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Touchy Topics: The Imperial Public Anxiety and Null Curriculum of Sexuality in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Britain

Abstract

At the height of British imperial power and global influence in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century, Britain's populace and intellectuals alike frequently saw one fitting comparison in patriotically describing their Empire: the might of Britain, in their eyes, resembled that of the Roman Empire. To the dismay of many, however, such a comparison extended not only to Rome's dominance but its demise as well. The fall of Rome was described in Britain as being the result of moral degradation, paralyzing the Empire from within. With the rise of social Darwinism, moreover, the strength of the British Empire, like that of Rome, soon came to be associated with the strength of the individuals that comprised the state. While troops fought for Queen and Country abroad, an alternative frontline of childhood sexual deviance, in the eyes of many, threatened the British Empire internally. An examination of the actions and policies of the perceived soldiers of this frontline, teachers and headmasters, is attempted here through the theoretical lens of null curriculum. Null curriculum signifies not what is taught publicly, but rather expressed and learned through absence. Despite public calls to arms against male sexuality in the speeches, publications, letters and policy documents of teachers and headmasters, the sexual regulation of boys in public schools was seemingly silent and largely reserved to the null curriculum.

Disciplines

History

Keywords

education, Britain, sexuality, null curriculum, empire

Cover Page Footnote

On August 24th, 410, “the Goths under their king Alaric entered the city of Rome”¹ and spent three days pillaging the seat of a once great Empire. It was the Goths’ third visit to Rome in three years and although the Empire managed to recover its dominance in the following three to four years, the Western Roman Empire fell soon after in 476.² Towards the end of the nineteenth century and leading up until the First World War, with external strife embroiling Britain and many of her colonies, and a rising German Empire making its presence known on the world stage, many British citizens feared the crumbling of their Empire like the once great Rome. British historians, like Edward Gibbon, equated breached Roman walls with crumbling moral decay from within. In the context of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, the strength of the Empire came to be linked to the strength of the individual parts that comprised it. To strengthen Britain’s resolve abroad meant to strengthen its morals from within. The rising prominence of public schools and the increasing value put on education provided the perfect opportunity for the state to produce morally upstanding sons of the Empire, an intent rarely disclosed to students. An examination of the actions and policies of teachers and headmasters is attempted here through the theoretical lens of null curriculum. Null curriculum denotes what is not taught publicly, but rather expressed and learned through absence. By withholding any mention of sexuality, for example, teachers can imply that it has a deviant nature as it is not taught in the explicit curriculum.³ Although anxiety over sexual deviance stood publicly near the forefront of imperial concerns, paradoxically, despite being staunchly present in all-male public schools, the regulation of boys’ sexuality was reserved for the null curriculum and was largely regulated by covert methods of teaching.

A precise documentation of the behaviour of teachers and headmasters in late-Victorian schools should not be confined to personal accounts alone, as valuable as they are in historical research. While assessing any given pedagogical method that is considered best practice cannot characterize all classrooms, as many educators do not abide by best practice, it provides a fitting description of large-scale educational trends. Consequently, null curriculum, an educational theory used predominantly within a contemporary British context, has much to offer as a tool of historical assessment. Many scholars, moreover, have contributed to the study of sexual regulation in Britain. In the context of the classroom, Alan Hunt has notably theorized about British public anxiety

¹ Richard Godden, “The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths: Rewriting the Sack of Rome,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 31, no.1 (2002): 47.

² Ibid.

³ Elliot Eisner, *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994).

inspired by masturbation. Sterling Fishman, in his survey of childhood sexuality, has similarly pointed to British public schools as tools of regulation. This article expands upon each of these studies. Given that null curriculum, what is taught and learned through absence, has traditionally been a theory reserved for contemporary educational analysis, it is used here to expand upon the ongoing dialogue of sexual regulation within male public schools, providing a new theoretical lens of history to articulate the actions of headmasters and teachers. Imperial anxiety, the perceived weakening of the Empire, is shown here to motivate the pedagogical practices of educators.

