Jeanne D. Petit, *The Men and Women We Want: Gender, Race, and the Progressive Era Literacy Test Debate*.

Chrysavgi Papayianni

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9388
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

Creative Commons License
Jeanne D. Petit, The Men and Women We Want: Gender, Race, and the Progressive Era Literacy Test Debate.

Chrysavgi Papayianni

REFERENCES


1 The xenophobia exacerbated after the 9/11 attacks in America brings to sharp focus current immigration policies since the predominant tendency today especially in Europe is to restrict the surge of immigrants, particularly those coming from the Middle East. Within such a context, Jeanne Petit’s The Men and Women We Want: Gender, Race, and the Progressive Era Literacy Test Debate represents a timely contribution to the study of such policies by focusing on the debates about immigration restriction in America in the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. It was during this time that restriction advocates came up with the idea of a literacy test that would represent the chief determinant of who would be allowed or not to enter America. Interestingly enough, the arguments of the past are very much part of the present, as Petit successfully shows, thus The Men and Women We Want can become a point of reference in contemporary debates over immigration.

2 The focal point throughout the book is that these debates are intimately linked with questions of identity, in short with questions of race and gender. Petit’s focus on Grace Abbott and the IPL (Immigration Protective League) brings the point home since one of Abbott’s chief arguments was that both the AAFLN (American Association of Foreign Language Newspapers) and the IRL (Immigration Restriction League) based their
argumentation for and against the literacy test respectively on gendered assumptions that promoted the idea that “citizenship was about Anglo-Saxon manhood” (30). Suffice it to say that the book’s detailed exploration of such assumptions adds a new dimension to the study of immigration history since immigration historians have not “systematically considered,” to use Petit’s words (10), the role of gender and sexuality in it. One cannot, of course, ignore the fact that despite the detailed exploration and the lucid analysis the book, nevertheless, suffers from a rather limited scope since, as Petit also admits early on, the focus on the IPL, IRL and AAFLN definitely does not “represent the full spectrum of the debate” (3). Indeed, apart from brief references to certain publications of the era, The Men and Women We Want does not really touch upon the attitudes, reactions and feelings of the wider American public. What is more, with a slight change of focus the book could easily pass as a tribute to Grace Abbott since Petit’s feminist intentions are rather obvious throughout.

3 Following an introduction, the book is divided chronologically into 6 more chapters focusing on the history of the literacy test debate that was introduced in the early 1890s and finally passed in 1917. In the first chapter Petit traces the formation of the IRL that endorsed the test using a eugenic framework for their argumentation. One of their main arguments, for instance, was that “if racially, inferior immigrants came in greater numbers...they could outbreed Anglo-Saxons, or, even worse, interbreed with them” (16). Even though the IRL’s attempts failed, the growing acceptance of eugenics in the twentieth century made their arguments stronger, as we see in the following chapter, “Parents and Progeny: the Dillingham Commission Report.” This second chapter also introduces Grace Abbott and discusses the active involvement of IPL in the debate explaining how for Abbott “the literacy test debate became a proxy debate about the role of women in the state” (33).

4 The next chapter, “Muscle, Miscegenation, and Manhood: The Literacy Test at The Height of the Progressive Era,” expands on the idea of a gendered approach to the issue of immigration by showing how for both the IRL and the AAFLN women existed only as objects and as potential mothers to the nation’s sons. Yet, despite the wide appeal of both the IRL’s and the AAFLN’s campaign, women, according to Petit, were gaining acceptance, and their role “as political actors was becoming harder to ignore” (83). Abbott herself, as a political actor, was becoming harder to ignore, as we see in the fourth chapter entitled “Practical Aid and Sympathetic Understanding: Grace Abbott’s Alternative to The Literacy Test.” The chapter, which is perhaps the strongest one in the book, pays homage to Abbott’s crusade both for immigrants’ acceptance and for female empowerment which challenged the assertions of white male power. More specifically, Abbott reinserted women in the center of stories while at the same time she promoted the idea of “sympathetic understanding” (81) which entailed a more “inclusive view of immigrants” (88) according to which both the government and the individuals should assist the immigrant’s transition to the community. Thus, Abbott became a fervent supporter of tolerance for immigrants and equality for women, continually underlying the interdependence between men and women, between foreign and native born.

5 This interdependence was severely tested during the Great War that unavoidably amplified feelings of xenophobia, as we see in the fifth chapter. Anti-immigrant feelings rose despite Roosevelt’s attempts for assimilation and gradually both the IPL’s and the AAFLN’s influence was severely undermined. The result of these transformations was the 1917 Immigration Act that finally turned the literacy test into a requirement for
newcomers. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act placed even greater restrictions on immigration by banning all immigrants from Asia and further limiting South Eastern immigrants. Most importantly, however, the Johnson-Reed Act “legitimized the IRL’s contention that the United States should be a “white man’s country, and others ---women and Anglo-Saxons--- should have no say in the nation’s identity” (127).

As Petit maintains in her concluding chapter, “The Legacy of the Progressive Era Literacy Test Debate,” the racial and gendered assumptions surrounding the literacy test in the past remained in play throughout the twentieth century and, I would add, are still very much part of the current agenda. An eloquent example is the 1994 Proposition 187 in California that aimed at banning illegal immigrants from public education and other social services. Of course, if race and gender are still important determinants on immigration policies, one can not help but be extra cautious in a supposedly human-rights sensitive world since as Petit rightly puts it, “in the process of debating the sort of men and women we want, we also reveal the sort of men and women we strive to be” (138).