

HST 203: History of the United States Sp17 (Escobar Meta 41054 41053)

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Censorship & Morality

by Joe Escobar - Friday, April 14, 2017, 6:38 PM

This thread is for discussions on the Censorship & Morality topic.

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Man, What An Act: Start With Something

by Cameron Wray - Sunday, April 16, 2017, 6:55 PM

If I understand the Mann Act correctly which according to the audio file it “made it a crime to transport women across state lines for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery or for any other immoral purpose” then I think it is a necessary law. For whatever purpose the law was created for I think it was a step in the right direction to help protect those that may have been forced into prostitution. Unfortunately it wasn’t used for all the right reasons and it seems a little absurd that it was used to help prosecute Jack Johnson. According to Wikipedia, the way the relationship of Johnson and Lucille Cameron was described doesn’t sound like she was a

prostitute. However messed up the law may have been when it was first brought into effect I do think there have been some positive changes to it such as helping to protect minors and in that sense I do believe the Mann Act is necessary for today, at least an act of its type.

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Re: Man, What An Act: Start With Something

by Andrew Trott - Tuesday, April 18, 2017, 11:44 AM

A law that protects against sex trafficking seems necessary. However the way in which this law is written seems to be ambiguous. This ambiguity is where we get ourselves into situations where the justice system can take advantage of certain people. The last part of this law seems dangerous in its lack of directness; "any other immoral purpose" has no limitation and is open to interpretation. What is immoral for one group may not be immoral for another; Protestant Christians are going to have very different moral standards (especially in the 1900's) than an atheist who serves in the military and so on.

I agree that there needs to be legal terms which stop sex trafficking but the ambiguity of this law make me question its real motives.

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Re: Man, What An Act: Start With Something

by Desmond Johnson - Tuesday, April 18, 2017, 6:23 PM

I agree with you in that the problem with the law lies in the way the wording is so open and ambiguous by including "any other immoral purpose." This allows for people to have an elitist approach to the law, as we talked about in class today. The rich and powerful get choose for themselves and for poorer and minority citizens what exactly is "immoral." I believe that laws with progressive motives should be as definite in their wording as possible, because so often we see the wording of laws put in place to protect people twisted around to hurt often those very same people they were put in place to protect. In the instance of civil rights, many seemingly progressive laws put in place to give african americans more rights have become the very basis for much of the systemic racism of the modern United States.

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Re: Man, What An Act: Start With Something

by Desmond Johnson - Tuesday, April 18, 2017, 6:24 PM

I think it is always best to make a law/bill/referendum as concrete and definite in it's wording and meaning as possible. This way it avoids confusion, and manipulation of the law/bill/referendum.

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Re: Man, What An Act: Start With Something

by Cameron Wray - Tuesday, April 18, 2017, 8:13 PM

I wouldn't argue against the ambiguity of the Mann Act's dark nature because I agree that the way it is written lacks direction and can easily be used to take advantage of people. The lectures in our class and the reading from the textbook have made it painfully clear that a lot of the politics during this era were very corrupt (not to say politics today aren't corrupt). The main point I want to make is that regardless of its' true nature I believe that some good can come from bad intentions. While it may not have been an act that was created and brought into effect with good intentions I believe that the end product was worth it. An example of this which we talked about in class is the requirement for children to attend school not for their own best interests but to keep them out of the job force. It may not have started out as noble crusade to educate children but it did achieve some progress on that front just as the Mann Act achieved some progress on its front.

I can see how this "ends justify the means" type of thinking can be dangerous as well. It's not something I apply universally to all of what has happened in the countries past but I think in some cases it's beneficial to acknowledge the progress.

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Sapho and Censorship

by Andrew Trott - Monday, April 17, 2017, 11:40 AM

As stated in class, the problem with much of the censorship taking place at the turn of the 20th century was that much of it was without the votes of the masses. As voting rights declined by 30 percent in the first 17 years of the 20th century (Murrin p. 696) it was the lower income minorities being disenfranchised. This limitation on voting was due to the lack of trust from progressives that the majority of the electorate would be rational when casting a vote. Though this belief in a lack of rational voters did lead to the success of the women suffrage it was mainly white middle class women who could vote and the right to vote was not given out of benevolence. progressives helped champion women's right to vote because women were seen as "possessing a moral sense and a nurturing quality that men lacked." (Murrin p.697). The progressive's goal of cleaning up corruption in politics was really only half of their goal the second part was coupled with cleaning up corruption, or vices, in society.

