Intimate Matters

A HISTORY OF SEXUALITY IN AMERICA

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CHAPTER 8

"Civilized Morality" Under Stress

IN 1929, Katharine Bement Davis published a massive study, *Factors in the Sex Lives of Twenty-Two Hundred Women.*[1] The product of almost ten years of work, the book had a depth and breadth that made it unique for the times. Based on lengthy questionnaires completed by both married and single women, it covered virtually every facet of the erotic experience of her respondents. Childhood influences, expectations about conjugal relations, birth control practices, the frequency of intercourse, the relationship of desire to the menstrual cycle, factors related to happiness in marriage—all these as well as other topics came under her scrutiny. Beyond its specific findings, the study is notable for the dispassionate way in which Davis applied modern techniques of social science to the subject of sex. Gone was the reticence that characterized the nineteenth-century middle-class approach to sexual matters. Unlike Clelia Mosher, who never published her small study of female sexuality, Davis was bringing sex into the public sphere as a subject worthy of scientific exploration.

Davis's life made her uniquely appropriate to initiate such a study. A long and distinguished professional career had placed her in contact with a wide range of sexual value systems. The oldest of five children, she was born in 1860 in western New York, the site of decades of religious revivals and intense female moral reform efforts whose exploits she learned from her grandmother. After years of teaching high school, she attended Vassar, where the daughters of many middle-class families were preparing for careers that they would pursue to the exclusion of marriage. As a settlement-house worker in Philadelphia, Davis, along with other men and women of her class, observed at close hand the lives of blacks and European immigrants whose family forms and sexual mores were strangely different from her own upbringing. Later, in the role of superintendent of the Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women, she

had to deal with working-class women incarcerated for prostitution and other morals offenses, and had to respond as well to the homosexual liaisons that frequently formed among inmates. Throughout her career Davis, who never married, found herself in close association with other female professionals whose lives often revolved around intimate relationships with other women.

Though Davis left little evidence to help us identify the motives behind her interest in sexuality, one can reasonably speculate that her awareness of sexual diversity in the American social landscape piqued her intellectual curiosity. By the early twentieth century, what Freud termed the "civilized morality" of the middle class was subject to intensifying pressures and diverse influences.[2] Among middle-class couples, extremely low fertility rates testified to the declining importance of procreation in conjugal relations, while the social purity movement was promoting an ethic of refined, tender passion between spouses. In many of these marriages the single standard of morality advocated by feminists and social purity crusaders had won acceptance. But the contrasting socialization of men and women continued to create tensions in the implementation of this ideal. Prostitution flourished as never before in large, commercialized red-light districts, placing the genteel morality of the middle-class home on tenuous foundations at best. At the same time, points of contact between middle-class and working-class culture were multiplying, as Davis's own life illustrated. Middle-class reformers were confronting norms that appeared sharply different from their own and seemed resistant to "uplift."

Meanwhile, between the 1880s and the First World War, the pace of economic and social change seemed to accelerate, transforming the context that had given rise to the civilized morality of the middle class. As growing numbers of working-class women left the home to work in factories, offices, and retail establishments, and as middle-class women entered college and pursued professional careers, the separate spheres that underlay nineteenth-century sexual codes disintegrated. Simultaneously, the economy moved beyond the stage of early industrialization, in which habits of thrift, sobriety, and personal asceticism had won plaudits. Instead, the emphasis in American life was shifting toward consumption, gratification, and pleasure. One result was that the commercialization of sex, previously an underground, illicit phenomenon, moved somewhat into the open, as entrepreneurs created institutions that encouraged erotic encounters. In the process, working-class forms of sexual interaction, previously beyond the ken of the middle class, were projected outward into society. Massive immigration from southern and eastern Europe, as well as the movement of blacks from the rural South to northern cities, aided this development by making these alternative cultures of sexuality far more visible. Having experienced directly two generations of rapid economic change, and having observed the divergent mores of America's social group-

ings, one can imagine Davis deciding to examine the sexual practices and meanings of women of her class. Moreover, the very fact of her study, initiated shortly after World War I, suggests that by the 1920s, erotic life was assuming a new, distinctive importance in the consciousness of some Americans.

This chapter describes some of the variety, tension, and change in American sexual patterns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It looks first at the world of marriage, and then turns to two very different arenas, each affected by the economic transformations of the era, in which sexual meanings were assuming new configurations: the social milieu populated by the college-educated, unmarried "new woman," and the nighttime subculture of urban working-class youth. Three themes in particular stand out. First, within the middle class, gender differences were becoming sharper. While the ideals of social purity advocates had permeated the consciousness of women, men had ever easier access to a world of commercialized sex whose size dwarfed the more casual prostitution that had existed earlier in the century. Second, a flood of immigrants in the generation before World War I, as well as the growth of a native-born white and black urban working class, confronted middle-class sensibilities with patterns of family life and sexual mores that diverged dramatically from their own. Placed alongside the tensions within the middle class, this weakened the hegemony of middle-class ideals. Finally, the economic transformations of the era, particularly the movement of growing numbers of women beyond the domestic sphere, were opening new opportunities for nonprocreative, nonmarital forms of sexual behavior. Some middle-class women were withdrawing from men entirely, while young working-class women were creating new modes of heterosexual interaction. Together, this combination of diversity and change undermined the foundations of late-nineteenth-century civilized morality.

