

J O N A T H A N Z I M M E R M A N

WHOSE AMERICA?

Culture Wars in the Public Schools



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C H A P T E R E I G H T

The Battle for Sex Education

The sex education controversy reached Kalamazoo, Michigan, in the early months of 1969. Its catalyst was a scheduled appearance by Gordon V. Drake, the author of a vitriolic pamphlet condemning the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). Circulated across the country by right-wing groups like the John Birch Society, Drake's pamphlet charged that SIECUS—a small team of physicians and scientists—spread “raw sex” through America's schoolhouses, softening children's moral backbone and making them “easy targets for Marxism.” For several years Kalamazoo schools had quietly taught sex education without any major criticism or disruption. When a local Birch Society chapter announced plans to host Drake for a speech, however, citizens quickly divided into hostile camps. As in countless other communities throughout America, sex education soon became Kalamazoo's most hotly contested school issue.¹

On one side stood the town's educational and medical establishments, led by the Kalamazoo pediatrician and SIECUS board member Frederick J. Margolis. Properly taught, Margolis believed, sex education would improve rather than injure children's morality. “We want to convey attitudes and feelings so that people learn to associate sex, not with promiscuity, VD, something dirty, but with a positive good,

[an] essential part of human living,” he told the *Kalamazoo Gazette*. True, he acknowledged, parents bore the primary responsibility for sex education. But “their fears and their own limited backgrounds too often stand in the way,” forcing schools to take up the slack. The doctor reserved his greatest disdain for Drake and his supporters in the John Birch Society, who presumed to tell educators how to teach about sex. Since Drake lacked any “real training” in “medicine or psychiatry,” Margolis argued, Kalamazoo would do well to listen to people who did. The *Gazette* agreed, praising Margolis as a “nationally recognized expert on sex education”—and blasting its critics as ignorant, far-right “Birchites.”²

In letters to the newspaper, though, citizens who opposed sex education bristled at this automatic association with the Birch Society. Only a fraction of critics bore any link to the society; the rest were simply parents, as one put it, outraged at the intrusion of “sexperts” into their sacred domain. “Isn't it strange that God gave children to parents and not to the experts, since the experts think they only are qualified to teach our children?” a Kalamazoo mother wrote. “I am perfectly willing to let the experts teach my children reading, writing and arithmetic. When it comes to matters which will affect their moral character, I will handle the job.” Youth were suffering from “degradation on all sides,” another mother noted, citing drugs, promiscuity, and the elimination of school prayer. Rather than capitulating to the “perverts” in SIECUS, then, parents must seize control of American public schools—and “turn back the tide of degeneracy” in American public life.³

Like advocates of school prayer, opponents of sex education spoke the language of right-wing populism. They were the defenders of tradition—work, family, nation, God—in a society that seemed to mock these time-honored values. But several important differences marked the twin struggles for school prayer and against sex education, highlighting Americans' profound ambivalence on the issue that linked these controversies: parents' rights. In the prayer debate, conservatives tended to claim that *children's* rights should trump parental

ones: since so many families neglected or ignored the religious instruction of their young, schools would have to provide it. On the question of sex education, conservatives made exactly the opposite argument: parental views must take precedence over "expert" pronouncements. Of course, a similar contradiction plagued the liberal camp. On prayer, liberals championed parents' rights: lest schools insult even a single family's creed, all forms of religious practice should be banished from the classroom. But when it came to instruction about sex, liberals were perfectly willing to violate these individual preferences. Indeed, the very fact that children did not receive sex education "at home"—at least not the brand of sex education that liberals thought best—became the central justification for instituting it at school.

The same tangled politics enmeshed sex education until the early 1980s, when several new patterns emerged. Rather than opposing all forms of sex education in schools, the so-called New Right started to demand its own version of the subject: "abstinence-only" education. Whereas an earlier generation had condemned liberals for stripping religion from the schools, meanwhile, the New Right indicted them on a much more serious charge: imposing their *own* religion, a "secular humanism" that supplanted God's authority. To challenge this ascendant faith—and especially to combat the loose sexual ethics it encouraged—Christians would need to promote their own sex education curriculum in the schools. Like the anti-drug programs that also proliferated during these years, New Right sex education bore a simple message: Just Say No. Abstinence outside marriage was right; masturbation, homosexuality, and all forms of premarital sex were wrong.

As in the prayer dispute, New Right spokesmen sometimes buttressed this argument with liberal rhetoric: since students came from a diversity of "cultures," some conservatives said, schools should transmit Christian as well as humanist views of sex. But to others the very goal of "presenting both sides" demonstrated humanism's evil influence. "Even the attempt to teach [sex education] without values

attaches a value to it," warned one opponent. "The value is that all varieties of sexual and social behavior are of equal validity."⁴ Such complaints reflected an exaggerated, almost fantastic view of so-called mainstream or liberal sex education, which still displayed a deep unease about premarital sexual relations. At least rhetorically, however, liberals favored "discussion" of sexuality in the classroom; conservatives, by contrast, demanded a single set of dicta. No simple compromise could "solve" the problem of sex education, which touched upon the deepest religious and philosophical rifts in post-World War II America.