The play Sapho was intimidating to this idea that women "possessed a moral sense and a nurturing that men lacked." (Murrin p. 697). The case against Olga Nethersole was a result of pushback from the establishment to the changes occurring in American society. Change such as rising sexuality was a direct reflection of the apparent shift in paradigm taking place. The play insinuated that women could be as sexually promiscuous as men, using men simply for pleasure and little other reasons. The idea that women could use men was threatening to the existing patriarchy. Some of the witnesses in the case called the play "instructive." Instructive to what? Was the play instructing women on how to take back their sexuality and control their lives? Sapho is based on a book about a "seductive women with any number of lovers," (video on Sapho) but what if we replaced women in that description with man. How much of an issue would the play have caused then? The leading man in the play was charged as well but was he charged for the sexuality of the play or rather because it was a women displaying and controlling these sexual urges.

The idea of censorship is something that has permeated and haunted American society since the signing of the constitution. In the 19th and into the 20th century it was states and local governments that were able to ban many things that they felt needed to be limited leading to phrases like “banned in Boston” to describe obscene texts and things with profane content. Today it is still local entities that are attempting to ban many of the things that might otherwise fall under freedom of press. Schools and libraries are frequently asked to ban books they see as not aligning with the values in that community. The *Communication Decency Act* attempted to ban indecent and obscene material from the internet in 1996. This could be equated to the *Comstock Law* which banned material that was thought to be obscene from being circulated through the mail. The internet is the new fight for uncensored material, as it is arguably the largest form of communication between the world.

At the beginning of the 20th century New York City had established a “war on vice” being led and organized in large part by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, which was founded by Anthony Comstock, who was dedicated to the “ideas of victorian morality” (wikipedia). This victorian morality is really another way of saying the suppression of anything that isn't controlled and regulated by white wealthy men. Victorian morality also entails imperializing places that are seen as savage. This imperializing doesn't have to entail setting up a government somewhere. It can be, if the imperializing entity already is governing this area, moral imperialization. This moral imperializing mainly consisted of spreading and standardizing christian protestant ideals. The Sapho case was the first trial that the NYSSV instigated and it was unsuccessful but they would continue to gain a voice and push for the suppression of vices. I find it interesting that there group was for the suppression of vices rather than the education of why vices deteriorate society or something along those lines. To attempt to suppress something often leads to excess use of it. As was the case with Sapho where after Olga Nethersole was found not guilty there were huge crowds ready to see Sapho from all the press that was brought upon the play. Attempting to suppress something, without education or justification as to why suppression is necessary, often leads to more people wanting what is being suppressed.

The biggest issue I have with suppression of vices is that it is to often the minority trying to control the behavior of the majority. It assumes that a minority is going to know what is better for a culture than that culture itself. Suppression of vices is to often the outsider suppressing something rather than those taking part deciding the perceived vice is not in their best interest. This idea of a minority in power deciding what is best for others falls mostly on the conservative side and even holds elements of fascism. For a group to campaign to legally suppress vices through coercion and punishment is the fascist idea that these vices are not in the best interest of the country.

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Re: Sapho and Censorship

by Andrew Trott - Tuesday, April 18, 2017, 12:25 PM

With the rise of "alternative facts" and "fake news" we are going to have more and more discussion about what should be censored and what we are losing when we censor things. Should things like "fake news" be censored? What is going to constitute "fake news"? Could this term be to ambiguous to just directly make legislation that "fake news" is illegal? Would this ambiguity leave the door open for things such as yellow journalism to be regulated and censored?