The World of Marriage

By the late nineteenth century the values of the social purity movement had permeated middle-class marriage. Nurtured by activists and sustained by the female world in which women were socialized, they promoted passion between spouses, but a passion tempered by female ideals of mutuality and spiritual union. At the same time, these marriages had to contend with the cultural assumption that men were by nature lustful, as well as with the influences that men who had access to prostitution brought to their domestic life. Although the gulf between male and female could be bridged, it also provided a source of tension and change.

The sexual practices of middle-class marriage at the turn of the century had clearly moved beyond a procreative framework. In 1900, the total fertility of

white American women stood at an average of 3.54, or fifty percent below the level of a century earlier. Large as this decline was, it seriously underestimates the extent of the change experienced by the urban native-born middle class, since immigrants and rural women tended to bear more children than the average. One study of middle-class families found that for women born between 1846 and 1850, whose childbearing years ended in the 1890s, almost half of those with husbands in the professions or in business had two or less children. For a comparable group of wives born between 1866 and 1870 the small size of families was even more pronounced: in 1910, almost two-thirds had families of no more than two children. By the latter date, between fifteen and twenty percent of these couples remained childless. The percentage of large families also evinced a sharp decline. Among the older group of women, about a quarter had five or more offspring, while among the younger, the figure dropped to under ten percent.[3]

This dramatic fall in fertility is all the more remarkable when one recalls the context in which it occurred. By the end of the century, the physicians' campaign to criminalize abortion had succeeded, forcing the phenomenon into hiding. Congress had outlawed the dissemination of birth control information through the mails; many states restricted the sale or advertising of contraceptive devices; Comstock and company were waging a ceaseless battle to enforce these laws; and the threat of imprisonment had impelled many authors of marital advice literature to expunge discussions of contraception from their books. Large sectors of the medical profession were declaiming against artificial methods of limiting fertility. Birth control information had virtually been driven underground, yet middle-class couples were exhibiting extraordinary success in sharply curtailing the number of children they conceived. Although the age of marriage had risen in the latter part of the century, with the median age reaching 26.1 years for men and 22.0 years for women in 1890, the change was not significant enough to account for the drop in family size.[4] The waning of procreation as the inevitable outcome of married life seemed to defy the attempts of lawmakers and reformers to block access to birth control.

Such widespread and successful efforts among the middle class to curtail fertility spark intriguing questions about the place of sexual expression in the relationship of husbands and wives. Although it might seem to raise once again the old specter of stereotypical Victorians repressing their sexual desires in the interest of family limitation, more likely the fertility decline suggests that the social purity movement succeeded in shaping conjugal relations in an era when options for restricting fertility narrowed. The call for voluntary motherhood and a single standard of morality offered a method by which middle-class women could exert some control over childbearing. The sexual ideals that emanated from the movement—of a passion that was tender and refined and

that respected female needs—could curtail male excess. At the same time, it might also permit the incorporation of some contraceptive practice into marriages to foster the spiritual union that women sought. The split between private behavior and public values so central to civilized morality allowed couples consciously to choose artificial methods of contraception even as some representatives of their class attacked it. The low fertility rates at the turn of the century demonstrate a sexual ethic in which a spiritualized intimacy and passion existed apart from procreative intent.

Two pioneering sex surveys provide a window into middle-class marriage. Their findings illustrate the extent to which sex had moved beyond its reproductive purpose and entered the realms of personal desire and intimacy by the turn of the century.[5] Katharine B. Davis studied one thousand women who had reached a marriageable age before World War I and three-quarters of whom were born before 1890. Seventy-four percent of the women in the Davis study practiced some form of contraception, while even larger proportions believed that its use was morally right and that reasons other than procreation justified sexual expression. Two-fifths of the women had intercourse more than twice a week, and four-fifths reported having sexual relations at least weekly. Forty percent acknowledged masturbating during childhood or adolescence, while others began the practice after marrying. Almost half of the women reported that they were "attracted" by their first experience of sex with their husbands, and many more came to enjoy conjugal relations after an initial period of adjustment. Finally, thirty percent of the women surveyed judged their sexual desires to be as strong as those of their spouses.

The results of Dr. Clelia Mosher's study are consistent with this portrait. Of the forty-five women she surveyed, eighty percent were born between 1850 and 1880. Approximately two-thirds of the women acknowledged feeling sexual desire, reported that intercourse was generally agreeable, and listed pleasure as a legitimate purpose of conjugal relations. An overwhelming majority said they experienced orgasm, with one-third reporting that they always or usually did. Eighty-four percent used at least one method of fertility control. Interestingly, despite the restricted access to contraceptive information and devices, a clear trend emerged over time toward adoption of artificial methods of limiting family size. Among the twenty oldest women—those born through 1862—thirty percent used the safe period of the menstrual cycle, forty percent practiced withdrawal, and forty percent employed some form of contraceptive device. For the twenty-five youngest women, the comparable figures were twenty percent for the safe period, twelve percent for withdrawal, and seventy-six percent for contraceptive devices. Finally, slightly over two-thirds of the women indicated that they continued to have intercourse even while pregnant.