In the public domain, moreover, the dangers inherent and contributing to a perceived weakening of the British Empire were equated to those confronting morality, spurring a desire to regulate sexuality. In Darwin's landmark publication, *The Origins of Species*, the theory of evolution depicted the eternal battle of growth between species and individuals of the animal world for survival and adaptation.⁴ His work, however, began to be interpreted along social and racial lines after its publication in 1859. Connecting the survival of the British Empire to the strength of the individuals that comprised it, social Darwinism spurred a desire to regulate the behaviour of the individual. British historian John Cramb modelled his assessment of the strength of the British Empire largely on Edward Gibbon's classical study *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.⁵ Cramb theorized that the gradual descent of the Roman Empire and peoples, from leading most of the known world, to defending the gates of Rome and Byzantium from that same world, was due to the moral degradation of Rome's leaders and citizens—paralysing a once dominant Empire from within.⁶ Cramb, in applying Gibbon's Rise and Fall Theory of Empires to Darwin's theory of evolution, expressed that "Rome was as Britain is,"⁷ an empire in "evolution, [a state of] perpetual, continuous"⁸ motion. Empire, to Cramb, was the "highest expression of State."⁹ The state itself was "but a unity created from units"¹⁰ and its rise and fall was utterly dependent on the strength and behaviour of the individuals that comprised it. Thus, to avoid the fate of Rome and to keep evolving to maintain its strength, the British Empire needed to strengthen

⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909).

⁵ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1900).

⁶ Alan Hunt, "The Great Masturbation Panic and the Discourses of Moral Regulation in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Britain," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8, no. 4 (1998).

⁷ John Cramb, *The Origins and Destiny of Imperial Britain* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1900), 132.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

each individual unit that comprised the state. Boys, perceived then as the military agents and legacy of the Empire, were a primary focus.

Within Cramb's social Darwinist theoretical lens, Britain needed to internally strengthen against moral degradation to survive and thrive in the perpetual evolutionary struggle of states. This worldview was not reserved for historians like Cramb or Gibbon, however, but encompassed a dominant public narrative of statehood.¹¹ A link between the moral actions of citizens and nation was best epitomized in the media by John St. Loe Strachey, social purity advocate and editor of the *Spectator* in London. He expressed that "unless the citizens of a State put before themselves the principles of duty, self-sacrifice, self-control and continence, not merely in the matter of national defense, national preservation and national wellbeing, but also of the sex relationship, the life of the State must be short and precarious. Unless the institution of family is firmly founded and assured, the State will not continue."¹²

With an emerging German Empire amassing a naval fleet to challenge Britain's domination of the seas,¹³ a second Boer War, and constant murmurs of rebellion in Ireland, many who could not strengthen the Empire against external strife turned inward.¹⁴ If moral degradation weakened the Empire, male sexual deviancy, consequently, had to be pre-emptively stifled. The rising prominence of male public schools provided an opportunity to do so. According to historian Allan Hunt, masturbation was seen to threaten individual, social and national well-being, depriving young men, the primary military agents, of their strength and will.¹⁵ Edward Lyttelton claimed that the "source of evil"¹⁶ began as the "solitary vice,"¹⁷ or masturbation, and progressed into any form of sexual deviancy, most notably homosexuality.¹⁸ Reverend Cecil Grant, headmaster of St. George's School in Harpenden, England, in an essay published by the University of Manchester, expressed that if a "wise" system of education "were universal in England, sexual immorality

¹¹ Hunt, "The Great Masturbation Panic and the Discourses of Moral Regulation in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Britain," 611.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 1991).

¹⁴ Hunt, "The Great Masturbation Panic and the Discourses of Moral Regulation in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Britain," 609.

¹⁵ Ibid., 595.

