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Sexual Citizens – Book Review

Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan's *Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus* does an anthropological and sociological deep dive into how sexual assault occurs within in particularly the Columbia University setting. Hirsch, a Professor of Sociomedical Sciences with a diverse background in the anthropology of love, gender, sexuality, and public health, brings a qualitative, ethnographic lens to the project. Khan, a Professor of Sociology and American Studies, contributes an analytical framework rooted in inequality, gender, and institutional cultures. Together, the authors examine not only individual behaviors of college students but also the social structures and environments that shape sexual encounters among them.

To carry out their research, the authors collaborated with the SHIFT program (Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation), a large-scale project designed to measure sexual health, sexual assault, and sexual culture among college students."Our ethnographic research, conducted between the late summer of 2015 and January of 2017, consisted of over 150 interviews, about two hours each, eliciting young people's broad accounts of their lives and how sex fit into them. We combined these interviews with talking to students in groups, and having the SHIFT research team members spend time with students in dorms, the bus to the athletic

fields, fraternity basements, and spaces of worship," (Hirsch and Khan, 5). Through this approach, *Sexual Citizens* introduces key concepts such as sexual projects, sexual citizenship, and sexual geographies, which reframe how sexual encounters unfold within campus environments. By exploring these tropes, the authors shed light on why consent frequently breaks down and why the traditional educational approaches in school systems are failing young adults.

In this book review, I will be reflecting on how gender, race, and sexuality affect the conversation of sexual assault through the many biases being placed. "It isn't just the amount or type of data that makes us different. It's how we think about the problem. Our focus is on the social roots of sexual assault," (Hirsch and Khan, 5). This follows into the varying gendered, racial, and sexual power dynamics and the intersectional social fluidity of power that Hirsch and Khan brought up in chapter 9. After conducting my final thoughts on Sexual Citizens, I realized how general the book was when it came to the discussion of marginalized groups such as the queer and POC communities. Mainly, how they navigate dating as a queer person while making the best judgment of a partner. Gender and racial inequality automatically continue into the social product of a forced situation.

Hirsch and Khan begin by describing what they call the sexual assault ecosystem, a term that connects roles of relationships, power dynamics, physical space, alcohol, and peer networks in shaping students' sexual experiences. The authors argue that campus environments cause certain forms of vulnerability through the layout of dorms, fraternity houses, and party spaces, as well as through social norms around alcohol and sex.

Their first major concept, sexual projects: the reason why anyone might seek a particular sexual interaction or experience. Sexual projects seeking pleasure, building intimacy, exploring identity, or fitting into peer culture. Students often struggle to articulate their desires openly, following the ideology of "missing discourse of desire." Many students tend to rely on alcohol to feel "looser" or become emotionally distanced from their actions. "Some, ashamed of their desires or their bodies, drink heavily to escape their rational, deliberate, considered state to feel comfortable having sex. For others, alcohol silences confusion rather than shame; they're totally unclear on their projects, unable to answer, for themselves, the question "What is sex for?" Getting drunk is a good way to avoid thinking about it," (Hirsch and Khan, 223). These actions lead to students being unprepared to recognize both their own boundaries and possibly their surroundings as a whole.

The second concept, sexual citizenship, the acknowledgement of one's own right to sexual self-determination, recognizes the equivalent rights in others. Hirsch and Khan suggest that many college students have not yet developed a mature sense of sexual citizenship, especially in environments where sexual norms are inherited from peers rather than taught through formal education. Without the guidance of voicing their sexual desires, many students rely on assumptions or social cues instead of affirmative consent.

The third major concept, sexual geographies, is the way physical spaces shape sexual encounters. The authors argue that space is not merely a backdrop to sexual interaction but an active force, a "third character" in the sexual scene. Students' access to certain spaces (for example, upper-classmen dorms, fraternity houses, or apartments with private rooms) often mirrors their social status, resources, and social connections. These spaces result in power

dynamics and reveal vulnerability among younger students and marginalized groups who lack experience or control over where sexual encounters occur.

