

Panel: “America As a Work in Progress”

Madison Prall

Title: Discovering the Relationship between Sex and Progressivism in the Quest for Women’s Sexual and Emotional Agency

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Madison Prall, currently a senior at IPFW completing a double major in history as well as English and Linguistics with a concentration in literature, has studied many facets of history in her college career. She began her exploration in historical inquiry for two summers as a historic interpreter at the Kirtland Temple, a national historic monument, where she completed a self-guided research project on women’s fashion in the 1830s-1840s. Her accomplishments include the 2005 Theresa Carpenter writing scholarship at Graceland University and her presentation of a project on romance novels as models of acceptable romantic relationships at the 2014 Poster Symposium at IPFW. Ms. Prall studied abroad in London where she researched medieval history and modern British literature. She plans to return to IPFW this summer to study Latin.

Abstract

Despite the political rhetoric of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the gains in women’s reproductive rights made by the birth control movement and its advocates, limits still remained in place concerning women’s control over their own bodies during the Progressive Era. In researching this topic, it appears that although other scholars have studied and published on these topics separately, the limits on Progressive Era social progress have remained largely undefined. This paper recognizes the Birth Control movement as an important gain towards achieving women’s autonomy over their own bodies, while exploring the limitations these gains had on women’s personal reproduction practices. Some of these limitations, as explored in this paper, include political dogma and propaganda, the advice and demands of family and friends, religion, constraints of social class, popular literature, and medical opinions and advice, all of which influenced women’s personal choices regarding their sexual health habits. Ultimately, women during the Progressive Era, despite an unprecedented level of freedom in public domains, continued to be constrained, in terms of control over their own bodies, by the above influences. To understand this point of view, this paper delineates the political-historical context of the women’s movement from the 1870s to the 1920s, then profiles women’s reproduction rights during this time period, followed by a discussion about ideology behind the birth control movement, advocates for women’s sexual health care, and early sexual health clinics. Although this research focuses on events which took place a century ago, women’s reproduction rights are still a contemporary topic because ideas about personal agency over one’s body and individual choices about controlling sex are still under debate. It was in the Progressive Era, however, that a woman’s right to control her own body as a civil liberty rightfully due to her was defined. Despite this, women were still constrained by the demands of their husbands, the advice of their mothers, the literature and products available to them, their religion, and the disparate points of view of medical professionals. A woman’s body, then, was and continues to be a pluralist symbol, belonging only partially to her and also to her environment. Thus, the rhetoric of the

Progressive Era called for women to have agency over themselves, but one which only partially extended to women's own bodies.

Bibliographic Note

This study made use of a variety of research materials, including early twentieth century periodicals such as the American magazines *Outlook* (1893-1924), *Current Opinion* (1913-1925), and *The North American Review* (1821-1940) which featured articles about contemporary social issues and more specific publications like *Forum Medical Series* (1886-1930) and birth control advocate Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review*. In addition, available issues of the successful magazine *Women's Home Companion* published from 1900 to the 1930s were studied.

This research also investigated several books and articles written and published during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century about contemporary social and sexual issues, by such authors as Ellis Havelock, British Physician, writer and social reformer who studied human sexuality; Julia Ward Howe, prominent American feminist, abolitionist, women's suffragist, poet, and social activist; and Margaret Sanger (journal articles as well as books)—American birth control activist and sex educator. Speeches, pamphlets, and other materials published by the National Woman Suffrage Association were also studied.

Finally, biographical works about feminists and sexual health advocates Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman were incorporated, as well as more general publications on feminism and sexuality in America by such scholars as Nancy Cott, John D'Emilio, and Estelle B. Freedman. Lastly, recent scholarship on the history of reproduction, reproduction rights, and sexuality was also drawn upon in this research.