The Emergence of Sex Education: A Franco-Swiss Comparison, 1900–1930

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AROUND 1900, SEX EDUCATION emerged as the focus of debate in western Europe and the United States, a phenomenon that can be viewed as part of the "discursive explosion" identified by Michel Foucault. In contrast to the salacious or even pornographic evocation of sexuality that had hitherto been dominant in literature and political pamphlets, doctors and philanthropists attempted to make discourse on sexuality respectable for the first time: they treated it as a legitimate object of knowledge, they used what Foucault called an "authorized vocabulary," and they proposed an analytical approach to the study of sex.[1] Although Foucault did not address sex education in his *History of Sexuality*, the subject provides an interesting development of the Foucauldian framework. Sex education implies considering not only the content of the message (namely, a scientific language that allows one to talk about sex) but also the identity of the recipient, children and adolescents. Providing sex education seemed to contradict prevailing tendencies to treat childhood and youth as an age of innocence to be preserved as long as possible from the necessarily corrupting realities of the flesh. The "repressive hypothesis" that Foucault challenged actually describes evocations of sexuality addressed to youth up until the end of the nineteenth century. An awkward silence prevailed at the expense of the dissemination of information; young people were forced to learn about sexuality through fragmentary information or abrupt revelations. Thus, talking about sexuality to young people and even teaching it in schools was a real innovation.

Scholars such as Lutz Sauerteig, Roger Davidson, and Jeffrey Moran have begun to address this puzzling shift.[2] Among the factors mentioned

[1] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

[2] Preliminary comparative research on Europe is available in Lutz D. H. Sauerteig and Roger Davidson, eds., *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in*

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to explain the emergence and legitimation of sex education, they point to the motivation to disseminate medical knowledge about the seriousness and contagious nature of venereal diseases (VD). But rather than accepting the arguments of historical actors at face value, we argue that other concerns were hidden behind this health warning, and we demonstrate that the dangers of the VD epidemic were exaggerated in order to serve other purposes, such as to solve the perceived problem of "race degeneration." Recent studies on the French case also underscore the normative function of sex education. Far from simply communicating information, its real purpose was sexual dissuasion; all advocates of sex education in Europe encouraged young people of both sexes to abstain from sexual activity before marriage, with the exception of some neo-Malthusians, who advocated free love combined with access to birth control as a radical denunciation of the bourgeois marriage.[3] Our goal here is to contextualize this shift through an exploration of how these advocates of sex education perceived the evolution of society and sexuality at the time.

The existing literature has demonstrated the variety of actors who mobilized around the issue of sexuality at the turn of the century: physicians, demographers, eugenicists, sociologists, pedagogues, philanthropists, pastors and other members of the clergy, politicians, and militant neo-Malthusians. In the process, some surprising and unorthodox alliances were sometimes formed; moral philanthropists, for example, initially very close to physicians, later united the promoters of innovative pedagogy against the medical profession. This suggests the existence of hidden agendas on the part of various individuals and groups and provides evidence that motivations for venturing into the territory of sex education were not limited to the stated goal of combating a hazard to health or morals.

Historians of sexuality have similarly reached a consensus on the issue of the relative lack of success of advocates for sex education across the Western world for the first decades of the twentieth century. Despite the proliferation of discourse in books, brochures, lectures, and newspaper debates, few sex reform groups succeeded in achieving significant policy reform to implement sex education in schools, and even these successes were controversial. This article proposes to analyze the reasons for these successes and failures through a comparison of the emergence of sex education in France and French-speaking Switzerland from 1890 to the interwar period. This comparative approach presents two complications. First, focusing on the national context might not seem appropriate given the fact that the debate on sex education around 1900 took on a transnational dimension

Twentieth Century Europe (London: Routledge, 2009). For the United States, see Jeffrey P. Moran, Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[3] Francis Ronsin, *La grève des ventres: Propagande néomalthusienne et baisse de la natalité en France (XIX^e^–XX^e^ siècles)* (Paris: Aubier, 1980), 67.

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from the outset through the rapid expansion of scientific and activist internationalism. The original impetus came from an international conference promoting syphilis and venereal disease prevention, held in Brussels in 1899, that brought together dermatologists and syphilis specialists. They founded an international union to combat venereal diseases and called upon governments to "draw the attention of the public, above all, young men, to the dangers of prostitution."[4] At a second Brussels conference in 1902, physicians were joined by the moral reformers of the International Abolitionist Federation, a Geneva-based group that had been founded by Josephine Butler in England in 1886 and that fought for the abolition of regulated prostitution and promoted sexual abstinence or moderation. The neo-Malthusian movement, which advocated the legitimacy of birth control and organized the advertising and selling of contraceptives, was also an important actor in these debates. Also initiated in England, the movement had taken root on the Continent around 1900 and held its first international congress that same year in Paris, where the Fédération universelle de la régénération humaine was founded.[5] Finally, what institution could have been more transnational than the Catholic Church, a mighty opponent to sex education?

A second objection to the comparative approach might be that in the case of France and French-speaking Switzerland, proximity and shared language would guarantee that the similarities outweighed the differences—an argument voiced by those who criticize comparative history for a tendency to treat national cases as entirely distinct, neglecting reciprocal influences.[6] This warning is relevant for the history of sex education in the Franco-Swiss space, since there was an extensive reciprocal exchange of ideas and people between these two countries.[7] Writings such as the popular *L'éducation sexuelle*, by the French physician Jean Marestan (1910), and the French translation of *Die sexuelle Frage*, by the famous Swiss psychiatrist Auguste Forel (1906), were equally widely read in France and Switzerland. French lecturers spoke in Switzerland and vice-versa, such as the French neo-Malthusians Nelly Roussel and Jeanne Dubois, who drew large audiences in Lausanne and Geneva in 1906. While neo-Malthusian ideas traveled from France to Switzerland, abolitionism took the opposite route. In both cases, however, Switzerland acted as the venue for the translation and the

[4] *Conférence internationale pour la prophylaxie de la syphilis et des maladies vénériennes, Bruxelles, septembre 1899*, vol. 2 (Bruxelles: H. Lamertin, 1899), 445.

[5] Ronsin, *La grève des ventres*, 58. The French neo-Malthusian movement was deeply rooted in left-wing politics and promoted birth control both as a weapon against capitalist exploitation of workers and as the first step in the empowerment of women.

[6] Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Penser l'histoire croisée: Entre empirie et réflexivité," *Annales: Histoire, sciences sociales* 1 (January–February 2003): 22.

[7] This observation is valid for Switzerland as a whole, since at the time Swiss-German intellectuals spoke French much better than English. Within the limited scope of this article, we discuss only French-speaking Switzerland, where relations with France were more direct.

exchange of ideas between France and Germany. One might mention, for example, the Zurich physician Fritz Brupbacher, who was first introduced to neo-Malthusian ideas in Paris, then tried and failed to generate a movement in Zurich, and finally went into exile in Germany; he disseminated these ideas within a circle of socialist doctors in Berlin, initiating the debate in 1913 over the Gebärstreik, a socialist campaign to reduce the birthrate in order to put pressure on capitalism.[8] Extensive internationalism among the supporters of sex education would seem to make a comparative approach superfluous, since it demonstrates the importance of the circulation of ideas rather than discrete developments within nations.

These arguments against comparative research design would be pertinent if our article were only concerned with an analysis of discourses and their diffusion. Our concentration on understanding the difficulties of implementation of sex education projects, however, means that our comparative approach more precisely identifies national and local actors, examines their inclusion in international and local networks, and assesses the adequacy of their speeches and strategies to the respective cultural, social, and political contexts. This more concentrated focus on the conditions of reception and appropriation of the transnational pool of concepts and projects at the local level clarifies how implementation was affected by both the competing interests of local actors and the respective legislative frameworks of the two countries.

The importance of sharing a common language should not be overstated, as a large proportion of the Swiss French-speaking elites had attended German-language universities. Moreover, for the period under study, language was not as powerful as religion for shaping attitudes toward sexuality. In Switzerland, the sex education debate emerged in Protestant French-speaking cantons where religious elites were influenced by the English religious revival and where youth movements such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) had been founded. The opposition of the Catholic Church to sex education was also strong in France and in Swiss Catholic cantons; however, it was more effective in the latter because of the tight connection between religious structures and the conservative cantonal authorities. All these observations reinforce the importance of a comparative approach that includes both the national and local levels, especially since the research on sex education is still in its infancy for France and almost nonexistent for French-speaking Switzerland.[9]

[8] Gabriel Nicole, "Du berceau au tranchées: Les enjeux du débat sur la 'grève des ventres' de l'été 1913 en Allemagne," *Le mouvement social* 147 (April–May 1989): 87–103.

