



Sex in the Heartland

BETH BAILEY

Sex in the Heartland



Beth Bailey

Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

Copyright © 1999 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Second printing, 2002

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2002

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bailey, Beth L., 1957–

Sex in the heartland / Beth Bailey.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-674-80278-0 (cloth)

ISBN 0-674-00974-6 (pbk.)

1. Sex customs—Middle West—History—20th century. 2. Sex
ethics—Middle West—History—20th century. I. Title.

HQ18.M53B35 1999

306.7'0977—dc21 99-21754

Sex in the Heartland

For David

There is a great crowded bluff
in Lawrence Kansas
that looks a long way
into the astonished heart
of America.

—*Lawrence Ferlinghetti*

Contents

Introduction

1	Before the Revolution	13
2	Sex and the Therapeutic Culture	45
3	Responsible Sex	75
4	Prescribing the Pill	105
5	Revolutionary Intent	136
6	Sex as a Weapon	154
7	Sex and Liberation	175
8	Remaking Sex	200
	Epilogue	216
	Abbreviations	221
	Notes	223
	Credits	251
	Acknowledgments	253
	Index	257

Introduction

Television current events programs often walk a fine line between chronicling trends and creating them, and the producers of the popular TV show *Open End* were probably doing both when they scheduled a show entitled “The Sexual Revolution in America.” It was 1963. John F. Kennedy was president. Going steady was the fad in high school. Female college students had curfews; many student handbooks included some reference to setting sexual “standards.” The Pill had been available as a contraceptive for almost three years, but few doctors would prescribe it to unmarried women. People married young: more than half the women who got married that year were under the age of 21. Homosexuality was officially designated a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association. In fact, a televised discussion of sex was beyond the limits of acceptability: panicked by the explosive topic, the New York station responsible for *Open End* canceled the sexual revolution show and withdrew it from national distribution.¹ What sexual revolution?

In hindsight, the sexual climate of the early 1960s appears repressed and repressive. Most of the events we identify with the sexual revolution lay in the future, and in the early fall of 1963 no one imagined the tumultuous years to come. Nonetheless, well before the “Summer of Love” or the gay liberation movement or even the bestselling sex manual *The Joy of Sex*, Americans were already talking about sexual revolution. They looked to *Playboy* magazine and its imitators, to the sexual claims of self-defined outsiders like the Beat poets, to skyrocketing rates of juvenile delinquency,

Sex in the Heartland

to the statistics offered a decade earlier in Alfred Kinsey's studies of human sexuality. Fifty percent of American women had had premarital intercourse. Thirty-seven percent of American men had participated in some sort of homosexual activity. Revolution. To most Americans in 1963, when combined with "sex," the word "revolution" signaled danger.

2

From the early 1960s on, Americans used a metaphor of revolution to make sense of changes in the nation's sexual landscape. "Revolution" provided the framework for understanding conflicts over sex; "revolution" was the context within which change occurred. Because of this overarching context, many Americans amplified the importance of what they might otherwise have understood as minor events or as results of long-term, gradual trends. The Pill, men with long hair, and student protests against curfews on college campuses all took on a significance as part of "the sexual revolution" that each lacked on its own. In a climate of revolution, it seemed that a great deal was at stake.

Those who watched this "revolution" with varying degrees of alarm were not all wrong in seeing it as such. Things were changing, and by the late 1960s there were many in America who embraced revolution, sexual and otherwise. But in the eyes of the nation the metaphor of revolution lent coherence to impulses that were, in fact, often in tension with one another. Young women's insistence that they were responsible enough not to need curfews at college was quite different from the politics of pleasure celebrated by parts of the 1960s "counterculture," for example, and the monogamous sexual relationship of an unmarried couple was not quite the same thing as "free love." In subsuming a diverse set of changes under the term "revolution," Americans conflated changes that had very different origins, intentions, and outcomes.

