Sexuality and the Movements for Sexual Liberation

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Even to the casual observer, it seems obvious that profound and fundamental changes have taken place in the realm of sexuality in the last half of the twentieth century. Most prominent among these, one might argue, are changes in sexual behaviors and sexual mores, the role of sex in our popular culture, the increased acceptance of gender equality and reproductive freedoms, and the growing visibility of gay men and lesbians in American society. The evidence of such change is worth recounting in some detail.

In 1950, fewer than four out of one hundred babies were born to unmarried women. In the 1990s, 30 percent of all births were to single women. In 1960, only 17,000 couples were reported to be living together “without benefit of matrimony,” as it was described at the time. That number increased 900 percent by the end of the decade and continued to rise until “living together” had become virtually unremarkable.

In 1963, a discussion of “The Sexual Revolution” was pulled from the schedule of a New York City TV station because station executives thought the very topic inappropriate for broadcast television. This was not an aberration: on TV sitcoms, married couples were consigned to twin beds and even the term “pregnant” was not fully acceptable. In 1965, The Sound of Music won the Academy Award for best motion picture; in 1999 it was the R-rated film American Beauty.

In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, gay men and lesbians were commonly expelled from universities or fired from jobs if discovered to be homosexual. Homosexuality was classified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Institute until 1974. In contrast, by the end of the twentieth century many major corporations offered benefits to same-sex domestic partners, most college campuses had active lesbian-gay-bisexual student organizations, and annual gay pride parades drew huge crowds of celebrants throughout the nation. (Gay men and women still were subject to dishonorable discharges from the military and only one state recognized the union – not marriage – of homosexual couples.)

Before the Supreme Court decision Roe v. Wade guaranteed a woman’s constitutional right to abortion in 1973, women sought often dangerous illegal abortions or attempted the process themselves, resorting to injections of lye, douching with bleach, or inserting coathangers into their uteruses. In the early 1960s, Chicago’s Cook County Hospital alone treated more than 5,000 women a year for abortion-related complications, some of which were fatal. Perhaps more surprising is the fact
that, before the 1965 *Griswold v. Connecticut* Supreme Court decision, married couples could be denied access to birth control. Before 1972, doctors could legally refuse birth control to unmarried adults – not for medical reasons, but for “moral” ones.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Americans disagree about the meaning of such changes. Some see them as signs of progress (even if they are concerned about some of the specifics), while others see them as evidence of the degradation of American society. Historians of sexuality, who by no means represent a cross-section of the American public, tend toward the former.

Political and moral evaluation aside, however, such pieces of historical evidence suggest that the history of sexuality written about postwar America would be a narrative of sexual liberation. To some extent that is true. Historians have tended to focus on change, as historians do, and the “sexual revolution” of the postwar era commands a central position in the historiography. But historians are scarcely unanimous about the meaning of these changes or their causes. Some focus on human agency and trace the political movements for sexual and gender liberation. Others locate the sources of change primarily in large-scale social, economic, and cultural forces. A significant handful believe that the focus on change obscures the continuity of experience of those who had never conformed to middle-class (hetero)sexual mores and who had, for the most part, existed beyond the purview of mainstream society before the “revolution.” Some scholars question the validity of a progressive narrative altogether. These historians do not divide into clear and discrete historiographical schools or camps. In scholarly analyses, these positions and focuses overlap, and there is frequently tension (sometimes quite productive) within a single book.

That complexity is further complicated by two other factors. First, there is no agreement about what we write about when we write about “sex.” There is a surprisingly small amount of “sex,” per se, in these histories. Most of the history of sexuality is at some remove from sex itself, in part because unmediated “sex” is impossible to find. We rely on representations of sex or on discourses about sex. Usually, the closest we get to the physical acts of sex is through records of some form of surveillance, most frequently of those deemed sexually deviant. These records are scarcely an unproblematic source.

Of course, most historians agree that the history of sexuality has a broad scope and that sex is much more than physical acts. Some historians of sexuality write about social movements. Some write about attempts to control sexual behaviors or to define and regulate “sex.” Others attempt to understand the construction of sexuality, especially in relation to gender. One group of historians writes about the formations of sexual identities or communities. Another tries to understand the production of sexual norms and conventions. Still others use traditional social history methods to attempt to recover the experience of “ordinary” Americans – in contrast to those who focus on people who most prominently seek sexual freedom or “revolution.” Once again, these categories are not rigid or exclusionary. Most historians of sexuality do not restrict themselves to a single focus within the field. The clearest topical division in the field is based on sexual orientation; another, less important division is gender-based. There is a large literature exclusively on gay/lesbian/queer Americans; a small literature focused exclusively on heterosexual experiences; and a somewhat
larger set of works that address both or analyze the construction of these binary categories.

