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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.