Robin E. Jensen’s *Dirty Words* adds to the growing literature on the history of sex education in the United States. Jensen, who writes from a communication studies perspective, argues that understanding the different rhetorical strategies of Gilded Age and Progressive Era sex education promoters shows how sex instruction became integrated—in however controversial and fragmented a fashion—into public education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She is particularly interested in the ways that ambiguous language alternately advanced and impeded the causes of both pro- and anti-sex education speakers. Jensen states explicitly that she is delineating those rhetorical strategies in order to understand their deployment in present-day political arguments concerning the scope and funding of sex education.

*Dirty Words* examines five episodes in struggles over sex education. Jensen begins with Anthony Comstock’s work through the Comstock Law to curtail distribution of sex-related language in print, and Margaret Sanger’s attempts to evade that law. Jensen then turns to the efforts of Dr. Ella Flagg Young, the first female superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools, to incorporate scientific sexual hygiene lessons into the curriculum to promote the sexual health of low-income immigrant children in the 1913–1914 school year. Jensen follows that discussion with an examination of federal propaganda directed at World War I soldiers, which openly and explicitly promoted sexual health and hygiene for military fitness. She then looks at the efforts of another individual educator, Dr. Rachelle Slobodinsky Yarros, a member of the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) who advocated for sex education that particularly targeted urban, low-income, immigrant women in order to slow rates of venereal disease, prostitution, and pregnancy in Chicago. Jensen returns to the federal level in her analysis of poster campaigns created by the U.S. Health Service that specifically targeted women and African American men. She concludes with an analysis of the different ways that the rhetoric of Progressive Era sex educators foreshadowed the speech of modern-day sex educators, concluding that “discourse about public sex education in the contemporary United States is driven by ambiguous language and produces programs that fail to foster sexually healthy individuals” (p. 159).

Jensen clearly demonstrates that political and social context shapes speakers’ and writers’ decisions about
whether to use clear or ambiguous language. She also shows that speakers and writers decide on what language to use based on their perceptions of their audiences, perceptions which are informed by contemporary gender, class, and racial tropes. For example, the wartime propaganda that the ASHA and Committee on Training Camp Activities created for white soldiers was forthright regarding the possible effects of syphilis and gonorrhea, but depended on portraying white women in only two ways: either as prostitutes waiting to infect soldiers or as chaste innocents waiting for them back home, needing education only their future husbands could provide.

Many of the individuals and agencies Jensen discusses have been examined previously in histories of these eras. The relatively unknown and most intriguing voice in her study is that of Yarros, who as a Russian immigrant female doctor used complicated rhetorical techniques to speak to women of similar ethnic backgrounds, and to speak for them to the mostly white, native-born, and middle-class ASHA. Whether or not contemporary sex education promoters will find Dirty Words useful for their own work is open to question, as deliberately ambiguous speech promoting abstinence continues to be the most effective means of securing federal funding. Nonetheless, Jensen’s work complements existing scholarship on sex education, adding nuance to understandings of speakers’ and writers’ choices of words.

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Striking with the Ballot
Ohio Labor and the Populist Party
By Michael Pierce


Michael Pierce’s study of organized labor’s involvement in Ohio politics during the 1890s does not live up to its title’s promise – and a good thing, too. Readers imagining that they are embarking on a finely detailed examination of Populism’s intermeshing with workers in a state where Populism cut almost no swath at all will find, to their surprise, that they have come upon something far more significant: a guidepost to future scholars about the ways in which labor, in a time of trouble, found a new voice in urban politics.