Finally, a second complicating factor stems from the origins of the field itself. The very notion of a history of sexuality emerged in the postwar years, and the field was shaped by the very events it attempts to analyze. The history of sexuality is one of the newest fields in American history, and the portion of the field focusing on postwar America is among the most rapidly changing and inchoate areas in American historiography. For those reasons, it is not possible or even especially useful to lay out an orderly set of schools and interpretations. Instead, this essay will discuss the origins of the field and the historiographical implications of those origins. Following that discussion I will offer a chronological overview of the history of sexuality in America beginning in World War II. Within that history I will address specific historiographical debates and controversies.

Origins and Issues

The history of sexuality in America is, in many ways, a field just coming into its own. One might, arguably, trace its origins as a self-conscious field to 1988, with the publication of John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman’s pathbreaking Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America. Certainly, many historians had been writing about sexuality before that; Intimate Matters was, in fact, a synthesis of existing scholarship. D’Emilio and Freedman, both of whom had written previously about sexuality, cited 283 books and articles in their selected bibliography – hardly suggesting a virgin field. However, most of the historians upon whom they relied did not define themselves as historians of sexuality. They fit, usually fairly comfortably, in existing fields: social or cultural history; the history of women (with a few using the term gender) or of the family; histories of science and medicine. It was not until 1992 that American history’s premier journal, the Journal of American History, began to list recent scholarly publications under the category “sexuality.”

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the history of sexuality is a boom field – it has become “sexy,” in the informal jargon of the academy. Presses ranging from the University of Chicago to Routledge not only have series on sexuality, but devote considerable editorial and promotional resources to them. College courses on the history of sexuality are commonplace. Dissertation students eagerly embrace topics relating to sexuality and assume the legitimacy – even the necessity – of using sexuality as a category of historical analysis.

Yet for all its contemporaneity and its youth, the history of sexuality shows clear signs of its parentage. The field emerged from the “new” histories created in the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. As Americans struggled over issues such as the Vietnam War, the African American civil rights movement, and feminism, historians (themselves Americans caught in the turmoil of the time) found models of American unity and consensus ever-less compelling. “New” social historians focused on the divisions in American society and asked questions about power relations. Strongly influenced by the era’s movements for social justice, they wrote about the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, recasting American history by shifting its focus.

Many of the men and women who wrote these first, controversial, histories intended them not only as scholarship but as activism. Recovering the history of
women, African Americans, and workers gave those groups voice, historians argued, framing their projects as acts of empowerment. While this claim was critically important to the early works of “new” women’s history (often concerning sexuality), it also provided the basis for early work on the history of gay men and lesbians. Jonathan Katz, who in 1976 published the first collection of historical documents on the experience of gay men and lesbians in America, wrote in his introduction: “We have been the silent minority, the silenced minority – invisible women, invisible men. . . . For a long time we were a people perceived out of time and place – socially unsituated, without a history.” In an activist voice, Katz argued: “Knowledge of Gay history helps restore a people to its past, to itself; it extends the range of human possibility, suggests new ways of living, new ways of loving” (Katz, 1976, pp. 1, 14).

The “new” histories’ activist intent and concern with the marginalized and oppressed have continued into the next scholarly generation. Those who write histories of sexuality are, in the main, highly conscious of the possible political import of their work and continue in the desire that historical knowledge may improve contemporary society. Many are often fairly explicit about political commitments and/or activist intentions. For example, Leslie Reagan concludes her excellent study, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973*, by arguing for continued legal abortion in the United States. “Making abortion hard to obtain will not return the United States to an imagined time of virginal brides and stable families,” she writes, “it will return us to a time of crowded septic abortion wards, avoidable deaths, and the routinization of punitive treatment of women by state authorities and their surrogates” (Reagan, 1997, p. 250). Her statement of advocacy follows almost 250 pages of immensely careful and nuanced historical analysis, but a feminist concern for women’s reproductive choice animates the entire book. In a different tack, John Howard begins his equally impressive *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* with the claim that “in today’s movements for economic and social justice, we benefit from recounting and scrutinizing historical events.” “Without apology,” he states, “I concede that my academic explorations of the past are informed by my activist’s will for social change in the present” (Howard, 1999, p. xxii).

Also in keeping with the practice of their fields of origin, current historians of sexuality continue to focus on those who have been historically oppressed and marginalized. Today it is easier to find excellent histories of “queer” experience than of heterosexual lives; we know more about the sexualities of heterosexual women than of heterosexual men; more about those who challenged gender/sexual norms than about those who lived by them.

