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SEXUALITY

SEXUALITY, along with race and gender, is an aspect of identity that historians paid relatively little attention to before 1975. Since then, however, it has become a very important topic for historical investigation, albeit one around which considerable theoretical debate swirls. Perhaps more than any other area of historical scholarship, the history of sexuality necessarily involves not only historians but anthropologists, literary critics, classicists, and philosophers. It is impossible to describe sexuality as a topic for historical inquiry in the United States without attending more than usual to historiographical debates, and to larger theoretical questions that encompass multiple disciplines. Regardless of whether one agrees that sexuality itself has a history, the history of sexuality as a topic for inquiry and debate in the late twentieth century is undoubtedly a major event in the intellectual and cultural history of the period. Recent research has demonstrated considerable variation in sexual practices and identities among different racial, ethnic, regional, and class groups even as it has demonstrated the centrality of sexuality to definitions of American national identity.

Indigenous Americans and Europeans

European conquerors and colonists saw sexual practice as distinguishing them from indigenous Americans starting with Columbus's first landing. About 1516, Vasco Nunez de Balboa, an early Spanish explorer of Central America, discovered men dressed as women and fed forty of them to his dogs. In North America and the United States, sexuality has consistently served since the beginning of European colonization as a basis for differentiating among racial and ethnic groups. This is so in the empirical sense that observers noted significant differences among the sexual practices and identity categories available to indigenous Americans, Africans and their descendents, and Europeans and their descendents in America. It is also the case in the sense that Europeans and their descendents have consistently relied on attributions of sexual immorality as justifications for discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities. Thus, sexuality has been a key to American national identity, and a major site for establishing and negotiating differences of power along lines of gender, race, and class, since 1607. The accounts of European observers throughout the Americas from the sixteenth century forward make clear that they could not separate their observations of indigenous sexuality from their European worldview, in which Christian prescriptions for proper gender roles and prohibitions on sodomy played a prominent role.

Consequently, understanding of indigenous and African sexual practices and identities in early America will always remain more partial and provisional than most historical understanding because the vast majority of the sources are highly moralizing or voyeuristic accounts by Europeans that tell us more about the European observers than about those they observed. However, most, if not all, of the indigenous peoples of North America had some institutionalized identity and role for males who wished to adopt a female role, and for females who wished to adopt a male role. Contemporary anthropologists and historians use "berdache" to describe this phenomenon. The specifics of the identity and role that these third-gendered natives assumed varied among tribes. In some instances parallel identities existed both for males who lived as females and females who lived as males, while others only institutionalized males living as females. In some cases berdaches had clearly defined social roles, such as undertaking and other funereal services in the Chu-mash and neighboring cultures around what is now Santa Barbara, California.

Sexual practice served not only to differentiate Europeans from native and African Americans, but as a vehicle for establishing and perpetuating European control over conquered peoples. Troops accompanying Columbus and later Spanish conquerors routinely used rape as one tactic for subjugating native populations. Venereal diseases, along with more well known infections, may have contributed to European dominance of

the Americas. The Catholic Church as well as the Spanish and French governments tried to prohibit sexual contact between settlers and natives, but to little avail. French missionaries in Quebec complained that marriages between fur traders and Native women typically produced nativized Frenchmen rather than Frenchified Native women.

British North America

Slave owners routinely assumed sexual exploitation as a lagniappe of ownership. Beginning with the expectations of British planters in the Caribbean, however, North American planters started out relying primarily on male slaves and were slow to recognize the profit potential in slave women's reproduction. Slave sex ratios began to even out in North America during the middle of the eighteenth century primarily because of the fertility of those slave women whom traders brought over. The presence of wives and children helped solidify owners' control over male slaves by creating the threat of retribution against loved ones for the slave's misconduct, even as owners' sexual exploitation of slave women served as further demonstration of male slaves' powerlessness.