At the same time, the women in these surveys could hardly be considered

"sexual enthusiasts."[6] The responses of many, including some of those who acknowledged their own sexual desires and who found sex agreeable, were brimming with tension, confusion, and guilt. For the most part, they viewed sexuality as properly confined to the marital relationship. Three-fifths of the Davis respondents had not masturbated as children or adolescents, and half of those who did described the effects as "harmful." A mere seven percent had engaged in premarital intercourse, while four-fifths of the sample thought it was never justified for men or women. (Mosher did not even question her patients about the issue of premarital experience.) Less than half of those in each survey considered sex necessary for mental and physical health. Although most of the women acknowledged the legitimacy of sexual relations for non-procreative purposes, the overwhelming majority of Mosher's patients still considered reproduction to be the primary goal of sex. Even among those who accepted sex for the pleasure it brought, many also revealed deep ambivalence about erotic enjoyment. One woman who listed pleasure among the purposes of sex immediately qualified her answer with the phrase "but not necessarily a legitimate one." Another thought "pleasure is sufficient to warrant it," but then described her ideal as "to have no intercourse except for reproduction." A third believed that procreation was "the real purpose," and that sex had been "made pleasurable so it would be indulged in, to accomplish [the] purpose of reproduction." Now that she was past her childbearing years she defined her ideal frequency of intercourse as "never." Most women felt less sexual desire than their husbands, and in the Mosher study, many described their "ideal habit" as involving less sex than they had. As one woman born in 1878 told Mosher, she did not find sex agreeable, yet had intercourse two to three times a week because her "husband's pleasure demands it and therefore [she] prefers to want it herself."[7]

Ignorance about sex stands out in bold relief as a prominent cause of the ambivalence many women felt about sexual passion. The limited sphere in which many late-nineteenth-century women moved, as well as middle-class reticence about sexual matters, restricted their access to information. Over forty percent of the women in the Davis study and half of Mosher's respondents reported less than adequate instruction about sex before marriage. Even among women who claimed knowledge about sexual matters, the content of their learning hardly suggested an easy marital adjustment. As one woman in the Davis study proclaimed, and she was by no means unique, her mother "had taught me what to expect. The necessity of yielding to her husband's demands had been a great cross in her own life." A number of the women in the Mosher study cited Alice Stockham's *Tokology,* an advice manual overwhelmingly concerned with pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing, as their chief source of information.[8] Fully a quarter of the Davis women reported that their initial

experience of conjugal relations "repelled" them; Davis found a high correlation between lack of sexual instruction, distaste for sex, and unhappiness in marriage.

Absence of information and distorted teaching about sex spawned fears before marriage, and anger afterward, as women struggled to overcome their early socialization. Worries about pregnancy loomed large in the minds of many adolescents who believed that "kissing, sitting beside someone, . . . eating certain foods, [or] touching a boy's hand" might cause conception. One woman, happily married, reported that her mother informed her that "the doctor brought [babies] in his grip and they were once mossy stones in the brook." Reflecting back, she recalled that the "Immaculate Conception was never clearly understood, and it occurred to me that there might be a recurrence." Others complained that they were given "mere knowledge of facts" or euphemistic explanations "by means of birds and flowers," but no understanding of "*sex emotions.*" As one woman put it, "my books left out the factor of passion. This was a surprise to me after marriage." Mothers in particular seemed so perverse in their teaching that Davis labeled them one of the more "unfortunate" sources of information. Yet, despite this, many women managed to leave behind their early instruction. "I think mother gave me an abnormal idea of men by her own sex attitude. . . . I thought most men must be beasts," said one woman, whose phrasing suggested that she had since learned differently.[9]

The impression that finally emerges from these surveys is that a small number of women approached sex eagerly, enthusiastically, and with great delight; a somewhat larger group experienced marital intercourse as difficult, painful, and unwanted; and finally, a clear majority found that sex, as social purity crusaders advocated, occupied an important, respected, but also limited place in their marital life. Properly restricted to marriage, it served procreative goals, yet not exclusively, since most employed contraceptive measures. Though not perceived as a necessity, intercourse was potentially a pleasure to be enjoyed, but only if experienced in moderation. "I consider this appetite as ranking with other natural appetites," said one woman, who preferred it "to be indulged legitimately and temperately." Repeatedly, women in the Mosher study referred to the "spiritual completeness" that sex engendered, while objecting to an unrestrained animal passion that inevitably would "degrade their best feelings toward each other." The foundation for this approach was a deeply held belief in mutuality, of husbands tailoring their passions in a way that was respectful of a wife's desires and concerns, and of wives willing to respond to the overtures of their mate. When this adaptation occurred and both could find a common ground, women spoke of the sexual side of marriage with satisfaction. "There is no experience on earth comparable to . . . the love