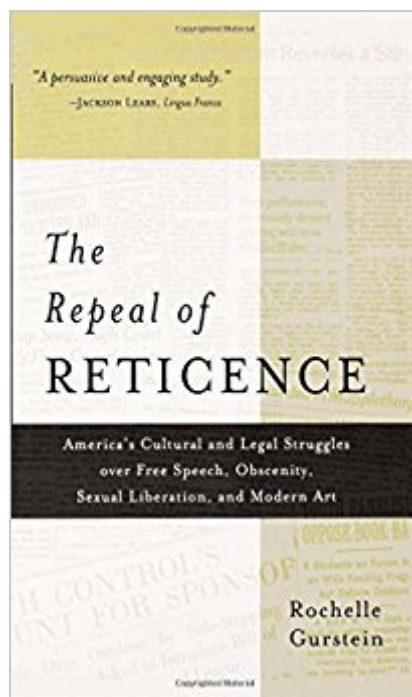


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# The Repeal Of Reticence: America's Cultural And Legal Struggles Over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, And Modern Art



## Synopsis

At a time when America's faculties of taste and judgment—along with the sense of the sacred and shameful—have become utterly vacant, Rochelle Gurstein's *The Repeal of Reticence* delivers an important and troubling warning. Covering landmark developments in America's modern culture and law, she charts the demise of what was dismissively called "gentility" in the face of First Amendment triumphs for journalists, sex educators, and novelists—from Margaret Sanger's advocacy of birth control to Judge Woolsey's celebrated defense of *Ulysses*. Weaving together a study of the legal debates over obscenity and free speech with a cultural study of the critics and writers who framed the issues, Gurstein offers a trenchant reconsideration of the sacred value of privacy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“The pollution of our moral environment has finally provoked a response comparable to *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's famous warning about the natural environment.”  
—Roger Shattuck, *The Wall Street Journal*

This striking study of America's battles over what we can decently say and do in public traces how and why principled debate about the character of our common world has been displaced by a new kind of public noise. Rochelle Gurstein offers a brilliant history of the arguments made for and

against the forces - invasive journalism, realist fiction, and sex reform - that altered public discourse between the late nineteenth century, when they first appeared, and the 1960s, when new controversies erupted about mass culture, avant-garde art, and sexual liberation. Now the public sphere is dominated by rights talk, by puritan-baiting, and by knee-jerk liberalism or illiberalism. Is this the best we can do? Gurstein gives a detailed account of how the "party of exposure" successfully opened American public life to matters that had once been hidden away in private, and studies the unexpected consequences of that victory. And she retrieves a way of thinking, wrongly discredited as "Victorian", that could in fact move us beyond our stalemates over what should and what should not be said or done in public. Once, Americans influenced by the "party of reticence" held that if personal matters were exposed to public scrutiny they risked becoming trivial or obscene; they thought that any indiscriminate display of private matters deformed standards of taste and judgment, lowered the tone of public conversation, and polluted public space. Ms. Gurstein's penetrating analysis suggests that we must reconsider these positions, and she establishes the vital connection between our legal-cultural history and current debates about obscenity, privacy, and issues of public decency.

Enjoyed this so much I bought back issues of *Raritan* to read more of her published work. This book does an historic analysis of publicity vs privacy in the US with it's roots in British culture. It placed the contemporary discussion over rights to privacy vs "public's right to know" in a context far more complex than the current discussion of "1st amendment anything goes or it is censorship blah blah" that usually passes for debate. It also enriched my thinking and reading on Appropriation and other forms of contemporary art. This started as her dissertation, so as a scholarly work it is a demanding read. I did wish for her to take on the debate in it's current state in more specific terms.

Nevertheless it is an excellent book I will return to. Here a quote from the intro: "Many modern liberals and radicals are now in the sorry predicament in which they can no longer discriminate between the essential circulation of ideas, which is the cornerstone of liberal democracy, and the commercial exploitation of news, entertainment, and sex as commodities..." Here is a quote from the second chapter: "While personal freedom and individuality are among the most cherished values of liberal democracy, they can become problematic when democracy is equated not with self-rule among equals, public deliberation and debate, or open elections, but with equality of social condition, with the imposition of mass standards of taste, or with the display of relaxed, casual manners." Often media outlets justify publishing something on the grounds that it sold well, or that many people read it. That tells us nothing about the first amendment or public debate in a republic. Instead it tells us

that the consumer capitalist values are determining what is acceptable in the public realm. Those are not the values of, as she points out, a democratic society. Very rich ideas. Highly recommended.

a blueprint to our current cultural experience. An excellent sociological analysis.

It's very difficult to understand attitudes from the past, like what "privacy" meant a century ago. I was fascinated by Gurstein's analysis.

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