Europeans' voyeuristic attitudes toward images of naked, virile Native Americans and Africans as contrasted to supposedly more civilized Europeans, combined with the other deeply entrenched power differentials of slavery, made attributions of sexual prowess and immorality key parts of the racist stereotypes that white Americans consistently used to justify and perpetuate discrimination against black Americans. After slavery, the charge that a black man had raped a white woman was the most reliable way to initiate a lynching. In some senses, black women could enjoy greater sexual freedom than white women, as reflected in the songs and other self-representations of black singers from Bessie Smith to Aretha Franklin. On the other hand, the overwhelming desire for respectability as an avenue to equal opportunity and treatment led many African American leaders to deny black sexuality altogether, creating difficulties for African American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons and for efforts to reduce the spread of HIV starting in the late twentieth century.

Puritans strove to confine sexual activity within marriage, but encouraged it there. Changes in sexual practices and expectations contributed to the new sense of American identity in religious and political matters that emerged with the great awakening of the early eighteenth century. Times of political and social upheaval tend generally to reduce the effectiveness of restraints on sexual activity; the American Revolution was no exception. Judged by reports of children born too soon after marriage, premarital sex increased significantly in British North America during the late eighteenth century even as a longer-term shift from a general perception of women as morally weaker than men to a perception that women were sources of moral uplift and instruction for men generally, and especially for sons, took hold during the early national period. Regional variations became more pronounced as the growing distinction between public and private in the commercial north allowed women a measure of power in their homes that predominantly rural women of the south continued to lack.

Birth rates among European Americans remained unusually high in North America and the United States until 1800, at which point they began to drop steadily. In 1900, the birth rate was half its 1800 level, and it continued to fall, dropping below the replacement rate during the Great Depression and rebounding only during the Baby Boom from 1946 to 1964. Although historian Nancy Cott described a nineteenth-century ideal of "passionlessness" for middle-class white women, this notion can easily be overblown. One should emphasize its specificity in terms of race and class. The earliest explorations in the history of sexuality relied primarily on the elite discourse of magazines and marriage manuals. Subsequent research has revealed much greater variation in practice, with significant populations that either disregarded or remained largely unaware of white, middle-class ideals in matters of sexuality.

Birth rates consistently remained higher in the South than in the North and for black than white women. The

birth rate decline long preceded significant declines in infant mortality. At the frontier, the birth rate was very low because almost all inhabitants were men. Recently settled areas just behind the frontier tended to have very high birth rates while urban commercial areas had low rates. Thus, race, class, and geography helped to determine the spread of sexual practices that reflected women's demands for increased autonomy, as in the burned-over district of New York and New England, and/or the calculation for middle-class urbanites that children were becoming a long-term cost rather than an asset because of their educational needs. This attitude contrasted with that of farmers, for whom children could provide labor at the earliest possible age.

The late nineteenth century produced both the largest cohort of never-married women in U.S. history and the idea of "voluntary motherhood," according to which women should control sexual activity in marriage as a means of controlling fertility. Although reforming middle-class women's efforts to "rescue" prostitutes dated to the antebellum period, some evidence indicates that voluntary motherhood carried with it a tacit acceptance that men who respected their wives' periodic demands for celibacy in the name of birth control would turn to prostitutes. While it is impossible to establish any clear links, the correlation between never-married women and the reform movements of the Progressive Era suggests that women's sexual relationships with men have political consequences at numerous levels. Whether they had sexual relationships with each other or not, many of the prominent women reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drew strength and inspiration from networks of close women friends. Changes in women's expectations and in men's roles in the new industrial, managerial economy contributed to the development of companionate marriage, more egalitarian and based on the expectation of love and fidelity, as the ideal for middle-class white couples beginning in the late nineteenth century. For many working-class white, immigrant, and African American couples, however, marriage remained as much an economic as an emotional and psychological arrangement.

