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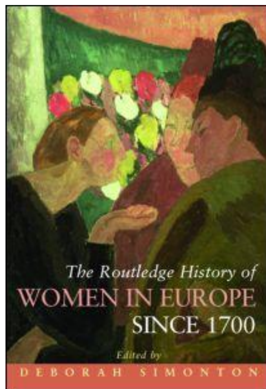

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Deborah Simonton

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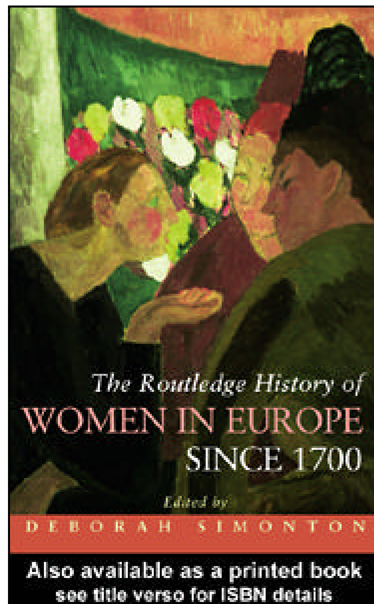

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FEMALE SEXUALITY

Anna Clark

Introduction

Female sexuality is one of the most difficult subjects in women's history, because female sexual desire has been both invisible and all too visible. Instances of transgressive female sexuality, such as the prostitute, the lesbian, or the unmarried mother, often attract much public attention, as moralists fear they will undermine the social order. Yet these images have more to do with fantasies and anxieties than they do with women's experiences. It is harder to gain access to women's accounts of their own desires or experiences, since sexual issues are so often clouded by shame and secrecy.

Female sexual pleasure has always been highly shaped by social forces. We know that women have long tried to control their fertility through abstinence and abortion, but relatively reliable birth control only appeared in the late nineteenth century and it took a century of struggle for it to become widely available. The structure of the economy has shaped the age at which men and women could marry, due to inheritance patterns and waged work. Above all, attitudes towards and experiences of female sexual desire varied tremendously by class and race.

But people do not simply respond to economic structures in determining their sexual practices, of course. Cultural forms shaped how women understood their sexual desires, such as popular songs, education, religious and family attitudes. Changing attitudes towards female sexuality also derived from wider intellectual and political concerns. Changing mores concerning female sexuality shaped how doctors interpreted new knowledge about sexual pleasure and fertility. Even through the twentieth century, psychiatrists and doctors continued to debate the consequences of female anatomy for women's pleasure.

Authorities often feared that female sexual desires would become uncontrollable, endangering the sanctity of marriage and the social order in general. They experimented with different kinds of laws, institutions and regulations to manage women perceived as promiscuous. Controlling female sexuality also helped define the boundaries of race during the imperial era. Since sexual desire has often been seen as an uncontrollable emotion, it becomes a metaphor for various kinds of social and political disorder. Generalised anxiety about social change often focused on the figure of the immoral woman. But women's movements also made female sexual autonomy a centrepiece of their struggles, protesting against sexual exploitation, although questions of prostitution and abortion also divided feminists.

As this chapter will demonstrate, the modern era, from the eighteenth century

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onwards, represented a significant shift in experiences of and attitudes towards female sexuality. The first section concerns the eighteenth century. The long-held attitudes that female sexual desire was voracious and female sexual pleasure necessary for conception were challenged by new medical developments. A new image of the unmarried mother as a victim of male lust began to compete with the older image of the disorderly woman as the new institutions failed to control illegitimacy and prostitution. Sexuality became a political issue in the controversies that led up to the French Revolution, as libertinism and sentiment contended in philosophical debates. By the early nineteenth century, another revolution became more apparent: the demographic revolution. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, fertility, both illegitimate and legitimate, began to explode, but contemporary awareness of this problem only began around 1800. Working-class and middle-class women experienced sexuality in very different ways, for sexual morality differed dramatically by class. Even the experience of women who desired other women varied by class, for we have evidence of working-class cross-dressers and female husbands and traces of erotic desire among Victorian middle-class women's passionate friendships. But it was prostitution, not lesbianism, that excited the concerns of nineteenth-century governments, who instituted a new system of registration and regulation in an effort to control venereal disease. In response, sections of the women's movement demanded the abolition of the regulation system, beginning an explosion of political concern about sexuality which spread to cover birth control and the sexual exploitation of children as well. The last section begins in the 1890s, when sex radicals and sexologists also began to pioneer new ways of thinking about sex. After the First World War, sexual freedom became emblematic of modernity, of the new culture of consumption, but this freedom also alarmed many people, especially as the birth rate dropped dramatically. Nationalist movements made natalism a central political concern, and totalitarian governments, such as Stalin's Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, clamped down on birth control and abortion for racist eugenic reasons. After the Second World War, continuing government control over sexuality was challenged by new liberation movements, such as feminism, the gay and lesbian movement and the New Left.

Historiography and theory

Sexual desire is not a natural, biological drive, unchanging through history; rather, the diverse emotions which constitute sexual desire are stimulated, created and constructed by social formations. Sociologists writing about 'sexual scripts' bolstered this insight by suggesting that people learn how to be heterosexual through the social messages of education and popular culture. Feminist psychoanalytic theory, adopting the insights of Freud while rejecting his misogynist and biologistic elements, promised to explore fantasy, desire and the unconscious. However, psychoanalytic theory is very difficult to apply historically because the formation of sexual attachments, and adult desires and fantasies, varied so much in different time periods.

It was feminists who pioneered the idea of the social construction of sexuality as the women's liberation movement tried to deconstruct the conventions of female desire. Feminists began to stress women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation, writing about rape and seduction. Activists against pornography such as Sheila Jeffreys sought precedents among the social-purity campaigners of the late nineteenth century, who warned

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of the dangers of untrammelled male desire.[1] By the early 1980s, other feminist historians such as Judith Walkowitz began to fear that the stress on sexual danger drowned out the voices of nineteenth-century women who asserted women's right to sexual pleasure.[2] In her survey of English feminist debates about sex in the late nineteenth century, Lucy Bland pointed out that both pleasure and danger must be considered.[3]

Historians have also debated the chronology of changes in attitudes towards female sexuality. For instance, in the pre-modern period, it was popularly thought that female genitals were just like those of males, but turned inside out. This was the central argument of one of the most influential books on sexuality in the past fifteen years, *Making Sex*. In this book, Thomas W. Laqueur argues that this idea derived from the ancient Greek scientist Galen. In diagrams, Galenic tracts compared the testicles to the ovaries, and the vagina to the penis, as if it were inverted. As a result, the masculine and feminine sex drives were seen as comparable in strength. Furthermore, the female orgasm was seen as necessary for conception.[4] However, several historians have argued that Laqueur ignores the long existence of competing ideas of female sexual organs as different from those of men. Aristotle's idea that female orgasm was not necessary for conception remained influential in many circles. He believed that the sperm contained a homunculus, or germ of the human being, so that the mother merely incubated the foetus.[5] Nonetheless, it is clear that the transition between the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century represented a turning point in attitudes towards female sexuality. If women's sexual pleasure was not necessary for conception, female desire would be downplayed. Nancy Cott suggested that 'passionlessness' could be quite useful to women, enabling them to assert moral superiority and rationality; by claiming sexlessness, they also had an excuse to say 'no' to their husbands and avoid unwanted pregnancies.[6]

Victorians had long been thought of as embodying sexual repression. However, some historians believed this was a myth that they needed to refute. Peter Gay, for instance, argued that behind her prudish exterior the Victorian woman really enjoyed sex, but he concentrated on a few middle-class women and men.[7] On a more sophisticated theoretical note, Michel Foucault pointed out that the myth of Victorian sexual repression depended on an understanding of sexuality as a force of nature, which could be repressed or bottled up but which would bubble up under this pressure into prostitution or be sublimated into neurosis. In contrast, he insisted that the Victorian era did not witness a repression of sex but a proliferation of discourses about sexuality.[8]

Foucault focused on medical and psychiatric discourses that constructed sexuality as a form of knowledge and as an identity. Foucault's argument that sexual discourses must be understood as a form of socially constructed knowledge has been very fruitful. Historians of the body found that during the scientific revolution, anatomists did not simply 'discover' facts about sexual organs and reproduction; rather, even their empirical investigations and depictions of the body were utterly shaped by their culturally specific understandings of gender difference. Psychoanalytic theory, for instance, could be seen as just another discourse shaped by the cultural maelstrom of late nineteenth-century Vienna. However, when analysing discourses, historians must ask who read them and what impact they had. The writings of doctors and sexologists that constituted the Foucauldian discourse were not available to the general public, especially women and working-class people, and popular sexual writings in England tended to

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advocate sexual restraint rather than pleasure. Feminists have also criticised Foucault for ignoring gender in his theories.

Hera Cook has recently asserted that, in England at least, late Victorian people *were* sexually repressed. In mid-Victorian England, middle-class men could indulge their sexual desires with prostitutes, but middle-class women were warned to constrain their desires. By the end of the century, however, this repression spread to men: as she writes, 'there appears to have been considerable female and some male ignorance of physical sexual activity along with diminishing mutual sexual pleasure.'[9] If the idea of the social construction of sexuality is to be taken seriously, sexual repression is a possibility. Cook's idea of sexual repression differs from the old Freudian notion that if sex desire is not expressed, it will be sublimated and will ooze out in a more neurotic form. Instead, she demonstrates how social constraints, family upbringing, the censorship of sexual information, the lack of good birth-control methods and the advocacy of sexual self-control all constructed a negative attitude towards sexuality.

But Foucault was also interested in 'governmentality': how institutional discourses studied, managed and regulated populations by creating identities such as the prostitute. Although Foucault briefly mentioned the 'hysterical woman' and the Malthusian couple as two of the four key figures in discourses of sexuality, he did not explore the way in which gender relations shaped these discourses. In part, this was because he rejected the idea of any overarching structure of domination, such as male power; instead, he regarded discourses of sexuality as dispersed among multiple nodes of power – not only the state, but also institutions of civil society, such as philanthropy. Judith Walkowitz more successfully applied a gender analysis to this theory in her study of the regulation of prostitution in nineteenth-century England. Only the female prostitute became the subject of discourses and regulation; male soldiers, their customers, escaped the disciplinary apparatus. Foucault's theory of multiple nodes of power, therefore, needs to account for the persistence of the double standard and modes of regulating sexuality that affected women much more harshly than men.