[9] On the French case, see Yvonne Knibiehler, "L'éducation sexuelle des filles au XX^{e} siècle," *Clio* 4 (1996): 143–46; Mary Lynn Stewart, "'Science Is Always Chaste': Sex Education and Sexual Initiation in France, 1880–1930s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 32 (1997): 381–94; Mary Lynn Stewart, "Sex Education and the Sexual Initiation of French Girls 1880–1930s," in *Secret Gardens and Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750–1960*, ed. Marie-Jo Maynes, Birgitte Solan, and Christina Benninghaus (Bloomington: Indiana

Our comparison is organized into two periods: before and after the First World War. To understand the emergence of sex education, its successes, and the barriers to its implementation, we put forward two hypotheses to be tested in the two cases under study. The first postulates that sex education was a novel form of political activism in which people tried to take action in the public sphere and gain recognition for their expertise; in both France and Switzerland, national and local contexts offered a distinct range of opportunities that translated into different potential benefits and costs for the actors involved. Identifying the actors thus provides insight into the hidden stakes of sex education from the standpoint of its promoters. In our second hypothesis, we postulate that the health warning concerning the "venereal peril" that triggered the debate served as a vehicle for the concerns of the elites in the face of the social transformations at the turn of the century. If the promoters of sex education wanted to be heard and ensure the success of their positioning strategy, they had to align their discourse with the dominant concerns of the day.

The First French and Swiss Sex Education Projects (1890–1914)

In France, doctors were the first and principal actors to mobilize in favor of sex education in the wake of the fight against venereal disease. After holding the first international conference in Brussels, Alfred Fournier, a renowned syphilis specialist, founded the Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale (French Society for Health and Moral Prophylaxis, or SPSM) in 1901. Thirty-nine of its forty-six members were medical doctors, most of them specialists in venereology or hygiene. Although the SPSM had no female members at this time, women, such as the feminist activist and journalist Adrienne Avril de Sainte-Croix, were occasionally invited to attend discussion sessions on girls' sex education. Nevertheless, few feminists took part in the French debate on sex education, and although some were close to the neo-Malthusians, they tended to follow the global trend of being more focused on political rights than on issues concerning sexuality.[10]

University Press, 2004), 164–77; Virginie De Luca Barrusse, "Le genre de l'éducation à la sexualité des jeunes gens au cours des années 1900–1930," *Les cahiers du genre* 49 (2010): 155–82; De Luca Barrusse, "The Concerns Underlying Sex Education for Young People in France during the First Half of the XXth Century: Morality, Demography and Public Health," *Hygiea Internationalis* 10 (2010): 33–52; and Tamara Chaplin, "Emile Perverti? ou Comment se font les enfants? Deux siècles d'éducation sexuelle (XVIII^{e} à nos jours)," in *Les jeunes et la sexualité: Initiations, interdits, identités (XIX^{e}–XXI^{e} siècles)*, ed. V. Blanchard, R. Revenin, and J. J. Yvorel (Paris: Autrement, 2010): 22–36. On French-speaking Switzerland, see Anne-Françoise Praz, L'éducation sexuelle, entre médecine, morale et pédagogie: Débats transnationaux et réalisations locales (Suisse romande 1890–1930)," *Paedagogica Historica—International Journal of the History of Education* 50, no. 1 (2014): 165–81.

[10] Anne Cova, Féminismes et néomalthusianisme sous la III^{e} République (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011); Christine Bard, *Les filles de Marianne: Histoire des féminismes, 1914–1940* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), 217–18. Sur les engagements des féministes dans les débats sur

In its founding text, the SPSM asserted its determination to play a political role, noting "the impossibility of giving any further credence to the public authorities for initiating what have become urgently needed reforms."[11] Through a network of active physicians and hygienists, the SPSM soon established itself as a pressure group in the fight against venereal disease. According to SPSM newsletters, members focused on two major topics: the regulation of prostitution, particularly medical checkups, and sex education, which became its primary area of concern. In 1903 the association therefore launched a debate on the advisability of antivenereal education in schools. When the doctor Charles Burlureaux advocated sex education with boys and girls in one classroom, he caused an outcry among the Catholics in attendance. Canon Fonssagrives, chaplain of the association of the Catholic students in Paris and author of widely disseminated pamphlets for parents and educators on educating children about purity, announced the results of his informal survey of Catholics, whom he described as being universally indignant without providing any precise numbers. But the doctors in the SPSM did not give in, and they relied on their connections to colleagues who had been elected to office to make sure that their voices were heard in parliament.[12] On 25 March 1905 Professor Augagneur spoke before the members of parliament and demanded that "physicians give lectures on the nature and dangers of venereal disease to students in the upper grades of educational institutions [*établissements d'instruction*]."[13] Although such demands fell on deaf ears, the SPSM redoubled its efforts to spread its message.

The sex education that the SPSM wanted to promote consisted above all of sexual dissuasion.[14] "What must be ensured is that young people remain virgins until marriage," insisted SPSM member Dr. Louis Queyrat in 1902.[15] Like this influential venereologist, the doctors in the SPSM firmly maintained that abstinence was a foolproof guarantee against debauchery and disease.[16]

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la maternité et de manière plus marginale sur la sexualité voir (On the feminist debate on motherhood), Anne Cova, *Maternité et droit des femmes en France (XIX^e^–XX^e^ siècles)* (Paris: Economica, 1997); Anne Cova, *"Au service de l'Église, de la patrie et de la famille": Femmes catholiques et maternité sous la III^e^ République* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

[11] "But et espérance de notre société," *Bulletin de la Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale*, 10 May 1901, 26–27. The other seven members were three lawyers, a publisher, an engineer, a counselor at the Court of Appeals, and a senator (Bérenger).

[12] Jack Ellis, *The Physician-Legislators of France: Medicine and Politics in the Early Third Republic, 1870–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3–4.

[13] Quoted in Dr. Jullien, *La vie sexuelle et ses dangers* (Paris: Baillière et fils, 1921), 13.

[14] Alain Corbin, "Le péril vénérien au début du siècle: Prophylaxie sanitaire et prophylaxie morale," *Recherche* 29 (1977): 257.

[15] Louis Queyrat, *Contribution à la défense sociale contre le péril vénérien: La démoralisation de l'idée sexuelle* (Paris: Rueff, 1902), 5.

[16] See particularly Alain Corbin, "Le péril vénérien au début du siècle: Prophylaxie sanitaire et prophylaxie morale," *Recherche* 29 (1977): 245–83; and Sylvie Chaperon, "La sexologie

The SPSM aimed to reach a wide audience with this message. During one of their first meetings, members were invited to discuss techniques for reaching high school students, soldiers in the army and the navy, and young people of the working class, though in practice the SPSM's educational efforts reached a far more limited audience.[17] Booklets offering advice to young men were primarily addressed to adolescents from good families, reflecting both the clientele of the books' physician authors and concerns about differential fertility in the "depopulation" of France—in other words, the lower birthrates among the bourgeoisie.[18] SPSM members believed that the bourgeoisie needed to be encouraged to produce healthy children, while high birthrates among the working class only spread alcoholism and tuberculosis.[19] The brochures intended for bourgeois youths were meant to complement books advising parents on what was suitable to tell their children, similar to those published at the end of the nineteenth century.[20] The reception given to these publications reveals the reluctance to mention sexuality and the risk of venereal disease, especially with regard to girls.[21] Thus, in 1902 Burlureaux's *Pour nos filles quand elles auront dix-huit ans* (For our daughters when they reach eighteen) was extremely poorly received when he presented it to the SPSM, in contrast to Alfred Fournier's *Pour nos fils quand ils auront dix-sept ans* (For our sons when they reach seventeen). The latter aimed to convince a young man of the need to abstain from sexual activity until marriage and remain faithful to his spouse; the chastity of his fiancée and wife was taken for granted.[22]

Sex education was also discussed in other circles. Starting in 1908, the neo-Malthusians produced a series of highly successful brochures that

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française contemporaine: Un premier bilan historiographique," *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines* 17 (2007): 7–22.

[17] The students in the higher classes in the academic sense were also those of the higher classes in the social sense.

[18] This phenomenon received much attention from the 1886 census on. In 1907 a survey of civil servants confirmed the fertility differential, demonstrating that white-collar workers had had 2,038 children, compared to 2,748 for manual workers. See Virginie De Luca Barrusse, *Les familles nombreuses: Une question démographique, un enjeu politique (France 1880–1940)* (Rennes: PUR, 2008), 175–203.

[19] Virginie De Luca Barrusse, *Population en danger! La lutte contre les fléaux sociaux sous la Troisième République* (Geneva: Peter Lang, 2013), 53–57.

[20] See, for example, Jeanne Leroy-Allais, *Comment j'ai instruit mes filles des choses de la maternité* (Paris: Maloine, 1907). On bourgeois education in the nineteenth century, see Gabrielle Houbre, *La discipline de l'amour: L'éducation sentimentale des filles et des garçons à l'âge du romantisme* (Paris: Plon, 1997).

[21] Stewart, "'Science Is Always Chaste,'" 381–83.

