Title:
Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in Twentieth Century Europe

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Book Review

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Body text:

One could be forgiven, when investigating sex education, for thinking there are only two key discourses at work; comprehensive sex education and the conservative movement aiming to repress it. Much of what gets published in books, journals, newspaper articles, radio discussions and (here I roll my eyes) televised news reports about what goes on in Western schools reflects this assumption. Often such texts explicitly promote this dichotomy; this is particularly true with texts privileging American cultural histories or perspectives. These texts vary in their selection of the focal point of their debate – it may relate to teen pregnancy, homosexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, safety, representations of the family, policy and so forth. But it is the depiction of the debate itself, the story of a struggle between power-holders and the sexually repressed, which is consistent. Extreme and bipolarised ideologies surrounding “what our kids should be taught about sex” are depicted as pitched in a valorised battlefield wherein one or the other side must clearly be championed. Wherein one or the other side clearly has the children’s best interests at heart, whilst one or the other will lead them not only to personal ruin, but to a damaging of society at large and a failing of its key institutions. Despite all Foucault’s insights, the plethora of sexuality discourses, and the complexities of their interrelations beyond a simplistic notion of repressive power, is frequently obscured in contemporary media. The value of *Shaping Sexual Knowledge* is threefold in combating this pervasive illusion.

COMBATING THE “REPRESSIVE” DICHOTOMY

Firstly, in focussing on European perspectives of sex education cultural histories, this book explores a range of discourses beyond the generalised and Americanised dichotomy typically offered to the reader. Including various chapters about sex education cultural histories and debates in Britain, Sweden, Germany, Scotland, Italy, Austria, Poland, the Netherlands and Flanders, it draws together multifarious narratives and sexuality education discourses generally overlooked and difficult to find simultaneously in one text. Most of the authors resist sublimating their
studies into the “grand narrative” of dichotomised discourses and the editors’ introductions to the book also avoid amalgamating subsequent histories and contexts politically too much. Secondly, Sauerteig and Davidson’s inclusion of a “historiography of sex education” – a history of sex education histories - in the book’s general introduction furnishes a variety of other frames to the dichotomised debate perspective. These include policy-making and changes, feminist perspectives that focus on the evolution of social control of female sexuality and gender roles, and the paradigmatic framing of sexual knowledge as “public” or “private”. While this is only a very cursory historiography, it shows that there are other perspectives and also brings to the fore the way in which all cultural histories are both partial and interested. Thirdly, the text is not limited to officially sanctioned and regulated sex education dispensed within the school system and controlled by the state. Rather, it actively defines sex education in “its broadest sense” to incorporate less formal, and decidedly informal, shaping of the sexual knowledge of youth. Thus, it examines the different nuances offered by sex education that is delivered within the private sphere of the family, obtained through peer-group interactions and through the media (including sex education books, magazines and films). This is particularly so in the third section of the volume – Sex Education and the Representation of Gendered and Sexed Bodies.

LAPSES AND LACKS

However, this is not to say that certain chapters in the book don’t evoke the sex education debate dichotomy from time to time. It emerges in most of them to a very minor extent; perhaps in a testament to the widespread nature of Sexual Morality, Social Purity and other Discourses. For example, chapter four – Lennerhed’s “Taking the Middle Way: Sex Education Debates in Sweden in the Early Twentieth Century” – uses this framing directly in the conclusion, when reflecting on the struggle between Christian and secular discourses in Swedish sex education. Also, in chapter three – “Sex Education and the Law in England and Wales: The Importance of Legal Narratives” – Blair and Monk explore tensions between the conservative moral right lobbyists and the opponents once termed ‘the loopy left leas’ in political campaigns. However, their analysis of how sex education law and policy debates seemed to hinge on the topic of homosexuality and moral panics is intelligent and insightful. Further, their discussion of Sexual Risk discourse, constructions of the child and other discursive tensions (such as the boundaries between “biological” and “non-biological” sex education, and “health” and “education” issues) complexifies this piece. I found their argument that parents who use the UK’s sex education “opt-out” option for their children come from backgrounds with strong cultural prohibitions on sex education and information, and that thus the “risk” of “homosexual activity as the child matures” would be more slender, jarring (p.42). The assumption here – that stricter parenting decreases someone’s same-sex attraction or activity – is naïve. Instead, while the incidence of same-sex attraction is likely to remain the same, such children should be considered more at risk in regard to issues and needs relating to anti-homophobia education. But overall, Blair and Monk provide a sound background useful for researchers looking into the British context, and none of the authors in this book extravagantly overplay the “repressive” narrative.

