Social purity

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“Social purity” was an ambitious ideal promoted by an international network of social reformers that flourished, mainly in English-speaking countries, from the 1880s until World War I. The movement (if one can call a diverse and loosely linked set of organizations a movement) aimed to root out vice, especially commercial vice, in the belief that vice corroded not only individual souls but whole societies. Social purity reformers believed that consumer capitalism’s temptations posed new and grave threats not only to individual virtue and health, but also to the health and moral fibre of the nation. Purity in personal conduct would not only reform individuals, but would also halt what was perceived as a decline in the collective health and morals of Anglo-Saxon and/or Protestant culture. The movement or network overlapped to a very large extent with the older and more powerful temperance movement, and also, in a more complex and less harmonious manner, with the women’s suffrage movement.

One of the remarkable features of social purity thinking, from today’s perspective, is that the activists did not separate physical health from moral health. For them, as for many medical authorities of the time, risks to physical health were also signs of moral decay. A father’s alcoholism, for example, could result in mental deficiency or sexual vice down through the generations. Drinking, smoking, and lewd entertainment were thus not only threats to individual health/purity but also symptoms of national and racial decay. Dr Elizabeth Blackwell, the world’s first female doctor, warned: “moral development must keep pace with the intellectual or the race degenerates” (“Moral education of the young,” in Jeffreys 1987:386).

With regard to the focus on individual virtue, social purity thought departed from conventional late Victorian morality in targeting men and in attempting to popularize what was called the single standard of sexual morality (by contrast to the sexist double standard, which winked at male sexual adventures). The focus on men was related to, indeed rooted in, the gender politics of the temperance movement. The international Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the most important transnational vehicle for social purity campaigns, devised the white lapel ribbon (ancestor of today’s philanthropic colored ribbons) as a visible token of commitment on the part of young men to hold themselves to the standard of sexual purity demanded of ladies. And the WCTU emphasized the risks, moral and physical, of smoking (then a male preserve), along with denunciations of alcohol and sexual immorality.

In an even more marked departure from Victorian ideas about repressing sexuality, some purity activists believed that some form of sex education (“sex hygiene,” in their language) was imperative, and they wrote popular sex education manuals, often distributed by the WCTU, with titles such as “What a boy ought to know,” “What a married woman ought to know,” and so on.

Purity reformers, however, did not agree completely with regard to sex and to feminism (one reason for the movement’s demise). While for socially conservative Protestant clerics purity ideas were tied to the patriarchal family, feminist activists and intellectuals used purity ideas to denounce masculine privilege and authority. Noted British suffragist Christabel Pankhurst, for example, who coined the slogan “Votes for women and chastity for men,” blamed the supposed “degeneration” of the Anglo-Saxon race on the fact that married men acquired syphilis from illicit encounters and passed it on to unsuspecting wives and children, affecting not only families but the whole nation. Few went as far as British feminist Frances Swiney, who speculated that sperm is toxic for women and for the human race, except when women want to conceive. But most social purity reformers believed that women’s greater influence in the public sphere would
result in both a cleaner political system and a healthier population.

With regard to seeking tough morals laws, while purity activists often campaigned in favour of liquor prohibition and censorship of lewd entertainment, some, especially in Britain, were skeptical about using state law to coerce people. British feminist leader Josephine Butler, who in the decades before social purity had led the campaign to repeal laws stigmatizing and coercing prostitutes, initially supported the main English organization, the National Vigilance Association, but soon denounced the social purity movement for its belief that coercive state measures (such as liquor prohibition) could bring about moral reform.

A final point concerns the connection of social purity ideas and campaigns with eugenics—that is, with more or less scientific ideas about “improving” racial and national health by promoting the “right” kinds of births and by discouraging or prohibiting the “wrong” births. Although the strongly racist form of eugenics promoted in the 1920s and 1930s not only by the Nazis, but also by many respectable international groups, had not yet become widely popular in the golden years of social purity, the fears about the “degeneration” of the white and/or Anglo-Saxon and/or European race that underpinned eugenics also fuelled social purity thinking. One Canadian activist, Rev. S. D. Chown, typically worried about “the purity of the national lifeblood” (Valverde 2010:68). The older purity feminists (Elizabeth Blackwell, Josephine Butler) would have rejected the state coercion promoted by later eugenics campaigners, if they had lived that long. In any case, once the era of suffragists and temperance gave way to the cynicism of the 1920s, with its “flappers” and its rum-runners, the movement, which largely suspended its activities during World War I, could not be revived.

SEE ALSO: Eugenics and Sexology; Feminism; Social Hygiene

REFERENCES


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