[22] Anne-Claire Rebreyend, *Intimités amoureuses, France 1920–1975* (Toulouse: PUM, 2008), 63. For broader accounts, see Louise Bruit Zaidman, Gabrielle Houbre, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, eds., *Le corps des jeunes filles de l'Antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 2001); Yvonne Knibiehler, "L'éducation sexuelle des filles au XX^{e} siècle," *Clio* 4 (1996): 143–46; Stewart, "Sex Education," 164–77.

informed adults about methods for controlling fertility.[23] They were supported by several physicians, such as Jean Marestan, who published *L'éducation sexuelle* in 1910, a popular work that went through several editions.[24] But most of the medical profession sided with those activists who advocated increasing the birthrate, and some began actively countering the neo-Malthusian message.[25] Speaking before the International Conference on School Health in 1910, Dr. Jean-Amédée Doléris outlined a sex education program explicitly designed to combat neo-Malthusian influence by using moral instruction to channel the thoughts of the young into a focus on biological function and a "de-eroticized" emphasis on reproductive mechanisms and the family.[26] Using a host of precautions and prescriptions, Doléris encouraged young men to combat their instinctive sexuality through a scientific exploration of its function that would defuse their confusion. But these and other similar efforts failed to produce any concrete policy changes. As Pauline Kergomard (the inspector general of kindergartens [*écoles maternelles*]) put it in 1912, "Sex education in the twentieth century is still a specter that frightened at least thirty million French people."[27]

Seeking a Consensus

Despite being frustrated in their goals to implement new education programs, physicians who promoted sex education knew how to be heard in high places. Armed with scientific expertise, they painted a catastrophic picture of the prevalence and impact of venereal disease. Alfred Fournier estimated that some 13 to 15 percent of the male population of Paris suffered from syphilis.[28] He and his colleagues presented these diseases not only as a health issue but as a dire demographic threat and one of the most pressing political concerns in France at the time.

In addition to the moral challenges of the resurgence of this disease, commonly attributed to brothels and debauchery, there were health and demographic issues. Believing venereal disease to be hereditary, French doctors feared that it would become a "gangrene" on the "race." They called the transmission of the disease from parents to children and its congenital

[23] Gabriel Giroud's book *Les moyens d'éviter la grossesse*, for example, was published with a print run of one hundred thousand copies in 1908. On neo-Malthusianism in general, see Ronsin, *La grève des ventres*.

[24] Jean Marestan, *L'éducation sexuelle* (Paris: Sylvette, 1910).

[25] In its early pronouncements, however, the society asserted that "there can be no question of acting upon children during their primary schooling," which ended at age thirteen in France (*Bulletin de la Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale*, 10 May 1901, 34).

[26] Jean-Amédée Doleris and Jean Bouscatel, *Hygiène et morale sociale* (Paris: Masson, 1918), 119–21.

[27] Lucien Mathé, *L'enseignement de l'hygiène sexuelle à l'école* (Paris: Vigot, 1912), 10.

[28] Alfred Fournier, *Traité de la syphilis* (Paris: Rueff, 1903).

effects "heredosyphilis."[29] In 1901 a play by Eugène Brieux, *Les avariés*, popularized the image of the congenital syphilitic as the symbol of a "damaged" generation.[30] Meanwhile, anti-VD propaganda campaigns decried the fact that syphilis would bring on sterility and intrauterine deaths, killing four hundred thousand infants in their mothers' wombs. This frequently cited statistic was commonly used for propaganda purposes without any empirical evidence. Supporters of the theory of heredosyphilis argued that it would jeopardize future generations through "too many births of weak or abnormal creatures who would become unproductive or poor reproducers."[31] They believed that by simultaneously affecting women's fertility and children's health (male fertility was not discussed), venereal disease combined the effects of depopulation and degeneration through the transmission of damaged traits from one generation to the next.[32] Although fears about the relationship between venereal disease, demographic decline, and genetic degeneration were widespread, supporters of sex education had little success in convincing governments to implement new general programs.

Compared with that in Switzerland, the situation in France reveals a surprising absence of cooperation between the medical and educational administrations. During its first sessions in 1901, the SPSM defined the limits of its intervention: it would focus on presenting "truths acquired and verified through experimentation," leaving their practical application to "men devoted to teaching."[33] For instance, when Fournier argued that the prevalence of syphilis among young people between the ages of fourteen and nineteen justified an annual lecture in the lycées, another member pointed out that this would involve consulting with high school principals and would thus exceed the association's scope of action.

This determination to stay strictly within the confines of medicine arose from the physicians' ambition to highlight their scientific expertise and assert an active role in relation to the state apparatus. It also stemmed from a

[29] On this belief, see Alain Corbin, "L'hérédosyphilis ou l'impossible redemption: Contribution à l'histoire de l'hérédité morbide," *Romantisme* 11, no. 31 (1981): 131–50.

[30] After the play was first shown in 1901 the term *avarie* came into widespread use to designate syphilis. At first, censors banned the play, but the medical world protested, claiming it was an opportunity to publicize the dangers of a disease that people hardly dared talk about. The prohibition was lifted in 1905, and the play became extremely popular. See Adrien Minard, "La syphilis est-elle obscène? Les Avariés d'Eugène Brieux et la censure théâtrale en France à la Belle Epoque," in *Obscénité, pornographie et censure: Les mises en scène de la sexualité et leur (dis)qualification sociale (XIX^e–XX^e siècles)*, ed. Régine Beauthier, Jean-Mathieu Méon, and Barbara Truffin (Brussels: Ed. de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2010), 71–85.

[31] Quoted in Dr. Vernes, *Le siècle médical*, 15 May 1936. His text was reproduced in *Prophylaxie antivénérienne*, June 1936.

[32] William Schneider, *Quality and Quantity: The Quest for Biological Regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Virginie De Luca Barrusse, "Natalisme et hygiénisme en France entre 1900 et 1940: L'exemple de la lutte antivénérienne," *Population* 3 (2009): 531–60.

[33] *Bulletin de la Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale*, 10 June 1901, 57–63.

desire—especially on the part of doctors within the SPSM, most of whom were of the Catholic faith—to avoid a break with the Catholic Church, which was strongly opposed to secular education.[34] Despite their republican leanings, most of the Catholics viewed schoolteachers as the henchmen of socialism, hostile to the family and opposed to Catholic morality. Collective sex education could not be entrusted to them, for it would pervert young minds. So the support of Catholic circles could be obtained only on condition that the SPSM upheld "the principle of purely individual teaching when it addressed young people." In order to keep control over antivenereal instruction, SPSM doctors thus gave up the idea of collaborating with public schools. The SPSM was seeking a consensus that would avoid a break with the Catholic Church or any personal challenges to faith. The issue of sex education was overwhelmingly political in the sense that it created a clash between Catholics concerned about church prerogatives and the maintenance of religious schooling and republicans—Catholic or not—who advocated youth socialization in institutions run by experts and who thus ventured into territory traditionally governed by the church. This political context explained the modifications of sex education projects and the search for consensus.

French-Speaking Switzerland: Moral Reformers Mobilize around Sexual Standards

The federal structure of Switzerland, in which cantons and communes enjoyed fiscal autonomy and extended control in matters of health, vice squads, and public instruction, means that we must examine the history of sex education on another scale. Contrary to the centralized French system, in which any educational project had to be approved by numerous bodies before it could be adopted nationwide, Switzerland's decentralization reduced coordination costs and authorized more innovative initiatives. The Swiss system also allowed associations emanating from civil society to take on a more important role in terms of being able to make proposals and to collaborate on local projects in public-private partnerships. In this respect, the Protestant canton of Vaud played a pioneering role in sex education. As early as 1896, Dr. A. Krafft proposed a series of fifteen lectures on "sexual hygiene" for the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Lausanne. This physician was a committee member of the Société vaudoise pour le relèvement de la moralité (Society for Moral Enhancement, or SVRM), a pressure group made up of pastors, physicians, and teachers.[35]

[34] Pierre Guillaume, *Médecins, église et foi depuis deux siècles* (Paris: Aubier, 1990).

[35] Founded in 1890, the society was originally 67 percent female but had reached gender parity by 1905. Between 1895 and 1905 membership grew from 107 to 461 members. The SVRM's lobbying activities included petitions to government about prostitution laws and the protection of minors, along with conferences on sexual morality intended for young male audiences.

The SVRM justified holding "sexual hygiene" lectures to future pastors by citing their "concern to prepare [them] to enlighten our boys at an age when they receive religious instruction, and to warn them against unhealthy and dangerous proposals."[36] In 1904 the SVRM organized lectures on sexual hygiene in some ten localities for middle school boys (ages thirteen to sixteen) with the approval of the local authorities, and in 1909 it conducted a broad survey of teachers.[37] The report, approved by the local association of secondary schoolteachers and sent to the educational authorities, concluded that the state should include sex education in the mission of middle and even primary schools. Faced with parental negligence, the report continued, the state had a legitimate right to use schools "to remind [parents] of their duties and above all to train [future parents] to have greater awareness of their responsibilities." The report's authors proposed to introduce instruction on "the laws of the propagation of life" in natural science courses and provide a special hygiene course for young people of both sexes in their final year of school. Both primary and secondary schoolteachers were to receive special training for this purpose.[38]

The SVRM was a local branch of the International Abolitionist Federation (IAF), and before concentrating its attention upon the education of young men, the organization's members had been militant advocates for the abolition of regulated prostitution. IAF leaders insisted that the source of the venereal peril was the double standard of sexual morality and the assumption that men would yield to their impulses. The IAF accordingly sought to promote the same behavior for men as for women—premarital abstinence, sexual moderation, and moral discipline—and it claimed that this "single moral standard" was a critical component of the fight for equality between the sexes.[39] Sex education was not part of the IAF's initial agenda, but international conferences in Brussels in 1899 and 1902 produced new alliances with physicians who were admonishing young people to remain abstinent; given the lack of effective therapeutic measures, male premarital abstinence remained the best prophylaxis, and sex education

[36] Archives of the City of Lausanne, *Rapport annuel de la Société vaudoise pour le relèvement de la moralité* (1897): 10.

