

A CROP OF BOYS AND GIRLS

ROSENBERG, GABRIEL N. *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 304 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4753-4; \$55.00 (ebook), ISBN 978-0-8122-9189-6.

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At a 1929 agricultural conference, Miriam Birdseye, a nutrition specialist with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), displayed a fine calf and “pointed to its many signs of good health.” Then, as Gabriel N. Rosenberg tells us in *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America*, “as the calf was led away, its place was taken by three boys, 10, 12, and 14 years of age, dressed in track pants, with legs, feet and torso bare.” She judged the 4-H boy’s physique as she had that of the calf, pointing out that they exhibited the “‘different types of build and coloring’ found among white adolescents” (106). Moments like this one capture the central dynamic of Rosenberg’s fascinating account of the biopolitical goals and ideologies of the largest, longest-running rural youth organization in the United States—the 4-H. Here, the mission for well-bred livestock merged with the 4-H’s goals of (re)producing white rural youth who embodied notions of robust wholesomeness, health, and proper gender and sexual roles. Using the 4-H, operated by the USDA, Rosenberg argues that agrarian futurists associated with the state saw in rural youth the potential to combat rural degradation, promote ‘healthy’ bodies and gender relations, and integrate farm families into the modern political economy of U. S. agriculture. The story of the 4-H is set against a backdrop of the mechanization of American rural landscape as capital-intensive, mono-cropping agriculture guided by technocratic expertise aligned with industry-backed agribusiness emerged as the dominant model. Indeed, Rosenberg demonstrates how the USDA’s 4-H, and rural youth, were key to promoting high-modernist agriculture. Gabriel N. Rosenberg, who is currently an assistant professor in the Women’s Studies Department at Duke University, earned his PhD in history at Brown University. This provocative and ambitious book grew out of his award-winning dissertation.

The 4-H Harvest incorporates a history of the state with the history of sexuality—of land, of farming and animal husbandry, and of rural youth—to produce a sophisticated and intriguing monograph that will be of considerable interest to rural historians, historians of the American state, and historians of sexuality. Rosenberg offers an institutional history of the 4-H from its origins in rural youth clubs developed in the U.S. South at the beginning of the twentieth century to the forays into international 4-H projects organized in the global South in the postwar era. But the book is much more than an organizational history. He also provides a cultural reading of the agricultural political economy, while simultaneously producing a history of the American biopolitical state. Chapter 1 locates the origins of the 4-H in the fears of racial and rural degeneracy that comingled and intertwined in the Progressive Era, prompting agricultural leaders to develop youth clubs to “husband the nation’s future at a time of reproductive uncertainty”(24). These youth clubs came together under the 4-H umbrella and the yoke of the state when the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created the Cooperative Extension Service of the USDA, which administered the 4-H. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the particularly gendered vision of farm life proposed by the 4-H, demonstrating how boys were inculcated with a version of rural masculinity, while girls were taught the skills to be a “refined female person” (101). Chapters 4 and 5 detail how 4-H youth were drafted into service for the state, first aiding in the administration of New Deal programs like the Agricultural Adjustment Act, contributing to conservation and rural electrification projects, and then, during World War II, leading efforts in resource salvaging,

bond sales, food production, and health promotion. These efforts coincided with democratic educational programs that emphasized civic participation for white 4-H'ers along gendered lines, while proposing a vision of citizenship that emphasized duty, obligation, and fealty for black 4-H'ers. Rosenberg takes the reader beyond U.S. shores in Chapter 6, where he examines how the 4-H was incorporated into the United States' development goals in places such as Japan, Latin America, and Vietnam in the postwar era. Throughout the various moments of 4-H programming, youth were seen as the key site of state intervention. The state could shepherd a new social vision by marshalling the transformative potential of young people.

The most compelling part of Rosenberg's analysis is his biopolitical approach that links discourses and policies about the productive and reproductive capacities of land, animals, and rural youth and sets them at the center of the story to show the ways that land management, animal husbandry, and gender roles discursively overlapped in provocative ways that were central to the state's agricultural agenda. Boys and girls joined 4-H clubs in large numbers, and each club was informally segregated by sex according to type of projects undertaken by the members. Boys most commonly engaged in revenue-producing projects that emphasized scientific expertise and record keeping, debt-financed farming, and cooperation with local bankers and merchants in what Rosenberg terms relationships of "financial intimacy." Girls' projects, in contrast, focused on aesthetics, health, and consumption, which he claims redirected female rural labor toward domestic spaces while also disavowing female labor in the rural cash economy. This sex segregation and gendered programming became more pronounced throughout the 1920s, while at the same time the focus of the 4-H narrowed on the bodies of the 4-H'ers themselves. White 4-H'ers competed in health contests to showcase their bodies as the "perfect boy and girl" (104). The white rural youth of the 4-H become the state's crop, carefully cultivated with technocratic expertise that frequently took on a strongly eugenicist tone. In these contests, standardized human and animal bodies as well as crop products were frequently juxtaposed and the contests routinely "forged bestial connections among boys, cows, and corn." (184). The focus on producing a healthy crop of bodies in the 1920s shifted to emphasizing the production of healthy heterosexuality, marriages, and families. By the end of the 1930s, the 4-H routinely offered sex education, gave advice on marriage, and provided sites for the development of what one 4-H administrator called healthy "heterosexual relations" (136). The biopolitical objectives of the state largely ignored African American 4-H'ers, who numbered over 300,000 in the South by the 1940s but remained segregated in underfunded and underserved clubs. The promise of health, modernity, and social reproduction was exclusively cast as a white affair in the United States.

Rosenberg's examination of the history of the American biopolitical state challenges the binaries between public and private, and state and civil society that tend to structure analyses of the political economy (234). The 4-H became a space of everyday state building. Through partnerships in local communities and with national businesses, it became associated with rural progress, producing an organization viewed as both apolitical and inevitable, with the state disappearing into the landscape. Much of the energy of the state-building exercise was devoted to producing and normalizing particular visions of heterosexuality in rural America.