We have inherited the term "sexual revolution" from those who first coined it in the 1960s, and in adopting their phrase we have perpetuated some of the confusions of that era. We continue to hear echoes of danger in the word "revolution." We continue to conflate very different impulses and outcomes. This received language of revolution has made it much more difficult for us to understand and discuss the roles and meanings of sex in contemporary America.

In order to make sense of "the sexual revolution," we need to sort out its various strands. They do not all have to stand—or fall—together. Too many of those who raise their voices in current debates about sex in our society see in the sexual revolution only the excesses and extremes of a

violent and difficult era. In a simpler time one might have said they risked throwing the baby out with the bath water. By offering a history of America's recent struggles over sex, showing what people were rebelling against and why and how things changed, I hope to make possible more complex judgments about the various legacies of revolution. Yes, some of it was excessive, and some of it was bad. But a great deal of it was good and necessary, and those portions made our society more just and perhaps even more moral.

Of course, good and bad, when it comes to sex in contemporary America, are not universal concepts. For those who believe homosexuality is a sin and premarital intercourse a moral crime, this book offers no common ground. But those who see the sexual revolution as the triumph of irresponsible and exploitative sexuality over decent, morally grounded, and responsible sexual behavior may discover new and useful perspectives in this history. And those who claim the radical nature of the revolution may be surprised by just how deep-seated and *mainstream* the origins of many of those revolutionary changes really were.

Despite the way it is often portrayed in contemporary diatribes and debates, the sexual revolution was not created by a set of radicals on the fringe of American society and then imposed on the rest of the nation. It was forged in America's heartland as well, shaped not only by committed revolutionaries but by people who had absolutely no intention of abetting a revolution in sex. Adding the heartland to our stories of the sexual revolution changes its meaning: this revolution was thoroughly *of America*.

For that reason, this book is not about the cosmopolitan enclaves and radical gatherings on the east and west coasts. It is also not the tale of larger-than-life actors—Hefner, Kinsey, Pincus, et al.—who too often stand in for the sexual revolution in our histories. These “heroes of the revolution” and its most committed activists are indeed critical actors. America's sexual revolution would have looked much different without *Playboy*, the Kinsey reports, or the Pill; it might not have happened in any recognizable form without the Summer of Love or the Stonewall Inn rebellion (which helped to coalesce a gay liberation movement) or the flood of writings that poured out of the radical communities in New York and California.

However, if the challenges to America's sexual codes had taken place only in the streets of Greenwich Village and the Haight-Ashbury, there

Sex in the Heartland

4

would have been no revolution. The noise and ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s would have been just another episode in which a small but highly visible group—like the bohemians of the early twentieth century or the Beats of more recent provenance—rejected the mores of a society its members found stifling. They might have claimed influence and importance greatly disproportionate to their numbers, but they would not have constituted a revolution.

To go beyond the usual suspects and demonstrate how widespread and fundamental were the changes we call the sexual revolution, where better to look than Kansas? Thanks to *The Wizard of Oz*, Kansas is the state that most consistently represents the antithesis of bicoastal sophistication. It is the ultimate provincial place, the ultimate not-New York. “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore,” Dorothy says as she opens her eyes to the Technicolor world of Oz. As Paul Nathanson puts it in *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America*, “Kansas lies precisely at the geographical center of the country: it is midway between East and West, North and South. This region symbolically transcends time, space, history, and geography. It is (to use a metaphor from *The Wizard*) the eye of the storm, the calm center around which national life swirls. This landscape belongs to none of the major sources of power.”² Kansas is the quintessential heartland state.

It was in the town of Lawrence that the battles of the sexual revolution were most widely engaged and most visible to the citizens of the rest of Kansas. Lawrence is home to the University of Kansas, which, like other major state universities, has been an engine of change in its state and region for much of the twentieth century. Throughout its history, Lawrence has often been somewhat out of step with much of the rest of the state.

