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INTIMATE MATTERS

A HISTORY OF SEXUALITY IN AMERICA

JOHN D'EMILIO AND
ESTELLE B. FREEDMAN

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Introduction

In olden days a glimpse of stocking,
Was looked on as something shocking,
But now, God knows,
Anything goes.

Anything Goes, 1934

WHEN Cole Porter wrote these lyrics more than half a century ago, he was reflecting the common-sense perceptions of denizens of New York's sophisticated nightlife. Freud, flappers, petting parties, Hollywood scandals, even the crusade of Margaret Sanger for easy access to birth control, all pointed to the same conclusion: the sexual mores of the times seemed infinitely freer than those of bygone eras. H. L. Mencken's stereotypical Puritan, tortured by "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy," was finally, and firmly, buried. The Puritans' straight-laced prudish successors, the Victorians, so uncomfortable with the erotic that they hid the nakedness of classical statuary beneath fig leaves, had also passed from the scene. In their place were the liberated moderns of the post–World War I decades, the young men and women who danced the Charleston, discarded the heavy corsets and starched collars of their parents' generation, enjoyed double entendres, and appreciated the pleasures of intimate, erotic companionship. From the perspective of Cole Porter's audience, the history of sexuality in America was a story of progress triumphant. The ignorance and suffering caused by past repression had given way to the freedom and expressiveness of an enlightened present.

As readers of this volume will quickly discover, *Intimate Matters* recounts a very different kind of story. The history of American sexuality told in the following pages is not one of progress from repression to liberation, ignorance to wisdom, or enslavement to freedom. Indeed, the poles of freedom and repression are not the organizing principles of our work. Rather, we have constructed an interpretation of American sexual history that shows how, over the last three and a half centuries, the meaning and place of sexuality in American life have changed: from a family-centered, reproductive sexual system in the colonial era; to a romantic, intimate, yet conflicted sexuality in

nineteenth-century marriage; to a commercialized sexuality in the modern period, when sexual relations are expected to provide personal identity and individual happiness, apart from reproduction. We argue, in short, that sexuality has been continually reshaped by the changing nature of the economy, the family, and politics.

We have been prompted to write this book, and to depart from past orthodoxy about the contours of America's sexual past, in part because of our own historical experiences. Coming of age during the 1960s, we witnessed firsthand the resurgence of feminism as well as the rise of gay liberation. Both movements focused national attention on issues of sexuality, sharply challenging common assumptions about the "naturalness" of gender and sexuality. Partisans of each cause argued that the cultural construction of gender and sexuality served political ends, namely, to keep women and homosexuals subordinate to men and heterosexuals. Their analysis raised intriguing possibilities: if what these movements claimed was true for the present, then the study of the past might offer insight into how contemporary sexuality took shape and how sexuality as an expression of power had changed over time.

Simultaneously, the academic world we entered in the 1970s offered a favorable intellectual climate for historians interested in the study of sexuality. In the first half of the twentieth century, the study of sexuality had taken place largely within the fields of medicine, psychology, and biology, as typified by the work of Freud and Kinsey. Scholars who concentrated on individual bodies and psyches tended to ask questions about whether sexual behavior was normal or pathological. After World War II, building on the work of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, social scientists gradually recast sexuality as a subject embedded in social structure and cultural forms. Authors such as John Gagnon and William Simon explored the relationship between sexuality and other forms of social interaction, adding a measure of cultural relativism to the study of sex.[1]

Meanwhile, a renewal of interest in social history emphasized the study of everyday life, or the private side of history. Borrowing methods from the social sciences, historians explored intimate aspects of individual, family, and community life, including birth, adolescence, courtship, marriage, divorce, and death. By the 1970s, the resurgence of feminism and social history combined in the burgeoning field of women's history, an academic endeavor with strong ties to a political movement for gender equality. Feminist historians helped spark a moderate explosion of literature about sexuality in the past. Their insight that sexual relations are a significant source of inequality between men and women has made an understanding of sexual history critical to the larger project of social history. Together, historians of the family and of women introduced new intellectual paradigms and historical sources to expand our

understanding of the sexual behavior, values, and politics of Americans in the past. By now, the field of sexual history has grown so large that only specialists can keep up with all the monographs and articles written each year on topics such as abortion, contraception, prostitution, courtship, venereal disease, and homosexuality.[2]

