

Alison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

One way to organize and teach a survey of United States history up until the present day would be to pitch the American past as a series of religious revivals aiming to purify the collective (read, WASP) American soul. From the Benevolent Empire of the 1820s and the Populist Era of the late 1800s through various episodes of Cold War paranoia to the Moral Majority of the 1980s, American society has been awash in efforts to cleanse and replenish itself. That most of these do-gooder attempts have largely proved unable to achieve their objectives to some might suggest failure, that these deeply conservative movements have simply been out of touch with the reality of an increasingly more open, liberalized society. Yet such a conclusion underestimates the lasting influence of moral reform — from William Lloyd Garrison to Williams Jennings Bryan to Joseph McCarthy to Jerry Falwell. Further, such a ready conclusion ignores the question of what precisely gives rise to such improvement movements.

Alison Parker's insightful and, in some ways, necessary book plumbs the censorship activities of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the American Library Association (ALA). It explores in some detail the WCTU as an instrument of middle-class betterment — but largely neglects to place it into a historical context. It fails, in short, to explain the birth of that which it aptly describes. The result smacks of form without content — or, at least, without sufficient content.

Yet the text is effective because Parker sketches the activities of two important organizations in turn-of-the-century America. In so doing, she fleshes out the workings of a key reformist organization (WCTU) as well as one of lesser stature (ALA). Both groups sought to restrict and delimit perceived immoral cultural voices in the United States as well as to promote more authentically mainstream virtues, as understood by them.

The easy thing would have been to have examined the WCTU and left it at that. Such a study is overdue. But Parker's more ambitious decision to take on the ALA proves to have been a good one because the different approaches to censorship that the two organizations adopted reflects a heterogeneity — often overlooked — in the more general reform movement of which these two organizations played a part. Further, such a tack allows her to play one off against the other, adding a greater depth to her contribution while at the same time providing a broader canvas upon which to draw. For example, she stresses that the WCTU sought to promote a multi-track approach to censorship — lobbying for stronger state and federal legislation, lobbying for stricter enforcement of existing legislation, funding and producing alternatives to the cultural materials deemed to be offensive or harmful to children. The ALA,

meanwhile, acted as a self-appointed censor at the points of consumption (i.e., libraries), a gatekeeper as it were.

The strength of Parker's text lies squarely in the muck and the minutiae of micro-history, the monograph. And through her thorough working of extensive primary evidence, Parker has produced a well-crafted, cogently organized institutional study of the censorship activities of two important groups. Yet she has also managed to fashion a text essentially devoid of macro-historical context. She makes no real effort to situate her work in the ongoing tradition of American reform movements waxing and waning from the earliest days of the republic through to today.

This weakness evidently stems not from a poor grounding in the secondary literature (it is all there in the notes), but perhaps a reluctance, or inability, to couch the study in the larger flow of secular and religious evangelicalism in American history. It is as if, in an effort to make her voice heard, she has deliberately cut it loose from the larger historical conversation in which her book rightly belongs. For example, Parker usefully makes reference to two groundbreaking studies — Nancy F. Cott's 1977 *The Bonds of Womanhood* and Suzanne Lebovks's 1984 *Free Women of Petersburg*. Yet her references to such works, and such examples abound (e.g., a clunky discussion of audience reception theory), appear more as an attempt to associate herself with a sophisticated historiographical tradition than to emulate the strengths of it. Both Lebovks's and Cott's work stand out because they speak to larger and deeper cultural forces at work in the historical flow of American culture. They are monographs, yes, but explore larger possibilities, and establish links to other historical phenomenon. Parker makes only a half-hearted attempt to do so.

To understand fully the current debate over censorship in the United States it makes good sense to revisit other attempts to censor forms of cultural entertainment — magazines, novels and, later, films. Not because social conditions are identical (obviously, they are not). However, the basic impetus to censor — to shield innocence and protect or return to an allegedly simpler, purer way of life remain the same. Or do they? Parker's study would have you believe so. She concludes as much. She writes:

As many Americans today contemplate pressuring or forcing the television networks to rate their shows and cut down on violence and sex, as they pressure chain convenience stores not to sell *Playboy* magazines, and as they contemplate issues of "obscenity" and government funding of the arts, the turn-of-the-century censorship movement helps us to better comprehend the precedents, arguments, and powerful but problematic logic that pro-regulatory positions — especially those based on protecting children — still hold today. (320)

The trouble with this glib summary is that while Parker is in one sense correct — history can sometimes teach us something — she errs by fashioning

an invidious comparison of historically dissimilar activities. Further, she provides no real context in which it is reasonable to arrive at such a conclusion. Her first slip is one that is easy to make: conservatives conserve, hanker for the past, a past sometimes (perhaps typically) more imaginary than real. That's what many of today's right-wingers who drive the pro-censorship movement share with those Christian zealots of the century's turn — a yearning to return to a mythical past. That much is obvious.

Parker fails to mine the deeper issues of what drove those turn-of-the-century conservatives. For example, the gist of the Benevolent Empire's improvement project in the early 1800s rested firmly on two ironically intertwined, yet apparently mutually exclusive goals — industrialization and agrarianism. Under the guise of moral reform, to return America to moral rule by a Waspish, ethno-phobic God, reformers set out to remake (or rediscover, they imagined) the American character. And so they promoted the Sabbath, punctuality, obedience, abstinence, temperance, and the like. The irony, of course, is that these were very nearly also the same virtues required to transform American farmers (and immigrants) into contented and efficient industrial workers, greasing the rails as it were from agriculture to industrialization. In short, to the extent that early nineteenth century amelioration efforts were successful, they served to promote that which they ostensibly decried — modernism, liberalism, and so on. Parker's study, while tightly focused and cogently argued, leaves you with an empty feeling, as if now you know all you ever wanted to know about the WCTU's censorship program, but so what? To make matters worse, today's pro-censorship debate is not informed by an investigation that glosses over deeper cultural, even structural issues. Or, to return to her conclusion, is there a close similarity between early twentieth-century efforts to censor immoral magazines and the invasive child pornography readily available today on the Internet? I suspect that not many would answer in the affirmative.

Many commentators in the 1980s railed against the Reagan administration's War on Drugs. Reagan's prescription for combating the nation's drug habit was to attack it (expensively and not very successfully) at its various sources of supply rather than to try to get at the more basic problem — the demand, the reasons many Americans found it necessary to smoke, snort and shoot. Parker's text mirrors this approach. While her effort stands as a solid institutional study, it fails to explain the *raison d'être* of such institutions. And that's the real question.

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