Lawrence, however, is very much a part of Kansas. While the town’s economy is largely dependent on the university, the university is funded by the state legislature at the taxpayers’ pleasure and filled with the sons and daughters of the state’s voters. Even though some of the town’s residents have wished it possible at times, Lawrence could never ignore the state to which it belongs. And despite the centrality of the university, the town of Lawrence has always been much more than KU. Town-gown conflicts have a long history in Lawrence, as do tensions among the various other groups that make up the population. Many of Lawrence’s people have not “belonged” to the university, and in the decades following World War II these citizens ranged from members of the prosperous business community to

farm families on the town's outskirts to a large number of people who had not completed a high school education, much less attended college. While Lawrence is not a "typical" Kansas town, facts of geography, population, politics, economy, and culture link it firmly to Kansas, and to the rest of America's heartland.³

Lawrence's sexual revolution is not representative of America's experience, but that is not because it lies in the heartland. Lawrence's revolution is specific to itself—as were the revolutions lived in San Francisco, New York, Atlanta, Ann Arbor, and Albuquerque. Different parts of the revolution flourished in different places. Lawrence, for example, never developed the large-scale singles-bar scene that was so important in some of the nation's big cities. It never had a gay bathhouse culture or a district full of adult bookstores and theaters showing X-rated films. And neither did the towns and suburbs and even urban neighborhoods in which the vast majority of Americans lived. Throughout America, people were affected by what was happening on a national scale, whether structural changes that touched their lives directly or simply awareness of geographically distant events through the omnipresent mass media. Nonetheless, these national events played themselves out on the local level in ways profoundly influenced by the specifics of local situations. While a study of one place does not provide a representative model of "the revolution," it does move us past policies and polemics to the texture of change in Americans' lives. By looking beyond the famous personalities, the rhetoric of national organizations, and the constructions of the media to the experiences of one midwestern university town embedded in an increasingly potent national culture, we can learn much about the social and cultural changes we call the sexual revolution.

—

To claim the sexual revolution for the heartland as well as for the radical fringes matters because our notions about what the sexual revolution was—the stories we tell, the histories we make—are tools in our continuing negotiations over the shape of our society.⁴ Portraying the sexual revolution as the product of a few extremists, somehow unattached to the world the rest of us lived in, is a political act. Such portrayals obscure the true sources of social change and often work to marginalize and discredit these past challenges to the sexual status quo. This version of the sexual revolution is also historically inaccurate.⁴ The set of changes we call the sexual revolution

Sex in the Heartland

was thoroughly part of American culture, born of widely shared values and beliefs and of major transformations in the structure of American society. For while the revolution was built of purposeful assertions and acts, often on the part of self-proclaimed outsiders, it was possible because of the recasting of American society during and after World War II.

6

In those years the nationalizing forces of the federal government, the market, consumer society, the mass media, and large institutions, both public and private, undermined the ability of local elites to control the boundaries of their communities. The opportunities for mobility—both social and geographic—presented by a strong economy, by universal high school education and the explosion of attendance at colleges and universities, and by new legal protections of civil rights, changed the face of America. Radio, television, and Hollywood films offered people knowledge of a wider world, and that knowledge sometimes challenged local beliefs and local hierarchies. The increasing power and presence of national institutions and national culture upset “traditional” ways—be it Jim Crow or sexual mores—and created openings for contestation and change.

The emerging national culture was not an outside force imposed on authentic, local cultures. It was created as a national project, as who we are became determined less by our geographic communities and more by other sorts of identities. Lawrence’s people were residents of Kansas, but that was only one facet of more complex identities derived, at least partially, from cultural categories and institutions of national scope. Medical doctors, professors, university administrators, public health officials—all had professional identities that transcended the local, and all claimed authority to act or speak based on professional credentials that were nationally constituted and recognized. The people of Lawrence participated in national professional societies and in local branches of national organizations. None of these organizations—the American Medical Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, Zero Population Growth, Campus Crusade for Christ, the Episcopal Church, Students for a Democratic Society, the Minutemen—was born in Lawrence, but all were active there.