[37] According to the above-mentioned annual reports, parents could, if they wished, keep their children from attending the lesson, but they seldom did. The 1909 survey reflected a conscious effort, initiated in 1903, to start paying particular attention to young men, since it was assumed that this was "the most necessary and most likely to produce a lasting impression" (*Rapport annuel de la Société vaudoise pour le relèvement de la moralité* [1903], 12, Archives of the City of Lausanne).

[38] For all these citations, see L. Robert, *L'école a-t-elle un rôle à jouer dans l'éducation sexuelle? Rapport présenté à la Société vaudoise des maîtres secondaires en 1911* (Vevey: Klausfelder, 1911).

[39] "Which Women? What Europe? Josephine Butler and the International Abolitionist Federation," *History Workshop Journal* 62 (2006): 215–32. For more details on the abolitionist movement in Switzerland, see Anne-Marie Käppeli, *Sublime croisade: Éthique et politique du féminisme protestant 1825–1928* (Geneva: Zoé, 1990).

that aimed to promote this behavior was welcomed. During the Brussels conference of 1902, for example, three members of the IAF, together with the eminent German biologist Alfred Neisser, succeeded in passing a resolution that sought to raise "the problem of rational, progressive intersexual education from a hygienic and moral standpoint among elementary schoolteachers and educators of youth at every level."[40] From this point forward the IAF emphasized medical arguments in its propaganda and sex education campaigns.

Like the French SPSM, the SVRM directed its efforts toward well-to-do young men. In 1906 it strove to reach working-class youths through lectures at the Maison du Peuple in Lausanne, the capital of the canton. At first, there was great concern about the impropriety of speaking to girls, and the society's newsletters advertised brochures that were intended for mothers rather than the girls themselves. But these concerns seem to have quickly vanished, and, following the advice of teachers who insisted that both sexes required sex education, the organization also began organizing lectures in girls' high schools in 1907. Henceforth, sex education sponsored by the SVRM took place in sex-segregated venues and with highly gendered content. For the boys, warnings against the venereal peril were presented as an encouragement to control sexual urges, thus demonstrating "genuine virility." The emphasis was on morality rather than health, and boys were exhorted to assume "altruistic responsibility" toward women in general and toward their future wives and children in particular. SVRM members believed that a more egalitarian society could only be achieved if men would assume responsibility for morally correct sexual behavior. Sex education for girls, on the other hand, consisted of an emphasis on maternity and on transforming women into equal partners in the enterprise of raising men's moral standards.[41] Emma Pieczynska, a leading figure of the Geneva abolitionist movement, underlined the moral dimension of sex education for girls, insisting that in humans "an idea more elevated than that of the pleasure of the senses dominates the generative function, the idea of the goal of that function, the associated thoughts of faithful love, paternity and maternity."[42]

[40] *II^e conférence internationale pour la prophylaxie de la syphilis et des maladies vénériennes, Bruxelles, 1902* (Bruxelles: Hayez, 1903), 2:521. The signatories of the resolution included Geneva-born Alfred de Morsier, who was then the president of the French branch of the IAF.

[41] Auguste de Morsier, a major figure in Swiss abolitionism, legitimized sex education for girls in the following words: "The young man's strength will be the direct result of liberating the young girl from her prejudices and the ignorance in which she vegetates. A woman who lacks knowledge and awareness of these issues is the greatest obstacle to the young man's acquiring high moral standards. That is the value of feminism" ("Fragments d'une conférence concernant l'instruction de la morale sexuelle," n.d., MS fr. 6939/20, *Morsier Manuscripts*, Bibliothèque universitaire de Genève).

[42] Emma Pieczynska, *Education sexuelle: Le rôle de l'école* (Saint-Blaise: Foyer Solidariste, 1910), 10.

While French doctors attempted to "de-eroticize" sexuality through scientific discourse, the Swiss approach was to make sexuality part of a discourse on spirituality and social morality, which made it more socially acceptable to speak to both sexes together. In 1910 an SVRM newsletter reported that six hundred young men and girls in Lausanne had become "literally euphoric about the ideal that the lecturer succeeded in presenting to them" in a talk entitled "Une conjuration pour transformer le monde" (A plea to transform the world).[43] The speaker, Adèle Hoffman, from Geneva, insisted that men and women needed to cooperate in forming associations for marriage, sex, and social reform, thus creating an atmosphere of mutual respect between the genders.

Political Stakes, Strategies, and Opportunities

The contrast between the obstacles to sex education in France and the early successes of reformers in the French-speaking Vaud canton demonstrates that Swiss federalism and local autonomy in educational matters enabled the close contact between the promoters of sex education and the authorities that made at least some early initiatives possible. Since the cantons were virtually denominationally homogeneous, Swiss federalism also reinforced the impact of religion on the sex education debate. Opposition from Catholic circles was limited to Catholic cantons where the religious authorities had the support of a conservative government. This was the case in the neighboring Fribourg canton, where the issue of sex education was never even raised due to the Catholic-conservative government's strategy of silence regarding sexuality.[44] In Protestant cantons, religion was more of a spur to reformist action than an impediment due to the influence of social Christianity, a Protestant movement that associated social justice and public morality. This provided a favorable context for introducing in Geneva the IAF, which tried to extend its influence to nearby France. Émilie de Morsier, of Geneva, founded a local branch of the IAF in Paris in 1879 and opened a home for prostitutes in 1887.[45] Her son, Auguste de Morsier, represented the French branch of the IAF in Brussels in 1902. But France, which was determined to regulate prostitution, was not favorable terrain for the IAF, since the organization was focused upon the abolition

[43] *Rapport de la Société vaudoise pour le relèvement de la moralité pour l'année 1910*, 12.

[44] Anne-Françoise Praz, "Religion, Masculinity and Fertility Decline: A Comparative Analysis of Protestant and Catholic Culture (Switzerland 1890–1930)," *History of the Family* 14 (2009): 88–106. The cantonal authority exercised severe repression: neo-Malthusian publications and scientific or medical writings were assimilated to pornography and fell under the blow of police measures. Conferences were not allowed, and policemen were ordered to inspect bookshops and newspaper stalls regularly to seize all publications on sexual issues.

[45] Anne-Marie Käppeli, "Émilie de Morsier," in *Les femmes dans la mémoire de Genève*, ed. Erica Deuber Pauli and Nadia Tikhonov (Geneva: Suzanne Huter, 2005), 112–14.

of such a regulation. Consequently, the French branch of the IAF was not able to influence the debate on sex education in the same way the Swiss branches did.[46]

Another factor encouraged mobilization on sexual issues in Switzerland. According to our analysis of the moral reformers' networks, the male members belonged to marginal political currents in the cantonal political landscape. Sex education promotion was a way for them to gain visibility and political prominence as specialists in the area of sexuality, an issue of growing social concern. For women, participation in associations advocating sex education provided access to the public arena, from which they were otherwise politically disenfranchised. While contributing to the egalitarian focus of the movement, however, women's involvement in sex education was also contingent on their maintenance of high moral standards and thus contributed to the moralistic tone of these groups. Nevertheless, the success of this strategy to bring concrete projects to fruition and the capacity of these groups for political action depended on the range of opportunities in each region. The strategy was partially successful in the Vaud canton, where moral reformers formed a pressure group that included a strong—and perhaps reassuring—female presence. It failed in the neighboring Protestant canton of Geneva, where reformers founded a political party that attempted to arbitrate local political struggles—a strategy that necessarily excluded women. In 1896 this political party suffered a stinging defeat when Geneva voters refused the party's plan to close the brothels. As a result, moral reformers were politically marginalized, and the cantonal authorities, who opposed the abolition of brothels, grew wary of all the projects proposed by the reformers, including sex education.

The strategies of the actors in the Geneva and Vaud cantons converged, however, in fighting against neo-Malthusians. In 1907 the newly founded Groupe néo-malthusien de Genève began distributing birth control propaganda in Geneva and across Switzerland.[47] In its newspaper, *La vie intime* (1908–14), the group advocated sex education for young people, particularly for young working-class girls. The newspaper invited mothers to attend mixed-gender meetings on sexual physiology so that they could educate themselves on how to speak to their daughters while they were waiting for sex education to be introduced into the schools.[48] *La vie intime* also published articles written by Margaret Faas-Hardegger (1882–1963), the first female secretary engaged by the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions and one of the rare neo-Malthusians among Swiss feminists. Most Swiss

[46] In late 1902 Auguste de Morsier came back to settle in Geneva, where he became a professional proabolition activist.

[47] Emmanuelle Allegra, "La propagande néo-malthusienne à Genève à travers son organe: La vie intime (1908–1914)," master's thesis, University of Geneva, 1996; Ursula Gaillard and Annick Mahaim, *Retard de règles: Attitudes devant le contrôle des naissances et l'avortement en Suisse romande du début du siècle aux années vingt* (Lausanne: Éditions d'En bas, 1983).

