening into a new historiographical paradigm and kick-start scholarly discourse. If so, she has certainly succeeded in that and should be applauded for it.

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