University and high school students also claimed identities that transcended the local—as members of the nationally validated category of “youth.” They understood their actions within a national framework, formed local branches of national organizations, and corresponded with their peers about the issues of the day. Lawrence’s African-American population situated itself in relation to struggles for civil rights or for Black

Power that were definitely not centered in this small town. And virtually all of Lawrence's citizens were immersed in national culture as communicated by the mass media. Just like people throughout the country, they watched television and saw movies and read *Time* or *Newsweek* or the *Ladies' Home Journal*. This was not a foreign "national" culture. It was *their* culture.

In the sexual revolution, both those who fought for change and those who opposed it acted in local arenas but drew on identities, understandings, and institutions that were defined nationally. Change was introduced in a set of locally negotiated actions by Kansans—and Iowans and North Carolinians and, yes, Californians and New Yorkers—who were full participants in the national postwar culture.

7

In sorting out the impulses and movements commonly conflated into "the sexual revolution," it is crucial to recognize how many challenges to America's sexual status quo were not made in the name of revolution. Many of them, in fact, seemed to have nothing to do with sex. The fundamental and large-scale transformations that reduced local cultural autonomy and isolation certainly did not originate in a desire for sexual revolution, but neither did a host of changes that are more clearly associated with shifting sexual mores and behavior. Some of the most important elements of the sexual revolution were unintended consequences of actions with quite different goals.

The birth control pill, to a great degree, made possible the (hetero)sexual revolution. Yet those who developed oral contraceptives did not intend their work to promote what the majority of Americans at the time called "promiscuity." Doctors generally refused to prescribe the Pill to women who were not married; the Supreme Court did not rule this practice unconstitutional until 1972. It was largely because of widespread concern about the "population explosion" and through the public health community's involvement with Lyndon Johnson's Great Society that the Pill became more generally available. Those who acted in such capacities were not promoting sexual freedom or championing women's right to control their own bodies.

On college campuses, too, the sexual revolution took root in spaces not intended for its growth. College students often found allies among administrators when they challenged curfews for women and other aspects of the *in loco parentis* system that provided (limited) institutional controls

Sex in the Heartland

8

on sexual behavior. Few of these administrators accepted doctrines of sexual freedom. Some supported liberalization of rules as a way to develop responsibility and maturity among students. Many deans of women believed parietals violated the principle of equality between the sexes. Other administrators, especially provosts, presidents, and members of boards of trustees or regents, became increasingly aware that *in loco parentis* was a potential legal nightmare, with the limits of universities' responsibility and liability undefined. By the time large numbers of students phrased their attacks in revolutionary terms, this system of sexual controls had already been weakened.

Even those who attempted to police the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior made progressive change possible—though usually not intentionally. In the years during and after World War II, many “sexually deviate” behaviors, including homosexuality, were redefined as mental illnesses, deserving treatment, rather than misconduct, deserving punishment. This shift affected institutional policies, and so had real impact on men's and women's lives. Being forced to undergo “treatment” was arguably as bad as or worse than being summarily dismissed from job or school, and this redefinition may have seemed little more than semantic to some of the men and women labeled sick instead of sinful. Nonetheless, the institutional move from punishment to treatment complicated lines of authority within the institutions and forced some of those who implemented the policies to confront what they saw as logical inconsistencies in such definitions. While defining homosexuality as mental illness did not foster sexual freedom, the concomitant changes in policy worked to undermine the authority of those who implemented the rules. That loss of authority would have long-term and profound effects.

The sexual revolution was not completely dependent on any of the above: the Pill was not the only means of preventing pregnancy; one could have sex before an 11:00 curfew quite as well as after; the turn to psychology as a means of managing transgressive sexuality may have stifled not only individual lives but also the options of liberation movements. Nonetheless, these developments and others like them helped to shape the sexual revolution. Even though these strands of revolution were largely unintended consequences of other efforts, they were critical parts of the whole.