Foucault was also interested in the way discourses constructed modern identities. Before the late nineteenth century, he claimed, authorities punished sinful or criminal sexual acts, but they did not regard the people who committed them as distinct personality types. The new sexological discourses invented the modern sexual identities of heterosexual or homosexual, regarding sexual desires as revealing the innermost truth about our beings. Foucault therefore made a great conceptual leap forwards by differentiating between sexual acts and sexual identities. He profoundly changed the history of homosexuality. Rather than searching for gay or lesbian people in the past, historians began to insist that gay or lesbian identities did not exist before the modern period; instead, acts and desires were much more fluid. Working independently, lesbian historians such as Lillian Faderman came to similar conclusions, arguing that in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, women engaged in passionate romantic friendships without suspicion, only coming under attack when sexologists promulgated the lesbian stereotype.[10]

Other historians have suggested that the distinction between acts and identities cannot be mapped onto a pre-modern–modern divide. Sexual identities did exist before the modern period, such as the effeminate sodomite or the prostitute; these people were not just seen as committing certain sexual acts, rather, their sexual behaviour created a social identity. However, identity in the pre-modern period was not the same as our

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modern notion of an innermost essence, but more likely to be defined by social relationships. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity also enabled theorists and historians to undercut the stability of heterosexual identity. The gender identity of 'woman' is not natural, she argued, but a performance that must be repeated over and over and that can never be perfected. Furthermore, normative identities incorporate the deviant. Butler suggests that while heterosexual women renounce their attraction to other women, they identify with them: 'the 'straight woman *becomes* the woman she "never" loved.'[11]

Yet we still need concepts to understand those sexual practices and desires which did not constitute identities, but which could not be reduced to acts, which were not seen as normative yet were not utterly deviant. For instance, many women sold sex parttime without defining themselves as prostitutes; for them, commercial sex was a 'twilight moment' which may have been shameful but which did not change their work identities as needlewomen or milliners. Similarly, we need to understand discourses that were not openly articulated, that may have been only half-understood or euphemistic. For instance, abortionists advertised in nineteenth-century newspapers that they could bring on blocked menstrual periods; women whispered to neighbours what this meant. These could be termed 'twilight discourses', shadowy and secret.[12]

Sources

Peering through the murky twilight can also serve as a metaphor for the difficulties historians face in tracing past sexual attitudes and experiences. Sexuality poses great problems of evidence for the historian, for sex tends to take place in the twilight, and historians must peer through the dim light of the past to discern people's experiences, feelings and attitudes. Heterosexual sex is the easiest to trace when it produces babies, for the birth rate can be traced through parish registers and censuses, which indicate legitimate and illegitimate fertility rates. Demographic information is very valuable in uncovering past sexual behaviour, because it surveys a large number of lower-class people whose lives went unrecorded by diaries and letters; it can also refute common stereotypes. However, demographic statistics cannot explain the reasons for such behaviour. Demographers attempted to correlate changes in sexual behaviour with other measurable phenomena, such as urbanisation or industrialisation. Although hardship clearly had an effect on illegitimacy rates, demographers often found that cultural factors could outweigh economic structures. Case records from foundling hospitals and penitentiaries where prostitutes were incarcerated provide more information about individual women's lives, but the institutional context of these sources must always be taken into account by asking how professional discourses shaped responses. Court records about rape also hint at the prevalence of sexual violence, although most assaults were never reported. Since lesbianism was not illegal in most countries, however, we cannot take advantage of the rich court records about sodomy available to historians of male homosexuality. Changing laws about sexual practices often reflect wider political concerns about social order and racial boundaries, as in Nazi Germany or European colonies.

To get at people's feelings of sexual desire is much more difficult. Some letters and diaries exist, but most people did not write about sex in such ways, and we do not know how typical those who did were. By the nineteenth century, doctors and

sexologists began to survey sexual attitudes, sometimes using a statistical and sometimes a case-study approach. Historians influenced by Foucault have often seen these case studies as shaped by the discourses of sexologists, who persuaded people to adopt new sexual identities, but more recently, other historians have argued that sexologists responded to letters and interviews with their subjects as they developed their theories. Social attitudes about female sexuality are much easier to explore, since desire was such a central theme in literature, medicine, morality and politics, but historians always have to remember that these sources present discourses about sexuality, rather than describing experiences.

The eighteenth century: challenges to control

Sexual attitudes of the eighteenth century are difficult to grasp, because sexual morality was so controversial and debated; no consensus could be reached. Popular attitudes towards sex contrasted with those of the authorities, who tried in vain to stem a growing tide of extramarital sex. Older ideas about female desire persisted and in fact were popularised while new medical knowledge challenged them. Sexual libertinism contributed to a revolutionary ferment, but a backlash lurked on the horizon.

Both Catholic and Protestant churches had tried to impose, or reimpose, a strict sexual morality in the seventeenth century. The counter-reformation Catholic church portrayed women as sexual temptresses, with their low-cut gowns and sparkling ornaments. It imposed strict controls over marriage and viewed sexual desire as the ultimate sin. The Protestant churches tended to denigrate celibacy and celebrate the bonds of matrimony, including marital sexual desire, but congregations imposed tight discipline over their members' extramarital behaviour. Institutional reformatories confined women accused of prostitution, or other sexual delinquencies. Originating with the counter-reformation, nuns usually ran these institutions and aimed to reform prostitutes through a strict regime of privation, regimentation, prayer and work. These reformatories also disciplined wayward women, not just prostitutes. Especially in France, parents or husbands could send recalcitrant daughters and adulterous wives to these reformatories. For instance, the official state institution, *La Salpêtrière*, founded in 1658, had wards for 'debauched' girls and wives and for prostitutes, as well as for girls of good family who had strayed from the proper path. In England, the first Magdalen Hospital was established in London in 1758, motivated by philanthropic and evangelical sentiments that sinners could be reclaimed for a religious path. Like the French institutions, it required the women to wear plain grey dresses and to walk with 'downcast eyes'. The Magdalen Hospital also received girls of genteel birth who had been seduced or had given birth outside of marriage. While these institutions aimed to return prostitutes to a virtuous life of labour and even marriage, thus recognising that unchastity was not a permanent stigma, they trained prostitutes in those very overcrowded, low-paid trades that forced women to sell sex to make ends meet – laundry, service and needlework. Thirty-seven to 40 per cent of the women in the Magdalen Hospital and the similar London Lock Asylum failed to reform and left the asylum, sometimes returning to prostitution. By the mid-eighteenth century, as the cities of London and Paris grew exponentially, it became obvious that prostitution would expand far beyond the capacities of these institutions to contain it. In London, Societies for the Suppression of Vice periodically demanded that constables sweep the streets

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and arrest prostitutes, but prostitution itself remained legal. In Paris, the police concentrated on spying on and harassing prostitutes through arrests or extortion. In eighteenth-century Copenhagen, the authorities tried to crack down on prostitution as part of an effort to force all women (and men) into labour, regarding the cafés where prostitutes worked as dangerous nests of crime.[13] Nowhere could prostitution be suppressed successfully.

Authorities also attempted to control unmarried mothers. In France, church and state united with propertied patriarchs to ensure that well-born young women did not run off with unsuitable husbands or fall pregnant before marriage. Rape laws focused on the fear that men would abduct heiresses, and the courts treated sexual violence as a crime against husbands and fathers, rather than against the women themselves. Midwives had to turn in unmarried pregnant women to the authorities and force them to reveal the name of the father, who could be charged with the child's maintenance. In Lutheran Strasbourg, unmarried mothers could be imprisoned. In England and Scotland, unwed mothers faced humiliating public punishments, such as standing in front of the church in sackcloth and ashes. But by the mid-eighteenth century, some of these sanctions began to erode. By 1741, Swedish pregnant girls no longer had to experience the humiliation of public purification, as ministers would take their repentance in the privacy of their studies. For instance, in 1765 Frederick the Great abolished all shaming punishments for unmarried mothers, seeing them as victims of seduction.[14] The causes of illegitimacy are discussed in depth later in this chapter.

Both legitimate and illegitimate fertility increased dramatically from 1750 to 1850 in many parts of Europe. Historians generally agree that the population grew because more people were marrying, and more people were having sex outside of marriage; death rates declined, but not dramatically enough to explain population growth. By the late eighteenth century, a significant sector of the British population began to marry in their early twenties instead of their late twenties. As a result, the woman of 1791 could bear two or even three more children than her great grandmother. In contrast, the average age of marriage rose in France, Tuscany and parts of Germany.[15] Premarital sex was very common among peasants and artisans. Young couples often engaged in night-courting, caressing each other as they cuddled, fully-clothed, in the evening. If they were betrothed, they often believed they could go ahead and have sex; as a result, many brides were pregnant upon marriage.

The religious insistence on the sinfulness of desire contrasted with the prevalent popular attitude that female sexual pleasure was vigorous and necessary. The first edition of the popular sex-advice book *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, which had nothing to do with Aristotle, appeared in 1684, and many more versions and additions were published over the next two centuries. On the continent, the counterpart to *Aristotle's Masterpiece* was Nicolas de Venette's *Tableau de l'amour conjugale*, a more medical work, quickly translated into Dutch, German, English and, by 1826, Spanish. These works presented the purpose of marriage as procreation and presented sexual pleasure, for both men and women, as a means to that end. They generally refuted Aristotle's idea that women did not contribute seed to conception, which would have meant that female sexual pleasure was unnecessary; as Jane Sharp, a midwife, noted, that was the ridiculous idea of an 'idle coxcomb'. But these texts debated whether Galen was correct to assert that male and female genitals were homologous. *Aristotle's Masterpiece* tended to follow the Galenic model of the homology between penis and vagina, while

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de Venette rejected it. But both recounted similarities in function between the penis and the clitoris, acknowledging that without stimulating the latter, ‘the fair sex neither desire mutual embraces, nor have pleasure in them, nor conceive by them’. These advice books urged men to confide in their wives and to caress them in order to incite their desires and ensure conception. The popular idea that women could not conceive without orgasm also had negative consequences for rape victims who became pregnant, since their accusations of assault were never believed. Heterosexual intercourse was believed to be essential for a woman’s health. If a girl was not married early enough, the pamphlet warned, ‘green sickness’ could result from celibacy. De Venette regarded male and female desire as equally strong, but tended to see women as ‘insatiable’, who would attack their husbands in ‘amorous battle’. According to a very old stereotype, men were seen as more rational and able to control their sexuality. However, Jane Sharp defended women, arguing, ‘we women have no more cause to be angry, or be ashamed of what Nature hath given us than men have, we cannot be without ours no more than they can want theirs.’[16]

These popular medical books also envisioned the possibility that women might desire other women. Jane Sharp’s midwifery book and some treatises on hermaphrodites speculated that women who had enlarged clitorises were a sort of hermaphrodite who might exert their lust on other women. De Venette described such women as ‘tribades’, but regarded them as curiosities of nature instead of sinners. Lesbianism, therefore, was not a recognised identity but an anomaly, seen only hazily, as in the twilight.

The intellectual challenges of the Enlightenment also changed attitudes towards sexuality. Medical ideas about female desire began to change over the course of the eighteenth century, as Thomas Laqueur points out. Physiologists rejected the old idea that male and female sexual organs were homologous. Turning to empirical examination of bodies rather than relying on the old authorities, they began to doubt that women had to experience sexual pleasure to conceive. For instance, in 1770, a doctor inseminated a dog with a syringe, proving ‘orgasm was not necessary for conception’, at least in canines. But cultural assumptions influenced these medical texts more than experiments did. Although medical texts had always regarded male and female bodies as different, new authorities began to argue that sex determined female physiology in every way, from the genitals to the skeleton to the brain. Many doctors believed that the female sexual organs controlled women’s minds. They debated whether inflamed ovaries caused sexual hysteria, or whether excessive sexual desire, or even reading erotic literature, could enlarge the ovaries.[17]

While medical men had begun to ignore the importance of female pleasure, the materialist philosophers celebrated it. The new materialist philosophy of the Enlightenment critiqued the old metaphysical and religious view of society. *Philosophes* saw a ‘new universe composed solely of atomized, animate bodies in motion, mechanisms driven by the laws of pleasure’.[18] Materialist philosophical ideas could also be found in pornography. Since censors prohibited both radical philosophy and pornography, publishers in the underground book trade sometimes combined the two. Historians have debated whether this philosophical pornography empowered female desire or exploited women. The author of *Thérèse philosophe* (1748) presented sex as completely natural, impelled by the body’s reasons; its characters criticised meaningless religious and legal constraints on sex. Thérèse expressed her own sexual desires and vowed never to

