

Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States

Janice M. Irvine. 2002. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Book review by Tina Fetner

In 1993, New York City erupted in controversy over the multicultural *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum, in which all types of families, including families with two moms or two dads, are validated. The ensuing debate was all over the papers for weeks, and the curriculum was ultimately defeated. Moreover, the dispute led many conservatives to run for and win seats on local school boards in New York City. In 1996, the welfare reform bill, passed by a Republican Congress and signed by President Clinton, included a provision for \$250 million to be spent over 5 years for abstinence education, kicking off a wave of "abstinence-only" curricula being developed by Christian evangelical activists and sold to America's public schools. All across the nation, local school districts have seen parents fighting vehement battles against other parents to decide what sort of sexual information, if any, is provided to children and youth. Is this what the sexual revolution, 30-odd years later, is supposed to look like?

Janice M. Irvine's book, *Talk about Sex*, questions how we arrived at this point, even though the majority of parents support sex education in the schools. Irvine claims that these battles over sex education are embedded in the transformation of American politics caused by the emergence of the Christian Right. Her explanation takes us back to the 1960s, to explore the institutionalization of information about sexuality, primarily through the federal agency, SIECUS - Sex Information and Education Council of the United States, founded in 1964. The mission of SIECUS, to provide scientifically accurate information about sex to the public, positioned it as a champion of sex education in public schools. However, at the same time, the Christian Right was beginning to surface as an important social movement, significantly changing the face of American politics. Mobilizing against sex education, homosexuality, and feminism, the Christian Right operated at both the national and local levels, constructing a discourse on the dangers of talking about sex that fit nicely into mass media-friendly sound bytes.

This history is an outstanding record of SIECUS' role in developing and advocating for sex education programs, as well as an excellent review of the early days of the Christian Right, before they caught the nation's attention in the 1980s. But this book is much more than a historical analysis of conservative and liberal activists fighting against each other over sex. Irvine's strongest contribution is the cultural analysis in the second half of the book. She pushes scholarly thinking on social movements forward by demonstrating how conservative activists mobilized both language and emotion to reach their policy goals.

Social movement theorists have long understood that the use of language and the mobilization of people's emotions are central to social movement activity. However, many social movement theorists have found these concepts too slippery and abstract. Irvine provides a model for analyzing language and emotions as cultural tools of activists. She demonstrates that the opponents of sex education played on cultural fears of sexuality and taboos against talking about sex to construct a discourse on sex education that was very different from SIECUS' reliance on scientific objectivity. Anti-sex activists would use "evocative vocabularies" when discussing sex education programs,

including words such as pornography, sodomy, and pedophilia. They claimed that schools were teaching children how to be homosexual and argued that talking about sex was tantamount to molesting children. Irvine points out that the language did not need to be accurate, only persuasive, in order for conservative activists to accomplish their goals.

Irvine also analyzes the mobilization of emotions in the battles over sex education. The book documents the use of misinformation to incite angry reactions from parents. School board meetings, usually quiet and routine, turned into shouting matches because parents had been told by conservative activists that schools were teaching boys how to perform fellatio and girls how to masturbate. School board members pointed out that, once emotions were strained to that point, accurate information was no consolation. However, Irvine also notes that emotions are not easily contained by social movement activists, and in many cases, the emotional display was more than conservatives had bargained for. Conservative activists then distanced themselves from the more unruly participants in school board meetings, even though they had provided the misinformation that provoked that anger.

Irvine does not provide any easy answers to the question of how to ensure accurate and complete sex education in public schools. However, this work is a major contribution not only to the history of sex education in the United States, but also to social movement theory and students of contested politics. Her work on contested discourses and the mobilization of emotion provide an excellent framework for analyzing the cultural processes of social movement activity.

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