Sex Education and the Sexual Revolution

Two empty envelopes were mailed to SIECUS director Mary Steichen Calderone on August 1, 1969. Playing on Calderone's M.D. and M.P.H. degrees, the first was addressed to "Mary Stinken Calderone, Mistress of the Devil, Misfit Prostitute of Hell." The second envelope was sent to "Sex-Maniacs In seducing Every Child, Under Satan's Directives," a parody of the "SIECUS" acronym. Across the bottom the sender had scrawled, "Steal a Bible and Read Matt. 23:15 and see Where God Himself Has Already Condemned You to Eternal Torture and Hell, and Remember this on your Deathbed." But the most vituperative remarks appeared on the back of the second envelope:

God Said, about Seducers of Children: You will Wish You Had Never Been Born . . . You'd Be Better Off if a Millstone Were Tied Around Your Neck, and You Be Cast into the Depths of The Sea. He Meant that the Drowning Would Be Better Than Being Cast into the Depths of Hell, where You Will Have Mouten Steel Poured into You From Two Directions . . . and Where Your Diet Will Be Puss, Excretions, Roaches, Maggots, and Spiders. Think it Over in Bed Tonight, as Well as On Your Deathbed.⁵

Both missives were mailed anonymously from New Orleans, where an array of citizen groups had mobilized against a proposed sex education program. Although Calderone and SIECUS had no direct

connection to the program, critics condemned them for fostering "immorality"—or worse, subversion—in the schools. Converging first on the city school board and then on the state legislature, opponents soon won a law barring any sex education in Louisiana below the ninth grade; by 1970 the state would prohibit the subject altogether. Across the country, a similar pattern obtained. In a narrow two-year span, hundreds of school districts and nineteen states considered measures to ban or limit sex education. Regardless of location, Mary Calderone served as the central lightning rod for this swift current of discontent. One Chicago minister accused her of plotting "to corrupt Christian America"; in Tennessee a columnist deemed her "head madam at SIECUS"; and in upstate New York parents charged that "sexual perverts and communists" permeated her organization. "Why don't you queers, pinkos and pimps crawl under some damp rock and have your own sex orgy until you die from exhaustion?" wrote a Michigan resident in a typically spiteful letter to Calderone. "Nothing would suit me better."⁶

At first glance, Calderone seemed an unlikely target for this condemnation. Hardly the brainchild of Calderone and SIECUS, sex education (or "sex instruction," as it was formerly called) dated to the outset of the twentieth century. It grew slowly in the early decades but gained speed in the 1940s and 1950s, well before Calderone entered the picture.⁷ Also, SIECUS itself was a minuscule organization: publishing a single book and a handful of teachers' guides, it bore little resemblance to the "octopus" or "interlocking directorate" that its enemies imagined. And, like the sex educators who preceded them, Calderone and SIECUS sought to control—not to unleash—children's sexual impulses. Beneath its rhetoric of "choice" and "honesty," the "new" sex education conveyed an overwhelmingly conventional morality—indeed, some said, an *old-fashioned* morality—of monogamy and self-discipline.⁸

Why, in that case, the explosive reaction against SIECUS—and against sex education—in the late 1960s? The answer lay in the complex set of developments that contemporaries called the "sexual

revolution." Defying simple definition, the term encompassed everything from cohabitation and homosexuality to pornography and the Pill. Its diverse and often contradictory strands were united by an impatience with the sexual status quo, a desire to free America from its repressive straitjacket.⁹ Profoundly ambivalent about this "revolution," particularly its acceptance of sex outside marriage, sex educators nevertheless shared in its spirit of candor and experimentation. To critics, then, sex education became a symbol of everything that was promiscuous, permissive, and decadent in American life. Significantly, these attacks occurred at the height of the sexual revolution. Most accounts of the revolution place its enemies at the end of the story, when the supposedly libertine Sixties gave way to the conservative Seventies.¹⁰ But the sex education controversy reminds us that the sexual revolution was contested at every turn, not just in its final laps. If millions of Americans—especially youth—celebrated new freedoms and frankness, just as many citizens sought to arrest these very trends. "Revolution" and "counterrevolution" occurred simultaneously, in other words, reflecting the overall polarization of the "radical" 1960s.

As early as 1964 both *Time* and *Newsweek* published cover stories describing a "sexual revolution" among young Americans. That same year Mary Steichen Calderone helped found the Sex Education and Information Council of the United States. The daughter of the photographer Edward Steichen and niece of the poet Carl Sandburg, Calderone grew up amid the artistic avant-garde of Progressive-era New York City. After a failed first marriage, she attended medical school and eventually became medical director of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. But Calderone grew frustrated at Planned Parenthood, which emphasized birth control services to the neglect of "sexual problems" such as impotence and frigidity. Since these problems stemmed from Americans' muddled attitudes and outright misinformation about sex, Calderone reasoned, the nation needed a separate agency devoted solely to sex education. Thanks to bequests from John D. Rockefeller and other philanthropists, SIECUS

soon boasted eight full-time staff members and an annual budget of \$500,000. It also enlisted several prominent "sex experts" to serve on its board of directors, including the Oregon educator Lester A. Kirkendall and the St. Louis gynecologist William H. Masters, the coauthor (with Virginia Johnson) of the 1966 bestseller *Human Sexual Response*.¹¹

To their foes, these "sexperts" represented the vanguard of the nascent sexual revolution. But SIECUS actually functioned as the revolution's rear echelon, restraining the more radical warriors at the forefront. On the one hand, Calderone welcomed the new public discussion and acceptance of "sexual energy," which she deemed a "vital life force" and a key to human happiness and fulfillment. On the other, Calderone and her colleagues aimed to channel this energy into its traditional venue: the marriage bed. "Let me assure you . . . that I stand squarely for monogamy," she wrote in 1968 in a typical response to a critic, "for the committed relationship in marriage that is life-long." Condemning "casual sex" between men and women, Calderone also denounced homosexual relations of every sort; "healthy" sex education, she argued, would help prevent both of these behaviors.¹²