By the late 1960s these nonrevolutionary origins were largely eclipsed by purposeful claims and radical acts. Young people adopted the Pill as a tool of revolution. College students no longer appealed for greater freedom

by arguing that they were “responsible,” but simply demanded freedom. Gay men and lesbians actively rejected the paradigms of sin and mental illness and created a public culture of liberation. A very visible portion of America’s youth were fighting for a revolution in sex, and a great many Americans, in more limited fashion, lived out the opportunities their battles made possible. Those who pursued revolution, however, did not share a single vision. While the disparate efforts of those who wanted very different sorts of change took on greater weight in society because they were all “part” of “the” revolution, these revolutionaries often were at odds with one another.

Some of them sought to challenge the values and norms of a repressive society they often called “Amerika.” Capitalizing on the sexual chaos and fears of the nation, political-cultural revolutionaries attempted to use sex as a weapon against “straight” society. In their own lives, some members of America’s counterculture practiced a Dionysian and polymorphous sexuality that completely rejected mainstream concerns about “respectability.” John Sinclair, manager of the rock group MC5, proclaimed in his “Total Assault on the Culture” manifesto: “Our position is that all people must be free to fuck freely, whenever and wherever they want to.”⁵ Other countercultural seekers believed they had to remake love and reclaim sex to create a new and viable community, and they experimented with sex as with other forms of community organization. Still others celebrated sex as a “natural” act that symbolized an alternative to materialism, capitalism, or the military-industrial complex. In these different ways, members of America’s growing counterculture used sex as a tool of revolution.

The movements for women’s liberation and gay liberation that gained force at the cusp of the 1970s overlapped with America’s countercultural and hip communities. There is no way to fully untangle these strands, and conflicts over sex and gender among members of these intertwined movements profoundly affected the “revolution” as a whole. The concept of liberation, however, distinguishes these movements from the larger counterculture. By the late 1960s many Americans considered sexual orientation and sexuality crucial aspects of an individual’s identity. Sexual identities, so constructed, were a critical component of “liberation” struggles, which were public and avowedly political. Among those who fought for gay liberation, some men and women pursued what was essentially a civil rights agenda. However, many women saw lesbianism as a sexual *and* political identity assumed in defiance against patriarchal oppression, and gay men

Sex in the Heartland

sought to forge a public gay culture in which sexuality played a prominent role.

10

The women's liberation movement, like the gay liberation movement, ranged from supporters of a NOW-type equal rights agenda to those who questioned the fundamental organization of society. However, unlike members of the gay liberation movement, which defined sex as a liberating force, many feminists believed sex was the key element in their oppression. Women demanded "the right to control our own bodies." They, along with male allies, fought to reform rape laws. They analyzed the ways in which women's sexuality was appropriated and devalued in a patriarchal or misogynist culture. At the same time, many women claimed the right to sexual freedom and/or sexual pleasure. "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" ranks right up there with *The Feminine Mystique* in many women's personal histories. Across America, women—alone or with other women—took mirrors and looked, for the first time, at their own sexual organs. While some feminists saw the differences between women and men as culturally constructed, others found pride and power in claims of an essential difference between the sexes, a difference that many believed was rooted in women's biological—and sexual-reproductive—nature.

Yet another strand of this revolution appears modest compared to the counterculture and the liberation movements but is perhaps the most revolutionary of all. During the late 1960s and early 1970s many young people began to rethink the role of gender in relation to sex. In coed dorms, college students declared that they were trying to escape the "sexual role-playing" of dating relationships. Men and women explored the possibilities of friendship. Androgyny was in. And an increasing number of young men and women began to live together "without benefit of matrimony," not as an affirmation of free love or revolution, but in a *de facto* rejection of the sexual double standard. Despite the lack of state or religious sanction, most of these couples looked more like young marrieds than like wild-eyed revolutionaries. The revolution they sought was in the meaning of sex, and their battles were over gender roles, not sexual freedom.

The sexual revolution was not a simple, two-sided contest between the proponents of freedom and the forces of repression. Even those who actively supported the "revolution" had radically different concepts of what it was and what it should accomplish. Those who actively opposed it varied as well. Parents who worried about their daughters' "safety"; public health officials who feared a potential explosion of venereal disease; fundamental-