The Administration of Sexuality

Sexual practice and identity attracted growing attention from the researchers and clinicians of the emerging biological, psychological, and social sciences and related professions during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Concerns about women's increased autonomy, combined with fears for the implications of absorbing an enormous number of immigrants, contributed to the pathologizing of intense romantic friendships between women as part of a larger move to connect deviant sexual activity with psychiatric diagnoses. Modern terminology for describing persons in terms of their sexual practices and presumed identities, such as "homosexual" and "heterosexual," emerged after 1870 as part of this new sexological discourse. Concerns and discussions about the relationship between sexual practice and national identity spread rapidly among professional and political elites. In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt expressed concerns about "race suicide," because he noted that native-born middle-and upper-class white women typically had far fewer children than immigrant women. He did not notice that the children of immigrants usually adopted the fertility patterns of their new land. In 1917, Congress created for the first time a category to exclude aliens with "abnormal sexual instincts," which would remain in immigration law in varying forms until 1990.

Mirroring Roosevelt, pioneering birth control advocate Margaret Sanger initially linked contraception to radical politics with her newspaper, *The Woman Rebel*, which she published briefly in 1914. Sanger learned of contraception after working with "Big Bill" Haywood of the Industrial Workers of the World and anarchist Emma Goldman in the early years of the twentieth century. She traveled to France, where she discovered that women routinely practiced contraception. She initially characterized contraception as a form of class warfare in which workers would deprive capitalists of wage slaves. Sanger's agitation accompanied a significant shift in sexual mores in the United States, at least in the major cities, beginning around 1910. Sexual experimentation outside of marriage increased, and popularized discussions of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories provided a new vocabulary of sexual repression as an omnipresent motivation in human action. Sanger's own career paralleled a general increase in the spread of knowledge about sexuality as both gradually lost their radical associations and the field became more professionalized from World War I on.

World War I precipitated further French surprises for Americans, as military leaders resisted the French solution to venereal disease—inspecting and licensing prostitutes. The large-scale population movements, such as African Americans moving from south to north, and workers generally moving to cities, contributed to the social disruption that created new opportunities for sexual experimentation among many Americans, especially young adults. In this respect as in many others, World War I anticipated trends that would occur on an even larger scale during World War II. The 1920s typically have a reputation as a decade of sexual permissiveness, with women smoking in public and wearing shorter skirts, but the same decade saw the recrudescence of a Ku Klux Klan that policed illicit sexual relationships, especially across racial and ethnic lines, as part of its culturally conservative program to sustain its ideal of American identity. With the onset of the Great Depression, employers including the federal government fired married women in order to create jobs for men. Virtually all couples began to count more closely the cost of each child, driving the birth rate to its lowest point in U.S. history.

World War II

World War II demanded long work hours from parents, leaving them less time to supervise their children. It also inspired some female adolescents to demonstrate their patriotism by bestowing sexual favors on soldiers. The war put large numbers of young adults, mostly men, but many women as well, into sex-segregated military environments and perhaps in large cities, away from parental supervision, for the first time. These changes contributed substantially to increased sexual activity among opposite-sex couples, but also among same-sex couples. At the same time, World War II saw the first use by the U.S. military of psychological tests and diagnoses in order to determine soldiers' aptitude as well as to exclude undesirables, especially lesbians and gay men. The effort largely failed, but it did result in significant punishments for many soldiers who got caught in same-sex activity, which in turn contributed to the growth of postwar lesbian and gay civil rights movements by creating a self-conscious group of veterans who saw their dishonorable discharges as an injustice.

Post World War II

The post–World War II period has seen an explosion of interest in and discussion about sexuality in the United States. The publication of the Kinsey reports on the sexual behavior of males (1948) and of females (1953), with claims that many women engaged in premarital inter-course and many men had at least some same-sex activity, touched off a frenzy of debate and revealed the capacity of the American public to find fascination in information about its own sexual practices. During the red scare of the 1950s, political leaders equated the foreign threat of communism with the domestic threat of homosexuality as part of a general effort to restore "normality" to American life via domesticity. The federal government fired more workers for suspicion of homosexuality than for suspicion of communist activity. One fired federal worker, Franklin Kameny, would spend the next thirty-five years fighting discrimination in federal employment and security clearances. The early 1950s also saw the formation of the first two "homophile" organizations, the Mattachine Society and the DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS, which approached lesbian and gay civil rights as a reformist campaign for respectability through cooperation with psychiatrists and other influential professionals.