This new literature on the history of sexuality has begun to challenge older, stereotypical views of Puritans, Victorians, and liberated moderns. For one, Puritans and Victorians have been distinguished from each other more clearly. As Edmund Morgan pointed out over forty years ago, Puritans were more interested in sex and more egalitarian about male and female sexual expression than we previously thought. More recently, scholars have revised the older picture of the Victorians. One school argues that repression characterized official ideology, but just beneath the surface of society lay a teeming, sexually active underground. Another argument holds that repression did not characterize even the ideology. Rather, in the view of scholars such as Carl Degler and Peter Gay, middle-class Victorians accepted sexual pleasures, as long as they occurred within the sanctuary of marriage. Finally, one can interpret the work of Michel Foucault to suggest that Victorians were actually obsessed with sexuality, elaborating on its meanings and creating new categories of sexual deviance and identity. For the modern period, new research refines the notion of a sexual revolution. Some scholars push its origins backward in time, before the 1960s or even the 1920s; others question whether a sexual revolution ever occurred, arguing that modern sexual ideas simply restated nineteenth-century concerns about family stability. In this view, birth control, for instance, did not challenge the existing order but merely gained acceptance as a means to strengthen marriage through family planning.[3]

The above description does, admittedly, oversimplify the new sexual history, some of which attempts to construct entirely new frameworks of understanding. Foucault rejected what he called the "repressive hypothesis" as the organizing principle for the study of sexuality in the West since the seventeenth century, and instead viewed sex as an expression of complex, dynamic power relations in society. Some feminist historians, such as Linda Gordon, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Judith Walkowitz, who begin with gender as a primary category of social analysis, have understood sexuality in terms of shifting power relationships between men and women and have explored as well the symbolic role of sexuality in the historical creation of gender.[4]

Despite these and other exceptions, it seems to us that implicit in much of the new history of sexuality is the same underlying set of questions that created the older stereotypes with which we began: Was sexuality repressed or not? Did Puritans and Victorians enjoy sexual relations? Has society made sexual progress in the last three hundred years? One problem with this approach is

that questions of repression and enjoyment are themselves present-minded. They rest upon a contemporary belief—based perhaps on popular conceptions of Freudian thought—that physical sexual pleasure, or satisfaction, is critical to human happiness. They often also assume that sexuality is a fixed essence that resides within the individual and, unless interfered with by society, reaches its proper, fullest expression. This essentialist framework overlooks the different meanings that sexuality may have had in the past and the way it has been historically constructed. It also ignores the many relationships sexuality has to other, nonsexual aspects of culture, especially its grounding in economic change and its role in maintaining systems of social inequality. A second problem in the new literature on sexual history is that most studies thus far have been highly specialized, revising only a small piece of the total picture. Thus we know a good deal about the legal history of abortion, the political movement for birth control, the demography of marital fertility, and the changing content of marital advice manuals, but we have no coherent picture of how these parts relate to each other and how the whole relates to the larger story of American history.

For these reasons, we have attempted to translate this new body of scholarly work into a synthetic, interpretive narrative that will, we hope, engage the interest of both scholars and general readers. Our discussion draws on our own research, but also relies heavily on the labors of many colleagues in social history, as a glance at the endnotes will quickly reveal. The sources upon which we have built our interpretation are diverse, ranging from medical texts and social-scientific surveys to personal memoirs, legal cases, and popular music. Since firsthand accounts of past sexual experience are rare, we draw heavily upon the few sources that are available, indicating when we believe these sources are representative and when they are atypical. We have tried to be as inclusive as possible, presenting the history of sexuality with an awareness of gender, class, racial, ethnic, and regional variations. Yet we cannot fully escape the limits of the field, which has tended to tell us more about women than about men (one of the few areas of history where this is true), more about whites than about other racial groups, and more about the native-born middle class than about the experiences of immigrants and the working class.

Moreover, some of the sources that we and other historians have employed—court records, vice investigations by reformers, medical cases, and survey research—represent members of the white middle class peering into or exercising control over the experiences of others. In mining these materials for clues about the past, we have taken care to separate content from judgments, a risky business to say the least. We are also aware that because of the strong tradition of public reticence about sexuality in our culture, many of the sources that may eventually enlighten us have yet to be used by scholars. In some cases,

sexual content has been censored from published or unpublished personal papers by family members who wish to protect the privacy of their ancestors. In other cases, scholars have simply overlooked the clues to sexual history that exist in sources that are available because of lack of interest in the subject.[5] We hope that one effect of this volume will be to help unearth both kinds of untapped sources by encouraging the recognition that sexuality is both an intriguing and a legitimate subject of historical inquiry.