[48] *La vie intime* 8 (April 1909): 2.

feminists either followed the dominant norms of respectable femininity and kept silent about contraception or shared the opinion that it was a dangerous threat to female sensibility and dignity. Abolitionist feminists were particularly likely to assume that using contraception threatened women's ability to influence the moral standards of men. For Emma Pieczynska, contraception was a profanation of love and intimacy.[49]

These views motivated Geneva moral reformers to join forces with the conservatives in opposition to neo-Malthusian propaganda, which they considered immoral.[50] In the canton of Vaud, abolitionists also denounced the immorality of neo-Malthusian doctrine. Although they viewed birth control as acceptable within morally upstanding Protestant families, they rejected contraceptive rights for women. As an article in *L'essor*, a new weekly Protestant publication launched in 1906, argued, it was the husband's responsibility to preserve the wife's dignity and innocence. The fight against the neo-Malthusians thus became a priority for reformers in Vaud and Geneva and contributed to their reluctance to promote sex education in schools.

To summarize the comparison between Swiss and French actors, strategies and opportunities, it is clear that the virtual monopoly of the French physicians and hygienists contrasts with the plurality of actors on the Swiss side (doctors, teachers, legal experts, pastors, moral reformers). This was primarily a consequence of institutional constraints (French centralism in contrast to Swiss federalism), which called for different strategies. French promoters of sex education had to form a pressure group capable of influencing parliamentary representatives and the national school authorities. The prestige of a professional group armed with scientific expertise was more effective than an association with diverse members, and the costs of organizing at the national level were lower when only one profession was involved. In the decentralized Swiss system, on the other hand, it was preferable to take advantage of the renown of local personalities from various fields who came together to support a single cause.

The variable impact of socioeconomic change also affected the range of opportunities available, influencing elites' perceived social policy and giving certain types of actors an authoritative role in the public sphere. In France,

[49] "Where does this insurmountable aversion to preventive practices experienced by so many women come from . . . even those who would have need of them? . . . These chaste hearts associate something inexpressible and sacred with the simultaneous and total giving of love by which two beings and two lives merge in an unreserved abandon for a higher end. To intervene in this supreme and mysterious accord, to denature that impulse, to trouble it with a conflict of contradictory interests is a profanation to their sense of intimacy" (Emma Pieczynska, "La question du néo-malthusianisme," *Revue de morale sociale*, September 1901, 333).

[50] Auguste de Morsier, also a member of the Geneva parliament, opposed the neo-Malthusians in a bill on the outrage against public morality. See "Mémorial du Grand Conseil," 27 May 1908, 1375–78, Geneva State Archives.

concerns about degeneracy and low birthrates made the elites more attentive to medical discourse. Doctors had an incentive to paint a catastrophic picture of the venereal peril in order to present themselves as indispensable experts on public policy. In Switzerland, a delayed demographic transition meant that low birthrates were not yet on the political agenda. Swiss elites were concerned mainly about social issues linked to rapid industrialization (poverty, social problems in working-class districts, prostitution, illegitimate children, etc.). To meet these challenges, moral reformers proposed legal and philanthropic solutions aimed at alleviating elite fears about the revolutionary impulses of the rising workers' movement. Moral reformers presented themselves as pragmatic and capable of launching pilot initiatives, but a primary motivation was to ensure their own role in official bodies or their entry into the political arena.

These elements influenced sex education discourse. Let us take, for example, the differing status of prostitution. In France, prostitution was considered an unavoidable scourge against which young people needed to be warned, and sex educators saw themselves primarily as advocates for health measures that would curb its inevitable effects. In the discourse of the Swiss moral reformers, on the other hand, prostitution was more closely linked to social issues and the sexual domination of women; sex educators thus saw their role as educating the population in social and moral responsibility, and they believed that this would abolish the demand for prostitution.

The Debate over Sex Education during the Interwar Period (1915–1930)

The increased social visibility of venereal diseases during World War I added new impetus to the movement for sex education. On the French side, fears about the dramatic increase in syphilis rates, particularly among returning soldiers who risked contaminating their wives and children, explains why the health problem eventually took relative precedence over the single issue of low birthrates. The rate of primary syphilis in the army, which some believed to be the real "syphilometer" of a nation, increased sixteenfold between 1915 and 1919.[51] At the end of the war, 2 percent of French soldiers were contaminated with syphilis, or almost 50,000 men, while an additional 130,000 had contracted gonorrhea, and 60,000 had various other kinds of venereal ulcers (*chancres mous*).[52] The perceived health crisis helped to widen what had been a very limited audience for

[51] The word "syphilometer" was coined by Dr. Lancereux and is quoted in Alain Corbin, "Le péril vénérien au début du siècle: Prophylaxie sanitaire et prophylaxie morale," *Recherche* 29 (1977): 254. For the increased rate of syphilis in the army, see Jean-Yves Le Naour, "Sur le front intérieur du péril vénérien," *Annales de démographie historique* 1 (2002): 107–19; *Misères et tourments de la chair durant la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Aubier, 2002), 128–31.

[52] Dr. Mignon, *Le service de santé dans l'armée pendant la guerre 1914–1918* (Paris: Masson, 1927), 17.

debates about the introduction of sex education in schools. "The future of our race depends entirely, I daresay, on sex education," asserted the child care specialist Adolphe Pinard in the preface to the book by the feminist Adrienne Avril de Sainte-Croix.[53] Pinard and Sante-Croix unsuccessfully exhorted the French High Council on Public Education to begin training primary schoolteachers in sex education. The influence of these eminent personalities was, however, soon thwarted by heated opposition.

In Switzerland, the rising incidence of venereal diseases due to the war prompted an initial national mobilization with the founding in 1918 of the Société suisse de lutte contre les maladies vénériennes (SSLMV) (Swiss Society to Combat Venereal Diseases), an organization made up primarily of physicians and judges. Its first achievement was to gather reliable statistical data on a national scale and to publish broadly distributed brochures for the public in both German and French.[54] The SSLMV still recommended abstinence before marriage, but it also encouraged doctors to be more understanding toward patients with venereal disease in order to encourage them to seek treatment at special dispensaries where anonymity would be guaranteed and treatment would be free. In other words, as in the French SPSM, a scientific and medical approach to venereal disease prevailed over moral judgment.[55] The SSLMV set up cantonal sections in which very committed physicians strove to influence health and criminal legislation and more resolutely promote sex education in schools. In both Switzerland and France, however, this new, more medicalized approach meant increasing conflict between anti-VD crusaders and moral reformers. As we demonstrate below, the differences in approach to sex education between France and Switzerland eventually lessened.

France: Doctors Confront a Catholic Offensive

Fears about rising rates of venereal disease after World War I encouraged physicians to redouble their efforts to rally teachers to the cause of sex education. The Congrès national de propagande d'hygiène sociale et d'éducation prophylactique (National Congress of Propaganda for Social Hygiene and Prophylactic Education), which had close ties to the SPSM, tested the waters with a survey of teachers, administrators, and education scholars on the advisability of sex education in school and how it should be

[53] Adolphe Pinard, preface to *L'éducation sexuelle*, by Adrienne Avril de Sainte-Croix (Paris: Alcan, 1918), 4.

[54] Bruno Bloch, *Les maladies vénériennes: Leur nature et comment les combattre*, trans. Robert Chable (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1919).

[55] Matteo Pedroni, "Radiographie de la peur: 40 ans de lutte contre la syphilis à Lausanne (1890–1930)," *Revue historique vaudoise* 103 (1995): 139–86; and Nicole Malherbe, *Péril vénérien: La lutte contre les maladies sexuellement transmissibles à Lausanne et à Neuchâtel avant l'apparition du sida* (Neuchâtel: Alphil, 2002), 57–58.

conducted.[56] In 1923 twenty thousand questionnaires were sent to rectors, academy inspectors, primary school inspectors, head teachers, school principals, professors, primary schoolteachers, school health officials, and Catholic and Protestant chaplains. Some fifteen thousand replies were received. In answer to the question "Do you think schools should initiate young people to sexual issues?" a clear majority of respondents said "yes." Nevertheless, those who supported sex education at school did not think they were capable of providing it themselves. A minority of respondents were entirely opposed, maintaining that "sex education only concerns families."[57] The SPSM believed that the survey supported its argument for the introduction of sex education in schools. The survey concluded with an anonymous reflection: "In view of the fact that innocence does not consist in ignorance and ignorance is the main cause of the sexual peril, it is vital to the future of the race to instill maternal instinct early through exact knowledge of the organism and to provide future mothers with an overall understanding of hygiene and prophylaxis that will enable them to monitor their own health, to carry their pregnancies to term, and to raise and educate their children in a healthy way."[58] The project was thus presented as a way both to avoid the risk of venereal disease and to prepare girls for family life.[59]

The physicians soon gained allies and influence in educational circles. The Groupe féministe de l'enseignement laïc (Feminist Secular Schoolteachers' Group) made sex education the topic of its 1924 convention.[60] On 27 November 1924 Professor Pinard gave a talk before the Société française de pédagogie (French Pedagogical Society) on "the role of schools in civilizing sexual instinct."[61] Other doctors gave lectures to young men through their personal networks, which were subsequently published. In December 1925 Dr. Laignel-Lavastine, president of the Association of Parents of Lycée Condorcet Students, gave an initial lecture titled "Vénus et ses dangers" to the school's fifteen- and sixteen-year-old male students. Though optional, the lecture generated considerable interest and drew a crowd, leading to its becoming a yearly event. In 1925 too the SPSM set up the Committee on Female Education, headed by Dr. Germaine Montreuil-Straus, author

[56] "Enquête du comité national de propagande d'hygiène sociale et d'éducation prophylactique sur l'éducation sexuelle de la jeunesse," *Prophylaxie antivénérienne*, October 1923, 637–40.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Quoted in Yvonne Knibiehler, "L'éducation sexuelle des filles au XX^{e} siècle," *Clio* 4 (1996): 144.

