Intimate Matters

A HISTORY OF SEXUALITY IN AMERICA

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HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York
Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington
London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore, Sydney

1817

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 groupings, 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 nonprocreative 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

and complete satisfaction of two perfectly mated people," said one woman after thirteen years of marriage. Another, the mother of eight children, simply wrote that after affectionate sex with her husband, "the next day filled with the joy of life."[10]

A woman's desire for mutuality meant, ultimately, that in sex, as in so many other aspects of married life, her happiness and security depended upon the character and behavior of her husband. As Davis reported,

> The comments of the women who were attracted [to sex in marriage] . . . emphasized the spiritual or emotional agreement—the "mental unity," as one puts it—which accompanied physical pleasure. Over and over again in this group are stressed the unselfishness, consideration, and self-control of the husband. Just the opposite qualities are most often emphasized in the [group that was repelled by sex]. . . . The wife ignorant, unprepared, shocked at the strength of her husband's passion; the husband unable to realize this, inconsiderate, uncontrolled; a long period of adjustment—and if this fails, unhappiness for both.[11]

Again and again, women in the Mosher survey specified mutuality as their ideal. "When acceptable to both," said one. "When desired by both," said another. "Everything to be absolutely mutual," responded a third. For some, the promise and fulfillment of mutuality was so great that they wrote lyrically when describing it. One woman who desired intercourse and found it agreeable, and who "almost invariably" reached orgasm, defined her ideal as "no habit at all, but the most sensitive regard of each member of the couple for the personal feeling and desires and health of the other. In fact, pure and tender *love,* wide awake to the whole of life, should dictate marriage relations." She penned these words after eight years of a marriage in which she and her husband indulged in intercourse once or twice a month. The tone of all her answers suggests that, in her husband, she had attained her ideal mate. On the other hand, another woman who also believed in mutuality and who described herself as "more alive mentally and physically" when she reached orgasm, had been badly disappointed by her husband's sexual demands. Throughout their sixteen-year marriage, she had acquiesced to intercourse more frequently than she cared to have it. The result was that she did not find sex agreeable and encapsulated male character by saying that "men have not been properly trained."[12]

Although her own experience in marriage makes this woman's judgment about men understandable, the deficiency did not lie in men's training as much as in the cultural prescriptions about male character. If the middle-class woman suffered from a tension between the inadequacy of her premarital instruction and the possibilities of the conjugal bed, her male counterpart

found himself battered by the incompatibility of what he was told was his "natural" self and the ideals expected of a husband. Late-nineteenth-century commentators, both professional and lay, described men as assertive, aggressive, and impassioned, with a physiology and character that was, by nature, "more or less explosive."[13] Such untamed energy had value in the world of work, though even there a man of integrity might strive to master his most unruly impulses. But, in the home, as husband and father, man's nature served him poorly, and he was expected to exhibit self-control and restraint. In short, the middle-class man was a personality divided against itself.

The tensions embedded in late-nineteenth-century masculinity revealed themselves most clearly in the realm of sexuality. Here, the passions associated with manhood were perceived as almost bestial, scarcely capable of containment. Ironically, middle-class culture seemed to encourage this presumed physiological bent. As Dr. Alice Stockham described it in her sex education manual for women, "We teach the girl *repression,* the boy *expression,* not simply by word and book, but the lessons are graven into their very being by all the traditions, prejudices, and customs of society. . . . Physicians and physiologists teach, and most men and women believe: That sexual union is a *necessity* to man, while it is not to women." Social custom demanded that young men take the lead in courtship by expressing interest, devising trysts, and pursuing their beloveds. Yet such a role only magnified, as one young man ruefully acknowledged, a "strained condition of mind and body," making it difficult for men to respect the supposedly natural modesty of the opposite sex. These contradictory pulls on men could lead to confusion and guilt. "When I tried to tell you how I love you," wrote one man to his fiancée, "I thought I was a kind of criminal and felt just a little as though I were confessing some wrong I had done you." Explosive as his desires were thought to be by nature, the middle-class man knew that somehow he had to control them. "You have only to ask . . . that I recede from any given position or privilege, and I shall do so," a young man informed his sweetheart.[14] To the woman he courted and the one he eventually would marry, the civilized male ideally was to bring the most refined expressions of love.

