



Sex, Sin, and Science: A History of Syphilis in America (Healing Society: Disease, Medicine, and History)

John Parascandola

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Social and cultural factors, as well as medical ones, help to shape the way we understand and react to diseases. In the case of a disease associated with sex, social and cultural factors figure especially large in its history. For example, moral and religious views influence almost everything connected with sex, and that includes sexually transmitted diseases. Syphilis thus provides an excellent case study to help understand the history of disease in a broader human context. This book covers the history of syphilis in America, from Colonial times to the present, as well as laying bare the origins and spread of the disease in Europe.

Several themes explored in the book illustrate ways in which non-medical factors influence our views of a disease and our reaction to it. One of these themes is the tendency to focus blame for the spread of a disease on a particular group (e.g., women, blacks, sinners). The balance between protecting the rights of individuals and protecting the public health, in issues such as whether to quarantine the infected and whether to require mandatory testing for the disease, is another theme. A third theme is the persistent reluctance of many Americans to discuss venereal disease openly because it involves sex, a subject that we are often not comfortable talking about.

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