Of course, many of those currently writing histories of sexuality are a scholarly generation – or even two – removed from the new social historians of the 1960s and 1970s, to whom they owe so much, and have moved in different directions from what was once called “history from the bottom up.” The development of the history of sexuality has been influenced by a range of theoretical formulations most fully articulated or disseminated in the final decades of the twentieth century. In general, American historians have been notably resistant to theoretical enthusiasms. That is at least in part because grand theory often appears totalizing and ahistorical. Historians of sexuality (along with historians of gender and of race) have been somewhat more interested in cultural theory than most Americanists, but tend to treat “theory”
as a toolbox, selecting useful ideas in a fairly eclectic fashion and jettisoning the aspects that fit uneasily with the specificity of historical analysis. The most important concepts that have shaped the historiography of sexuality include the general notion of social constructionism and the more specific understandings of power and of sexuality set forth by Michel Foucault in work that appeared in the English language in the 1970s.

First and most fundamentally, most historians of sexuality have treated both gender and sexuality as socially (and historically) constructed. Rather than positing a set of timeless, inherent, and essential differences between the sexes, they have argued that basic biological differences are given meaning – or constructed – in and by specific cultures. Through the 1980s, most would make a distinction between the term “sex” (used to describe the basic biological “facts” of maleness and femaleness) and the term “gender” (the socially constructed categories of male and female, masculine and feminine, through which those biological differences were given meaning). Later theorists would raise questions about the givenness of the body itself, suggesting that biological sex was also constructed. Few historians have traveled very far down that path, but in general they are increasingly careful about assuming the givenness of any definitional category.

Not surprisingly, those who attempt to write histories of sexuality tend to be constructionists, for the very idea that sexuality has a history presumes that sexuality is not stable, essential, timeless, or universal in its manifestations and meanings. Constructionists begin with the premise that sex and sexuality are subject to historical forces and do indeed change over time and across cultures. Of course, there is probably very little that has changed over time in the physical acts of sex; human bodies have been coming into contact with one another for many thousands of years, and even allowing for unbounded creativity there are still a relatively limited number of possible physical permutations. The meaning of those acts, however, both to participants and to the cultures in which they are situated, has varied greatly over time and place.

Within the field of the history of sexuality in America, debates over social construction versus essentialism have only been truly significant in gay and lesbian history. Some historians, most prominently Europeanist John Boswell but to some extent Jonathan Katz in his 1976 documentary collection, *Gay American History*, have written about “gay people” or about “Lesbians and Gay men” in the distant past. Most historians agree that same-sex sex (and the confusion inherent in the terms is worth noting) has always existed, but was not defined through categories like “gay,” “homosexual,” or “lesbian.” In most Western cultures, while sexual acts such as sodomy were often illegal and punishable by extreme means, an individual’s identity – whether to him/herself or to the society at large – was not based upon the sort of sexual acts in which he or she engaged. The categories “homosexual” and “heterosexual” themselves did not exist, nor did such modern notions of identity. Historians date the emergence of a possible homosexual identity differently, but most agree that by the late nineteenth century categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality had been consolidated and often structured the experiences and meanings of sex.

As this essay focuses on the history of sexuality in postwar America, such debates about pre-twentieth-century categories seem irrelevant. However, they have more significance than one might imagine. The first historians who sought a history of gay
people did so to demonstrate the legitimacy of such identity: we are everywhere; we have always been here. As I have already argued, many historians of sexuality still write from a desire to promote social justice; they are aware of the political implications of their work. And since the 1970s, much has been invested in the public claim that sexual orientation is, in some fundamental way, essential—not a choice, not a “sickness,” not an “identity,” just a simple and unalterable fact. While social-constructionist analysis does not dispute the existence of same-sex desire, dealing, instead, with the ways in which such desire has been given meaning and constituted within a set of binary categories of identity, scholarly notions about the construction of “homosexuality” fit uneasily with arguments for the civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. Scholarly nuances do not necessarily translate very well in the public arena (Epstein, 1987).

The dilemma is somewhat similar to that faced by scholars who reject the existence of biological categories of “race” but who, in what might seem a paradox, seek race-based remedies to social inequality. Very much aware that people’s lives are structured in and through historically-socially constructed racial categories, whether or not biological races “really” exist, some advocate a “strategic essentialism.” Few historians of gay/lesbian/queer Americans find themselves in such troubled waters, but they often must walk a fine line in their treatments of identity and desire.

After the notion of social construction, the work of Michel Foucault probably influenced the development of the field more than any other theoretical approach. That is not to say that Foucault’s theories were carefully and systematically applied by historians; there were few strict Foucauldian analyses of the history of sexuality in America. Nonetheless, his influence was powerful and widespread. In a way, just as one might distinguish between Freud’s work and a more general Freudianism, one might think of Foucault and a more general Foucauldianism.