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1



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Re: Sapho and Censorship

by Desmond Johnson - Saturday, April 22, 2017, 2:22 PM

This makes me wonder if our own government could attempt to regulate the spread of fake news or if this is out of the realm of government. Personally, i think it is the responsibility of individual civilians and media companies to educate and be aware of which news articles are supported by research and firsthand reporting and which are not. Especially with the rise of media sites and blogs on the internet, anyone can post their words on the internet for the world to see, so it's unrealistic to think that our government would be able to put regulations on that. Hopefully there will be a media consensus to limit yellow journalism, and Facebook has launched a campaign recently to educate user about what could be "fake news". They have also taken steps not to embolden fake news articles by sharing them as sponsored content on users feeds. In this way corporations have a lot more power than the federal government over the spreading of news and information today. This is a major difference i see in the politics of today vs. the politics of the early 20th century when newspapers and propaganda posters were the main source of information, and there was a movement towards more government involvement and regulation.

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The Mann Act: Conservatism and Progressivism

by Desmond Johnson - Monday, April 17, 2017, 1:45 PM

I find the Mann act to be a necessity in the early 1900's, as much as it is today, simply because I find the trafficking and commodification of human beings to be greatly immoral and feel there should be laws in place to protect young women from being kidnapped and put into sex slavery. That being said, i think that a lot of the wording and enactment of the law seems to have led to problems for some people such as Jack Johnson, Charlie Chaplin, Chuck Berry, who have been convicted of transporting women across state lines, when it seems that these women were with them willingly and that their ethnic heritage played a role in seeking a conviction against these defendants (NPR snippet). In this sense the law seems like it began as sort of proxy by conservatives to be able to seem like they're leading some noble progressive cause against human trafficking, when in reality they seemed to have utilized this new law to target and sabotage prominent minorities, when bringing their girlfriends at the time across state lines. This is one of those times, of which there seem to be many in history, when conservative and progressive ideals sort of align. The staples of conservatism are to want to uphold traditional values, as well as to want a limited role of the federal government, allowing for more free enterprise (Conservatism, Wikipedia). These pillars of their philosophy often intersect on issues like this, however, because how are you going to uphold traditional values without the government somehow enforcing them as a "law" of morality. This is where I see the divergence in progressivism vs. conservatism, because the progressives of the time likely would have agreed that they wanted to keep prostitution and other sexual occupations at bay, but aren't afraid to employ the federal government in doing so. In fact the chapter on progressivism in our book claims "on one issue, however, most progressives agreed: the need for an activist government to right political, economic, and social wrongdoings." and believed

the “Federal government best equipped to solve social problems” (Textbook, pg. 685). While many of the traditional values of the conservatives and progressives overlapped at this time in U.S. history, I believe it is this difference in relationship with the government that sets them apart from each other most. This is interesting, because when I think of the term Progressive v.s. Conservative in terms of 21st century connotation, I think their values have become a lot more separated than what they were in the early 20th century, but that they have both remained pretty steady on their approaches to governmental involvement. Can you think of other major differences setting apart, or drawing further similarities between these political ideologies? Can you think of any historical events or shifts in thinking that could have led to the change in what we think of today as progressive and conservative, v.s what we are now learning that these words meant in a historical context?

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3



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Progressives and the 18th Amendment

by William Mc Mahon - Saturday, April 22, 2017, 4:13 PM

I think the 18th Amendment to the Constitution is an interesting case.

In modern times I associate most morality-based legislation to Conservatives. It's always Conservative politicians who are bemoaning the deteriorating moral fiber of the nation. And Conservatives seem most interested in censorship and what media and ideas are and are not acceptable.

However, in the early 20th century, the 18th Amendment was a progressive reform. Here we have a moral cause in which one group of people thought they knew what was best for everybody. That's the kind of conservative thought I see today behind many moral initiatives. Another difference to today, the progressive law wound up hurting minorities the most. “In depicting alcohol and saloons as unmitigated evils, the prohibition movement ignored the larger role that saloons played in ethnic, working-class communities.” (Textbook pg. 690)

I think you're right that both liberal and conservative laws can be morally based. I think that's what they both ultimately share.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Sappho and censorship

by Morgan Steinmetz - Monday, April 17, 2017, 5:52 PM

“Any hint that women could experience pleasure in sex was scandalous” a quote from the Sappho video clip pretty much sums up censorship in the United States in 1900. The idea that women weren't allowed to be involved in anything that promoted sexual pleasure fits nicely along with everything else women had going against them.