A significant portion of *Sexual Citizens* focuses on the role of alcohol in college social life. Hirsch and Khan critique the American cultural expectation that college should involve heavy drinking, which normalizes and even glamorizes binge drinking among young adults. The authors describe alcohol as a form of social risk, a behavior that is harmful yet socially normalized. This is especially true for privileged students who face fewer consequences because of their race, gender, or socioeconomic background. The authors highlight how policy emphasizes these dynamics. The 1984 Uniform Drinking Age Act, which raised the drinking age to 21, created a culture of underage drinking where private spaces such as fraternities, basements, and off-campus apartments became central hubs of alcohol consumption. These spaces are often unregulated, gender-imbalanced, and controlled by socially powerful groups, particularly white men from wealthier backgrounds. This power imbalance shows how in control these groups of students are and how at risk younger students are, even marginalized students who may lack the financial statuses to advocate for their safety. “Differences in institutional knowledge, maturity, self-confidence, and friendships deepened through time and shared experience further disadvantage younger students, with their structural inequalities amplified by the control of space on campus,” (Hirsch and Khan, 87). As the authors state, these dynamics influence inequalities among the upper-class privileged students.

Sexual Citizens tend to debate that the American education system fails to teach students how to have meaningful conversations about sex, desire, and boundaries. Consent, as Hirsch and Khan describe it, is “socially produced,” from cultural norms that shape expectations around sexual behavior. Students arrive at college with experience in showing their desires or

negotiating boundaries by indirect methods such as body language, signals, or assumptions. While some students practice affirmative consent, most interpret consent through a combination of social cues and spatial context. The "missing discourse of desire" plays a crucial role. Women are often socialized to be sexually passive, while men are encouraged to pursue sex actively. These dynamics enforce patriarchal norms that undermine mutual consent. Students who lack sexual experience may feel ashamed of their desires or confused about how to communicate them, leaving them vulnerable in intimate situations. Many students also struggle to process sexual assault afterward. Some fear social repercussions, while others battle internalized shame or confusion about whether their experience may be defined as assault. "Alcohol taxes could support revenue streams for sexual assault prevention, and especially for comprehensive school-based sex education," (Hirsch and Khan, 251).

While *Sexual Citizens* offers insight into college campus discussions on sexual assault and sexual knowledge, one area that could be elaborated on is the experiences of marginalized groups. Gender, race, and sexuality significantly influence how students navigate desire, safety, and social interactions.. Queer students, for example, often operate within alternative sexual geographies: online platforms, private dorm rooms, or LGBTQ+ student spaces. They may also face other challenges heteronormatives might not, such as risks of outing, homophobia, and limited safe spaces. These factors shape their sexual projects and influence how they negotiate consent and safety. Students of color also encounter unique challenges. Racial stereotypes such as hypersexualization, fetishization, or conforming to others to fit in certain social groups. These dynamics can undermine their sexual citizenship by making it more difficult for them to voice their boundaries or sexual desires. Because sexual citizenship depends on mutual recognition, marginalized students are at greater risk when others fail to acknowledge their sexual projects

and geographies. Addressing these dynamics would further push Hirsch and Khan's framework and broaden the topic of sexual assault for a more diverse group of student communities.

Sexual Citizens highlights the major components of sexual assault cases on campuses and how students cope with them afterwards. Through the concepts of sexual projects, sexual citizenship, and sexual geographies, Hirsch and Khan provide a framework that examines how social structures shape sexual encounters. Their analysis highlights the impact of physical space, alcohol culture, peer dynamics, and structural inequality on campus that affect sexual experiences. Although the book sometimes underemphasizes the experiences of queer students and students of color, its overall message remains impactful: preventing sexual assault requires an understanding of the social worlds in which sexual interactions occur.

Works Cited

Hirsch, Jennifer S., and Shamus Khan. *Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.