Perhaps most important was Foucault’s insistence that power was multiple, deployed and coordinated through a multiplicity of discourses, not located in a single, identifiable, external site. Thus humans are not caught between the poles of freedom and repression, liberation and domination, but instead are enmeshed in webs of power. Such understandings, even though not fully accepted or articulated by historians, helped to undermine the dominance of a “progressive” narrative of the history of sexuality, in which the forces of liberation struggle against—and gradually triumph over—repression. In fact, John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, on the very first page of their introduction to Intimate Matters, disavow the progressive narrative: “The history of American sexuality told in the following pages is not one of progress from repression to liberation, ignorance to wisdom, or enslavement to freedom. Indeed, the poles of freedom and liberation are not the organizing principles of our work” (p. xi).

A suspicion of the progressive narrative did, in fact, shape much writing on the history of sexuality in America. At the same time, the pull of the freedom narrative is and has been extraordinarily strong in the scholarship on postwar American history. Studies of movements for social justice and liberation tend to accept a framework of justice and liberation, especially as a full generation of historical scholarship was written by those who had been part of those struggles and felt strongly enough about them to continue to attempt to understand their successes and failures. Experientially, intuitively, and analytically, these scholars believed that movements for civil
rights, against the Vietnam War, and for social justice and equality were meaningful and progressive, even if sometimes flawed and incomplete.

Historiographically, scholarship on the history of postwar sexuality is probably as closely related to the scholarship on “the Sixties” or “the Movement” as to the larger field of the history of sexuality. That is not surprising, as few historians would argue that a topic can be studied in isolation from its time. Our historiographical understandings of society and politics in the colonial era are scarcely absent from histories of sexuality in colonial America. Nonetheless, a field that owes much both to narratives of liberation and to Foucauldian notions of power must contend with some important tensions.

Histories of Sexuality in Postwar America

Though this volume focuses on the period from 1945 forward, a historiography of sexuality demands the inclusion of World War II as well. World War II is a watershed in the history of sexuality in twentieth-century America, but not for the obvious reasons. Yes, as young men and women faced separation “for the duration” with the knowledge that death might come sooner than victory, they did things they might not otherwise have done: have sexual intercourse; get married; explore desires they had been told were not “normal.” These changes in sexual behavior and the struggles over them are undeniably significant. But World War II was significant to the history of sexuality for many other reasons, some of which had very little to do with sex.

World War II changed the United States. This was a war not confined to the military, but one in which the civilian population was mobilized as well. The demands of such a war put people into motion. More than 13 million Americans served in the armed forces and more than 15 million civilians moved to another county or another state, most for defense-related work. People who had never traveled more than a hundred miles from their homes found themselves across the country or across the world, living in close proximity to people from very different backgrounds and with very different cultural expectations.

It is important to remember how provincial much of America was in 1941. Regional differences were much more pronounced then than now; racial segregation much more complete; mechanisms of national culture, whether the media or educational institutions, were much weaker. As David Farber and I argue in *The First Strange Place: The Alchemy of Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii* (an argument upon which I build in *Sex in the Heartland*), World War II changed the cultural geography of the nation. During the war, more than ever before, Americans found themselves in close and often enforced contact with others not like themselves. These contacts were not always pleasant or easy, especially under the difficult circumstances of war, but they were disruptive. These disruptions and the dislocations brought about by the war created new spaces for contestation and change in American society. They opened new arenas of possibility, created cracks and fissures in which social change—including changes in sexual behaviors and mores—would take root (Bailey and Farber, 1992).

Changes brought about by the war were not only demographic, but structural. During World War II the federal government assumed an unprecedented role in the
life of the nation. The needs of the wartime state, as defined by the federal government, often conflicted with local custom. In administering the war, the federal government often undermined the control of local elites and created new sites of power and authority which ultimately tied local communities and their citizens more closely to an increasingly powerful national culture. In terms of sex, most of the institutions through which the federal government attempted to manage sex – departments of public health focused on VD control, the military itself – took actions that would be difficult to characterize as progressive. Yet these institutions would have a different long-term effect. And in some ways, what is most important is that they disrupted local control and local hierarchies of power. These disruptions, like the demographic ones, would create the ground on which the sexual revolution would eventually be staged.

Historians who write about sex and sexuality during World War II are divided on the question of whether the new freedoms of wartime or the new mechanisms of surveillance and control were most significant. Those who write about sexuality in general terms, focusing explicitly or implicitly upon majority experiences, tend to stress new freedoms. Those who focus on the experiences of “minority” populations – gay men and lesbians; people of color; the working class; even women – are more aware of mechanisms of control that were employed to counter possible freedoms. These different interpretations reflect the critical divisions that existed among groups in American society during the war years.

For example, John Costello, in his engaging work on sexuality in Britain and the United States during the war, Virtue Under Fire, suggests that the intense experience of the war itself “enhanced intimacy and the expression of love that liberated many people from traditional inhibitions” (Costello, 1985, p. 2). Costello argues, in a progressive vein, not only that the war accelerated the process of social change and so helped to liberalize moral attitudes, but also that sexual liberalization was inextricably linked to improvements in women’s economic and social status brought about, in large part, by the war.