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marry or have children. By explicitly describing *coitus interruptus* (withdrawal), the novel explained how she could enjoy sex without fear. Pornographic texts sometimes portrayed women initiating each other into sex. In one, Ottavia tells Tullia, 'thy garden is setting mine on fire'. However, lesbian sexual desire was usually seen as a sideline to the main heterosexual event. And as we have seen, it was not particularly innovative to portray female sexual desire as active, given the traditional link between female insatiability and irrationality. The philosopher Diderot, for instance, believed that women's lusts were naturally violent. Artificial mores, such as religion and social propriety, encouraged female irrationality and distorted women's natural desires. In his novel *La Religieuse*, greedy parents confined their daughter Suzanne in a convent. She became the prey of a wickedly lustful mother superior who seduced her, indulging her lesbian desires freely because Suzanne was so innocent she did not understand these caresses. However, when these works were translated into English, either the translator cut out the most explicit sex scenes between women, or the books were suppressed by censorship. Nonetheless, arcane allusions to female–female eroticism surfaced in erudite yet libidinous poems written for a very elite English market.[19]

The sexual cynicism apparent in this pornography was also reflected in aristocratic culture. Among the elite, men openly took mistresses and frequented courtesans. Great ladies might take lovers once they had provided their husbands with a male heir, but the double standard mandated much greater discretion and risk. Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, for instance, had to go into exile abroad when she bore a child by her lover. In France, husbands could force wives accused of adultery into a convent for two years, and even for life. A few aristocratic women engaged in lesbian relationships, but as a result, vicious rumours discredited their reputations. Anne Damer, a sculptress involved in the political circle of the Duchess of Devonshire, was also mocked for her allegedly Sapphic tastes and accused of interfering with the relationship of an actress and her lover.[20] In France, the actress Mlle Raucourt wrote a play with a cross-dressing heroine; she supposedly wore men's clothes in order to seduce women. But scandalous memoirs alleged that she belonged to Sectes des Anandrynes, tribades who renounced the company of men and preferred that of their own sex. These rumours severely damaged Raucourt's career.[21]

By the late eighteenth century, similar scandalous memoirs and pornographic tracts aimed to undermine the *ancien régime* by portraying aristocrats and royals as perverse, decadent, immoral and unfit to rule. For instance, radical pamphlets depicted Marie Antoinette as an incestuous mother and indiscriminate lover of both men and women. The alleged sexual adventures of aristocratic women, royal mistresses and queens personified the personal and political corruption that radicals perceived in the *ancien régime* and eroded the deference the common people were supposed to feel for them. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, most influentially, resented the power that the women of the salons held over culture and regarded them as artificial and decadent.

By the later eighteenth century, Rousseau pioneered a new move towards sensibility that challenged aristocratic and philosophical cynicism about sex. Rousseau advocated the authenticity of genuine feeling, the uniqueness of individual emotions: as he put it, 'I know my own heart'. In his *Confessions* (1770), he passionately depicted his inner sexual life as failing to conform to conventions, but all the more worthy of examination; for instance, he candidly admitted to masochistic desires and to abandoning his illegitimate children at the foundling hospital. In the novel *Julie, ou La Nouvelle*

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Héloïse (1761) Rousseau wrote with great empathy about the struggles faced by Julie, his heroine, trapped into an arranged marriage while falling deeply in love with her handsome and intelligent tutor. Yet Rousseau realised that if sexual desires were indulged freely, society would be reduced to a state of nature. To resolve this problem, he laid the burden of controlling desires onto women. While men could explore their genuine emotions, women must be trained into social constraints. Rousseau advised women to dress to allure men with bows and ribbons and to gesture coquettishly. They should induce men's sexual advances, but then repel them to preserve their chastity, the highest female virtue. Julie, who succumbed to her sexual passions, died at the end of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, her fate a warning to women.

Like many other women, Mary Wollstonecraft admired Rousseau's insistence on the authenticity of the soul and his political radicalism. But, whereas most female readers seem to have responded positively to the idea that women should be respected as the guardians of social virtue, Rousseau's insistence that women should be coquettish yet modest infuriated Wollstonecraft. She criticised the conventional double standard and the hypocrisy of valuing chastity as the only female virtue, but in her published writings she tended to regard sexual passion as dangerous and irrational. Yet she fell prey to sexual passion herself, bearing a child out of wedlock to her lover Gilbert Imlay and only marrying her lover William Godwin after becoming pregnant. She and Godwin, in somewhat different ways, developed an idea that true passion could become refined as a meeting of minds as well as bodies and should not be marked by the sanction of artificial institutions such as church and state.

During the French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges also asserted female sexual rights by claiming that women should be able to claim maintenance from the fathers of their illegitimate children. The French revolutionaries did make some changes advantageous to women, declaring that they would free them from the despotism of husbands and fathers and from the tyranny of arranged marriages, for instance, by allowing divorce. Working from the principle that the citizen must have the right to the 'full disposal of one's own body', they removed old references to abduction in the laws of rape and simply regarded it as a crime against a woman's person rather than against her husband or father. However, these laws changed only principle, not practice, and authorities rarely prosecuted men for rape. The Jacobins rejected feminism and sent Olympe de Gouges to the scaffold. They refused to regard seduction as a crime after the age of sixteen, given the difficulty due to 'the precocity of the sex and its excessive sensibility, to separate seduction from voluntary surrender'. In fact, the Jacobins were more concerned with protecting men's sexual freedom, in 1793 forbidding unmarried mothers from bringing paternity searches.[22]

The nineteenth century: class contrasts and political conflicts

By 1800, the backlash against sexual radicalism was in full force as the middle class defined itself in part through sexual morality. In France, the Civil Code of 1811 reversed the revolutionary legitimation of divorce and imposed extremely harsh penalties on women who violated the sexual double standard. Women could not sue the fathers of their illegitimate children. And husbands could prosecute adulterous wives – and their lovers – in the courts and have them condemned to prison for two years. If

a husband caught his wife and lover in the act, *in flagrante delicto*, he could kill them and escape punishment for murder. Many such cases were brought to the courts, although more often, the husband would simply have his wife arrested and not go through the full prosecution.[23] In Britain, conservative evangelicals denigrated Mary Wollstonecraft and her supporters as prostitutes after her death in 1797. They depicted her as undermining the very foundations of marriage and, in doing so, endangering all social institutions with the threat of revolution. But they also warned that the sexual decadence of the aristocracy might bring the revolution to Britain's shores. The middle class increasingly contrasted its virtuous morality with perceived aristocratic libertinism. This contrast reached its apogee in the trial of Queen Caroline in 1820. King George IV put his wife on trial for adultery, even though he had abandoned her twenty-five years before and notoriously frolicked with his mistresses. For many, Caroline became a symbol of middle-class purity in contrast to the corrupt oppressive aristocracy. However, when evidence that she had taken a lover surfaced, middle-class public opinion turned against her. Nevertheless, many working-class people still supported her, because they thought she had every right to take a lover after being deserted by her husband.

Working-class morality was very different than that of the middle class in the early nineteenth century. As rising illegitimacy rates became more apparent, sexual morality became a marker of class status. Among working people, rates of premarital pregnancy were very high, ranging from 30 to 50 per cent in parts of rural England, Sweden, Vienna and the Netherlands.[24] Illegitimacy rates increased at about the same rate as marital fertility. At first, historians attributed lowered marriage ages and rising illegitimacy to industrialisation and urbanisation. Edward Shorter argues that by allowing young people to earn wages instead of having to wait to inherit property, they could enjoy sex before marriage and marry younger. Earning wages in factories, for instance, enabled young women to enjoy sex, reflecting liberated working-class sexual attitudes. But this argument has been refuted on several grounds. Illegitimacy rates were high among domestic servants, the most traditional female occupation, and generally lower among factory girls, who had more social support and slightly higher wages. Demographers demonstrate that illegitimacy rose in many areas long before industrialisation. Some rural areas had much higher rates of illegitimacy than urban industrial ones such as north-east Scotland, the Austrian Alps, Hungary and parts of Germany. Rural areas of Austria experienced extremely high illegitimacy, up to 27.8 per cent in 1870. Historians therefore now concentrate on proletarianisation, not industrialisation alone, as the cause of the decrease in marriage age and the rise of illegitimacy.[25]

Looking at life stories and ethnological accounts of village customs as well as statistics, Louise Tilly and Joan Scott argue that changes associated with the growth of a capitalist economy disrupted the regulation of desire long practised by communities. As Tilly and Scott point out, the birth of an illegitimate child or marriage at a young age did not signal women's liberation. Unmarried motherhood was very onerous, and low female wages forced women to marry young. Illegitimate children faced higher risk of dying as infants or children, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, indicating that their mothers lacked family support and insufficient income. As Tilly and Scott argued, when young women moved to the cities in search of work, they followed traditional rural customs of sex after a promise of marriage. Early modern customs had allowed for non-reproductive sexual play before marriage, including elaborate courting

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customs such as bundling or night courtship. If a young man refused to marry a woman he courted, he would be pressured or shunned by the family and community. But with proletarianisation, hard times brought unemployment which prevented young men from fulfilling their promises or forced them to delay marriage; they could easily move to another city in search of work and never see their pregnant sweetheart again. However, isolated and far from home, pregnant women could not draw upon the social support of family or village to force their sweethearts to follow through with their promises. But illegitimacy was not always tied to social isolation. In Louvain, Belgium, many unmarried mothers worked as lace-makers and continued to live with their parents. They may have become pregnant in an effort to escape from their families' houses, only to find that hard times prevented marriage.[26]

A significant minority of women also became pregnant after being sexually coerced. In the records of the London Foundling Hospital, which took in the infants of unmarried mothers, 15 per cent of the women interviewed claimed that they had been 'seduced against their consent', 'forced', or raped. While it may be thought that these women would claim rape in order to make themselves look more respectable, foundling hospital officials were unlikely to believe a woman who said she had been raped by a stranger; their ideal candidate had been seduced after a promise of marriage. Some of these women were assaulted by their fellow servants. Despite the stereotype of the immoral factory workers, servants were more vulnerable to sexual assault than factory workers; servants could be assaulted as they worked alone in an empty house, while factory girls laboured together and could defend each other.[27] But most of these women who claimed that they had been sexually forced were victimised by men who courted them, not by strangers.

Historians debate whether sexual violence was an expression of male dominance or an aberration of individual men. Barret-Ducrocq regards sexual violence as 'the pathological behaviour of certain individuals', rather than tying it to the tensions of certain historical eras. Anne-Marie Sohn tries to tie violent and sexual behaviour much more tightly to specific moments. For instance, in the early nineteenth century, there were many cases of young unmarried male agricultural workers sexually attacking isolated women working in the fields. Later in the nineteenth century, when improving economic conditions allowed such men to marry, these rapes declined in number. She therefore sees rape as the result of sexual frustration. I have argued that sexual violence reflected a division in masculine mores in early nineteenth-century Britain. Many working-class men espoused a restrained, self-controlled, chivalrous masculinity. But others, especially among certain occupations of artisans, celebrated a libertine, even misogynous masculinity, singing songs that celebrated violent seductions and assaults on women.[28]

The question of sexual violence is also complicated by the question of language. The unmarried women who applied to the foundling hospital found it very difficult to articulate what happened to them, mentioning that they had been 'seduced by force', which seems to be a contradiction in terms for modern readers. This difficulty was caused by the fact that nineteenth-century society did not find the distinction between seduction and force to be very important. Rape was seen as an attack on the property of a husband or father. Whether or not a woman consented, she was damaged property. The French, for instance, defined seduction as 'a victory won over a woman's propriety by criminal manoeuvres and odious means'.[29]

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Many unmarried mothers actually cohabited with the fathers of their children. In Paris, there was one consensual union for every four married couples, and the illegitimacy rate was 30 per cent. Historians initially argued that this represented an alternative morality, a defiance of the bourgeois order. Indeed, many working-class people seem to have regarded cohabitation and informal divorces as socially acceptable. However, other historians now see cohabitation as a symptom of poverty. In Paris, a wedding required an expensive certificate and paperwork from the couple's home village, including the written permission of parents. Many cohabiting couples would have preferred to marry. In Vienna, up to a third of working-class people could never hope to earn enough to marry and support a family. Some cohabited instead, while others, unable to even afford a room together, had to be content with brief visits in rooms rented by the hour.[30]

The experiences of middle-class women differed dramatically from working-class women in the early and middle nineteenth century. In proper French society, bourgeois women were supposed to appear very modest, with downcast eyes, and girls were not supposed to know anything about sex. In England, as Hera Cook observes, 'respectable women were expected to control their sexual feelings'.[31] Any woman who became pregnant or cohabited outside marriage risked total social ostracism. Of course, there were exceptions in bohemian life, such as the novelist George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), but they were not accepted in bourgeois society. Middle-class women had little access to knowledge about sex, for the authorities quickly censored any works that gave medical information about sex to a popular audience.

