

The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America

Nancy K. Berlage
Texas State University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2017 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Berlage, Nancy K. "The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America." *The Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 361-363.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12418>

Hosted by Iowa Research Online

that encourages further research on the continued evolutions of agricultural organizations, technological change, community building, and gender roles.

The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America, by Gabriel N. Rosenberg. Politics and Culture in Modern America Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 290 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$55.00 hardcover and e-book.

Reviewer Nancy K. Berlage is assistant professor of history and public history at Texas State University. She is the author of *Farmers Helping Farmers: The Rise of the Farm and Home Bureaus, 1914-1935* (2016).

“Fretting about the countryside is a great American pastime” (1). So states Gabriel N. Rosenberg as he begins his book, *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America*. 4-H, an educational organization for youths administered by the federal government, was designed, in part, to alleviate that anxiety. Rosenberg details how, through 4-H, “the state” increasingly penetrated life in the countryside; as he does so, he unmasks the state’s role in managing “the production of sexuality and intimacy” (236 n.26). This multifaceted, sophisticated interpretation will challenge even those already familiar with 4-H to revise their understanding of its broad social and cultural impact.

Rosenberg’s complex and nuanced analysis interweaves three narratives, simultaneously offering an institutional history of 4-H from the early 1900s through the 1970s; an interpretation of the political economy of modern agriculture; and an account of how 4-H operated as “biopolitics” — a concept defined by the scholar Michel Foucault as a political strategy rooted in biology (4, 233 n.1). This biopolitical framework allows Rosenberg to critique the control and power that 4-H (as a state apparatus) exerted by prescribing particular ideals about the physical and moral health of the body, marriage relations, and sexuality. Programmatic policy and discourse mutually reinforced this power. For me, the visual aid reproduced on page 141, which was used to teach boys about health, illustrates this nicely: it juxtaposes photographs of slight boys growing into sturdy ones with corn nubs developing into full cobs.

In chapter 1, Rosenberg traces the origins of 4-H to Progressive Era critiques maintaining that the countryside was in decay and its population threatened by moral and physical degeneracy and racial decline. 4-H was envisioned as a means of ensuring the reproduction of healthy, wholesome farm people by training youth in home economics and agriculture, as well as in appropriate gender ideals and behaviors. Rosenberg gives fresh life to previous interpretations of these critiques by revealing

the intense degree to which they centered on bodies, sexuality, insufficient parenting, masculinity, and reproduction, even in debates surrounding the 1914 Smith-Lever Act. His conclusion that “concern about rural social production licensed and shaped the expansion of state authority” is compelling (43).

In chapters 2 and 3, he discusses the gender ideals that 4-H promulgated concerning farm labor as well as definitions of masculinity and femininity. The agricultural modernization project pivoted on creating gendered identities that reinforced it. For example, 4-H taught boys to emulate financial leaders and technocrats rather than fathers and to acquire a masculinity vested in the expansion of capital-intensive, debt-financed agriculture. Rosenberg insightfully describes 4-H business lessons as “gendering instruments” (74) that guided boys to rural manhood.

4-H placed rural youth in the service of the state during the 1930s and 1940s and tightened the links between wholesome bodies, rural fertility, good rural citizenship, and national strength. In chapter 4, Rosenberg shows that members promoted New Deal conservation measures and electrification. 4-H also cultivated heterosexual romance among members and proposed standards for sexuality. The Iowa extension staff, for example, taught about venereal disease and discouraged female “promiscuity” (140). Chapter 5 reveals the sharp disjuncture between citizenship rhetoric, with its emphasis on “inclusion, tolerance, and equality” (154), and the reality of racial inequalities. Although African Americans participated in 4-H, the vision of rural good citizenship was tinted white.

Chapter 6 shows 4-H operating internationally during the postwar period. Among the various national programs, the book highlights those in Latin America, Japan, and Vietnam. Youth-oriented programs (with attendant ideals about family, modern agriculture, and gender) constituted part of the broader developmental and aid packages the United States offered other nations to stymie the spread of communism. Although the theme of bodies and sexuality at times disappears, the chapter more than makes up for that by showing how 4-H was an important component of foreign policy, and that even the United States Information Agency, the Peace Corps, and the military helped coordinate some of this work.

The 4-H Harvest is a significant book. It is replete with provocative, penetrating insights, and Rosenberg uses the sort of deft and precise writing needed for intricate arguments. At times I wanted more discussion of girls, as well as about how the 4-H messages influenced individuals. Regardless, the book will no doubt stimulate those interested in the history of Iowa and the Midwest, given the deep roots and large

presence of 4-H there. Additionally, rural historians, scholars of gender and sexuality, and those examining the development of the modern American state will be among the many to find it absorbing.

Herbert Hoover: A Life, by Glen Jeansonne. New York: New American Library, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2016. viii, 454 pp. Essay on sources, notes, index. \$28.00 hardcover.

Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency, by Charles Rappleye. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016. xx, 555 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.50 hardcover, \$16.99 e-book.

Reviewer Kendrick A. Clements is professor of history emeritus at the University of South Carolina. He is the author of *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism: Engineering the Good Life* (2000) and *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Imperfect Visionary, 1918–1928* (2010).

Herbert Hoover's name rarely arises in conversations about American presidents—unless the country is in economic trouble, when he is routinely cited as the president who mishandled the Great Depression. That charge infuriated him during his long post-presidency, and many of his biographers have shared his outrage. Even his defenders, however, have to admit that he was singularly inept in defending his policies to the American people while he was in the White House. Whether his actions were right or wrong, most Americans then and since got the impression that he didn't care about the suffering of his fellow citizens.

Hoover began his career as a mining engineer, and most of his public and private documents are dense with facts and figures—not easy reading. Although, as Glen Jeansonne points out, in later life Hoover worked hard to make his writings and speeches more “literary” and easier for general audiences to follow, much of his earlier work is pretty soporific. Digging through the mountains of material in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, the Hoover Institution at Stanford, and elsewhere is a daunting task. The evidence illustrates Hoover's enormous contribution to America and the world, but making the story accessible to modern readers is a challenge for any biographer.

Fortunately, identifying the central themes of complex issues and explaining them clearly and briefly are among Glen Jeansonne's great strengths. Insofar as any account of Hoover's career can be easy, pleasant reading, *Herbert Hoover: A Life* is such a book. Its coverage of Hoover's early life, in particular, reveals a warm human being very different from the iceberg who is the thirty-first president in most people's minds. Tracing Hoover's careers as a mining entrepreneur and pioneer in distant corners of the world, creator and manager of a relief program for