It must also be stated that the range of sex education discourses, approaches and issues explored in the text are by no means exhaustive. There is a lack of the early “Birds and Bees” or “Sexual Readiness” Discourses. Nor does the book engage with
the range of post-modern sex education discourses in theory or practice. Plus, in my own enthusiasm to learn more about the unique approaches stemming from European socialism, I felt keenly the absence of detailed information regarding State Socialist/ "Sex Pol", Sexual Revolutionary and Radical Freudian Discourses in European sex education. There were three articles on German sex education (chapters five, eight and eleven), but while they certainly offered interesting data, they were not primarily concerned with the particular period and pedagogies that I was interested in. Chapter five – Mark Fenemore’s “The Growing Pains of Sex Education in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-69” – does furnish the reader with some useful facts about Weimer-era sex reform and the Soviet model of sublimation, but this is more to provide the context for a later period. Some readers might be satisfied with this, but I had harboured certain expectations of a book with the broad claim of covering sex education in Twentieth Century Europe… whether this flaw lies with the reader’s assumption, the editors’ choices, the page limits of the text or its deceptively sweeping subtitle is arguable.

A READY AIM WITH SOME MISFIRING

The book’s stated aim is “for the first time, to draw out patterns of continuity and change and of convergence and divergence within the European experience as a whole” (p.6). With regard to this aim its successes are somewhat limited. While a few brief comparisons are offered in the introduction (pp.6-10), this does not occur throughout and there are no conclusive reflections. The editors include an admission that there is generally a lack of comparative research (p.11), but some more direct comparisons made regarding the studies offered would have, at least, been useful, and constitute a key oversight. Such comparisons are also restricted by the unavailability of research on Spain, Denmark, Norway, Hungary and the Czech and Slovak Republics; as opposed to more well-researched countries such as Britain, Sweden and Germany (which also tend to feature more heavily in European education texts generally).

The structure of this text could have been used or else brought out to greater advantage. The introduction offered no direct discussion of why the editors divided the chapters under the particular headings chosen: Sex Education, Sexual Rights, Society and the Child; Shaping Sex Education Policy: Religion, Medicine and the State; Sex Education and the Representation of Gendered and Sexed Bodies; and Mapping the Sexual Knowledge and Ignorance of the Young. Their reasoning was not self-evident. Such explanation, perhaps combined with subsequent introductions to each subsection, could have improved the flow and congruence of the text for the reader. It furthermore could have assisted in its aim of drawing out patterns within the European sex education experience. As they stood, the sections instead seemed to be randomly chosen, or simply a result of clumping available research articles together. The patterns and disparities across the articles and countries explored were instead left to the reader to draw out, requiring a concentrated and chronological reading style. Thus some of the accessibility of the comparisons, and their poignancies, are lost.

FASCINATING FEMALE FIGURES

A highlight of this book is its figures. Unquestionably, sex education figures will always be a source of interest, causing even the more reclusive researchers to engage in “academic discussion” in the office kitchen and suspiciously assiduous
students to clog up library isles. Yet for a primarily text-based tome this book’s small, black and white reproductions generate unexpected interest. This is partially due to the curious content of individual images (such as the calmly smiling mother-to-be straddling the emerging head of her baby on p.148), their particular use in sex education (such as in legitimising sexual harassment on p.189) and the surrounding analysis by authors. In addition, viewing the females in the figures throughout the book cumulatively offers insights into the reductive representations of women in European sex education more broadly.

It goes without saying that this book is well worth reading, for those looking for information beyond the usual sex education debate reflections. While there are limitations on what it offers with regard to European sex education discourses, these should be viewed as useful leads for further (particularly comparative) research. This book provides an excellent starting point in its field.

Final By-/Bio-line:

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