Doctors disagreed about whether 'good' women were naturally sexless, or whether they simply controlled their desires. Dr William Acton asserted that most women were not normally troubled with sexual feelings and had intercourse only to oblige their husbands. Acton was extremely influential and his works went through many editions. Similarly, Dr Alexandre Mayer, 'a leading French authority', wrote in 1848 that women only submitted to sexual intercourse out of love for their husbands. Many other doctors believed that most women experienced sexual pleasure, even if their desire was less than that of men. Dr Auguste Debay argued in 1848 that it was important for men to satisfy their wives in bed with sensitivity and skill. However, female desire could be seen as dangerous. Isaac Baker Brown tried to popularise the idea that clitorectomies could cure the 'problem' of excessive female sexual excitement which he alleged led to unhealthy independence, hysteria and mental illness, but he was struck from the medical register because he did not get consent from husbands or fathers before performing this procedure, and because he was regarded as mentally unstable.[32]

The increasing prevalence of the idea that women did not need to experience orgasm in order to conceive also made female sexual pleasure seem less important. Most nineteenth-century versions of the popular sex manual *Aristotle's Masterpiece* no longer mentioned the clitoris. Even doctors who acknowledged the importance of the clitoris regarded women as sexually passive. Of course, women did not necessarily need explicit information from doctors to enjoy sex. One 1884 survey of infertile women found 68 per cent experienced sexual pleasure in marriage, and 79 per cent said they desired sex. But sexual pleasure was not the same as orgasm: one survey found that under 40 per cent of German women born between 1896 and 1906 ever had an orgasm.[33]

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After 1850, illegitimacy declined sharply in most areas. By the end of the nineteenth century, sexual repression seems to have affected working-class as well as middle-class women. Mid-nineteenth-century German working-class activists were quite sexually puritanical.[34] By the late nineteenth century, many British working-class women were so ignorant of sex they did not know where the baby would come out, even when they were pregnant. In rural France, the Catholic church was able to increase its influence and inculcated a cult of virginity among girls. If they remained virgins, their villages celebrated them as '*rosières*'.

The late nineteenth-century decline in fertility – first experienced by the middle class – may have resulted from sexual restraint rather than from sexual pleasure. Fertility declined first in northern Europe, especially in France. By 1877, 'for every 1000 married women aged fifteen to fifty, 248 babies were born in England, 275 in Prussia, and 279 in Belgium, but only 173 in France'. Fertility declined much more slowly in the southern and less developed areas of Europe, such as most of Italy, Spain and Portugal, but also Sweden and Ireland, where it did not decline at all. However, in Italy, fertility diminished notably in northern industrial areas.[35]

Historians have debated how far the fertility decline (known as the demographic transition) was due to traditional methods, such as abstinence, withdrawal and abortion, or the newer barrier methods, such as sponges and diaphragms. Rubber was vulcanised in 1843–4, but condoms remained twice the price of a loaf of bread, and they were associated with prostitution; the new diaphragms of the later nineteenth-century were illegal and available only to a few brave souls. Withdrawal and abstinence were by far the most common methods, but they resulted in much conflict between men and women. Withdrawal depended on the husband's cooperation, and abstinence meant the lack of sexual pleasure for both (although many, but not all working-class women saw sex as more of a duty than a pleasure). Many women felt frustrated at their inability to refuse their husbands. National differences may be important here. Hera Cook argues that by the end of the nineteenth century, both middle-class men and women controlled their fertility largely by sexual restraint. But Anne-Marie Sohn observes a greater sexual openness in late nineteenth-century France. The number of abortions sharply increased and women enjoyed a somewhat greater degree of sexual openness.[36]

Late nineteenth-century women commonly resorted to abortion. They took various poisonous herbal or chemical remedies to 'bring on their periods', such as ergot of rye, savin or lead, or even submitted to abortionists' mechanical methods. Abortion allowed women to control their fertility without getting the permission of their husbands, who usually did not know; it was a twilight knowledge whispered among women. Even middle-class women resorted to abortion, if they could find a cooperative doctor. According to 'exasperated' doctors, these women did not believe that abortion was a sin or a crime before the third month, or at least before the fifth, when the foetus began to move.[37] However, authorities harshly punished abortionists when they could find them.

The extent to which Victorians recognised the possibility of erotic relationships between middle-class women has also been debated. The French, of course, were much more aware of this possibility than the British. George Sand recalled that in schools, girls had to walk in threes, rather than twos and were forbidden to kiss each other. Authors such as Maupassant and Baudelaire were fascinated by lesbians, but they depicted them as fearful, perverse creatures.[38] But in Germany and Britain, awareness

of lesbianism seems to have been much lower. Some years ago Lillian Faderman wrote an influential book arguing that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women could experience passionate friendships with each other, exchanging kisses and embraces, sharing beds and sending each other torrid, romantic letters, all without exciting any suspicion. Faderman also argued that such women were unlikely to have had physical sexual experiences with each other, since they had no concept of lesbianism as an erotic activity.[39]

Then Helena Whitbread decoded the diaries of Anne Lister, an early nineteenth-century Yorkshire gentlewoman. Anne Lister did not use the word 'lesbian', but she definitely understood the concept. At age thirty, she wrote, 'I love and only love the fairer sex and thus, beloved by them in turn my heart revolts from any other love but theirs.'[40] In the diaries in which she recorded her passionately sexual relationships with several women, she noted orgasms with an 'x' in the margins of entries. Anne Lister did not face the overt stigma of lesbianism, protected by her wealth and class status, but neighbours remained suspicious of her masculinity and whispered about her close relationship with another woman. Other scholars have found cases of gossip and rumours spread about women thought to be sexually attracted to others, and satirical descriptions of masculine women in novels. By the 1870s, new all-female institutions such as settlement houses and boarding schools allowed intense female friendships to flourish, and enabled women to make lives with each other, without having to marry. However, for the most part, these relationships were not viewed as sexual or stigmatised as sexual until around the turn of the twentieth century. Yet as Martha Vicinus argues, even with the silences around female–female desire, women found ways of articulating their passions for each other through coded languages, for instance appropriating family and marital metaphors to describe their relationships.[41]

Because working-class women generally did not write diaries or letters, we do not have as much evidence of such passionate friendships among them. Instead, court records and newspapers give us a different picture of the possibility of erotic desire between working women. However, the awareness of erotic possibilities between women varied greatly between national cultures. Theo van der Meer found several cases of women prosecuted for having sex with other women in Amsterdam in the 1790s. While some of them lived on the margins of society as beggars or prostitutes, at least one was from a 'respectable' social station. The authorities learned of their cases when neighbours denounced certain houses where women met to caress each other. However, unlike men who had sex with other men, these women did not form a subculture, and these cases are very rare. Even in cultures influenced by Germanic law, which did condemn sex between women, only a few cases surfaced in comparison with the large numbers of men prosecuted for sodomy.[42]

In Britain, many hundreds of women passed as men in search of adventure, better pay and safety in travelling. Newspapers frequently gave short accounts of these women, and popular songs and pamphlets also celebrated their exploits. However, we cannot know how many of these women were motivated by lesbian desire. Many ballads told of young women who disguised themselves as men in order to find their male lovers who had joined the army or navy. These songs enabled women to reimagine a different path for heterosexual romance, as they experienced many adventures and proved their bravery on the way to finding their lovers. Yet tales of female soldiers also enabled female desire to be understood indirectly. In autobiographical accounts, female

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soldiers, such as the Russian Nadezhda Durova, claimed that young women flirted with them, forcing them to leave town quickly before they had to disappoint the young woman or reveal their true identities. A few cases of 'female husbands' emerged. While very rarely female husbands were portrayed as criminals attempting to swindle innocent women, usually they lived with another woman in a long-standing couple. The 'husband' blended into working-class culture, working as a carpenter or sawyer, or some such typical masculine occupation, drinking with his workmates and even behaving violently toward his 'wife'. The wife typically claimed to be completely unaware of her 'husband's' true sex. While historians have interpreted these women as precursors of lesbians, dressing as men because they could conceive of no other way of being sexual with and loving women, more recent interpretations would understand them as women who actively wanted to play a masculine role or even change sex.[43]

In general, the concept of lesbianism did not overtly appear in early nineteenth-century working-class British culture. Prostitutes and other denizens of the streets sometimes insulted masculine women as hermaphrodites, or 'moffrydites' but the term 'lesbian' was not used until later in the century. Of course, many women may have engaged in passionate, even sexual friendships with each other. One authority believed that among all-female work environments, such as needlework establishments, women 'excite each other's passions' and therefore become hysteric. Dr Michael Ryan, however, never found any hint of lesbianism among English prostitutes.[44] In contrast, French authorities often noted that prostitutes engaged in lesbian relationships, sharing beds, looking out for each other and quarrelling in jealous rages.In 1828, doctors also observed lesbian attachments among women in French prisons. Prostitution was one of the few occupations where women could make enough money, if they were lucky, to support themselves and live together, enabling those women who wished to fulfil erotic desires for other women.

Prostitution was a very common female occupation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, given the fact that female wages were too low for survival. Many women who sold sex, occasionally or full time, could not be identified easily as prostitutes; they occupied discreet rooms and worked at other jobs. In St Petersburg, peasant women coming to look for work in the city often had to exchange sex for lodging or even to find a job. The women who appear in records of the police, lock hospitals (which treated venereal disease) or Magdalen reformatories were more likely to be fulltime sex workers and followed quite a different trajectory than unmarried mothers. Most prostitutes had lost one or both parents. Orphans brought up in workhouses, foster care or orphanages were often sent out to earn their own living by age twelve, and thus became vulnerable to sexual exploitation. They began to have sex earlier than other women, at sixteen or even younger, although the number of child prostitutes was low. Working as domestic servants or needlewomen, they had no home to fall back on if they lost their jobs.[45]

During the nineteenth century, authorities tried to develop new institutions and regulations to deal with prostitution. Authorities also believed that by controlling prostitution, they could regulate the 'dangerous' classes, the working people who seemed so prone to revolutionary riots and strikes. The French pioneered the system of registered and regulated prostitution which spread across Europe from the early nineteenth century onwards. First put forth in the revolutionary era, the idea of regulation was revived in 1804, as fears of venereal disease also increased as troops

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moved all across Europe during the Napoleonic wars. But the system was only rigorously instituted in 1828.The system spread to Brussels and Russia in 1843–4. In Italy, the regulation of prostitution was introduced by Camillo Cavour, the politician who engineered the unification of Italy and who saw regulation as a way of modernising and civilising Italy. In central and eastern Europe, the regulation of prostitution had somewhat different roots in the old system of municipal brothels, resurrected in the early nineteenth century by the morals police who tried to confine prostitution to certain parts of towns or even, in some cases, to run their own brothels. In turn, the Prussian system influenced the Polish system of Warsaw in 1802. By 1870, the new unified German state supplanted these local regulations with its own system of regulation.