Out in the schools, meanwhile, sex education courses proliferated: by 1968, according to one estimate, half of American school districts taught the subject. Few of these programs had any direct connection to SIECUS, which sent consultants to some thirty communities and literature to several hundred others. But the "new" sex education classes shared SIECUS's joint emphasis on expression and control, welcoming "discussion" of the sexual impulse but stressing the need to discipline it. As educators admitted, the very *goal* of "discussion" was to encourage such discipline. "We don't lecture or give sermons," a school superintendent explained in 1968. "The truth is, though, we are selling middle-class morality." When the topic of premarital sex came up for "debate," for example, teachers frequently distributed statistics on venereal disease, abortion, and divorce. Such techniques lent a scientific gloss to the "hell-fire warnings" of the past, a journalist

observed, but their objective was exactly the same: to foster monogamy in marriage.¹³

Still, the journalist added, the "new" sex education signaled a much more frank, direct attitude toward sexuality. The subject "has changed its aura from that of a shady mistress to that of a prim matron," she quipped, "who can be taken everywhere in broad daylight." Formerly tabooed terms—"erection," "orgasm," "masturbation"—now found their way into American classrooms; however much sex educators stacked the deck in favor of traditional morality, their vocabulary diverged sharply from that of their forebears. Nowhere was this trend clearer than in the new crop of books, films, and slide shows that arose in the 1960s to supply the burgeoning sex education market. The most controversial item was a text called *How Babies Are Made*, which featured drawings of dogs and chickens copulating as well as a cartoon of a man and woman in bed together; although they were covered by a sheet, the man clearly lay atop the woman. In a popular movie called *The Game*, meanwhile, a teenage boy pressured a reluctant (and virginal) girl to have sex in the back of his father's car. To be sure, both the book and the film embodied a staunchly traditional, "Cellophane-wrapped" view of sex, as an amused British reporter noted: the modest cartoon identified its subjects as "mother and father," while the movie concluded with a stern warning against premarital intercourse. To underscore the point, the reporter's article was entitled "Unpermissive America." To millions of Americans, however, these same materials embodied the evils of a society that seemed to permit *everything*—at least when it came to sex.¹⁴

From Soviet Subversion to the Sick Sixties

Attacks on sex education were hardly unique to the 1960s. On the contrary, they had accompanied the subject since its inception. In the early 1900s, for example, Catholics charged that sex education—like Darwinism—denigrated religious interpretations of human life.

After World War II they also protested a popular new sex education film, *Human Growth*, which included diagrams of male and female genitals and even footage of a baby's birth. But the loudest condemnations of sex education came from right-wing patriotic and veterans' groups, who suspected that the entire subject was a diabolical Soviet plot. "Why all of a sudden this emphasis on SEX?" asked Amos A. Fries, who also led campaigns against allegedly "Red" history textbooks. "Is this departure—that is, teaching Sex Education—part of the efforts of Communism aimed at destroying morality among American youth?" In California the state Un-American Activities Committee even convened a hearing in 1947 to investigate "sex books" in the schools. After collecting testimony from parents, teachers, and physicians, the committee concluded that the sex education texts "follow or parallel the Communist Party line" for "the destruction of the moral fibre" of America.¹⁵

Such accusations seem to have declined in the early 1950s, possibly reflecting a decrease in sex education itself. But they reawakened near the end of the decade, when "the superabundance of sex" in the mass media—television, movies, and advertising—gave new life to theories of a "Red Sex" conspiracy. "Few contemporary authors dare mention Communism in connection with the so-called 'sex revolution,'" one critic noted in 1959. "Yet evidence exists that there is a connection." Specifically, he claimed, sex educators used Pavlovian "mind-conditioning" methods to promote "unrestrained sexual license," which Soviet theorists had long identified as a precondition for the worldwide triumph of their ideology.¹⁶

The conspiracy theory would be revived ten years later, courtesy of the John Birch Society. Founded in 1958 by the Massachusetts candy manufacturer Robert Welch, the society detected a Soviet plot in almost every aspect of American life. Most notoriously, Welch even condemned Dwight D. Eisenhower as a "conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy." The Birchites seem to have ignored sex education until January 1969, when Welch told a Houston audience that the subject was part of a "filthy Communist plot"; its "real purpose,"

he insisted, was "to keep our high school youth obsessed with sex." That same month Welch announced the formation of the Birch Society's Movement to Restore Decency (MOTOREDE). In the long run, MOTOREDE would aim to reclaim "the morals, manners, customs, traditions, and values that have preserved our civilization," as its first bulletin blared, highlighting America's alarming epidemics of crime, pornography, and drug abuse. But the group's first target would be sex education courses, which had proliferated along with these negative trends—and seemed to have perpetuated them, "exactly as the Communists have planned and intended."¹⁷

The organization proceeded to distribute instructional packets for starting local chapters, complete with leaflets, bumper stickers, sample news releases, and form letters to prospective members. It also produced a thirty-minute filmstrip on sex education, *The Innocents Defiled*, which activists could purchase for thirty dollars. Focusing mainly on Calderone and SIECUS, Birchite material besmirched them with the time-honored tactic of guilt by association: one SIECUS board member had been active in the "Communist-controlled" teachers' union in New York City, another signed the "Communist-inspired" Stockholm Peace Petition, and so on. Most of all, SIECUS's subversive intent was apparent in its own published doctrines and directives. Simply by raising sexual ethics as a "question for discussion," Birch Society members charged, SIECUS undermined those very ethics. The results could be seen and heard on any American streetcorner, in youths' "filthy language, squalid dress, lewd behavior, and disrespect for authority." The only remedy lay with American parents, who must seize back the moral authority they had mistakenly ceded to public schools. "I'm the person responsible for raising my children, not the principal," declared a suggested MOTOREDE script for addressing stubborn school officials. "And I certainly know more about what is best for them than he does."¹⁸