In organizing our research, we immediately found ourselves dissatisfied with one distinction drawn in some of the literature—the opposition between sexual ideology ("what ought to be") and sexual behavior ("what was"). It seems to us that this dichotomy assumes too simple and direct a relationship, as well as an opposition, between what individuals believe and what they do. It also can obscure important topics of inquiry. To avoid these problems, we have chosen to explore three subjects that most concern us, each of which incorporates evidence of behavior and ideology: sexual meanings, sexual regulation, and sexual politics. In the chapters that follow we show how each of these has changed over the course of our history. Here we want to explain briefly what questions we ask about each and the direction our overall interpretation takes.

First, by looking at sexual meanings, we make historical the problem of defining sexuality. Sexuality has been associated with a range of human activities and values: the procreation of children, the attainment of physical pleasure (eroticism), recreation or sport, personal intimacy, spiritual transcendence, or power over others. These and other meanings coexist throughout the period of this study, but certain associations prevail at different times, depending on the larger social forces that shape an era. To understand the meanings that sexuality has at any given time, we ask a number of historical questions. What was the language of sexuality—were the terms and metaphors religious, medical, romantic, or commercial? In what kinds of sources did references to sexuality appear—secular or sacred, personal or public? In which social institutions was sexual experience typically located—marriage, the market, the media?

Our chapters articulate many answers to these questions, but, in brief, we argue that the dominant meaning of sexuality has changed during our history from a primary association with reproduction within families to a primary association with emotional intimacy and physical pleasure for individuals. In the colonial era, the dominant language of sexuality was reproductive, and the appropriate locus for sexual activity was in courtship or marriage. In the nineteenth century, an emergent middle class emphasized sexuality as a means to personal intimacy, at the same time that it reduced sharply its rate of reproduction. Gradually, commercial growth brought sex into the market-

place, especially for working-class women and for men of all classes. By the twentieth century, when the individual had replaced the family as the primary economic unit, the tie between sexuality and reproduction weakened further. Influenced by psychology as well as by the growing power of the media, both men and women began to adopt personal happiness as a primary goal of sexual relations.

Various groups within society experienced these changes in different ways. The separation of sexuality and reproduction, and the gradual emergence of individual pleasure as a primary sexual goal, had divergent meanings for each gender. Women remained more closely linked to reproduction, while men experienced greater sexual autonomy apart from the family and simultaneously greater responsibility for sexual self-control. In addition, the concept of "dominant sexual meanings" usually refers to the beliefs and experiences of members of the white middle class. Their beliefs were dominant not only in the sense of being widespread, through an expanding published discourse, but also because sexual meanings enforced emerging racial and class hierarchies. Thus European settlers attempted to justify their superiority over native peoples in terms of a need to civilize sexual savages, and whites imposed on blacks an image of a beastlike sexuality to justify both the rape of black women and the lynching of black men. Similarly, portrayals of workers as promiscuous and depraved helped define middle-class moral superiority in the nineteenth century.

Although images of sexual depravity served to strengthen class and race hierarchies, there were also real cultural differences between white middle-class Americans and workers, immigrants, and blacks. Afro-American culture was in fact more tolerant of sexual relations outside of marriage, even as blacks valued long-term monogamous unions. In addition, sexual meanings changed at a varying pace. Immigrant and black reproductive rates fell later than those of native-born whites. Whatever the differences in sexual values and the timing of change, however, the dominant sexual meanings—those emanating from the white middle class—strongly affected the ways that other groups were seen and, indeed, saw themselves.

The second concern of this book is how systems of sexual regulation have changed. By sexual regulation we mean the way a society channels sexuality into acceptable social institutions. Who has authority for determining what is normal and what is deviant: clergy, doctors, legislators? By what means have social rules about sexual behavior been enforced: church discipline, courts, external peer pressure, internalized control?

When we began our study, we suspected that the agents of sexual regulation had changed from the church in the seventeenth century, to the medical profession in the nineteenth century, to the state in the twentieth century.