Although the British had long resisted the regulatory system, colonial authorities first introduced it in 1857 to Hong Kong, and in 1864 the state established a system of registration and forcible treatment in garrison and port towns in England, and extended it to Ireland, though not to Scotland. These Contagious Diseases Acts aimed to protect soldiers and sailors from venereal disease. Various systems of registration under the Contagious Diseases Acts were also put into place in the Straits Settlements (Singapore), the Cape Colony and India. Authorities tended to regard native women as potential prostitutes who could fulfil the sexual needs of soldiers but who also might infect them; registration and treatment of women was seen as the solution, rather than controlling men.[46]

In all these systems, the police were empowered to require all women who worked as prostitutes to register with the police and to submit to medical examinations for venereal disease. If they were found to be infected, they had to undergo treatment at a lock hospital. The police also wanted prostitutes to work in brothels rather than independently, because then they would be easier to observe, register and regulate. The police could also use these rules to harass any woman on the street, even if she did not sell sex. In Italy, any woman without a job found on the streets at night or in a dancehall could be arrested, charged with being a clandestine prostitute and forced to submit to a medical exam or sent back to her family. In 1880s Warsaw, out of '4,000–5000 detained and examined … only 700–1200' were registered as prostitutes; the rest were working women, such as maidservants out on the street at night.[47] The policing and regulation of prostitution led to greater isolation and stigmatisation of prostitutes as they were cut off from their neighbours who might have accepted women who had sex occasionally for money.

The system of regulation failed to control both venereal disease and prostitution. For those women caught up in the system, registration was an onerous burden so, as a result, most women who engaged in sexual commerce evaded registration. They avoided working in the licensed brothels, which may have diminished in number as a result. By the late nineteenth century, the numbers of prostitutes also declined, perhaps as a result of increased economic opportunity for women. From the 1860s, state regulation of prostitution also came under sustained attack by the abolitionist movement, who wished to do away with the system. For many abolitionists, the system enshrined the double standard, accepting male unchastity as 'natural' but punishing women for being prostitutes. For others, state regulation violated the individual's rights to privacy and represented an expansion of state power. The movement brought together middleclass women, liberal individualists, socialists and churches and chapels.

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In Britain, Josephine Butler spearheaded the Ladies National Association against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Many of its adherents were originally motivated by religious horror at state sanctioning of prostitution. But as they listened to prostitutes tell of the humiliation they faced at the hands of the authorities, the ladies began to see these women as their sisters and the cause as a matter of women's rights. These middle-class women faced violent attacks from angry men in garrison towns and opposition from members of parliament who believed ladies should not speak out on such matters. But they also found allies among working-class men angry at the class exploitation of prostitution. Eventually, the movement forced the government to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts in England and Ireland in 1886. In 1888, the Acts were repealed in Canada, St Helena, Trinidad and Barbados, but the colonial governments of Jamaica, Gibraltar, Penang, Straits, India and Hong Kong insisted on keeping them, despite intense opposition from the woman's movement, missionaries and groups of colonised people such as the Bramo Somaj.[48]

In Germany, the movement against regulated prostitution brought together a broad coalition. Socialists believed that the system allowed soldiers to exploit working-class women and resulted from the elite militaristic domination of politics. Evangelical Protestants supported the state, but they viewed prostitution as a symptom of social disorder and immorality. Feminists regarded prostitution as the sexual exploitation of women. However, the authorities banned most meetings of the abolitionist movement, limiting its efficacy. Feminists also united with nationalists and the Left in Italy against the regulation system, arguing that newly unified Italy should abolish the system to prove its 'moral rebirth' as a nation. In 1876, the new government conceded to the movement by modifying the regulations so that only brothels, not individual prostitutes, would be registered. But, in practice, police regulation of prostitution continued. In France, the creation of the anti-clerical Third Republic led to intensified hostility against the Catholic church, which abolitionists blamed for the survival of the regulationist system. Liberals and radicals attacked the police system as corrupt and hypocritical. However, the system was only modified, not abolished, in 1904.

The 1880s and 1890s also witnessed increasing concern for child victims of sexual exploitation. In 1885, the white-slave scandal burst onto the British scene when journalist W. T. Stead alleged that he had been able to purchase a thirteen-year-old virgin for 10 pounds. In response, huge numbers of people, chiefly women and working-class men, demonstrated against what they perceived as the class and sexual exploitation of children. Stead obviously exaggerated the extent of the trade in very young girls, identifying the epicentre of the 'white-slave trade' as Belgium. A judicial enquiry confirmed that English girls were sold for 300 francs to Belgian brothels, and that the chief of the police had been complicit in the system. As a result, the regulationist system was repealed in Belgium. Historians first explained the white-slave agitation as a symptom of Victorian repression, a refusal to acknowledge childhood sexuality. But as the current feminist movement began uncovering the extent of child abuse today, historians have shifted ground somewhat. They acknowledge the genuine concern social activists felt for sexually abused children, but they also point out that late Victorian activists xenophobically projected their anxieties about child sexual abuse onto foreign exploiters.[49]

Anger at the state sanctioning of prostitution and the sexual exploitation of women also led to the movement to promote wider social purity by abolishing the double

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standard and advocating chastity for both men and women. Although members of the abolitionist movement had tried to protect the civil rights of prostitutes, the social-purity movement increased the regulation of female sexuality and advocated censorship of sexual representations in popular culture. In England, they supported the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, which raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen for girls. However, it also allowed the police to remove girls from homes suspected of being brothels, or where women accused of being prostitutes lived, and to put them into reformatories or industrial schools. Social reformers regarded the child victims of sexual abuse as sexually contaminated themselves and incarcerated them in industrial homes where they could not 'corrupt' 'normal' children. In Germany, the movement to raise the age of consent did not commence until somewhat later, due to restrictions on women's political activity. In 1910, the Federation of German Women's Organisations wanted to raise the upper age limit for the age of consent from fourteen to sixteen. 'Clearly, although rape and sexual abuse were referred to only in veiled language, these measures were designed to protect underage girls from these crimes.'[50]

The exploitation of children also became an issue in the British Empire when the British Government attempted to change the age of consent for marriage in India in 1891. Historians debate whether the British Government was genuinely concerned with young girls, or whether it was trying to impose alien customs with its imperial power. Research has found that the British Government reluctantly initiated the Act under pressure not only from European missionaries and women's groups, but also from Indian social reformers and female activists. But British opponents of the Bill accepted the contention that Indian female sexuality was so intense that women needed to be married at young ages. The Government did not enforce the Bill very effectively, fearful of alienating Hindu traditionalists.[51]

The social-purity movement also strongly influenced the strand of the later suffragette movement that blamed male sexual desire for the ills of women. Most notoriously, Christabel Pankhurst claimed that 80 per cent of men were infected with venereal disease and advocated 'Votes for Women / Chastity for Men'. Less stridently, many feminists wished for marriages based on spiritual unity, not just physical passion. The sexual objectification of women seemed to stand in the way of women's emancipation. Many German feminists also focused on the dangers of sexual desire rather than the pleasures it could bring. For instance, in 1908 they opposed contraception and abortion because birth control would simply make women too vulnerable to men's sexual demands, even sexual abuse.[52]

Another strand of the European women's movement took a more positive approach to sex, joining with the sex radicals. Birth control became a major issue. For instance, Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh were put on trial for obscenity in 1877 for distributing birth-control tracts and were sentenced to two months in prison. Although that sentence was later lifted, Annie Besant was deprived of the custody of her child for being an 'immoral' woman. However, the publicity around the trial vastly increased the sale of their birth-control tracts and may have contributed to the fertility decline in England in certain areas. In the 1880s, the Dutch Dr Aletta Jacobs began using Dr Mensinga's pessary, or Dutch cap (similar to a diaphragm), after testing it on the women who came to her for contraceptive advice. After finding it safe and effective, she prescribed it in her medical practice but ran into fierce opposition from doctors and the Government. The Catholic church effectively suppressed birth-control information,

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and fertility actually increased in the Netherlands. Around the turn of the century, Stella Browne, Helene Stocker and the French feminists Nelly Roussel and Dr Madeleine Pelletier advocated birth control as the key to women's emancipation. Roussel denounced the idea that women must serve society by giving birth, no matter how they suffered. Instead, women needed to serve the state as citizens, workers and thinkers. Pelletier also championed abortions and attacked the middle class for its hypocrisy in practising birth control in private yet refusing to allow birth-control information to be publicly accessible for workers. But French birth-control advocates were followed by the police and often arrested.[53]

Sex and modernity in the long twentieth century

For many radicals from the 1890s onwards, overthrowing Victorian sexual repression seemed to be a marker of the new modern way of thinking, but until after the First World War, they remained an avant-garde fighting against a hostile culture. In Germany, Helene Stocker espoused the theory that sexual desire was a creative force for humanity. Following the philosophy of monism, she believed that body and soul could not be separated and that to repress the sexual drive therefore harmed the mind. Ellen Key, the Swedish feminist, argued that in 'exalted individuals' sexual desire evoked 'noble feelings, and love of everything which is high and beautiful in life', although she did see women's primary role as motherhood. In Britain, Edward Carpenter and Stella Browne challenged conventional principles of middle-class morality. In the pages of their publication, the *Adult and the Freewoman*, they debated the idea of 'free unions', monogamy, masturbation and heterosexuality. Younger feminists were no longer content with the older generation's rather ethereal ideal of spiritual passion and wanted to explore the concept of female sexual pleasure.[54]

These radicals often turned to the works of the sexologists to justify their cause. However, the sexologists did not influence popular culture or policy until the inter-war years. Many of their works were censored or were so expensive they had a limited circulation, and Anne-Marie Sohn has found that their ideas and terminology did not trickle down to ordinary people.[55] Nonetheless, for those in avant-garde circles the sexologists pioneered the open discussion of sex, especially female sexuality. But sexology could be problematic as well as inspiring for women.

Sexologists decisively rejected religious assumptions about sexuality and instead studied sex scientifically. By categorising anatomical variations and by insisting on the centrality of sexual selection to evolution, Darwin strongly influenced many sexologists. They were also influenced by Geddes and Thompson, two biologists who went even further than Darwin to posit males and females as fundamentally different, the former active, the latter passive. This focus on biological categorisation also paralleled contemporary efforts to categorise human anatomy by race. But feminists also used Darwinian ideas for their own ends. Some English feminists argued that women should use their sexual power to select men of a higher morality and therefore improve the human race. Helene Stocker 'welcomed' Darwinism as a refutation of the doctrine of original sin. 'If sexual desire was necessary and hereditary, then how could it be sinful?' Sexologists differentiated between the drive for procreation and what they variously categorised as the drive for pleasure or relationships.[56] As a result, they could acknowledge women's sexual desires went beyond the need for a child. They argued

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that female sexual satisfaction was necessary within marriage, and some even raised the possibility that women could be sexually satisfied beyond marriage. However, their ideas on female sexual desire could also be highly problematic.