For the next several years Calderone and her supporters would blame the John Birch Society for the nationwide attack on sex education.¹⁹ Just as SIECUS's critics exaggerated its scope and power,

though, so did sex educators inflate the Birchites' influence. By the late 1960s the Birch Society was in disarray; plagued by paranoia and internal strife, it faded quickly from the scene. Across the political spectrum, meanwhile, Americans heaped ridicule upon the Birchites' accusation of "subversion" in sex education. The Chicago columnist Mike Royko jokingly suggested that Mao Tse-tung, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh had sparked Communist revolutions by distributing sex pamphlets entitled "Let Mao Tell You How," "Hit the Hay, by Fidel and Che," and "Want to Know? Ask Ho!" In a more serious vein, the staunchly conservative American Medical Association published an impassioned attack on "the *extreme* right wing"—a code word for the John Birch Society—after the Birchites blasted the AMA for supporting "Communist" sex education.²⁰

In the same editorial, however, the AMA acknowledged that the movement against sex education extended far beyond the Birch Society. Even as they rejected the society's claims of Communist intrigue, it seemed, thousands of "sincerely motivated but uninformed individuals" embraced the other two themes of the Birchite critique: moral degradation and parental rights. To put it differently, many Americans who scoffed at charges of subversion still rejected sex education as a blight on society and an insult to their own authority. "It's a red herring to label opponents as the far right," warned an Illinois school superintendent who supported sex education. Instead, he added, most critics of sex education were simply parents who were concerned about the moral well-being of their children. More precisely, most of them were *mothers*: rejecting the content and sometimes the premises of sex education, they also bridled at any association with the "far-right"—and male-dominated—John Birch Society. "The [sex education] programs are springing up like crabgrass and dichondra," noted Dixie Ryan, the mother of three children in the California schools, "but the opposition to it is beginning to sear the grass roots like prairie fire." Hardly the seedlings of the Birch Society, foes of sex education sprouted independently across the American political landscape.²¹

At least a year before the Birchites appeared on the scene, for example, Ryan had forged a group called Parents United for a Responsible Education (PURE) to fight sex education in the Los Angeles area. In a veritable avalanche of acronyms, hundreds of other local groups across the country also attacked sex education. The most common symbol was "P," for "parent": from Parents Opposed to Sex Education (POSE) to Parents Against Universal Sex Education (PAUSE) to Citizens for Parental Rights (CPR), hundreds of citizens' groups demanded the halt—or at least the suspension—of sex education in their children's schools. Battering school boards and legislatures, they made sex instruction "the most hotly debated topic in American elementary education," as *Time* magazine reported in July 1969. With only a touch of hyperbole, another pair of observers deemed sex education the most explosive school issue since the *Scopes* trial of 1925. In a small Phoenix elementary school district, more than 1,500 spectators crammed into a school board meeting on the subject; in Kansas a school official supporting sex education received a death threat; and in Minnesota tear gas fumes interrupted legislative hearings on the issue.²²

Minus charges of Communist subversion, most of the local protest groups echoed the Birchites' basic critique: sex education promoted a promiscuous, amoral conception of sex. At its root, indeed, much of the debate about sex education concerned rival views of the sex act itself. To Mary Calderone and her supporters, sex was not simply a means of procreation but an essential component of human pleasure and happiness. To sex education's critics, however, this so-called recreational philosophy *denigrated* what was truly unique about human beings. Animals copulated whenever they pleased, for no higher reason than pleasure; by acknowledging or even celebrating this principle, then, sex education reduced people to a "bestial" state.²³ At the same time, it exaggerated the importance of sex to human health and well-being. "What makes you so positive about sex, as if it were the only thing in life," began a Rhode Island critic in a lengthy letter to Calderone:

I am 71 years old, love to work hard, try to have a purpose in life, *other than sex*. Hate dirty nude pictures the body is *far from beautiful*, when there are no clothes on it. God gave us sex to have children, not to play around with the body. People should have interests, as they mature, not depend on sex. My brother had a business and still looked young at 65 a bachelor, no sex drives, too bussy for such. Sex is to bear children, *if you want them*. I had two and it was all I cared to have, but, I wouldn't allow my husband to maul me, and play around, and we are both healthy . . . What makes you think your cryterian is for every woman or man. The sex foolishness is getting too much out of control.²⁴

Worse than nonprocreative sex between partners was masturbation, the *bête noire* of sex education opponents in the 1960s. Even sexual intercourse with contraceptives had the potential to create children, but masturbation's sole goal was gratification—and of the self, at that. Although sex educators never “taught” or “advocated” masturbation, as critics often claimed, some textbooks and course outlines did seek to correct the widespread notions that it caused pimples, warts, blindness, and especially insanity. “The commonly quoted medical consequences of masturbation are almost entirely fictitious,” stated one California textbook. “Masturbation will not impair the mind.” Actually, many doctors and psychiatrists still preached the alleged perils of “self-abuse.” More to the point, millions of citizens still believed in these dangers. “At 67 my bodily powers ceased and family life hampered which should of continued for life had I not wasted my substance,” wrote one. “So don't let the medical profession or anyone hoodwink you into believing that masturbation is harmless.”²⁵