¹⁶ Edward Lyttelton, *The Causes and Prevention of Immorality in Schools* (London: Social Purity Alliance, 1883), 8.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

among young or grown-up people would become as extinct as hydrophobia now is.”¹⁹ As Britain’s forces fought for Queen and Country abroad, headmasters and teachers came to be seen as the front line against moral degeneration internally. The *National Teachers Handbook* details that it is the teacher’s duty to “enable children not merely to reach their full potential as individuals, but also to become upright and useful members of the community in which they live, and worthy sons and daughters of the country to which they belong.”²⁰ With the rise of compulsory and subsidized education, male public schools became the desired tools for strengthening the individuals of the Empire against moral degradation.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the years leading up to the First World War, all-boys public schools became increasingly centralized and compulsory, allowing the state to not only regulate proper sexual behaviour, but to teach it. The British education system, up until the latter half of the nineteenth century, was largely decentralized in curriculum and instructional practices and did not require mandatory attendance of all individuals. Spurred by state commissions, many acts soon transitioned Britain’s youth into the classroom. The Clarendon Report (1864) led to the Public Schools Act of 1868, instituting new governing bodies of schools overseen by state appointed special commissioners. The Newcastle Report (1861) findings fostered the *Elementary Education Act* of 1870. The Act ceased attendance as a matter of local jurisdiction and compelled the attendance of children ages five to ten as a nationwide standard, greatly increasing student enrollments. The 1880 *Elementary Education Act* required local authorities to instate bylaws requiring school attendance and to provide penalties for illegally employed ten to thirteen-year-old children. By the 1880s practically every child in Britain was in school up until eleven years of age.²¹ Later acts in the early twentieth century gradually raised the age of compulsory education and provided free secondary education. According to historian Sterling Fishman, although Britain did not pass laws overtly aimed at regulating the sexuality of boys, the “state schools certainly could be used to crusade against it.”²² With state sanctioned and

¹⁹ Cecil Grant, “The Relative Failure of the English Public Schools,” in *Moral Instruction and Training in School: Report of an International Inquiry*, ed. M. E. Sadler (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908), 248-249.

²⁰ Board of Education, *Handbook of Suggestions: For the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned in the Work of Public Elementary Schools*, (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1928), accessed October 15, 2017, [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b239351;view=1up;seq=1](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b239351;view=1up;seq=1), 9.

²¹ Quentin Bailey, “Heroes and Homosexuals: Education and Empire in E. M. Forester,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 48, no. 3 (2002): 344.

²² Sterling Fishman, “The History of Childhood Sexuality,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 2 (1982): 277.

centralized education established, “the control of childhood sexuality became institutionalized”²³ and the establishment of normative behaviour for boys became the concern of the state.

While young women and girls did not escape calls to sexual purity, regulation and education through null curriculum was directed towards male students due to their image as the primary military agents of the Empire. In describing the role of young men, Historian Alan Hunt expressed that “questions of military needs, imperial capacity, and economic stability were constructed as signs of an internal—that is, national—debility....[This] linked moral and military strength and constructed males as soldiers as the standard by which to measure national strength.”²⁴ As all young men funneled through school, to some degree, many educational institutions took on the task of educating them for the longevity of the Empire, ensuring an adequate number of healthy males for military service. While British women also experienced many calls to purity throughout different institutions, headmasters focused on educating men of strength and morality for the Empire.

With rising imperial uncertainty and an increasingly centralized school system, male public schools were soon utilized as tools to suppress deviant sexuality; however, due to the popular perception of boys as inherently innocent and made sinful due to their environment, suppression of sexuality was executed covertly. In a speech, and later privately circulated essay to English headmasters, Reverend Edward Lyttelton, an influential voice in the late Victorian school system, cautioned against overt renouncement of the “original” and “dual” sin.²⁵ Due to the innocent nature of young school boys, Lyttelton “urged against the theory that schoolmasters should warn boys against the dangers of impurity,”²⁶ but rather create an environment to enforce good behaviour. Occasional public enforcement of morality was employed, for example, E. W. Benison, headmaster of Wellington, ran barbed wire around dormitory cubicles, as did later the Archbishop of Canterbury.²⁷ However, according to discussions of the British Headmaster’s Conventions, public demonstration of sexual enforcement was discouraged because it might taint the minds of young pupils, transmitting vice as opposed to preventing it.²⁸

²³ Ibid., 278.

²⁴ Hunt, “The Great Masturbation Panic and the Discourses of Moral Regulation in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Britain,” 609.