Most observers identify the 1960s as a key decade for changes in Americans' sexual attitudes. The anovulent pill became available as a means of contraception, protest on college campuses included resistance to curfews and restrictions on visitation, and theorists such as Herbert Marcuse linked sexual repression to other political problems. Feminists and lesbian and gay rights activists drew inspiration from the civil rights movement to make their demands and their tactics more militant. On the other hand, federal policymakers, lacking historical information about Africans' adaptation of their family forms under slavery and refusing to acknowledge the ongoing effects of racism, claimed that overly powerful black women were responsible for the widespread breakdown of black families.

Late Twentieth Century

From the 1970s onward, sexual practices and identities became major topics of cultural and political debate in the United States. The conservative movement that had coalesced around opposition to communism and support for Barry Goldwater took up lesbian and gay civil rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, and abortion as causes that, in their view, undermined long-standing moral principles that buttressed the American way of life. They pointed to the rising divorce rate, widespread use of sexual imagery in advertising and television programs, and the increasing visibility of lesbians and gay men as indicators of a nation in moral decline. Conservative President Ronald Reagan routinely made statements supporting "traditional" ideals of gender and sexuality, cut off the access to the White House that lesbian/gay civil rights activists had enjoyed during the Carter administration, and steadfastly ignored the new epidemic of ACQUIRED IMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME (AIDS) that emerged during his first year in office, 1981, because the vast majority of victims in the United States were gay men who transmitted the AIDS virus via anal intercourse.

During the closing years of the twentieth century, technological advance spread debates over sexuality into new areas. In vitro fertilization and surrogate motherhood raised legal issues that American institutions proved ill prepared for. The U.S. government granted an asylum request to a woman who feared she would suffer genital mutilation if she returned to her home country. Trans-gender activists, including transsexuals but also others who defied gender norms, struggled for recognition even from the lesbian and gay civil rights movement, much less conventional political and legal institutions. Intersexed persons, born with ambiguous genitalia, began to speak publicly against the medical practice of surgically assigning a sex to such babies at birth.

Sexuality as a Topic for History and Theory

Amidst such political confusion, major scholarly work on the history of sexuality began to emerge. Carroll Smith Rosenberg, Jonathan Ned Katz, Lillian Faderman, Jeffrey Weeks, and John D'Emilio all published important articles and books that explored sexual practice and identity as historical topics between 1975 and 1983. Much the way the African American and women's movements sparked increased interest in African American and women's history, so the increased visibility of the lesbian and gay civil rights movement after 1969 led a growing number of scholars to wonder about the history of sexual minorities. Historical study of sexuality depended on the belief that sexual minorities merited study and that sexuality was as much a historical as a medical or psychological topic. Both the politics of the scholars who conducted the re-search, and the evidence they found, contributed to the conclusion that definitions of sexuality varied not only on their own terms and with respect to gender, but in relation to race and class as well. The *Radical History Review* published a special issue on the history of sexuality in 1979.

Because of his status as an established scholar in France and his willingness to make provocative claims, Michel Foucault came to overshadow most American scholars during the 1980s and to define the field with volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, which appeared in English in 1978. Foucault's work has proven more valuable for the conceptual framework it provides than for the empirical claims it makes. It has also provoked considerable intellectual and political debate, with important scholars such as John Boswell dissenting vigorously from the claim for the recent provenance of "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" as identity categories. Regardless, sexuality as a matter of individual, cultural, and national identity will continue to motivate considerable historical research for the foreseeable future.

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See also Birth Control Movement; Gay and Lesbian Movement; Gender and Gender Roles; Military Service and Minorities; Homosexuals; Pornography; Prostitution.

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