By accepting or even promoting sexual hedonism, opponents emphasized, educators echoed the crass messages that children received from the mass media. “To me, the whole thing we witness today on sex, sex, sex, sex sex sex sex sex sex sex sex is revolting,” one correspondent told SIECUS officials in 1968, in a typical jeremiad. Critics particularly targeted modern film and literature, each of which had become, another spokesman complained, “a mere vehicle

for four-letter words and dreary sexual perversions.” Schools should challenge this pervasive coarsening of popular culture, he continued, establishing at least one safe harbor from “the sexual Typhoid Marys of the Sick Sixties.” Thanks to sex education, however, the same bawdy winds that swirled across the mass media also blew into the American classroom. In schools as on the streets, critics warned, children ingested “an unmixed diet of high-calorie, highly commercialized sex.”²⁶

Ironically, sex educators often shared their opponents' abhorrence of wanton sexual imagery in the media. From television and the movies, Planned Parenthood president Alan Guttmacher worried, students learned to “treat sex as a commodity” rather than as an expression of love, trust, and respect. But this problem demanded the *expansion*—not the elimination—of sex education. “It's time we acknowledged that most parents fail utterly to educate their children sexually,” Guttmacher declared. Citing several well-documented studies, educators noted that only a slim fraction of American youngsters learned about sex in their homes. So schools needed to take up the slack, just as they did in other areas of the curriculum. “By state law, parents are not—except under exceptional circumstances—permitted to teach history, geography, mathematics or any other academic subject,” a Chicago sex educator explained. “Yet consider the strange anomaly: every parent is expected to be an expert in the critical area of sex education.” Actually, a Kansas City supporter admitted, sex education *did* take place in the home. But it was the wrong *kind* of education, she emphasized, conveying a host of inaccurate and even damaging lessons: “Psychiatrists, psychologists, and marriage counselors report vast human suffering derived from warped, confused, repressive attitudes and concepts learned from well intentioned but misguided parents . . . While healthy sex education in the home is a fine ideal, it does not occur in the majority of homes, and cannot occur until parents themselves are capable of providing it. Thus it becomes the province of the specialist to provide such vital services.”²⁷

Parents versus Experts

Such paeans to “specialists”—and insults to parents—sent critics of sex education into convulsions of rage. “I am tired of being told by ‘leading’ educators, psychologists, doctors, and clergymen that we do not know how to raise our children,” wrote an angry mother in upstate New York. “Do you really think that Satan would hesitate to appear in a scholar’s robe, a doctor’s uniform or a clerical collar?” Critics reserved special distaste for prominent churchmen who supported sex education; like school prayer, the issue exposed huge chasms between Protestant leaders and their laities. Mary Calderone dated her own involvement in sex education to a conference in 1961 sponsored by the National Council of Churches, which became a prime target for prayer supporters and sex education opponents alike. The director of the NCC’s Family Life Department, William Genne, served as a SIECUS board member and became one of Calderone’s closest confidants. As early as 1963 other NCC leaders displayed disagreement—and skepticism—about traditional sexual mores. “On this subject of premarital chastity the problem of the churches is in not knowing what to say,” observed one NCC spokesman. “We must be courageous enough to define our differences of opinion and let the world know our confusion . . . The time has come to be honest.”²⁸

To millions of parishioners, however, such matters caused little “confusion”: scripture, after all, placed an ironclad prohibition on sex outside of marriage. The only real conundrum concerned the church leaders themselves, who had inexplicably strayed from “God’s immutable laws,” as one worshipper wrote. Controversy proved particularly sharp within the United Presbyterian Church, where in 1970 leaders endorsed state contraceptive services, legalized abortion, and “thoughtful programs of sex education.” Refusing to condemn premarital sex, the church’s general assembly simply called on couples to make “responsible decisions”; it also deemed masturbation “one of the earliest pleasurable experiences,” deploring the “guilt and shame” that still surrounded the topic. Across the country, local churches

reacted with shock and outrage. “Less politely put, the [general assembly] seems to say, ‘Go to bed, kids, it’s all right,’” an Illinois pastor fumed. “We are paying more attention to Masters and Johnson than to Moses and Jesus.” Sexual sinners *should* feel “guilt and shame,” another critic added, as should the national church leaders who abetted them. “Little did I dream that our once grand and glorious old church would ever sink to such a level as to approve immorality and filth!” exclaimed a Presbyterian in Minnesota, vilifying church leaders who supported sex education. “You are going against the teachings of Christ, and I pray he will reward you according to your works!”²⁹

Aside from these allegedly apostate ministers, sex education opponents probably reserved their greatest ire for psychiatrists. In part, their enmity reflected psychiatrists’ obvious prominence in—and support for—sex education programs. More than that, though, it reflected critics’ fears of emotional manipulation or “mind control” in the schools. The “new” sex education emphasized students’ emotions, feelings, and attitudes: its goal was not just to teach the mechanics of sex (often derided as “plumbing”) but rather to transmit a “healthy view” of it. To critics, this objective conjured up what one frightened parent called “psychological brainwashing” in “permissive morality.” In the guise of encouraging students to make decisions, opponents asserted, sex educators used sophisticated psychiatric techniques of “sensitivity training” (ST) to inscribe their *own* decisions upon students.³⁰

In California fears of ST grew so rapidly that the state assembly held special hearings in December 1968 to investigate it. Critics testified that ST techniques had infected the entire curriculum, not just sex-related instruction: in the “new” English and the “new” social studies, too, teachers tried to elicit—and to alter—students’ “innermost feelings.” But ST was clearly most dangerous when applied to the “new” sex education, which sought to influence the deepest emotions and the most critical decisions that a child could confront. “The child should be considered an individual,” insisted one opponent of

sex education, "not something to be standardized, plied with information as in computer programming, and/or wound up like a spring with pre-set attitudes and behaviors."³¹