The most sophisticated formulation of sexual desire came from Freud who strongly distinguished between the sexual drive and its object. He is notorious for first believing in the widespread incidence of childhood sexual abuse and then denying it. But by claiming that children fantasised about sex with their parents, Freud developed the theory of infantile sexual desire and the idea of the unconscious. He believed that children experienced a diffuse, 'polymorphously perverse' sexual desire that did not have a particular object. This desire gained an object through attachments to parents, especially to the mother. But children had to learn that these attachments were incestuous and forbidden, and therefore had to be transferred, when adult, to persons of the opposite sex. While it was fairly straightforward for a male to transfer his desire from his mother to an adult woman, the path to adult heterosexuality was much more difficult and circuitous for a woman. Freud believed that girls first experienced sexual arousal through the clitoris. However, this was a 'masculine' form of desire, improperly active. To reach maturity, a female not only had to transfer her desire from her mother to her father, and then to adult men, she also had to abandon clitoral eroticism for vaginal eroticism. In fact, he claimed to have discovered the vaginal orgasm in 1905.[57]

Most sexologists regarded sexual desire in much more biological terms, concentrating on the alleged differences between active masculinity and passive femininity. Sheila Jeffreys argues that sexologists used pseudo-scientific ideas to argue that it was 'normal' for women to want to be dominated and to experience pain during sex with men. Some sexologists failed to see marital rape as rape, instead, categorising rapists as perverted, psychopathological deviants, different from normal men. They also ratified the idea that adult women could not be raped, that they secretly wanted to be sexually assaulted. However, French sexologists criticised marital rape, at least on the wedding night; they warned husbands not to deflower their wives violently, concerned wives would fear sex during their married life.[58] It must also be recognised that sexologists acknowledged and categorised male masochism, although they saw it as a perversion, not as an extension of 'normal' desire.

While sexologists asserted the existence of female desire, many of them feared it could not be controlled. Continental thinkers such as Cesare Lombroso were more likely than their English counterparts to believe that sexual perversions were embedded in the female body. He regarded prostitutes as degenerate specimens. 'Normal' women, he believed, should be passive sexually, because if women expressed active sexual desire, they could lose control and endanger the social order. Lombroso also equated racial and sexological thinking, regarding prostitutes as atavistic throwbacks resembling 'primitive' races. French thinkers feared the 'New Women' who appeared around the fin-de-siècle, asserting their right to a public life and private pleasure. Newly discovering the 'unconscious forces working in the human mind', these sexologists believed that women lacked a 'rational, autonomous self'. Otto Weininger, an Austrian writer, similarly believed that men were more evolved and spiritual than women, while women were totally shaped by their sexual organs. Men risked being dragged down into the mire of material life if they engaged in sexual love for women. Weininger's misogynist, self-hating anti-Semitism was meant to justify the hostility many men felt for the fin-de-siècle New Woman. Yet some sex radicals and feminists

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found that his unflinching exploration of sexual passion explained why conventional morality was so destructive for women as well. He declared that 'the sexual impulse destroys the body and mind of the woman, and the psychical eroticism destroys her psychical existence', because men did not love women's true selves, but only projected onto them their own fantasies.[59]

Sexology's implications for lesbianism were also ambiguous. Some sexologists categorised homosexuals as gender inverts whose sexual desire could be explained by the idea that they had been born with the wrongly sexed body. Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, two English sexologists, initially believed that heredity determined the inclinations of 'mannish' lesbians; they were 'inverts' who were born with masculine elements to their personality. Some sexologists initially hypothesised that lesbians were mannish women with enlarged clitorises. However, the Russian Dr Tarnovski found that the lesbians he examined exhibited 'normal' personalities and anatomy. Homosexual desires could also be seen as a variation of the 'normal' sexual drive, whether benign or perverse. Through the early 1900s the 'official' British medical profession held to the degeneracy theory: homosexuality was 'an acquired and depraved manifestation of the sexual passions'. However, other sexologists, such as Ellis, argued that homosexuality was a natural variation rather than a sickness or perversion. They often recognised the bisexuality of sexual desire, but more often, they regarded homosexuality as a separate identity or innate form of desire. Sheila Jeffreys argues that sexology stigmatised lesbians by stereotyping them as mannish and perverse. Their theories stigmatised the passionate friendships among girls and women which previously had not necessary been seen as sexual. Some sexologists accused feminists of stimulating artificial lesbian desires among women who would normally want to marry and have children. Even some feminist sex radicals believed that the repression of heterosexual desire would lead to 'substitute homosexuality'.[60] By the turn of the century, lesbianism was illegal in both Austria and Finland.

Sexology also had positive connotations for lesbians, however. In Germany, the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld joined forces with feminist sex radical Helene Stocker to protest against unsuccessful German efforts to criminalise lesbianism. Using the case-study method, Ellis and Carpenter also found that many lesbians did not fit within the mannish stereotype and even those who did had many admirable qualities. Sexological discussions also made it possible for some lesbians to recognise and create their own identities. In Germany, several turn-of-the century novelists combined sexological theories of inversion with their own experiences to portray their erotic experiences with other women.[61]

Many sexologists were also very involved in the new field of eugenics, the pseudo-science of human breeding. While eugenics is now closely associated with its most evil consequence, the Nazi regime, until the 1930s eugenicist thinking was common not only among conservative racists but also among many socialists, liberals and even feminists. Some socialists argued that birth control would enable the working class to improve their own condition, and pointed out that poor maternal health and infant mortality endangered the 'race'. Some feminists believed that eugenics could give more power to women who could use birth control to experience sexual fulfilment and also to choose the most fit mate, and the most healthy time, to procreate. As Swedish feminist Ellen Key declared: 'Freedom for love's selection, under conditions favourable to the race; limitation of the freedom, not of love, but of procreation,

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when the conditions are unfavourable to the race.' These feminists also argued that the state should support unmarried mothers, out of concern that their children would die as infants or grow up to be stunted.[62] However, such feminists often conflicted with mainstream eugenicists, who believed that individual control of reproduction must be subordinate to the state.

In Germany and Britain, eugenicists feared that the 'unfit', i.e. the poor and the working class, would reproduce too much, swamping the 'fit' middle classes. They argued that middle-class women failed in their eugenic duty by having too few children and using birth control, not for eugenic reasons, but for fulfilment. They argued that women must subordinate their own needs for an education and a career to fulfil their primary purpose of motherhood. Unmarried mothers and prostitutes were defined as unfit and feeble-minded and were confined to reformatory institutions or hospitals. In Italy and France, eugenicists believed that population increase was necessary, even among the working class. French eugenicists focused their ire on women, whom they blamed for using birth control and abortion instead of having large families.

Eugenicists' racial theories about degeneration also influenced laws about concubinage in colonial settings. In the Dutch colonies, for instance, authorities had tolerated concubinage for centuries, because they believed that white men needed a sexual outlet, but did not want the presence of white women to interfere with the colonial mission. However, the resulting mixed-race population undermined theories of racial difference and superiority. Around 1900, colonial authorities began to ban concubinage and encouraged white women to settle in Indonesia and marry white men. White women were therefore given the responsibility to control the sexual drives of white men and to preserve the 'race'. Of course, tensions remained because such controls could never be effective.[63]

After the First World War, these radical ideas about sexology, eugenics, birth control and homosexuality moved from the fringes to the centre of society. The war had disrupted sexual relations and sexual ideas as women took over men's jobs and experienced a new freedom from dependency and chaperonage. Young women found soldiers alluring, and illegitimacy rates shot up after a long decline. But above all, the mass carnage of the battlefields traumatised society, increasing eugenic fears about a loss of population and the fragility of masculinity. A language of blood and nation began to replace the old religious rhetoric of sin and damnation. The French denounced birth-control advocates as complicit with Germans in destroying their population, and French novelists used the female vampire as a metaphor for the war that had sucked out men's lifeblood. In turn, the Germans personified France as a blood-drenched prostitute when French troops occupied the Ruhr after the war. Racial anxieties also intensified when the French used Senegalese troops in the war, resurrecting the myth of the black rapist – or the reality of mixed-race children.[64] After the war, the image of the 'New Woman' fascinated and horrified readers, as in the best-selling novel *La Garçonne*, published by Victor Marguerite in 1922, which portrayed a wild young woman who smoked, drank and had affairs with both men and women. Her short skirts and bobbed hair made modernity, and sexual freedom, boldly visible.

In the 1920s, it was often unclear whether lesbianism was just another sexual variation for adventurous sexual women, or a distinct sexual identity. *La Garçonne* shocked moralists because she was from the *grand bourgeois*, not a bohemian or working-class woman who could be dismissed as inherently immoral. French writers feared

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that, like *'La Garçonne*', any woman could give into her desires and have sex with a woman. But French female poets, writers, artists and film-makers began to depict lesbian desire from their own perspective after the war, following the pre-war lead of Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien. These women, such as Germaine Dulac and Marie Laurencin, formed an avant-garde, international coterie in inter-war Paris. In Germany, working-class and middle-class women began to form a much more extensive subculture, especially in Berlin. Several lesbian magazines were published in which women could recount their experiences, justify their desires and publicise new meeting places. A network of bars sprang up, where women, some with cropped hair and masculine suits, could dance and flirt with each other. Lesbians also formed social, cultural and political clubs. However, these women often faced suspicion and hostility from neighbours and family; conservatives (and even some socialists) reacted with horror at what they perceived as sexual decadence.[65]

Until 1928, lesbianism remained 'twilight' knowledge in Britain. Many women still lived together in passionate friendships without necessarily seeing themselves as lesbians, and one psychologist even accepted these relationships as viable in an era when so many men had died in the war. An effort in 1920–1 to criminalise sexual relations between women in England failed, in part, because members of parliament did not want to publicise lesbianism, believing very few women even knew of its existence. As Laura Doan points out, the 1920s fashions of close-cropped hair, trousers and ties were as popular among heterosexual flappers as among lesbians. However, the 1920s also witnessed an increased hostility to spinsters, who came under suspicion as sex-starved creatures who might warp the minds of young people under their care. The trial of Radclyffe Hall's book *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 did much more to publicise the concept of a lesbian identity. Hall drew on, but also modified, sexological discourses from Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, as well as her experiences with women partners, to craft a novelistic plea for tolerance for lesbians as inborn 'inverts'. The novel sold well, but a conservative newspaper publisher, frustrated that his campaign against flappers and the extension of female suffrage had failed, demanded that it be censored. The Government forced the publishers to withdraw the book from circulation until 1949, but the trial publicised the concept of lesbianism much more widely than ever before. As a result, masculine fashions and female friendships suddenly became stigmatised. However, many lesbians also found Hall's ideas to be a great revelation and inspiration because it provided them with an identity and a rationale for their desires.[66]

Heterosexual behaviour had begun to change before the First World War, but these shifts became much more apparent in the 1920s. In pre-war France, the word 'to flirt' became widely used to describe seductive wordplay, kissing and caressing. By 1900, an estimated 20 per cent of French women had sex before marriage. In Britain, young people may have indulged in petting as they engaged in the courtship rituals of 'walking out' and the 'monkey rank'. But statistical studies of women's heterosexual experiences over the generations find a sharp break between the pre- and post-First World War generations. A survey of British women found that 19 per cent of married women born before 1904 had sex before their weddings, while 36 per cent of those born between 1904 and 1914 did. Only 8 per cent of married women born before 1904 had engaged in 'petting' before marriage, but 22 per cent of the next generation petted. A German study found that under 40 per cent of women born between 1895

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and 1907 who were surveyed had had orgasms at any time in their lives, while 78 per cent of those born between 1907 and 1916 did. However, many women remained sexually unsatisfied in the inter-war years, as these changes percolated slowly through the generations. One French study from 1938 found that half of women were not sexually satisfied in marriage, while half regularly or sometimes experienced sexual satisfaction. In Vienna, Wilhelm Reich pointed out that workers' sex lives were constrained by their overcrowded housing; families often shared one room, giving no privacy for sex. Marie Stopes, the pioneering writer of marital advice, received thousands of letters from men and women frustrated at sexual ignorance, the difficulties of birth control and their lack of sexual pleasure.[67]