[59] De Luca Barrusse, "Le genre de l'éducation," 155–82.

[60] Anne-Claire Rebreyend, *Intimités amoureuses: France 1925–1975* (Toulouse: PUM, 2008), 62; Christine Bard, *Les filles de Marianne: Histoire des féminismes, 1914–1940* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), 223–25.

[61] "Le rôle de l'école dans la civilisation de l'instinct sexuel, conférence faite à la Société française de pédagogie par le Pr. Pinard, le 27 novembre 1924," *La prophylaxie antivénérienne*, March 1930, 234–35.

of numerous books for future mothers.[62] The committee was put in charge of setting up a system for educating girls, "above all a moral and scientific preparation for marriage and motherhood with a view to individual preservation and protection of the race."[63] The doctors on the committee, made up exclusively of women, proposed lectures for young girls age sixteen to nineteen, in which they discussed the risks of venereal disease and the girls' future role as wives and mothers. The Ministry of Public Education authorized these lectures, and the Ministry of Social Hygiene, Assistance, and Prevention subsidized them, demonstrating that advocates of sex education had made considerable progress in getting their ideas accepted in government.

As soon as the SPSM made its first requests to the Ministries of Public Education and Social Hygiene, Assistance, and Prevention, however, Catholics voiced their opposition to sex education in schools. In 1922 Abbot Viollet's Association du mariage chrétien (Christian Marriage Association) voiced its fears:

> In one form or another, laws are being promulgated or prepared that tend to bring sexual education under the purview of natural science teaching. Such teaching would thus take place in groups, it would be neutral from the standpoint of religious morality, and it would be focused exclusively on anatomy and physiology. In other words, this teaching would be disastrous. Even worse, it might, in the name of science, promulgate physiological laws (such as the impossibility or even harmfulness of abstinence) that are contrary to the truth and to the moral order. It would result in vice supported by scientific arguments.[64]

The first sex education lectures in schools set off a new wave of Catholic reaction. The parents' associations asserted that such instruction went against the freedoms of the family and respect for religious convictions. French parents' associations were organized to react against the secularization of schools and were composed of Catholics. Though a minority, these leagues were vociferous. They were backed by the elitist alumni associations that also demanded to be consulted regarding any modification of the curriculum and conditions of school life.[65] Already in 1924, when the

[62] Catherine Rollet, "'Savoir trébuche ignorance': L'éducation sexuelle et la lutte contre les maladies sexuelles dans l'entre-deux-guerres," in *Pour la famille, avec les familles: Des associations se mobilisent (1880–1950)*, ed. Virginie De Luca Barrusse (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), 157–83.

[63] Germaine Montreuil-Straus, "Éducation sanitaire de la jeune fille," *La prophylaxie antivénérienne*, June 1929, 540.

[64] R. P. De Ganay, "L'éducation de la pureté et les initiations nécessaires," *Le Mariage Chrétien*, Paris, 1922, 3, report presented to the Congress of the Christian Marriage Association, 30 June 1922. On the association's intervention in the debate, see Rebreyend, *Intimités amoureuses*, 62.

[65] Jacques Donzelot, *La police des familles* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 184.

minister of public education issued a circular asking these associations about the advisability of sex education at school, they had replied that the parents should be solely responsible for conveying this information to their children. The Catholic representatives or members of Catholic groups did not reject sex education and in fact counted on it precisely to impose the Christian family model, but they did reject the idea of collective instruction being placed in the hands of schoolteachers whose neo-Malthusian preferences they feared. They were particularly opposed to disseminating information on contraceptive methods and to what they perceived to be a trivialization of the moral importance of sexual intercourse. These concerns were somewhat unjustified, because natalist fears about the declining French birthrate had led to the 31 July 1920 law prohibiting the sale of contraceptives and any diffusion of knowledge about contraceptive techniques.[66] Teachers who presented contraceptive methods thus risked heavy fines. Catholics nevertheless worried that even teaching the mechanics of reproduction implied that sex could be a nonreproductive act.

But in 1927–28 there were growing rumors that the ministry, under pressure from the SPSM, intended to introduce sexual hygiene courses in lycées and middle schools. On 2 May 1928 Dr. Gallois, president of the Federation of Parents' Associations, questioned the minister, Édouard Herriot, who replied that he had no plans to do so: "The greatest freedom has been left to the associations to hold or not hold lectures, under their own responsibility, with the speakers they choose."[67] At the time, education was free for middle school pupils, and bourgeois and upper-class parents were concerned that children from low-income families, whom they considered to be more sexually mature, would have a bad influence on their children.[68] This context motivated Marguerite Lebrun, who was the mother of a large militant Catholic family and who went by the pseudonym Vérine, to found an organization called the École des parents (School of Parents) in 1929. This group brought together Catholics who were convinced that sex education should be left entirely to parents. Vérine called for the multiplication of parents' associations to form a rampart against providing sex education in groups (as opposed to between one child and one educator), arguing that group education would have a negative impact on individual modesty. The École des parents organized lectures and annual conferences in which sex was always implicitly at issue. So the position of each group remained entrenched.

[66] An exception was made for the condom, which was considered indispensable in the fight against venereal diseases. On this law, see Bard, *Les filles de Marianne*, 209–13; Cova, *Féminisme et néomalthusiasnisme*, 125–42; De Luca Barrusse, *Les familles nombreuses*, 123–24.

[67] Quoted in Maurice Monsaingeon, *Un devoir des parents*, Ligue des familles nombreuses, brochure (1929).

[68] Donzelot, *La police des familles*, 185.

DEVELOPING A CONSENSUS: DELAYED OPTIONAL TEACHING

The resolute opposition of French Catholic circles forced the physicians to rethink their sex education project. From April to June 1929, a debate took place between the two parties at meetings organized by the SPSM. The debates reveal an effort to overcome sharply contrasting perspectives through a consensus around shared interests. As Lucien Viborel, the director of the Comité national de defense contre la tuberculose (National Committee to Combat Tuberculosis), put it: "There is no such thing as sex education without moral education."[69] There was broad consensus with this point of view. In Paris in 1929, for example, the general assembly of presidents of the parents' associations insisted that "parents want to avoid at all cost having [sex education] become mandatory in schools."[70]

Faced with such firm opposition, the SPSM unanimously approved a new approach. Before puberty, education could only be individual, given by the mother. During the phase of "pubertal crisis," mothers should initiate girls into knowledge of reproductive function, while fathers should inform boys, though with an emphasis on moral rather than physiological aspects. From age fifteen to twenty, training in sentiment should dominate. School-based sex education should place emphasis on the importance of the family—especially for girls—and present physiology, genital hygiene, and the dangers of venereal disease.[71] The principal of each lycée was to send a letter to the parents of tenth-grade students asking them to authorize their child to attend the "Conférence de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale: Conseils aux jeunes gens pour se conduire dans la vie" (Lecture on health and moral prophylaxis: Advice for young people in conducting their lives). A brochure was to be enclosed with the letter explaining the aim of the lectures, which would be divided into three parts: the first, pertaining to morality, would be presented by the philosophy professor; the second, on biology, by the professor of natural history; the third, on prophylaxis, by a doctor. As the lectures were not mandatory, they would require the authorization of the head of the school. In other words, opposition to sex education prevented its implementation in schools, and it remained confined to conferences and flyers. Plans to implement school-based sexual education were not discussed again until after World War II.