Several sharp ironies marked this campaign against "sensitivity training" and psychiatry. In most of their pronouncements, opponents attacked sex education for promoting "pluralistic" or "situational" ethics: on matters like premarital sex, one spokesman declared, schools should inculcate "universal and immutable" principles rather than encourage students to formulate their own. In their attacks on ST, however, these same critics castigated sex education for imposing "group control" or "group-think" on individual students. Here these conservatives' rhetoric echoed the contemporary left-wing critique of psychiatry by popular authors like R. D. Laing, who charged that the discipline used pseudo-scientific terms and rationales to scapegoat racial minorities and stamp out political dissent. At the height of California's ST debate, in fact, white foes of sex education quoted a radical black activist's attack on a study that alleged a high prevalence of psychiatric illness among African-Americans: "It becomes clearer what may be crazy about those people: they are black, and they act differently than 'normal' people—that is, the white political psychiatrists." In a hopeful spirit, sex education critics even quoted the black activist's concluding call to arms: "There is no reason why blacks, Christians, conservatives, youth—all those alienated from the mental hygiene establishment—cannot join, despite all their differences, in demands for restraint of political psychiatrists."³²

At the same time, though, opponents of sex education eagerly invoked the handful of mental health professionals who shared their position. The most popular such authority was the New York child psychologist Rhoda L. Lorand, who decried sex education courses for interfering with the "latency" period of development (ages six to ten) that Sigmund Freud had described. "Sublimation of sexual curiosity . . . is the price we must pay to live in a civilized society," Lorand proclaimed in a much-cited pamphlet that drew heavily on Freud. "Cramming sex knowledge down kids' throats does not promote

healthy growth." (Lorand neglected to note that Freud himself supported sex education in schools, ridiculing "the customary concealment from children of everything connected with sex.") Critics also claimed that sex educators suffered from "neurosis," another Freudian term that had entered the vernacular. "Now you want us to believe that these neurotic [sex educators] should teach our kids about Sex?" an Oregon activist asked. "Well there are Psychiatrists of a different opinion and I will continue to listen to them."³³

As in the controversy over the medical consequences of masturbation, however, most sex education opponents ignored these abstract, theoretical debates. In the final analysis, they argued, only one arbiter really mattered: the parent. "The basic issue at stake [is] USURPATION OF PARENTAL AUTHORITY," a Californian blared. "This is the real cause of the so-called generation gap." Across the country, shocked parents reported that sex education interfered with their own efforts to instill modesty and chastity. In Illinois a ten-year-old boy announced over dinner that he "had a good time discussing the penis in school today"; in California a second-grader dissected his breakfast egg "to find the thing the rooster put through the hen to make the egg fertile"; in New York a mother complained that her seven-year-old son asked his grandmother to lift her skirts so he could see her vagina—a term he had learned in school. "There was never any kind of talk like this or anything even near it when I was growing up," the despondent mother wrote to Mary Calderone. "I'm beginning to think that we just don't have much say for OUR childrens education or life anymore no matter how hard we try to bring them up decently."³⁴

Apocryphal or not, such anecdotes accurately captured the moral challenge that sex education posed to parental control. Sex educators did believe that "most parents" were "reluctant" or "unqualified" to teach their children about sex, as one supporter noted in 1969; the entire subject, she admitted, rested on that very premise. Like Calderone's New York correspondent, some dejected foes simply conceded that schools would supplant their authority in this area. But

others resolved to seize back their God-given rights. "Ever Hear of 'Parent Power'?" one critic wrote to Calderone in March 1969. "You Will!" In Portland, Oregon, members of the National Parents' League picketed a Calderone speech; near Buffalo, New York, the newly formed "Parents of New York United" urged citizens to "CHALLENGE YOUR PTA AND YOUR SCHOOL BOARD" on sex education; and across the state in Schenectady, members of Citizens for Parental Rights argued that taxpayers should not have to subsidize such "poison" for their children. "Hell hath no fury like a parent scorned, and you perverts have not heard the last from me," threatened a Michigan critic in a letter to SIECUS's board of directors. "Where the morals, religion, and upbringing of my children is concerned, I will fight you to the death."³⁵

Many of the same Americans who fought sex education also deplored the removal of prayer from the schools. Like the Supreme Court's ban on prayer, they claimed, sex education demonstrated the overall degeneracy of the schools as well as educators' hostility toward the Christian faith. "The schools got into trouble when they took God out and put sex in," thundered the evangelist Billy Graham in an oft-quoted address in 1969. In each case, it seemed, citizens were forced to subsidize an initiative that ran directly counter to their spiritual beliefs. "Why must I as a taxpayer give money to a school system that is not allowed to teach about God," a Michigan mother asked, "but is allowed to teach, instruct, show filthy literature and movies on sex, family planning, sensitivity programs, etc.?" Both sex education and the ban on school prayer, a New York critic explained, violated a basic American freedom: the right of parents to transmit their religious values to their young. "My children belong to me," she insisted, "and I do not want the school involved in teaching [a] moral and religious subject."³⁶

As other sex education critics quickly recognized, though, this argument almost exactly echoed the case *against* school prayer. According to prayer opponents, any classroom devotions would violate the

rights of religious minorities—or of atheists—to uphold and transmit their own beliefs. Even as they condemned the prayer ban for "secularizing" education, critics often summoned that very principle to censure sex education. "If the teaching of religion is such an infringement on the rights of the individual, so, then, is the teaching of sex," declared one upstate New York citizen. As "a Christian thinking parent," she added, she certainly deplored the removal of prayer from the classroom. But now that the courts had barred religious instruction, any presentation of sexual issues was bound to occur within a materialist, "anti-religious" framework. "The government and the people have taken God out and Prayer out of the schools and now they want to teach sex . . . without the Book that invented or started sex," a Michigan couple complained. Better to bar all mention of the subject than to subject all children to a "secular" view of it.³⁷