In response, sexologists argued that both men and women needed to be sexually satisfied to ensure marital happiness and the health of society, and their message finally became much more influential in popular culture during the 1920s and 1930s. The marriage-counselling movement shifted sexual morality away from the old Victorian emphasis on fear of sex imposed by authorities to a new idea of the individual's self-regulation of sex. This movement also promised to remake and transform heterosexuality with a new emphasis on 'companionate marriage'. This movement has been criticised as reinforcing 'compulsory heterosexuality' and downplaying clitoral orgasms, following Freud's lead. Some of Freud's followers warned wives that if they persisted in their 'immature' clitoral orgasms, they would never be able to have the proper vaginal orgasm. The psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte even underwent surgery to move her clitoris closer to her vagina so that she could have an orgasm in the Freudian way. The idea that 'frigid' women also rejected their femininity put pressure on women to conform sexually. The sex-reform movement in the inter-war period, however, was not dominated by Freud's ideas, and the insistence on a vaginal rather than clitoral orgasm did not become widespread in sex advice until the 1940s. Most sex counsellors believed that a clitoral orgasm was better than leaving a woman unsatisfied. Sex counsellors urged husbands and wives to please each other sexually, insisting that husbands must learn how to bring their wives to orgasm. For instance, Marie Stopes spread information about female sexual pleasure to the masses in her book *Married Love* (1918). She criticised men for thinking that the male sexual drive was overwhelming and had to be satisfied. Instead, men must recognise when a woman became sexually receptive and learn to please her sexually, including how to stimulate the clitoris. Her 'romantic' style did not threaten popular audiences, because she portrayed women as 'mysterious coy nymphs always alluring and escaping'. The Dutch doctor Theodore van de Velde, whose *Ideal Marriage* was widely translated and extremely popular, taught men how to please their wives, including how to perform oral sex on women. He instructed couples that their goal should be simultaneous orgasms. Yet he also believed that female sexuality was passive and that men must retain control and skill in order to allow their wives to lose control. He disapproved of women on top in sex as a perversion of natural gender relations.[68]

Many sex reformers also believed in sexual or moral hygiene, which would modernise sex. They believed that uncontrolled sexual desire could be dangerous, but that properly managed and regulated, sexual pleasure could contribute to marital stability and social productivity. In Germany, social hygiene clinics were opened to counsel men and women for the purposes of eugenic marriage, but they were not very popular, since people preferred more practical information about sexual pleasure and birth control.

Socialists in Berlin and Vienna sometimes warned young people not to indulge too much in irresponsible activity, but instead, to sublimate their desires into healthy outdoor activities. In response, Wilhelm Reich criticised the social-democratic and communist sexual-hygiene movements for not focusing enough on sexual pleasure among working-class young men and women. The movement should not try to regulate and direct sexual activity, he argued, but to teach young people how to enjoy sexual pleasure. However, Reich and his followers did not always acknowledge the difficulties women in particular found in enjoying sexual pleasure and expressed hostility to homosexuality.[69]

The dramatic drop in family size among the working class also represented a significant change from the pre-First World War generation and helped make sexual pleasure possible, especially for women. Whereas working-class women of the pre-war generation tended to have large families, family size dropped to two or three children, and in many cases in Germany, only one child. Working-class women had relied on abstinence, withdrawal or abortion to control their fertility. The number of abortions in Germany and France had skyrocketed even before the war. After the war, governments in Britain and Germany slowly and reluctantly allowed health clinics to prescribe birth control for married couples, and chemists and mail-order suppliers also sold condoms. In Britain, Marie Stopes's popular works spread the knowledge and motivation for birth control to a popular audience.[70]

In Germany, the government forbade the advertisement, but not the sale, of contraceptives. Millions of men had used condoms during the war, and they became cheap and widely available. Doctors and chemists also invented new forms of diaphragms, IUDs (intrauterine devices) and chemical contraceptives, which were distributed in clinics set up by new birth-control leagues. These clinics preferred to give women chemical contraceptives and diaphragms, because condoms meant depending on men, and cervical caps and IUDs required a doctor. In 1926, the Social Democratic Government passed a law diminishing punishments for abortion, which was allowed in cases of 'medical necessity'. As James Woycke argues, once women had recourse to abortion, they realised that control of fertility was in their own hands so they became more receptive to the barrier means of birth control that were becoming more available.[71] Underground abortions were very widely practised especially among working-class women who found it difficult to get a doctor to sign off on the medical necessity clause.

Birth control and abortion also became an issue for socialists in revolutionary situations. Soviet Russia legalised abortion, through the first trimester, in 1920. In part, Alexandra Kollontai, a Bolshevik feminist, inspired these ideas through her insistence on female autonomy and free love. However, the Communist Government also faced a chaotic period of civil war in 1920, with millions of unmarried mothers and victims of rape and no resources to care for these children. During the 1920s, the Soviets claimed to be increasing access to contraception to enable women to make decisions about their sex lives and motherhood and to diminish the need for abortion. However, given the shortage of consumer goods, contraceptives were not the highest priority for the Soviet Government. Some Spanish anarchists, very interested in sex reform and eugenics, legalised abortion in Catalonia in the 1930s and promised to set up birth-control clinics to diminish need for abortion. During the turmoil of the Spanish Civil War and the hostility of the church and even many feminists to birth control, however, these promises could not be carried out.[72]

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The inter-war period also witnessed a harsh backlash against these advances in contraception. The French legislature banned the distribution of contraceptive information, except condoms, in 1920, in a fit of hysteria about the decline of population after the war. The Government also prosecuted abortionists even more harshly. The birth rate did increase slightly in France in the 1920s, but Frenchwomen's long tradition of controlling their fertility could not be legislated away. In Italy, the rise of Fascism also led to increasing restrictions on birth control and abortion. The Italian birth-control movement had always been weak, in part because, unlike their northern European counterparts, Italian eugenicists saw large families as a proof of national, even imperial, virility. During the 1920s, Fascists warned that the birth rate was declining and must be reversed. From 1926–7, the Fascist Government of Mussolini heavily censored any birth-control information that might come into the country from foreign sources and punished abortion even more severely than before. However, these and other efforts to raise the birth rate were remarkably unsuccessful, and at least in one instance, women protested at the arrest of their local abortionist. In Soviet Russia, Alexandra Kollontai's ideas of sexual freedom increasingly came under attack as self-indulgence. In a 1925 interview, Lenin said that 'lack of restraint in one's sexual life is bourgeois'.[73] By the time Stalin took power, much more conservative ideas about sexuality held sway, as women's desires were subordinate to the needs of the state, and abortion was outlawed in 1936.

By 1933, the Nazis had destroyed the sex-reform movement in Germany. They had campaigned for years against what they perceived as communist and socialist sexual immorality, depicting sexualised women as symbolically responsible for Germany's defeat in the First World War. They blamed Jews for the sexual freedom of the Weimar years and promised to restore the traditional family, thus appealing to conservative and religious elements of public opinion. Upon seizing power, they immediately banned birth-control information and distribution, repealed the medical-necessity clause for abortion, closed down sex-advice clinics and burned Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sex Research. They stigmatised abortion and sex reform as Jewish and communistic. They institutionalised 'promiscuous' women and arrested suspected abortionists and their clients. The Nazis, of course, were motivated by a eugenicist agenda, but one very different from that espoused by Weimar sex reformers. Racial hatred motivated them above all. In 1935, the Nazis forbade sex and intermarriage between Jews and Aryans. Neighbours harassed and denounced mixed couples to the police, although only men could be prosecuted for this offence. They put forth the idea that Aryan women were pure and needed to be protected, less they become corrupted and hypersexual. Jewish women, by contrast, were seen as racially promiscuous and dangerously seductive.[74]

Nazi sexual ideology, however, also differed from traditional conservative, especially religious, sexual morality. They did not intend to repress sex *per se*, but to ensure that sexual activities served the state and racial purity.[75] In 1935, they re-legalised certain forms of abortion to allow 'or force' the termination of 'unfit' pregnancies in women who were prostitutes, promiscuous, mentally disabled, foreign slave workers or German women impregnated by Jewish or foreign slave-worker men. A powerful strand of thought within Nazi discourse actually regarded 'Aryan' sex as healthy. Members of the Schutzstaffeln, the SS, blamed 'oriental Christians' for suppressing 'healthy' sexual attitudes. For these Nazis, sex did not need to be confined in marriage. As Julia Roos notes, 'Himmler resented the church's "moralistic" stance on

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extramarital sex, which he believed was conducive to the spread of male homosexual relations.' The Nazis reintroduced state-regulated brothels in 1933 and, eventually, established military brothels. They believed that men needed a sexual outlet, but unlike the Weimar sex reformers, they did not see sex as a vehicle for personal fulfilment. The SS also strengthened the position of single mothers, providing them with more welfare benefits in order to deter them from abortion and to encourage them to 'present the Fuhrer with a child'. They established secret *Lebensborn* homes for unmarried mothers. Fathers of illegitimate children gained more custody rights, but Hitler blocked a proposal to allow the SS to take in illegitimate children against the mother's will, and there is no evidence that these homes were used as places for the SS to 'mate' with Aryan women.[76]

The ambiguities of Nazi attitudes towards sex and women can also be seen in their policies toward lesbians. Once the Nazis had completely defeated feminism, they did not regard lesbians as much of a threat. In 1935, an effort to criminalise lesbianism was rejected because it would be too difficult to distinguish between lesbians and innocent female friends. The Nazis also believed that lesbianism could be a temporary state and that such women could be reclaimed for marriage. However, they also harassed lesbians. The lesbian subculture of bars, magazines and clubs disappeared, and lesbians had to adopt a protective camouflage of more feminine clothing and even false marriages. More visible lesbians could be sent to the concentration camps as 'asocial' when communism or other forms of dissidence brought them to the attention of authorities. However, the Nazis did not persecute lesbians as severely as they did homosexual men, thousands of whom died in the camps. Even then, the Nazis believed that some men who had sex with other men only once or twice could be reclaimed as soldiers.[77]

In the immediate post-war period, German fears of social chaos and contamination were projected onto women. In the occupied territories, the authorities forced women who worked in restaurants, bars and places of public entertainment to undergo examinations for venereal disease. But women who had been raped by invading Soviet soldiers were allowed to have abortions, a remnant of eugenic policies. Soon after, conservative West Germans tried to repudiate the Nazis by claiming that they were sexually promiscuous and immoral. Their solution was traditional families and sexual repression. The Nazis' restrictions on abortions were not lifted, and the network of sex-advice and birth-control clinics was not revived. Social scrutiny of young people's sexual activity was so strict that landladies could be accused of pimping for allowing tenants to have overnight visitors of the opposite sex.[78]

In the Soviet zones of eastern Europe, sexuality had to serve the state. In East Germany, abortion was recriminalised in 1950, despite women's protests. In the Soviet Union, the Government instructed doctors to report women who sought abortions in an effort to rebuild the population after the losses of the Second World War. But given the absence of other forms of contraception, which as small consumer goods were in short supply and not a priority for state industries, women in Russia and East Germany relied on abortion as their main form of birth control. The most dramatic example of state control over women's fertility came in Romania, where all abortion and birth control was banned and women were strictly monitored for pregnancies. However, in most areas of eastern Europe, unlike Romania, birth control was allowed and generous welfare benefits and daycare made it easier for women to work and take care of