After surveying the historical evidence, we discovered a more complex pattern. In early America, a unitary system of sexual regulation that involved family, church, and state rested upon a consensus about the primacy of familial, reproductive sexuality. Those who challenged the reproductive norm could expect severe, often public, punishment and the pressure to repent. But those who confessed and sincerely repented were welcomed back as members in good standing of church and state. From the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, an era of extensive economic and geographic mobility, the role of both the church and the state in sexual regulation diminished. This process left the family—which increasingly meant women—with the task of creating self-regulating sexual beings, both male and female. The medical profession played an important role in fostering the objective of sexual self-control, as did voluntary associations that hoped to reform sexuality along with other aspects of American culture. In the late nineteenth century, each of these groups—women, doctors, and sexual reformers—argued that the state ought to play a larger role in regulating personal morality. The twentieth century has witnessed an intense conflict over the ways in which state power can appropriately be used to do so.[6] At the same time, modern American culture has regulated sexuality in both overt and subtle ways. The media, for instance, are saturated with sexual images that promise free choice but in fact channel individuals toward particular visions of sexual happiness, often closely linked to the purchase of consumer products.

Systems of sexual regulation, like sexual meanings, have correlated strongly with other forms of social regulation, especially those related to race, class, and gender. Women's role in sexual regulation has varied throughout our history, from responsibility shared with men in preindustrial communities, to a specialized female moral authority in the nineteenth-century middle class, to a weakened role in formal sexual regulation in the twentieth century. Even as middle-class reformers have claimed authority over sexual regulation, members of black and immigrant communities have created unique internal systems of morality, as in the case of the black church, or of immigrants maintaining preindustrial patterns of community control over sexual behavior. However diverse the systems of sexual regulation, white, middle-class, and Protestant authorities have tended to maintain formal authority over sexual morality, whether through the control of religion, medicine, or law.

The third topic we address, sexual politics, relates closely to the changing nature of sexual regulation, especially the competition between interest groups that attempt to reshape dominant sexual meanings. In the nineteenth century, for example, women led movements for moral reform and social purity, wishing to impose a single standard of morality (chastity before marriage and fidelity within it) upon both men and women; doctors attempted to criminalize

abortion; anarchist free lovers opposed all state intervention in personal and sexual relations. Censors like Anthony Comstock—the chief proponent of the laws to limit circulation of "obscene" materials, such as birth control information, through the postal service—wanted to use the power of the state to limit public sexual discussion. Since the mid-twentieth century, sexual politics have emerged on a national scale, not only from the forces of sexual "liberation"—namely, the feminist and gay-rights movements—but also from the conservative politics of the New Right's Moral Majority.

We have found that three critical patterns recur in the history of sexual politics in America. First, political movements that attempt to change sexual ideas and practices seem to flourish when an older system is in disarray and a new one forming. For example, in the nineteenth century, the reproductive system of the colonial period fragmented as sexual meanings moved simultaneously into the private realm of personal identity and the public realm of commerce, exacerbating the gap between male and female, working-class and middle-class values. In response to these changes, women, doctors, free lovers, and censors began to battle over the meaning and regulation of sexuality. Again, by the 1960s, the so-called sexual revolution brought to the surface and tried to extend beyond marriage long-term shifts toward the acceptance of sexual pleasure as a critical aspect of personal happiness, a trend we refer to as sexual liberalism. These changes set the stage for political struggles over sexuality that pitted various liberationists against moral conservatives. In each period, some groups tried to extend a newly emergent system further, perhaps to its logical extreme. Thus the anarchist free lovers of the nineteenth century took romantic ideas about the importance of love in sexual relations to the extreme of substituting love, rather than marriage, as the precondition for sex. Other groups, however, resisted the new system and attempted to restore elements of an earlier one. Thus the contemporary New Right holds up an older model of familial, reproductive sexuality in an era when sexuality is no longer limited to the family.

A second pattern of sexual politics reveals a consistent relationship to inequalities of gender. Even more than its relationship to class and race, sexual politics arise from efforts of male authorities to define female sexuality and of women either to resist such definition or to counter through efforts to reshape sexual values and practices. The attitudes of the predominantly male medical profession toward female sexuality, as well as the organization of women in moral reform, social purity, anti-prostitution, and later movements against sexual violence all point to ways in which sexuality has been a primary battlefield in a struggle to insure or combat gender inequality.