In the Sappho video clip, it mentions that the New York society for the suppression of vice “Proudly” seized thousands of obscene photographs and even obscene songs and poems. When I think about this in connection to today, I relate it to The American Library Association and all of the banned books or books that are being challenged due to explicit material.

When people are told no, it's almost human nature to want to do the exact opposite and it almost seems like that is the case with Sapho. After Olga Nethersole was deemed innocent, the "publicity" of the arrest made the shoe more popular than ever due to getting shut down. That is an example of the repercussions that sometimes happen when groups try to manage people way too much.

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Women's sexuality in 1900 USA vs. Today

by Julia Tomlinson - Monday, April 17, 2017, 7:43 PM

The play Sapho was seen as scandalous for its time in 1900 United states because it portrayed a woman that had many different sexual partners. It also showed the main actress going upstairs with a man, insinuating that they were going upstairs to have sex. Even worse than that, the character was not punished for this act which was seen as extremely immoral. Censorship in the United states in 1900 was highly concentrated on the act of eliminating sexual content fro, the public eye. Sex was seen as something that was supposed to be an act between a married man and woman for the sole purpose of conceiving a child. I found that the fact that the actress, Olga Nethersold, was put t trial for her performance in this piece. In the episode, nothing was states about writers or directors being punished. I believe this type of censorship is still relevant in the United States today. America was founded with Puritan principles buried deep in its roots. Sex work is still seen as very taboo, even though it is one of the worlds oldest professions. There is a very fine line in what is accepted in today's society when it comes off to women showing off their sexuality. If you walk the streets of New York City giant billboards of Victoria's Secret models wearing nothing up racy underwear hang high above the streets. This is socially acceptable. When is came to Yahoo's CEO, Marissa Mayer, her showing off her sexuality for a Vogue shoot for an article titles "40 Hottest Women in Tech," she was met with severe negative backlash. Some of the negative comments said that Mayer's photos undermined all the progress women had made knocking down the negative workplace stereotypes about women; for example, that women are just sexual objects for men to look at while they work. This mentality is stating that women are not allowed to be attractive and show it off, while also being capable powerhouses in the workplace. The connection between censorship in the United States in 1900 and today is one that still exists. Even though monumental strides have been made in the direction of women showing off their sexuality being accepted, there is still a long way to go.

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Re: Women's sexuality in 1900 USA vs. Today

by Andrew Trott - Tuesday, April 18, 2017, 12:23 PM

Thank you for bringing the perspective up on being a women in the work place today and showing off their sexuality. This is a perspective that, as a white male, I can never fully understand.

Its interesting though because for a women to "show off" her sexuality almost always implies her body while a man can "show off" his sexuality though being a "power house in the work place" alone. It seems that what makes a women sexy is going to rely solely on her body. While what makes a man sexy, relies on physical attraction yes but, also relies

heavily on his achievements, posture, and social status. There is certainly a double standard in the work place, that is only a reflection of the double standard within society, that anytime a women is "showing off" it is for her male coworkers rather than herself. There is certainly a double standard where our society shames the women for showing off her sexuality rather than shaming the male coworkers for oogling her. Where society shames the women for being sexually overt, instead of shaming her coworkers for focusing on that not their work.

I also thank you for bringing up that much of the censorship we see today is through public shaming rather than legislative action. This public shaming has taken on new heights with the rise of social media and a growingly connected world.

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Pessimistic Reforms and Metal Music

by William Mc Mahon - Wednesday, April 19, 2017, 1:40 PM

Morality based political reform oftentimes backfires. I don't believe you can legislate someone into thinking and believing the way you want them to think and believe. In the case of Sapho, the sensationalist trial in which Olga Nethersole was ultimately acquitted, served only to heighten the play's popularity. (3.:06 Sapho and Olga Nethersole, Video)

The same thing happened with heavy metal and the PMRC. The decision that "lewd" music had to have an explicit content warning on the cover, only piqued the interest and rebellious tendencies of the people the label was supposed to dissuade. (Heavy Metal cs. the PMRC 7:04)

Both these attempts are examples of conservative, pessimistic reforms that failed miserably. Conservatives have a handicap when trying to relate to political or social thought in the sense that society is always moving forward. Both the Sapho play and heavy metal music are examples of artists pushing social conventions. That's never going to stop. It's not possible to live in the 1950's forever. There's no way to create or sustain that. I would love to see morality and politics viewed separately in America.