²⁵ Lyttelton, *The Causes and Prevention of Immorality in Schools*, 14.

²⁶ Ibid., 20.

²⁷ Hunt, “The Great Masturbation Panic and the Discourses of Moral Regulation in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Britain,” 586.

²⁸ Lyttelton, *The Causes and Prevention of Immorality in Schools*, 20.

Given the need for caution surrounding the topic of sexuality within schools, null curriculum, or what is taught and learned through absence, became the framework in which an education on sexuality was indirectly provided to students. In *Counsel to Parents on the Moral Education of Their Children*, British physician Elizabeth Blackwell best articulated the need for such a pedagogical methodology. She claimed that “instruction and guidance in relation to sex is not only required by the young, but is indispensable to their physical and moral welfare... [However,] the utmost caution is necessary in giving such guidance.”²⁹ Here, Blackwell notably asserts the importance of educating students on matters of sexuality within a conceptual framework of null curriculum. Dr. Rudolph Eucken, a German academic and commentator on educational practices in Britain similarly remarked that “moral influence [or] training is much more important than instruction.”³⁰ It is to be “achieved by indirect methods.”³¹ If sexuality, consequently, could not be completely abandoned by teachers and headmasters or taught openly, it had to be addressed, taught, and regulated indirectly by creating an environment suitable for the moral development of students. Where regular instruction could not be utilized, null curriculum, “guidance”³² without direct instruction, took hold.

The establishment of null curriculum, moreover, hinged on both headmasters and the broader community, connecting both the imperial motivations of headmasters to the imperial anxiety of the community at large. Educational theorists Landon E. Beyer and Michael W. Apple express that null curriculum often serves to please community standards. Headmasters noted the calls from social purity activists like Edward Lyttelton and Elisabeth Blackwell to strengthen the British Empire, requiring the enforcement of male sexual purity as a “fundamental virtue in [the] State.”³³ Consequently, they followed community standards in addressing sexuality through null curriculum. Within an environment of null curriculum, headmasters, theorize Beyer and Apple, enforce their own agendas and act as the architects of programming, given the absence of the questionable material in formal curriculum.³⁴ As a result, many headmasters, while not able to take

²⁹ Elizabeth Blackwell, *Counsel to Parents on the Moral Education of Their Children* (New York: Brentano’s Literary Emporium, 1880), 90.

³⁰ Rudolph Eucken, “The Problem of Moral Instruction,” *Moral Instruction and Training in School: Report of an International Inquiry*, ed. M. E. Sadler (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908), 5.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Blackwell, *Counsel to Parents on the Moral Education of Their Children*, 121.

³⁴ Landon E. Beyer and Michael W. Apple, *The Curriculum: Problems, Politics, and Possibilities* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1988), 193-196.

up arms for their Empire, saw themselves as serving it by responding to a widespread imperial anxiety, strengthening the Empire through their pupils. Headmaster Hely Almond appropriately captured the imperial role in the education of boys by identifying his main objective as being “the production of a grand breed of men for the service of the British nation.”³⁵ Consequently, to covertly regulate sexuality, limiting it to null curriculum, and uphold the might of the Empire, British schools and their headmasters used regular physical activity and a healthy diet, a morally guiding tutor, and peer surveillance.

Strengthening the individual through physical activity and healthy eating habits to curb the sexual desires of youth was a common belief held by headmasters. In an international inquiry on moral education, published by Manchester University in 1908, Mr. G. Gidley Robinson, former headmaster of Hill Side School in Godalming, claimed that “moral strength in the young is closely connected with physical fitness.”³⁶ To Robinson, “too much stress cannot be laid upon”³⁷ a full and healthy breakfast and dinner and frequent open air exercise as a preventative means of enforcing moral behaviour. The rise of modern team games in school, like rugby and cricket, was expected to stomp out masturbation.³⁸ Even writers like William Acton connected physical weakness as an indicator of “self-abuse.” In his mind, the boy who did not participate in sports or aerobics was undoubtedly engaged in deviant activity.³⁹ In embodying health as not only a preventative means of curbing male sexuality, but a duty of any student to the Empire, the British Teacher Handbook expressed that “the study and practice of health should be a part of everyday life of the school. It should be connected in the mind of the child not only with duties to his comrades, his school and his home, but also with the welfare and happiness of the nation at large.”⁴⁰ Rather than openly educate pupils or warn them about immorality, physical activity, used as a form of null curriculum, was expected to not only stomp out sexual desire but to strengthen British pupils, the primary military agents of the Empire.