SWITZERLAND: A CURIOUS ALLIANCE BETWEEN MORALISM AND PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION

Before the war, Swiss physicians and moral reformers agreed that sex education in schools should focus on encouraging abstinence. Due to the

[69] Lucien Viborel, *L'éducation publique contre la syphilis* (Paris: Berger Levrault, 1928), 8.
[70] Quoted in *Prophylaxie antivénérienne*, April 1929, 329.
[71] Ibid.

pragmatic orientation of the doctors and the moralizing orientation of the reformers, this consensus crumbled after the war. The moral reformers linked the rising rates of venereal disease to the decadent behavior that they believed had accelerated during the war. In their view, a vigorous reaction was required to reset individuals' moral compass. To this end, the Cartel romand d'hygiène sociale et morale (Swiss-French Association for Social and Moral Hygiene) was formed in 1918. While this umbrella association began in Protestant French-speaking Switzerland, members gradually rallied Catholics to their cause and claimed to represent the entire country at international conferences.[72] The cartel grouped together all the activists interested "in the fight against immorality"—abolitionists, associations against venereal peril, smut, or alcoholism—and were united by a common objective: to support family structures, which they viewed as being threatened by individualism, low birthrates, abortion, modern leisure activities, and decadent behavior.[73] In their conservative, profamily creed, the issue of equality between the sexes, which was central to the arguments of moral reformers before the war, disappeared. The focus on the family was partly a reaction to sociodemographic change: there had been worrisome reports about an increasing number of abortions, and demographers were expressing concern about the results of the 1920 federal census, which revealed a noticeable drop in the number of births in certain cantons.[74]

The unification of the associations engaged in the struggle against immorality also reflected a new direction for the medical profession. Doctors affiliated with local sections of the Société suisse de lutte contre les maladies vénériennes (Swiss Society to Combat Venereal Diseases) recommended a pragmatic approach. They sought to educate the population, particularly students, about individual preventive strategies while encouraging those suffering from venereal disease to seek immediate treatment from free clinics provided in some municipalities.[75] This was the position advocated by the Genevan physician Charles Dubois: "Thanks to compulsory school attendance, the state can reach everyone; it should take advantage of this opportunity to give boys and girls as complete an education as possible in this area. It is a whole new special program to be integrated into the general

[72] Geneviève Heller, "Psychiatrie et société: De quelques associations pour l'hygiène mentale, morale et sociale," *Revue historique vaudoise* 103 (1995): 115–37.

[73] "There are people who are frightened, driven away or amused by the words 'moral rehabilitation.' . . . So be it. Let us set aside this expression which has such a bad reputation and talk about the family. We shall see that it amounts to the same thing" (Maurice Veillard, *Revue annuelle d'hygiène sociale et morale*, 1920–21, 3).

[74] Anne-Françoise Praz, *De l'enfant utile à l'enfant précieux: Filles et garçons dans les cantons de Vaud et Fribourg* (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2005), 331–42.

[75] The physicians in the Vaud canton rallied more quickly to this pragmatic view. In 1921 the Société vaudoise de médecine (Vaud Society of Medicine) decided to spread public information on individual prophylactic methods capable of preventing contamination (lozenges, creams, injections, but not condoms!). See Pedroni, "Radiographie de la peur," 177–79.

curriculum. Once it has been structured for the different grades and become well established, it would culminate in the wonderful result of requiring all students to take an examination in social and medical prophylaxis when they finish school."[76] However, this pragmatic position faced strong disapproval from moralists grouped together in the Cartel romand d'hygiène sociale et morale. What would become of moral education and encouragement to abstinence if young people could engage in "safe sex" thanks to effective prophylaxis and therapies?

The various specialized journals that addressed sex education in early twentieth-century Switzerland (in the fields of hygiene, medicine, morals, and pedagogy) reveal a curious alliance between the conservative moralists in the cartel and the pedagogues and psychologists associated with the pedagogically innovative Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Geneva.[77] All teachers in Switzerland's Protestant cantons received *L'éducateur*, a pedagogical journal very closely connected to the Institut Rousseau that, between October 1921 and July 1927, ran a series of articles featuring a debate between two teachers, one in the Vaud canton (Mr. J. Laurent) and the other in Geneva (identified only by her initials, M.B.).[78] The former proposed a program of sex education in primary school that would begin with instruction on the physiology of reproduction in natural science courses and that would include lessons on human reproduction for twelve-year-olds. Questions concerning heredity and venereal disease would be reserved for secondary school.[79] The Genevan teacher denounced the plan as an "illegitimate encroachment of schools on family rights." Before the age of seventeen or eighteen, she asserted, any initiation to the "mysteries of life" by a teacher should be strictly individual; young people should be allowed "the possibility of remaining ignorant for as long as possible" instead of having their imaginations dangerously and prematurely stimulated. Instead, she advocated a program to strengthen students' willpower and expose them to an ideal of moral purity that would be differentiated according to sex; boys should be taught to respect women, while girls should be encouraged to develop maternal instincts.

The only thing new about this debate was its references to recent scientific theories—to the writing of Stanley Hall, an American pioneer in

[76] Charles Du Bois, "Du rôle de l'état dans la lutte contre les maladies vénériennes," rapport présenté à la réunion des Directeurs sanitaires suisses, Berne, 5 juin 1921, *Revue médicale de la Suisse romande* 41 (1921): 535.

[77] Rita Hofstetter, *Genève, creuset des sciences de l'éducation, fin du XIX^e^–première moitié du XX^e^ siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2010), 357–60.

[78] The debate lasted six years. See *L'éducateur*, 29 October 1921, 7 January 1922, 24 April 1922, 8 July 1922, 21 January 1924, 8 March 1924, 22 March 1924, 1 November 1924, 24 November 1924, 24 January 1925, 1 May 1926, 14 August 1926, 15 September 1926, and 9 July 1927.

[79] Primary schooling in Geneva was completed at age fifteen and in the Vaud canton at age fifteen or sixteen, depending on the commune.

adolescent psychology, who was hostile to any form of sex instruction in the classroom, and Friedrich W. Foerster, a German academic, pedagogue, and philosopher.[80] Dominique Ottavi has pointed out the "spectacular conversion" that Foerster underwent over the course of his career, from an advocate to an opponent of scientific and eugenic morality as a legitimation for sex education.[81] He came to emphasize only moral education, arguing that prior to the awakening of instinct during puberty, children must be taught "a complete education of character . . . that brings out the inexhaustible strength the spirit can call upon to make itself the master of the body's desires and tendencies." In his view, sex instruction went "against all pedagogical caution," since it focused students' attention on sexuality, which was precisely what should be avoided.[82] The correspondent from *L'éducateur* also mentioned the German psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel, who saw sex instruction in the classroom as "a monstrosity that would lead to innumerable traumas."[83] Drawing on the authority of Stekel, the Geneva teacher refused to recognize that doctors had any skill at discussing sexual matters with children or adolescents. Finally, she denied the ability of schools to provide such instruction, arguing that in most classrooms, "military discipline is still the rule, which is hardly favorable to moral cultivation, and which would be advantageously replaced by self-government."[84]

This mention of "self-government" drew inspiration from the New School movement, an Anglo-American approach to education that challenged traditional teaching methods and aimed to make the child more active in the learning process.[85] Having given rise to pedagogical initiatives

[80] In 1909 Foerster's book *Schule und Charakter: Beiträge zur Pädagogik des Gehorsams und zur Reform der Schuldisziplin* (1907) was translated into French as *L'école et le caractère* by Pierre Bovet, who in 1912 became the head of the Institut Rousseau.

[81] Dominique Ottavi, "Friedrich W. Foerster et le défi de l'éducation sexuelle," in Blanchard, Revenin, and Yvorel, *Les jeunes et la sexualité*, 49–59.

[82] "Sexual instincts are by nature sufficiently conscious," Stekel continued. "It would be aberrant to project them, as it were, into the hemispheres of the brain in such a way as to give them an even greater hold over the soul. Once one's attention has been drawn to these subjects, the imagination starts working, curiosity and desire are aroused, and reason is quite incapable of standing up to them. . . . Sexual curiosity acts upon the will much more quickly than upon intelligence" (Frederik W. Foerster, *L'école et le caractère: Les problèmes moraux de la vie scolaire* [1909; reprint, Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1911], 104).

[83] Wilhelm Stekel, *Nervöse Angstzustände und ihre Behandlung* (Berlin, 1906), 310, quoted in ibid., 105. Even the method based on natural history seemed "impracticable" to him; he believed that the only possible method was individual instruction.

[84] *L'éducateur*, 1 November 1924, 417.

[85] The first "New School" was founded by Cecil Reddie in Abbotshome, UK, in 1889. Étienne Demolins introduced this model in France, and the École des Roches was founded in 1899. Others followed in Germany, the United States, Switzerland, and other countries. In 1899 Adolphe Ferrière, a professor at the Rousseau Institute in Geneva, created the Bureau international des écoles nouvelles to promote this movement, which became increasingly active after the First World War through its conferences and a journal, *L'école nouvelle*, that was published in both French and English.

throughout Europe and the United States, the New School movement was enthusiastically promoted by the Institut Rousseau after 1912.[86] Inspired by new psychological work on adolescence, such as work by Stanley Hall and Sigmund Freud, these pioneers viewed sexual instinct positively and held that its sublimation encouraged creativity, aesthetic emotion, and interest in others. New School followers believed that teachers should help students educate their wills and manage their drives. They disagreed with the premises of sex education, which focused students' attention on sexuality precisely at the time when it was necessary to shift that attention elsewhere. In a work devoted to hygiene in the New Schools, the Geneva psychologist Adolphe Ferrière insisted sexual hygiene could only be taught privately. While the reproduction of animals and plants was included in natural science courses, human reproduction should remain the subject of "*one-on-one* instruction by the student's father, mother, school principal, physician or even pastor."[87]

Whereas the French Catholics opposed sex education at school by invoking morality and family prerogatives, the Protestant moralists of French-speaking Switzerland used scientific legitimation based on innovative teaching methods and the teachings of the burgeoning field of adolescent psychology. At the international conferences on hygiene, the representatives of the cartel referred to the critique of educational institutions led by the New School movement (pointing to brain washing, passive pupils, and overloaded schedules) to reject sex education in schools. "L'école?," asked Dr. Robert Chable, a Swiss physician close to the cartel. "As long as the educational system is based solely on completing a teaching program, schools cannot do much. They can teach the biology of sex. . . . [T]hey cannot do much about the very foundation of any character formation through sex education. The view of success is radically different in new schools, open air schools, and wherever people are trying to pull official schools out of the rut in which they have been bogged down for too long."[88]

Developing a Consensus: Toward Educating the Educators

The unusual alliance between Swiss Protestant conservatives and scholars of pedagogy, which was given considerable attention in *L'éducateur*, helped to reinforce teachers' and educational administrators' misgivings about the progressive, compulsory sex education that physicians were advocating. In Geneva, the idea of sex education in primary school was abandoned in favor of confining it to middle and high schools and focusing it primarily

[86] Hofstetter, *Genève, creuset des sciences*, 277–319.