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Re: Pessimistic Reforms and Metal Music

by Morgan Steinmetz - Wednesday, April 19, 2017, 3:48 PM

I love how you mention the artists pushing social conventions. That was such a controversial issue in that time and it's amazing to see how much has changed since then when it comes to entertainment. Could you imagine having a group of people from that era view a movie from 2017? Their views on women when it came to being able to experience pleasure would probably cause them to have a heart attack. One thing that hasn't changed today is the concept of "you telling me I can't do something just makes me want to do it even more". That's almost just human nature in some cases. So seeing how Sapho expanded like it did after the trial definitely shows that's nothing new to America.

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Re: Pessimistic Reforms and Metal Music

by Andrew Trott - Thursday, April 20, 2017, 12:00 PM

It is funny, in a way, to think about people from the early 20th century seeing where entertainment is today. It is an intriguing thought experiment.

One thing that occurred to me while learning about Sappho is the dichotomy between corporations and government. While the government often tries to regulate growing trends that are seen as dangerous to the paradigm or risqué, corporations tend to use these trends and exploit them for profit. Instead of stopping to think about the moral repercussions of something they quickly put up adds that are using the latest cultural trends.

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Re: Censorship & Morality - Leaning toward the Right

by Kejana Potts - Friday, April 21, 2017, 1:48 PM

When going over chapter 21 in class, we learned that the Progressives loved reform, but often had a difficult time sticking to what they were pushing. Sappho is definitely an example of their lean towards the right, but I think there is a little more to this than "not wanting to pay the expenses or deal with the consequences." (Class notes, Chapter 21)

People have a difficult time with change, even when they believe it's good, so it's not surprising to see strong opinions and action against the show. The charges against Ulga was probably a gut reaction based off of social norms. Around 2:52 the video says the jury quickly decided Ulga was innocent. Not only that but the show reopened and it's popularity grew. I believe this is evidence that the minds and ideals of Progressives truly were changing, just slowly.

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Mann Act. Yes or n

by Morgan Steinmetz - Friday, April 21, 2017, 4:25 PM

When thinking about the Mann Act in 2017, the law almost seems outrageous to me. The wording of the laws is what makes it seem so outrageous. In the NPR clip it states that the law was prohibiting the transportation of women over state lines for prostitution or for any other immoral purpose. The prostitution aspect of it I completely agree with whether it be 1910 or 2017. The aspect that really bothers me is the "or for any other immoral purpose" statement. Adding that part to the law almost creates a loophole. How do you determine what is moral and what isn't? Something I could argue that is morally correct could be argued as morally incorrect by someone else, especially a person who was out to get me in trouble. I really do think that some sort of law was and is still necessary to prevent forced prostitution and to protect men and women from something as serious as sex trafficking, but the Mann Act was definitely not went about in the right way.

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Political / Celebrity Sex Scandals

by Julia Tomlinson - Saturday, April 22, 2017, 6:23 PM

Celebrities and politicians getting caught up in a sex scandal is not that uncommon. These scandals are often met with the media taking these stories, and running them down the general populations throat. The difference between political and celebrity sex scandals, is that in general political sex scandals are met with harsher backlash. In the case of New York Governor, Eliot Spitzer, his approval dropped from 62% in January 2007 to 35% in February 2008, after it came out that he was involved in his second sex scandal with a prostitute. (statistics and facts from pictures in forum tools part 1). Spitzer would then wind up leaving his position in office as the scandal started to grow. In the world of celebrities, having a sex scandal can actually further your career. For example, Kim Kardashian. Today she is one of the more recognizable celebrities. It is almost impossible to get away from her pictures. I believe that morality today parallels that of morality in the 20th century. Sexual conduct and sexuality is by far more accepted today than it was in the 20th century. When it comes to sex scandals with politicians, though, the general public is still unforgiving. When politicians make poor decisions in their own lives it makes the people question how reliable they will be in terms of running a state or a city.

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2



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