³⁵ Stefan Collini, “The Idea of ‘Character’ in Victorian Political Thought,” *Transaction of the Royal Historical Society* 35, no 1(1985): 48.

³⁶ G. Gidley Robinson, “Moral Instruction and Training in Preparatory Schools for Boys,” *Moral Instruction and Training in School: Report of an International Inquiry*, ed. M. E. Sadler (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908), 164.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁸ Fishman, “The History of Childhood Sexuality,” 278.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Board of Education, *Handbook of Suggestions*, 421.

Alterations to the classroom, however, did not cease at physical activity and healthy eating. Many British schoolmasters employed morally guiding tutors to regulate student sexuality. Due to the initially innocent nature of young men, “the view which pretty generally obtains among [school]masters is that immorality results from the formation of bad friendships and attachments between elder boys and those younger ones.”⁴¹ Since the headmaster may not outright warn the boy of vices in fear for corrupting him himself, he may assign the boy a morally upstanding tutor to guide him. From time to time, the young boy may be “tempted”⁴² or exposed to foul language and matters of an inappropriate nature that could awaken sexual deviancy. The tutor, if they could not proactively halt the spread of vice, would then be tasked with keeping the boy “straight,”⁴³ helping the boy steer clear of morally degrading individuals and practices. The tutor, in Lyttelton’s eyes, is the first guard and protector of morality and Empire. “Defeat or victory” for the young boy and the nation rest on the “importance of morals...[and] the first great battle a boy has to fight against indulgence and selfishness.”⁴⁴ In displaying null curriculum, tutors were expected to guide the young pupils, educating them in proper moral behaviour in the absence of formal morally guiding instruction in the explicit curriculum.

To counteract the restraints of constant teacher supervision, moreover, peer policing was employed to identify inappropriate acts and to encourage decent behaviour among students. According to Robinson, “constant vigilance is needed” to minimize the risk of “moral difficulties.”⁴⁵ Favorites of the headmaster, typically outstanding senior boys, captains of dormitories or students organised in purity bands were often employed to not only act as moral pillars like the tutors, but to also relay information about student morality back to the headmaster.⁴⁶ Any student caught using profane language or otherwise “going wrong”⁴⁷ “should be taught that the schoolboy honour does not apply: it is [the student spy’s] plain duty to inform the headmaster ‘so and so would be better for a talk with him.’”⁴⁸ In the dormitories and spaces out of reach of the school administration, peer surveillance covertly enforced principles of strict morality to create

⁴¹ Lyttelton, *The Causes and Prevention of Immorality in Schools*, 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁵ Robinson, “Moral Instruction and Training in Preparatory Schools for Boys,” 164.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

not only students of outstanding morality, but to strengthen the individual units that comprised the Empire.

Despite the public nature of sexual debates and dialogue, the frontline of sexuality in male public schools seemed silent. External threats to the Empire often changed by the decade, but internally, the war on sexual immorality stood near the forefront of British affairs in the late nineteenth century and leading up to the First World War. In responding to a growing anxiety surrounding the fate of the British Empire, many British headmasters did not brandish arms to defend their borders and colonies abroad; rather, those who could not strengthen the Empire on the global stage turned inward. Boys, identified as the legacy of the Empire and its primary military agents, obtained much attention from headmasters. Given the popular theory that the mention of sexuality was enough to corrupt young men, headmasters were forced to educate them, often regulating their sexuality covertly. Null curriculum, indirect educational and behavioural practices, was utilized by headmasters to not only instill moral values in their pupils, but to create strong component pieces of a global, yet vulnerable, British Empire.

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