Nor would it suffice to excuse objecting families from sex education, as school officials frequently ordered. Here, too, sex education critics explicitly invoked the campaign against prayer and other religious exercises. "In the controversy over voluntary Bible reading in the schools we were told that it would do grave psychological harm to children if they were excused . . . for they would be set off from the other students and that would constitute punishment," a minister noted. "Now we are told that sex education is somehow different. We may excuse our children, but the program will continue." In fact, critics claimed, children who refused to take sex education faced far *greater* social censure than those who declined to pray. Given the rebellious spirit infecting many high schools, protesters against prayer might well win popular acclaim from their peers; but students boycotting sex education would simply be dismissed as "squares," prudish retrogrades whom the sexual revolution had left behind. In elementary schools, meanwhile, *any* exclusion—from prayer *or* sex education—could traumatize young minds. In a large California district, for example, students whose parents objected to sex education were sent to a study room or to the principal's office. One of these

children spent the entire class period in tears, his mother reported, convinced that his removal implied some form of reproach.³⁸

Thirteen years later, in February 1982, a group called the Coalition of Concerned Parents brought suit against a state-mandated sex education curriculum in New Jersey. Like earlier critics, the CCP attorney Joseph Shanahan appealed to the Supreme Court's bans on prayer and Bible reading: if spiritual exercises violated dissenters' freedom of religion, surely sex education did the same. But Shanahan also cited the Court's more recent ruling on abortion, *Roe v. Wade*, which ordained a constitutional "right to privacy." Just as prohibitions on abortions violated a woman's right to privacy, Shanahan argued, so did the state's sex education program inhibit a similar right between parents and children. "When you make a sword," he said, summarizing his strategy, "expect it to be used against you." Well into the 1980s, it seemed, sex education's right-wing foes were hoisting liberals on their own petard.³⁹

Sex Education in the 1980s

Like the school prayer battle, the struggle over sex education cooled in the 1970s. By 1978 nearly half of American pupils reported that they had studied the subject. And a growing fraction of schools addressed the so-called Big Four topics of sexual controversy: masturbation, homosexuality, contraception, and abortion. Some curricula and textbooks deemed masturbation "an acceptable way to relax" or even a safe alternative to intercourse; some schools showed films describing homosexuality as normal. Many of these materials aimed explicitly at provoking student "discussion," a hallmark of the "new" sex education. Students in Richmond, Virginia, simulated a visit to Planned Parenthood, including a role-play pelvic exam in which male students placed their feet in stirrups; in Minneapolis they stood on a "Values Continuum" line representing their reactions to remarks like "young teenage women don't like sex"; and across the country

girls carried an egg for a week to experience the responsibilities—and the difficulties—of young parenthood.⁴⁰

Indeed, the issue of teen pregnancy played a key role in sex education's overall expansion in the 1970s. Contrary to many popular perceptions, the birth rate for teen women nearly *halved* from 1960 to 1975. But the widespread fear of an "epidemic" of teen pregnancy sparked a new infusion of funds for sex education, most notably from the federal government. Under the Adolescent Health Services and Prevention and Care Act of 1978, school districts could receive federal grants to develop sex education programs that provided birth control counseling. Two years later New Jersey became the first state to require sex education (as opposed to health instruction) in all of its public schools. Proponents played heavily on the rise of illegitimate births in the state, especially to teenage girls. They also emphasized the overwhelming support for "preventive" sex education among teens themselves, both in New Jersey and across America. "Maybe I'm in the 'Immoral Minority,'" quipped a teenager in Pittsburgh, "but I'd rather be informed than a FATHER."⁴¹

The teenager's comment alluded to the Moral Majority, the brain child of the preacher Jerry Falwell and the best-known component of the so-called New Christian Right. In 1980, just a year after its founding, the Moral Majority sued the Washington State Library in an attempt to learn which schools had borrowed a controversial sex education film. The following year the group was selected to rebut Mary Calderone in a much-discussed episode of the popular television show *60 Minutes*. Nearly eighty years old, the spry Calderone continued to insist that sex education sought to stem—not to encourage—premarital intercourse. Nonsense, replied Moral Majority vice-president Cal Thomas. Sex education in America resembled a driving teacher who announced to children, "Here is the wheel, here are the keys, here is the accelerator, but forget the brake, and for Heaven's sake, don't use reverse gear," Thomas told *60 Minutes*. Whatever its apologists said, in short, sex education encouraged youngsters to have sex—an act

that true Christians reserved for marriage. "We are simply and *fundamentally*—if I may used that word—involved in a battle for the hearts and the minds of the American people," Thomas concluded.⁴²

Hundreds of other organizations joined in the attack. As Thomas's pun implied, many sex education opponents belonged to fundamentalist Protestant churches. But many others were Catholics, who joined with conservative Protestants to fight sex education just as they had united in the struggle for school prayer. As in the prayer dispute, moreover, Catholics often found themselves at odds with their own leaders. To the alarm of many parishioners, for example, New Jersey's Catholic Conference supported the state's 1980 sex education mandate. "It is almost impossible for those of us who are Catholic to get any input even with our own Bishops," one worshipper complained. "This is a tragedy." Several lay Catholics wrote letters to the Pope, condemning their conference's position on sex education and pleading with the Vatican to intervene. Others flooded meetings of the state board of education, lest school officials conclude that Catholics stood united on the subject. "The Catholic Conference of New Jersey [has] absolutely no right to represent us," an angry parishioner told the board. "As a matter of fact, they better get themselves straightened out because they are going definitely against the Catholic faith."⁴³