Third, the politics of sexuality responds to both real and symbolic issues. Sex is easily attached to other social concerns, especially those related to

impurity and disorder, and it often evokes highly irrational responses. The crusade against commercialized prostitution illustrates this process. It attacked a real social problem that had serious consequences for women's lives and for public health. At the same time, opponents of prostitution tapped deeper symbolic associations when, in order to justify nativist fears of immigrants, they claimed that foreign women filled the ranks of prostitutes. Similarly, when southern whites lynched black men for raping white women, the charges usually stemmed not from any sexual assault, but because of economic and political competition between blacks and whites. Yet the highly charged issue of interracial sex proved very effective in establishing a new method of racial control—the fear of lynching—in the turn-of-the-century South. Similarly, rape, homosexuality, and sexually transmitted diseases have all become symbolic, as well as real, targets of political movements, especially at times of particular stress in American society.

In the following pages, the history of sexual meanings, regulation, and politics are placed within a chronological framework that reflects main currents of American social and economic life. We attempt to periodize sexual history, yet it is important to keep in mind that we are not trying to draw strict chronological boundaries, nor do we wish to suggest that a new sexual system replaces an older one at a given moment. Rather, the process is one of layering, in which certain motifs dominate sexual discourse in a given era; later they remain influential but are joined and gradually overwhelmed when another set of concerns takes precedence.

In Part I, "The Reproductive Matrix," we explore the centrality of marriage and procreation to the preindustrial sexual system. The first chapter begins with cultural diversity during the era of settlement, when English men and women confronted native Americans and the wilderness, and when unique sexual patterns characterized the northern and southern colonies. In Chapter 2, by exploring both the life cycle of the family and the regulation of deviance, we explain how the family-centered sexual system was recreated throughout the mature North American colonies. The seeds of change during the era of commercial growth and revolutionary politics in the eighteenth century, the subject of Chapter 3, provides a hint of the ways sexual life would later expand beyond the familial system of the colonial era.

The title of Part II, "Divided Passions," refers to the fragmentation of sexual meanings along lines of gender, race, and class, as well as to the split between the intensely private passions of the middle-class family and the increasingly public world of commercialized sex. Chapter 4 looks at the family, where control over fertility coexisted with the middle-class idealization of marital sex as a means to personal intimacy. It emphasizes the difficulties of

achieving this new ideal, given the unique social worlds occupied by men and women. Racial diversity and the role of sexuality in maintaining white supremacy is treated separately in Chapter 5, while Chapter 6 looks closely at the expanding opportunities for sex outside the family—in utopian communities, same-sex relationships, and the urban world of sexual commerce. In Chapter 7 we analyze political responses to the movement of sexuality outside the family and into the marketplace, including cooperation and conflict between clergy, women, doctors, and radical free lovers.

In Part III, "Toward a New Sexual Order," we examine the transition to recognizably modern forms of sexuality. Chapter 8 explores the challenges to middle-class respectability posed by conflicting male and female values within marriage, innovations in the sexual marketplace, new forms of intimate relationships among college-educated women, and the public sexuality of working-class youth. In the early twentieth century these tensions exploded into the political sphere, with movements against venereal disease, prostitution, and interracial sex—the subjects of Chapter 9. In Chapter 10, we present the ideas and the movements, including Freudianism and the birth control crusade of Margaret Sanger, that most clearly rejected nineteenth-century middle-class assumptions and that consequently helped usher in a new sexual era.

The final part, "The Rise and Fall of Sexual Liberalism," describes the dominant sexual system of the mid-twentieth century and the recent assaults upon it. Chapter 11 analyzes the contraceptive revolution, the patterns of sexual expressiveness that evolved among youth, and conjugal experience in an era that emphasized the importance of sexual satisfaction for a happy marriage. In Chapter 12, we look at new sexual boundaries, namely, the expansion of heterosexuality in the marketplace and the public realm, intensified penalties against homosexual behavior, and the reshaping of sexuality as a mechanism of racial control. Chapter 13 examines various "sexual revolutions"—those of urban middle-class singles, radical youth, feminists, and gay liberationists—and the impact that they had on sexual liberalism. Chapter 14 presents the dimensions of change from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, a period that saw a major shift in patterns of sexual behavior and values. The final chapter assesses the political reaction spawned by rapid change as well as the rethinking provoked by the AIDS epidemic.

At the very least, we want the drama and novelty of the story that follows to capture the interest of our readers. But we also hope to reveal through our interpretation the ways that historical forces continually reshape our sexuality, and the ways that individuals and groups have acted to alter the contours of sexual history.

Contents

Illustrations appear following pages 108 and 274.

PART I

THE REPRODUCTIVE MATRIX, 1600–1800