In contrast, Allan Berube’s emotionally powerful Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II, paints a deeply ambivalent picture of sexuality in wartime America. Surveillance and control are a central part of this history. In an attempt to forge the most effective fighting force, Berube explains, the military tried to screen out those whom military officials believed might somehow compromise morale or effectiveness in combat. According to Berube, psychiatrists introduced the idea that the “homosexual [was] a personality type unfit for military service and combat” to the armed forces and, in introducing screening procedures to detect and disqualify gay men, helped to create an “administrative apparatus” that relied heavily on surveillance, interrogation, mass indoctrination, and discharge from service (Berube, 1990).

At the same time, Berube finds much evidence that wartime mobilization “relaxed the social constraints of peacetime” and made it possible for many gay men and lesbians to escape lives of isolation and silence. “Gathered together in military camps,” he writes, “they often came to terms with their sexual desires, fell in love, made friends with other gay people, and began to name and talk about who they were.” Berube is not simply documenting the existence of both repression and liberation. Instead, he sees World War II as an arena of struggle and negotiation, in which “a dynamic
power relationship developed between gay citizens and their government and . . . transformed them both” (Berube, 1990, p. 7).

Among the most interesting works on sexuality during the war is Leisa Meyer’s *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women’s Army Corps During World War II*. Meyer focuses on constructions of sexuality rather than on the experiences of women in the WAC, analyzing the ways in which such constructions were deployed in attempts to “create a place for women without disrupting contemporary definitions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’” (Meyer, 1996, p. 2). Meyer’s attention to the importance of race in constructions of sexuality and to the sexual agency of both heterosexual women and lesbians makes her study especially useful.

In the years following the end of World War II, “sex” became increasingly visible in America’s public culture. The new pulp paperback industry relied on sexually sensationalist covers to sell books, and comic books contained enough sex to prompt a congressional investigation. As Joanne Meyerowitz argues, this sexualization of mass culture was largely a matter of redrawing boundaries of respectability (Meyerowitz, 1996), as such material had long been available in an under-the-counter fashion. However, as *Playboy* magazine (begun in 1953) and cheap paperbacks promising tales of lesbian love were set out on newsstands alongside the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, it seemed to many Americans that something significant had changed.

The publication of what were popularly known as “the Kinsey reports” (on men in 1948 and women in 1952) made sex a topic of public debate as they revealed to the American public that contemporary notions of sexual morality and normality did not come close to matching the actual sexual behavior of Americans. Subsequent historical scholarship on Kinsey and on sexology, or the scientific study of sex, analyzes the ways in which Kinsey and other scientists constructed “sex” in their research (Morantz, 1977; Robinson, 1989; Bullough, 1994; Jones, 1997; Terry, 1999; Gathorne-Hardy, 2000), but it is critical that Kinsey’s data were presented to millions of Americans in the 1940s and 1950s as a *scientific* depiction of actual sexual behavior.

Finally, as historians of lesbian and gay American experiences have shown, some people built on the consolidation of gay identities in World War II to establish gay communities in cities throughout the nation. “Teen” identity was also consolidated in this era, and the highly visible cultures of young Americans seemed to center around sexually charged issues, whether the practice of going steady or the emergence of rock and roll (Bailey, 1988).

These trends were accompanied by heightened public concern about sex and sexuality, and the 1950s can scarcely be characterized as an era of sexual liberation. Many histories of this period, in fact, focus on issues of sex control. In general, “the Fifties” are a complicated era in the historiography of sexuality because they fall between “the War” and “the Sixties.” How to explain the powerful (re)claiming of “traditional” gender roles and the accompanying emphasis on sexual control after the war? How to explain the relation of this decade to the sexual revolution that followed?

Some historians situate the repressive aspects in or around Cold War politics. Elaine Tyler May, in her influential *Homeward Bound* (1988), employs the foreign policy term “containment” to describe Americans’ relation to sexuality during the postwar era. Sex was understood to be a powerful force which, if “contained” within the proper spheres of heterosexual marriage and home, could strengthen family and
nation alike. Both Jennifer Terry (1999) and Michael Rogin (1987) draw even more explicitly on Cold War politics in their discussions of sexuality. In Terry’s words, “The Cold War period was characterized by a large-scale tendency toward demonizing particular groups of people . . . and particular forms of sexually taboo behavior, though commonly practiced among average Americans, were attributed by conservative isolationists and anti-communists to external and evil forces outside the healthy mainstream of the nation” (Terry, 1999, pp. 329, 331). Moving beyond the Cold War paradigm, Rickie Solinger considers the ways in which unmarried pregnant girls and women were incorporated into the political arena, divided by race, and used to “explain and present solutions for a number of [domestic] social problems” in the postwar era (Solinger, 1992, p. 3).