[87] Adolphe Ferrière, *L'hygiène dans les écoles nouvelles* (Zurich: Zürcher & Furrer, 1916), 320–25, italics in the original. Ferrière's study concerned only the eight schools in Switzerland that practiced the principles of *l'école nouvelle*.

[88] Robert Chable, "Sur l'éducation sexuelle," in *Congrès international de propagande d'hygiène sociale et d'éducation prophylactique sanitaire et morale, Paris, May 24–27, 1923* (Paris, 1923), 339.

on preparing young girls to be mothers. Girls did not receive the advanced information provided to boys in college, business schools, and mechanical and industrial engineering schools until it was introduced in high schools into natural history courses in the mid-1930s.[89] In 1920 the Comité vaudois pour l'étude des questions sexuelles et de la lutte contre les maladies vénériennes (Vaud Committee for the Study of Sexual Issues and the Fight against Venereal Diseases), which was affiliated with the Cartel romand d'hygiène sociale et morale, conducted a survey of two hundred primary and secondary schoolteachers in the Vaud canton. The results show that the teachers were highly sensitive to the importance of sex education, but they nevertheless felt they lacked the authority and poise to handle it.[90] The report suggested that school commissions provide a lecture on sexual hygiene "as regularly as possible by a physician-pedagogue" to pupils of both sexes who were finishing primary school.[91] Such lectures were held here and there in some schools, but they were still far from a widespread warning to all adolescents.

Finally, moralists and pedagogues collaborated on a project that appears to have been intended to fend off sex education at school: the organization of courses in "sex education teaching methods." Parents, teachers, pastors, youth club leaders, and physicians were invited to lectures on the child sciences. In 1929, under the auspices of the association Pro Juventute and the Société pédagogique romande (Swiss-French Pedagogical Society), the cartel organized such courses at Lausanne in the Vaud canton. The speakers included physicians in the cartel and pedagogues at the Institut Rousseau, notably, Professor Pierre Bovet. *L'éducateur* offered a long report on the event, describing its twin objectives as an effort help educators "enlighten" young people, preferably individually, and to generate a consensus among the adults "regarding the essential points of sexual morality."[92]

What does the Franco-Swiss comparison for this second period reveal about the actors, their strategies, and their opportunities? We can note convergences in the configuration of the actors and the content of the debates, which had become focused on sex education at school. In both countries, doctors asserted their legitimacy as advocates of such an education. Medical progress had provided preventive and curative solutions that went beyond the single moral solution of abstinence. For example, the Bordet-Wasserman test was developed in 1906 to diagnose syphilis, while

[89] Éléonore Zottos, *Santé, Jeunesse! Histoire de la médecine scolaire à Genève: 1884–2004* (Geneva: La Criée / Service de la recherche en éducation, 2004), 92–93.

[90] Caroline Cortolezzi and David Muheim, *L'éducation sexuelle dans le canton de Vaud (1969–2001): Un exemple d'intégration des risques dans une valeur positive de la sexualité* (Lausanne: Institut universitaire romand d'histoire de la médecine et de la santé, 2002), 85.

[91] *L'éducateur*, 27 November 1920, 694. The lectures were open to all fifteen- and sixteen-year-old students of a given locality, regardless of sex or social category.

[92] *L'éducateur*, 23 November 1929, 356.

prophylactic creams and treatments based on arsenobenzol improved both prevention and treatment.[93]

In France and Switzerland, the concerns of the political elites also converged during this period. The war had increased the spread of venereal disease and strengthened the interest of the public authorities in medical responses. They were all the more eager to find solutions because warnings about low birthrates had reached a new fever pitch. Fears of depopulation were common in both France and Switzerland, fed by the disaster of the war in the former and by the 1920 census in the latter. Aware of these new imperatives and their increased influence, doctors concerned about population decline, such as the members of the SPSM in France, turned back to the educational experts on whom they had given up before the war. This in turn prompted renewed efforts on the part of the adversaries of school sex education. French Catholic opponents of sex education mobilized family leagues and parents' associations, both of which were very close to the church. They sought to preserve the church's influence in civil society, which they believed would be undermined if public schools disseminated a discourse on sexuality that counteracted Catholic morality by providing information on contraception. Catholics joined with a natalist group, the Alliance nationale contre la Dépopulation (National Alliance against Depopulation), which was concerned about low birthrates and was just as hostile to neo-Malthusianism.[94] Their efforts succeeded in limiting the number of physicians who came to lecture in public schools and in ensuring the inclusion of moralistic, profamily rhetoric in sex education.

The political stakes to preserve church influence and Catholic morality were similar in the Swiss Catholic cantons, which refused any sex education at schools. In the Protestant cantons, moral reformers with ties to social Christianity became ever more conservative. Political considerations also explained their shift from concerns about social problems (like prostitution and illegitimate children) to the defense of family and morality after the war. The viscerally anti-Communist climate of the period was not favorable to any discussion of dramatic social change, and policy suggestions were rapidly discredited through the accusation of Bolshevik sympathies.[95] Consequently, to present themselves as reliable partners for the dominant conservative authorities, moral reformers appealed to contemporary concerns about low birthrates and called for the defense of the family against moral decadence. This approach led to opposition to sex education at school, where more pragmatic physicians were asserting themselves. The moral reformers could

[93] De Luca Barrusse, *Population en danger!*, 239–42; and Claude Quetel, *Le mal de Naples: Histoire de la syphilis* (Paris: Seghers, 1986), 176.

[94] On this group, see De Luca Barrusse, *Les familles nombreuses*, 264–70.

[95] In November 1918 Switzerland experienced the first and only general strike in its history, prompted by a serious deterioration of living conditions for a large proportion of the population. Swiss authorities attributed this strike to a conspiracy of Russian Bolshevik refugees and activists. This hypothesis was later refuted by Swiss historians.

not invoke Protestant morality, which did not formally forbid contraception, and they considered the question a matter of individual conscience. The recourse to the scientific expertise of the psychologists was therefore useful, especially as they saw the topic of sex education as an opportunity to defend their own expertise against the growing authority of physicians.

Conclusion

Our comparative analysis has revealed what was at stake in the debate over sex education for both its promoters and the elites they represented. Rather than framing sexuality as a personal reality that the individual must learn to manage to achieve satisfying emotional relationships, sex education in early twentieth-century Switzerland and France described sex as the source of a collective threat to health, population growth, or society. It was this threat, above all else, that made it possible for the previously taboo subject of sex to become respectable in public discourse and in the education of children and young people. This biopolitical perspective formed the backdrop of the debate and explains why the aim of dissuading young people from having sex before marriage drew the support of all the promoters of sex education. In the early twentieth century, advocates of sex education began to insist that premarital abstinence was the only solution to combat the venereal peril and to reduce prostitution and illegitimacy. Only one group in the debate advocated both an individual and a positive approach to sexuality: the neo-Malthusian movement, which was the first to encourage separating sexuality from procreation by promoting contraceptive methods.

The preventive and prophylactic remedies for venereal diseases that were available in the post–World War I period could have freed sex education promoters from these fears of degeneration and caused them to rethink their project. But it must be remembered that sexual issues remained eminently political issues. First, both the Catholic and Protestant groups that opposed leaving sexual decisions entirely up to the individual—even if sex education might have proven an effective means of combating venereal disease and other health threats—were most focused on maintaining their influence over civil society by asserting their right to set standards of sexual comportment and reproductive decisions. Second, all actors in the debate were determined to provide a reassuring demonstration of absolute moral respectability and to avoid overly daring discourses on sexuality. This was particularly true for the neo-Malthusians, who had been discredited by the accusation of immorality at the beginning of the century and whose post–World War I enemies accused them of refusing to understand that individual rights needed to be subordinated to national collective needs.

These fierce postwar controversies over sex education at school nevertheless led to the creation of a new sex pedagogy in which content was carefully adapted to children's age and gender and in which practitioners

reflected on their methods of knowledge transmission. It was the beginning of a process of politically and ideologically detached reflection on the importance of sex education for childhood development.

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