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children. Yet, as Susan Gal notes, 'interwar communist discussions of sexual liberation and search for pleasure by women were replaced by a communist Puritanism that focused on reproductive sexuality; the existence of same-sex sexuality was simply denied.' Limitations on consumer goods made it more difficult for women to exert choices over birth control. Magazines did not stress sexual attractiveness and consumerism, and regarded sex as a duty for married women.[79]

In contrast, in 1950s' western Europe, the new consumerism was tied to marital adjustment. Freudianism gained greater influence, criticising women for clitoral orgasms and accusing them of penis envy or frigidity if they did not conform. Even in Sweden, where contraception was freely available, school sex-education curricula stressed chastity before marriage and warned that sex was primarily for procreation. General de Gaulle declared that French women must procreate to make France great once again. In Britain, governments feared a perceived expansion of street prostitution. In fact, the number of prostitutes was probably less than in the nineteenth century, but streetwalkers made London's streets seem seedy and dangerous. In 1959, the Street Offences Act forced many prostitutes off the streets and into 'commercial prostitution agencies and call-girl rackets'. But during the 1960s, a decline in demand and more economic opportunities for women led to a sharp drop in the number of prostitutes all over Europe. In France, 21 per cent of men born between 1922 and 1925 had their first sex with a prostitute, but only 6 per cent of men born between 1944 and 1951 were initiated by prostitutes, and today, almost no young men are. The same may have been true in Greece and Portugal where in previous generations, young men experienced their sexual initiation at a much younger age than young women of their own class. By the 1970s, young men and women had first sex at similar ages, probably with each other.[80]

Above all, the liberation movements of the 1960s challenged conventional sexual mores. In Germany, radicals inspired by Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse declared that Nazism had been caused, in part, by a bourgeois family structure which repressed natural sexual drives and therefore encouraged sado-masochistic impulses. They declared that Nazi influence could only be purged by overthrowing post-war restrictions on sex and experimenting with free sex and non-monogamy. Klaus Theweleit's historical volumes on *Male Fantasies* came out of this milieu. He hypothesised that German veterans after the First World War were engulfed by fears of fluid, threatening female sexuality, so in response, they yearned for hard masculine authority.[81]

The feminist movement was reborn in the tumult of the 1960s. As early as 1965, students began to agitate against regulations forbidding men to visit female students in their dorms, and, during 1968, the slogan 'make love not war' pervaded the student revolution. In part the student movement inspired women to demand their own liberation, but feminists also reacted with frustration against masculine claims for sexual freedom that ended up oppressing women. In France, restrictions on sex eroded as the women's movement established family-planning clinics and women rejected the pronatalist message. By 1967, the Government gave in and legalised contraception. By the early 1970s, abortion began to be legalised all across Europe, in France in 1975, and in Italy in 1978, both cases demonstrating the erosion of the Catholic church's control over sexuality. Britain and West Germany, however, required social or medical reasons for abortions. By 1972, East Germans legalised abortions for much the same reasons

as western governments: pressure from women who wanted to control their fertility.[82] The pill finally provided relatively safe and extremely effective contraception, as governments gradually made it available to single women.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, sections of the feminist movement also began to link pornography and sexual violence as oppressive to women. Feminists first protested against the Freudian emphasis on the vaginal orgasm. They even critiqued penetration, instead demanding clitoral orgasm.[83] Feminists also refuted the neo-Freudian idea that the rape of women and the sexual abuse of children were fantasies or individual perversions, arguing that sexual violence stemmed from structures of male domination.

The lesbian movement had its roots in both the gay-liberation movement and the feminist movement. A few lesbian clubs had sprung up in London, and the British magazine *Arena 3* started in 1963 and helped create a network of lesbians who had faced social isolation and employment discrimination.[84] By the late 1960s, lesbians could also join in the much more open and flamboyant Gay Liberation Front, but by the 1970s and 1980s lesbian separatism challenged this alliance. They proclaimed that rejecting men and having sex with women was a political act. Sheila Jeffreys' book, *The Spinster and her Enemies*, came out of this particularly historical moment, trying to trace back the lesbian heritage to the social-purity feminists of the late nineteenth century. But other feminists began to resist the message that sexual images were necessarily oppressive to women and equated the contemporary religious right with the late nineteenth-century social-purity movement. They warned that repressions on sexual expression could backfire and oppress women once again, and they also questioned the equation of celibacy with lesbian feminism, arguing that lesbianism was a sexual, not a political choice.

Between 1975 and 1989, the end of the Franco dictatorship in Spain and the end of the Cold War in eastern Europe transformed sexual cultures in similar ways. In most areas, women were able to fight back against the Catholic church's attempt to reimpose strictures on abortion. The puritanical attitudes of the Franco dictatorship and of eastern Europe Communism disappeared under the onslaught of consumer society, but also brought widespread pornography and sexualised advertising. Women in eastern Europe reacted with ambivalence. Some welcomed the new focus on sexualised femininity as pleasurable and adventurous, whereas other women, especially older women and working-class women, found these sexualised images demeaning or laughable.[85]

In western Europe, to a much greater extent than in the USA, sexual cultures have been shaped by a secular society, where cohabitation is common and same-sex partnerships legally recognised. Europeans increasingly began to believe that sex should be a matter of the private rights of the individual and that the government should not interfere. But Europe shares with the USA a media culture saturated with sexuality. While eighteenth-century people regarded female sexual desire in terms of fertility, twentieth-century people associated sex with consumption.

Conclusion

Ideas about female sexuality have changed dramatically from the eighteenth century to the late twentieth century. Even medical depictions about the female genital organs have been culturally shaped. As we have seen, popular sex manuals of the eighteenth century still believed that female orgasm was necessary for a woman to conceive and,

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as a result, they believed that female sexual pleasure was important, regarding male and female genitals as inverted versions of each other. By the nineteenth century, doctors depicted women's bodies as utterly different to those of men, and downplayed the importance of female desire. Freud and his followers resurrected the female sexual drive, but they insisted that only the vaginal orgasm was mature. Feminists in the 1970s had to reshape their ideas of their own bodies to claim female sexual autonomy.

Whether female sexual desire has been regarded as passive or voracious, authorities have always seen it as dangerous. Institutions to incarcerate unruly women have ranged from the late seventeenth-century La Salpêtrière to the nineteenth-century workhouses for unmarried mothers to twentieth-century homes for the feeble-minded. As Foucault pointed out, doctors and psychiatrists developed discourses that labelled homosexuals and prostitutes as deviant identities. But he failed to acknowledge that women, much more than men, risked being labelled and incarcerated (with the exception of lesbians in the nineteenth century). A man could frequent a prostitute privately and retain his public respectability, but if a woman sold sex even once or twice, middle-class moralists would denounce her as a whore. In the nineteenth century, the harassment of streetwalkers warned all women to stay off the street at night. By the twentieth century, the lesbian gained visibility as the new warning to women, as psychiatrists admonished the New Woman not to be perverse in her freedom.

Women have had to grapple with these contradictory and negative social constructions of female desire in their own experiences. Yet they have often evaded and refused these definitions. Efforts to regulate prostitutes always failed, as women who sold sex refused to register. Nineteenth-century women who loved women spoke of their desires in coded language. Early twentieth-century working women whispered the address of abortionists to each other. More openly, feminists demanded the abolition of the regulationist system and the legalisation of abortion. Yet when historians search the past to try to understand female sexual experiences, debating the fluidity of identity and the competing pulls of pleasure and danger, sexuality still remains in a mysterious and alluring twilight, only half understood.

Guide to further reading

Allen, Ann Taylor, *Feminism and Motherhood in Germany, 1800–1914*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991. This book surveys the debates among German feminists about abortion, unmarried mothers and prostitution.

Benabou, Erica-Marie, *La Prostitution et la police des moeurs au XVIIIeme siècle*. Paris: Perrin, 1987. Based on research in police archives, Benabou looks at the lives of eighteenth-century French prostitutes and how the police tried to regulate them.

Bland, Lucy, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885–1914*. London: Penguin, 1995. This book surveys the debates among English feminists about social purity, celibacy and birth control in the late nineteenth century and covers responses to early sexology.

Bland, Lucy and Laura Doan, eds, *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*. New York: Routledge, 1998. This is a very useful collection of essays on sexology.

Bonnet, Marie-Jo, *Les Relations Amoureuses entre Les Femmes du XVIe au XXe Siècle*. Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1995. A significant study of lesbians in France, concentrating on upper-class lesbians.

Clark, Anna, *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England, 1770–1845.* London: Pandora, 1987. This book covers sexual violence in courtship, political myths of rape and ideologies of libertine masculinity.

Cook, Hera, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800–1975.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. This book covers much more than birth control; Cook traces changes in sexual behaviour and attitudes for a significant challenge to most of the historiography on sexuality.

D'Cruze, Shani, *Crimes of Outrage: Sex, Violence, and Victorian Working Women*. London: UCL Press, 1998. This is a careful examination of mid- to late nineteenth-century cases of sexual assault and other types of violence against women.

Dean, Carolyn, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000. Dean shows how anxieties engendered by the First World War were projected onto women and homosexuals in cultural forms.

Doan, Laura, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of Modern English Lesbian Culture.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. This book reinterprets the flapper style before Radclyffe Hall's trial and also the circumstances of the trial itself, demonstrating its importance for the emergence of lesbian identity.

Donoghue, Emma, *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1688–1801*. London: Scarlet Press, 1993. Donoghue challenged the idea that people could not conceive of lesbianism before the nineteenth century, revealing many eighteenth-century allusions to lesbianism.

Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. A pioneering work that established the paradigm for the field of the history of sexuality.

Fuchs, Rachel G., *Poor and Pregnant in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992. An intensive study of unmarried mothers and cohabitation, tracing changing experiences and social policies.

Gibson, Mary, *Prostitution and the State in Italy*, 2nd edn. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1999. This book examines the regulationist system in Italy.

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Jackson, Louise A., *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*. London: Routledge, 2000. A careful study of court records and institutional records concerning child sex abuse.

Jeffreys, Sheila, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*. London: Pandora, 1985. A controversial interpretation of the social-purity movement from the point of view of lesbian feminism.

Laqueur, Thomas W., *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990. This book established a paradigm for shifts in ideas about sex and gender from the pre-modern to the modern world.

Levine, Philippa, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire*. New York: Routledge, 2003. A comparative study of British contagious-diseases regulation in different regions of the British Empire in Asia.

McLaren, Angus, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978. A classic with much information about the practices and politics of birth control.

Oram, Alison and Annemarie Turnbull, eds, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*. London: Routledge, 2001. An invaluable source for rare primary-source accounts of lesbianism.

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popular knowledge about sex from the early modern period to the late nineteenth century and provides valuable assessment of debates.

Roberts, Mary Louise, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press. This book demonstrates how the 'New Woman' became a focus for anxieties about sexual modernity in the wake of the First World War.

Schoppmann, Claudia, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians during the Third Reich*, trans. Allison Brown. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. Primary source narratives of hidden lives.

Sohn, Anne-Marie, *Du premier baiser à l'alcôve: la sexualité des français au quotidien (1850–1950)*. Paris: Aubier, 1996. This book is based on extensive archival research into letters, memoirs and court records, providing an in-depth look at changing experiences and attitudes towards courtship, marital sex, homosexuality, rape and prostitution, as well as a good narrative of dramatic changes that challenges Foucault's paradigm.

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Vigarello, Georges, *A History of Rape: Sexual Violence in France from the sixteenth to the twentieth century*, trans. Jean Birrell. Cambridge: Polity, 2001. An important survey of laws and attitudes toward rape in France.

Walkowitz, Judith, *Prostitution in Victorian Society: Women, Class, and State*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1980. A path-breaking work which combines a Foucauldian analysis with careful archival research to illuminate prostitutes' experiences, government policy and the feminist response.

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