Some of the more interesting new works on homosexuality or gay and lesbian experiences explicitly reject “the assumption that the 1950s were a universally bleak and homophobic decade” (Beemyn, 1997, p. 5). These works, in a tradition that goes back to John D’Emilio’s Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities (1983), demonstrate that gay life in America did not begin with the riot at the Stonewall Inn in 1969. Works like Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis’s Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold (1993), Esther Newton’s Cherry Grove, Fire Island (1993), Marc Stein’s City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves (2000), and (though covering an earlier era) George Chauncey’s Gay New York (1994) document the existence of strong and viable gay and lesbian communities stretching back well before the sexual revolution and gay liberation. As Brett Beemyn notes in his anthology, Creating a Place for Ourselves (1997), many of these community studies contradict longstanding assumptions that outside a few major metropolises gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans existed in sexual and cultural wastelands. Instead, works such as these demonstrate the richness of gay life in the pre-Stonewall era.

Most of the earlier works also emphasize the repressive nature of the larger society and stress the ways in which these communities survived against great odds. In Kennedy and Davis’s words, members of these communities “supported one another for survival in an extremely negative and punitive environment” and also “boldly challenged” those repressive aspects of American society. Some recent works shift that emphasis. For example, in Men Like That, John Howard argues that the “quiet accommodation of difference” that existed in rural and small-town Mississippi during the 1940s and 1950s ended in the “‘free love sixties’” with “strident, organized resistance to queer sexuality” (Howard, 1999, pp. xvii, xv), due in part to the visible role queer Mississippians played in the civil rights movement during the 1960s and to a subsequent crackdown on homosexuality. In a further difference from the studies above, Howard’s study is not of community-building, and it is not identity-focused. He writes about “queer sex” and gender nonconformity, thus including men who did not claim a gay identity and focusing on the “meanings, practices, and regulations” of sex and gender in specific times and spaces (Howard, 1999, p. xviii).

While increasing numbers of historians find continuities between the 1950s and the 1960s, “the sexual revolution” still commands the central position in the historiography. As I argued above, the historiography of the sexual revolution is closely related to the historiography of “the Sixties.” Much historical writing about the sexual revolution is not about sexuality alone but is instead embedded in histories
of movements for equality and social justice. For example, both Terry Anderson’s *The Movement and the Sixties* (1995) and Todd Gitlin’s *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987) incorporate the sexual revolution into “the Movement.”

In keeping with that understanding, a “first wave” of writing about the sexual revolution treated it primarily as a social movement. For example, D’Emilio and Freedman define the sexual revolution broadly in *Intimate Matters*, ranging from *Playboy* to communes in their discussion, but find its heart in movements for social justice. In the 1960s, they argue, “sexuality emerged more clearly than ever as an issue of power and politics,” as “women’s liberation and gay liberation each presented a wide-ranging critique of deeply held assumptions about human sexual desire, its place in social life, and the hidden purposes it served. In particular, both movements analyzed the erotic as a vehicle for domination which, in complex ways, kept certain social groups in a subordinate place in society” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 1988, p. 308).

Liberation movements provide the framework for many of the early treatments of the sexual revolution and its prehistory. Historians who were particularly aware of the importance of sex in the emergence of the women’s movement include Sara Evans, who describes the complex role of sex in women’s experiences of activism and liberation in the early 1960s in *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (1979). Although in different ways, both Wini Breines (1992) and Susan Douglas (1995) look to the cultural messages about sexuality that pervaded 1950s-era girlhood for the seeds of feminist consciousness.

The gay liberation movement likewise provided both site and impetus for discussion of the sexual revolution. Some, such as sociologist Laud Humphreys’s *Out of the Closets: The Sociology of Homosexual Liberation* (1972) and Jonathan Katz’s anthology, *Gay American History* (1976), were fundamentally part of the movement they analyzed. Later scholarly works such as John D’Emilio’s influential *Sexual Politics*, *Sexual Communities* (1983) continued to focus on activism, tracing activist struggles before the rebellion at the Stonewall Inn symbolically launched the gay liberation movement. (A more recent narrative history by journalists Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* [1999], offers a carefully researched and very readable history of the movement from 1969 through the 1980s.)

As historians began to write more directly about the sexual revolution in a “second wave” that overlapped with the first, several framed their work around the notion of revolution itself. Had there really been a sexual revolution? Some historians (usually in brief asides in books on other topics) treated sexual desire as a constant force, which, once the Pill freed women from fear of pregnancy, flowered into revolution. Others took more complex positions, conceding the magnitude of change in the realm of sex, but asking whether changes in the sexual landscape simply worked to accommodate the existing power structure and ideological organization of sex. Was the sexual revolution “only [male] libertinage by another name” (Grant, 1994, p. 13)? Was it “little more than a male fling and a setback for women,” to whom the sexual revolution offered only “deepening objectification . . . as potential instruments of male pleasure” (Ehrenreich et al., 1986, p. 1)?

Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, in *Re-Making Love: The Feminization of Sex* (1986), firmly reject the notion that the sexual revolution was simply a “male fling.” They argue that much of what commonly passes for sexual
revolution – *Playboy*, wife-swapping – represents the men’s sexual revolution, a superficial set of changes that were hardly revolutionary. The women’s sexual revolution – which they find everywhere from “Beatlemania” to fundamentalist Christian Marabel Morgan’s *Total Woman* – was another matter entirely. In this interpretation, the winners of the revolution were not men, but women, who realized a new realm of sexual rights and expressions.

Linda Grant’s study of the British and American sexual revolutions, *Sexing the Millennium*, begins like *Re-Making Love*, with a dichotomy between male and female sexual revolution. Grant, however, moves to a less completely gender-based opposition. “The sexual revolution,” she writes, “has its origins in the struggles of those who fought not to explore the crevices of their own desires, but to change the world.” One sexual revolution is “the seediness of swinging and the disintegration of group marriages”; the other a millenarian movement, a desire to re-make not only sex but society (Grant, 1994, pp. 26, 17).

In *Romantic Longings*, Steven Seidman rejects not only the idea of dual sexual revolutions (male and female/good and bad), but the very notion of revolution. He argues that the changes attributed to the 1960s-era sexual revolution actually stemmed from an early twentieth-century “cultural rebellion against Victorianism” (Seidman, 1991, pp. 122–4). Dismissing the revolution as “more rhetoric than reality,” he nonetheless finds revolutionary potential in a movement to uncouple sex from love. While the dominance of the love–sex nexus never wavered even during the “free love” 1960s, he argues, rejections of the belief that sex must be justified by love constituted an important countercultural stance that was most fully articulated in what he describes as the community-building role of casual sex in gay male communities.

Recent works on the sexual revolution – what might be described as a “third wave” of scholarship – tend to manage the question of the revolutionary nature of the revolution not by positing dual revolutions (male/female; libertine/millenarian), but by accepting the long-term, evolutionary nature of social-sexual change while still insisting on the importance of purposeful revolutionaries. The debate among these authors is not explicit, but implicit. They look in different places for “the sexual revolution,” and so find different revolutions.

At least superficially, the most similar books are James Peterson’s popular survey, *A Century of Sex: Playboy’s History of the Sexual Revolution, 1900–1999* (1999), which was commissioned by Hugh Hefner, and David Allyn’s *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History* (2000). Both center on the usual suspects – national figures like Hugh Hefner, Alfred Kinsey, and sex researchers Masters and Johnson, all of whom undoubtedly helped to change the sexual culture of the United States. In so doing, each treats the sexual revolution as a set of struggles against repression, engaged in by people who, in Allyn’s words, “devoted their lives to challenging society’s views about sex” (Allyn, 2000, p. 7).

*What Wild Ecstasy: The Rise and Fall of the Sexual Revolution* (1997), by former *Penthouse Forum* editor John Heidenry, leaves behind the usual suspects to focus on sex’s most ardent enthusiasts. Heidenry paints a portrait of the most extreme parts of America’s sexual culture and, rather oddly, calls it the sexual revolution. This sexual revolution took place in Plato’s Retreat and New York SM clubs like Hellfire; the heroes of this revolution were people like Hellfire’s Annie Sprinkle and Marco Vassi,
a self-described “meta-sexual” who boasted that he had had sex with 5,000 women and 10,000 men.

On the other end of the spectrum is my work, Sex in the Heartland (1999), which portrays the sexual revolution in Lawrence, Kansas. While the sexual revolution would have looked much different without the “heroes” identified by Peterson, Allyn, and Heidenry, I argue, the acts of sexual revolutionaries do not, in themselves, constitute a revolution. It is when revolutionary beliefs and practices (though perhaps less ardently embraced or strenuously practiced) are taken up by those who have not devoted their lives to sexual revolution that we see a sexual revolution rather than a set of sexual subcultures or bohemian lifestyles.

The sexual revolution I describe is a mainstream revolution, born of widely shared values and beliefs. It develops from major transformations in the structure of American society, such as the greater inclusiveness of America’s civil society that was created in part by federal interventions into local cultures in the years following World War II. It is made possible by people who had absolutely no intention of fostering sexual freedom, such as policymakers who promoted birth control as a solution to the “population explosion” and college administrators who supported the end of parietal rules as a way to develop student “responsibility.” Only after significant changes had already taken place in American culture was this nascent revolution engaged by purposeful revolutionaries.