The same critics also blasted sex educators' "non-judgmental" approach toward homosexuality, which allegedly undermined "the traditional nuclear family" as well as the word of God. Ironically, they noted, New Jersey's sex education mandate was known as "family life" instruction. "We keep talking about family life, family life, family life," a grandmother complained. "There is no way you're going to teach [my] grandchild that homosexuals make a family. The sin of homosexuality is forbidden." Some opponents even suggested that classroom discussion of masturbation indirectly encouraged sexual abuse of children. After all, they reasoned, masturbation in childhood implied that the child was a sexual being. Sexual predators shared—and acted upon—this warped perspective. Here critics especially

targeted the popular feminist health book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which was used as a reference text in a few school districts. By "normalizing" masturbation as well as homosexuality, foes alleged, the book also encouraged "public acceptance of pedophilia."⁴⁴

Most important, critics now charged that sex education—formerly viewed as an enemy of religion—actually conveyed a religion of its own: "secular humanism." The charge dated to the 1960s, when a handful of opponents said that sex education reflected a "humanist" faith that elevated man over God.⁴⁵ By the early 1980s New Right groups like the Moral Majority had brought this argument into the popular lexicon. "Secular humanism . . . is an aggressive atheism which denies God, denies life after death, and shuns all moral absolutes," wrote one New Jersey activist. Moreover, she added, sex education was "the major transmission belt" for this religion in American schools. Just a few years earlier, she pointed out, Mary Calderone had received the "Humanist of the Year" Award from the American Humanist Association. But the real proof of "humanist indoctrination" lay in sex education curricula themselves, which consistently supplanted God's word with "godless ethics." In short, critics concluded, sex education violated the First Amendment's ban on the establishment of religion. Humanism *was* a religion, and sex education foisted it upon the public schools.⁴⁶

Two very different corollaries flowed from this argument. Since humanism had already penetrated the public schools, some critics argued, their own religion should receive "equal time." Like advocates of school prayer and creationism, opponents of sex education often echoed the neutral, "impartial" cadences of liberal pluralism. "If we are to educate the whole child, practice democracy, stimulate critical thinking, then both sides of an issue must be presented," asserted one critic, demanding a "God-centered" perspective to complement the "humanist" faith. "Permitting one over the other is alien to everything a democratic society represents." To other activists, however, this very attempt to satisfy "both sides" reflected the loose, "situational" ethics of the humanist foe. "How can we give

our children answers that we as a society are still in the process of arriving at?" asked another opponent of sex education. "Let's stick to things we do know about: reading, writing, arithmetic, the basics." Better to avoid the subject altogether than to confuse children with mixed, incoherent messages about morality and sexuality.⁴⁷

By the mid-1980s conservatives began to formulate a third position. Rather than teaching "both sides" of sexual issues or eliminating them from the curriculum, they argued, schools should provide an entirely new brand of sex education with a single, unambiguous message: abstinence. Following their sweep of Congress and the White House in the 1980 elections, Republicans in Washington had required that federally funded sex education programs emphasize "self-discipline and responsibility in sexuality." But such programs did not become common at local levels until 1985 and 1986, thanks to the first stirrings of a new sexual crisis: AIDS. Conservatives were shocked when Surgeon General C. Everett Koop demanded broader sex education—including instruction about condoms—to fight the spread of the disease. Asked at a press conference in 1986 when such education should begin, Koop responded, "at the earliest age possible"; pressed to be more specific, he blurted, "third grade." Across the Christian Right, critics blasted Koop—a staunchly "pro-life" conservative—for his apostasy on sex education. According to the fundraiser Richard Viguerie, the surgeon general was "proposing instruction in buggery"; to Phyllis Schlafly, a longtime critic of sex education, Koop's report appeared to have been "edited by the Gay Task Force."⁴⁸

Yet given the obvious threat of AIDS, even Schlafly could no longer oppose all forms of sex education. Instead, like other conservatives, she began to advocate "abstinence only" curricula. The same year as Koop's comments on AIDS, Christian Right activists started to tout a federally funded program called "Sex Respect"; six years after that, roughly 1,600 school districts had adopted it. In marked contrast to the surgeon general, "Sex Respect" made no mention of contraception. Instead, it focused obsessively on the supposed perils of even

the "safest" premarital sex. "Schools ought to teach that the consequences of sex fall twice as heavily on girls as on boys," Schlafly declared, in support of the abstinence-only approach. "Little girls ought to be taught about . . . the side effects of contraceptives, of abortion and its trauma, venereal diseases, the poverty, the cervical cancer, the emotional and psychological trauma."⁴⁹

In at least one suburban New York district, meanwhile, schools offered students a choice between "mainstream" sex education and a new abstinence-only curriculum. But such compromises were rare on the issue of sex education, which polarized Americans for the better part of two decades. "I think this country is very deeply split over morality," a California teenager observed in 1968. "What some parents consider an outrage seems rather tame, even quaint, to younger, more liberal parents." Twenty years later Americans were no closer to reaching an accord on the question; by some measures, indeed, they were much farther apart. Designed to elicit discussion of Americans' "values," sex education would remind Americans how sharply—and, it seemed, how irrevocably—these values clashed.⁵⁰

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10. See, e.g., David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), esp. 272–273.
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Epilogue: Searching for Common Ground

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5. See Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Knopf, 1997).
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