Their revolution, however, was not a singular, unified movement. Even the committed sexual revolutionaries had radically divergent ideas about what sort of revolution they sought and how it might be achieved. In the 1960s and early 1970s, “living together” was quite different from “free love,” which was not the same thing as “wife-swapping,” which was different from “the [SM] Scene,” though all were, arguably, part of “the revolution.” The violent and misogynistic sexual images that some members of America’s counterculture used as weapons against “straight” society did not seem liberating to everyone. Many self-styled sexual revolutionaries were openly hostile to gay and lesbian struggles. Prominent feminists described the role of sex in women’s oppression; social movements splintered over the proper role of sex in movements for liberation. It is critically important to untangle the various strands of the sexual revolution, for a movement that encompasses both “The Playboy Philosophy” and “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” is obviously not a coherent whole. At the same time, we must remember that most people did not experience these enormously diverse phenomena as separate and discrete. The world seemed in revolution because of the combined force of all these changes, not because of a single set of acts or beliefs.

Very little history has been written about sexuality in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The field has been left primarily to sociologists, polemicists, and to cultural studies scholars. There are, however, three relatively recent developments that seem especially significant for the study of sexuality in postwar America.

First are the feminist struggles over sex and its meaning. These debates were played out most conspicuously in the “pornography wars” or “sex wars” that peaked in the 1980s, and then in the controversial 1990s analyses of the “woman as victim” model that some critics identified as the cornerstone of “second-wave” feminism (MacKinnon, 1987; Roiphe, 1993). Sociologist Lynn Chancer, in Reconcilable Differences: Confronting Beauty, Pornography, and the Future of Feminism (1998), argues...
that a troublesome divide has emerged in contemporary feminism, in which pro-sex and anti-sexism positions have come to seem mutually exclusive, even oppositional. She analyzes the way in which this fragmentation frames several debates in contemporary feminism, including the contests over pornography, rape, and the “beauty myth.”

Second is the emergence of popular “men’s movements” that range from Robert Bly’s *Iron John*-inspired programs to the Promise Keepers and the Million Man March. They coincide with the recent growth of the scholarly field focused on the history of masculinity and of men. Historical sociologist Michael Kimmel is one of the few scholars who writes at the nexus of these movements, and the relationship between histories of men and masculinity and of the men’s movement is nowhere near so close as between women’s history and the women’s movement. Nonetheless, it seems plausible that the development of both popular and scholarly movements will influence the writing of the history of sexuality in the future.

Finally, the relatively new field of cultural studies, not surprisingly, has found sex an enticing subject. Queer theory, which rejects the notion of stable and clear-cut sexual identities, has already influenced the writing of the history of sexuality (Howard, Terry), and may well continue to complicate assumptions about identity that underlie even avowedly social-constructionist scholarship. Some cultural studies work is appallingly ahistorical, but there is much good work – such as Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998) and Erica Rand’s *Barbie’s Queer Accessories* (1995) – that should be of interest to historians. Since cultural studies scholars are claiming the same historical topics as historians, the historians of sexuality will need to come to terms with their theoretical claims and their specific analyses.

While it is difficult to predict what directions future scholarship will take in such a new and rapidly growing field, I will end with a few recommendations. Studies of “queer” acts and identities promise to continue to complicate the homosexual-heterosexual binary in which much scholarship is based and I hope it will prompt useful discussions about how historians employ notions of identity in our scholarship. Greater attention to the role of race/ethnicity both in constructions of sexuality and in sexual behaviors is critically important; there is surprisingly little history of postwar American sexuality that does not focus on white Americans. More works that carefully examine relations between sex(uality) and gender would be most welcome. Socially conservative understandings of sexuality and opposition to changes in America’s sexual landscape both deserve scholarly attention. And, finally, normative heterosexuality needs more of a history.

I, like many historians of sexuality, hope that the field’s current focus on historically oppressed or marginalized groups will help to challenge the heterosexism and sexism that still exist in contemporary American society. At the same time, such focus on sexual rebels or on marginalized groups creates a rather odd mapping of the historical landscape of American sexuality. The problem is in part that majoritarian experiences are downplayed, leaving a significant gap in our historical understanding. It is also that they are rendered invisible. Just as the equation of “race” with African Americans in historical scholarship worked to render “whiteness” natural and invisible, or as the equation of “gender” with women obscured the constructions of masculinity, so the equation of sexuality with homosexuality or sexual transgression tends to suggest that “mainstream” heterosexuality is timeless, natural, and universal.
Early in the twenty-first century, the history of sexuality is one of the most intellectually exciting fields in recent US history. It is volatile and incoherent, but that is perhaps a strength, allowing for new and vital combinations of topic and method in our attempts to write about something as elusive as “sex.”

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