In the battle that raged between the call of nature and the demands of civilized society, a man's own efforts at self-control received assistance from the women around him. Since the antebellum era, notions of proper womanhood had placed upon mothers the task of moral guardianship, of inculcating in the young purity of thought and action. Changes in American society in the last third of the nineteenth century made middle-class mothers especially prone to fulfill that responsibility toward their sons. The residential segregation of the middle class in the sprawling cities of the Gilded Age kept working fathers away from the home. Women, meanwhile, had fewer children to care

for, and were yet to embark upon extensive extra-familial roles. The habits and values that these mothers might pass on to their sons could later make the difference between continence and indulgence. As one young man remarked to his fiancée, "my love for my wife can not be less strong or pure, because of the love I shall always have for my mother." Others looked to their intended brides to set limits upon their sexual propensities. "Help me fight myself—my worse self that has so long had the mastery," pleaded one man to his future bride. Another wrote, "you are the very incarnation of purity to me . . . and you shall help to cleanse me."[15] As the testimony of women in the Mosher and Davis surveys suggests, many late-nineteenth-century men, through their own efforts and the influence of the women close to them, shaped their sexual desires in ways that successfully combined chastity and passion.

However, males encountered other influences on their sexual development that ran counter to the dictates of civilized morality. The reticence that characterized middle-class mores meant that boys would often learn about sex not from parents or teachers, but from male peers. One study of about a thousand male college students who were born in the early to mid-1890s found that, on the average, boys had received their "first striking and permanent" impression of sex before the age of ten, from sources that the overwhelming majority of respondents labeled as "unwholesome." In most cases, the information came from another, somewhat older, boy, and a picture emerges of a transmission belt in which male youth taught each other surreptitiously. By contrast, two-thirds of the students did not receive any kind of formal sex instruction—from parents, educators, or specialized literature—until after the age of fourteen. By that time, as the author of the study remarked, the lesson was "six years too late," since most of the boys already had commenced sexual activity of some sort. Over three-fifths of the students reported masturbating, and more than a third had engaged in sexual intercourse by the time they were surveyed, figures that the author considered "very conservative."[16]

For most of these young men, their underground sexual learning did not represent a welcome alternative to repressive moral strictures, but rather a troublesome deviation from norms they valued. It created a preoccupation with the erotic such that one young man reported, "my sex ambitions run so high that often I could not control myself." Another confessed that he could think of "nothing but sexual indulgence and every girl that passed was thought of in a vulgar manner." The example of older boys gave one student "a wrong idea of manhood and led me to look upon women as merely to be used to satisfy one's passions." Time and again, respondents used words such as "vicious," "evil," "vulgar," and "degrading" to describe what they had learned, and the habits they had developed. Most of the young men viewed their sexual behavior as a problem, as a sign of moral weakness and a failure of manly self-control.[17]

The high incidence of intercourse among this group of young unmarried males immediately points to a major area of tension in turn-of-the-century sexual life. Large numbers of middle-class men were participating in sexual activities not shared by women of the same class who, overwhelmingly, entered marriage without the experience of coitus. By the early twentieth century, among the white native-born middle class, the gulf between the premarital sexual socialization of male and female had grown larger than ever, with important ramifications for marital adjustment. While women remained virginal and chaste, with desires that stopped short of coital expression, many men honored the ideal of continence only in the breech, and entered marriage sexually experienced.

Commercialized prostitution made this disparity of experience possible. By the end of the century, the casual streetwalking prostitution of an earlier era had long given way to a highly organized system of urban red-light districts. The success of feminists and purity reformers in the 1860s and 1870s in forestalling the legalization of prostitution did not obstruct brothels from operating in segregated vice districts with the connivance of police and municipal officials. In fact, social purity campaigns may have contributed to the creation of these districts by forcing prostitution beyond the view of middle-class women and into the working-class neighborhoods of immigrants and blacks. Investigations into the workings of the "social evil" found it to be a feature not only of major metropolitan areas such as New York and Chicago, but of smaller cities throughout the nation. Little Rock, Arkansas, for instance, reportedly had nineteen houses of prostitution, and Lancaster, Pennsylvania, twenty-seven. The districts were so much a fixture of the age that "sporting guides" and "blue books" were published to direct customers to them. The guide books told the price, location, and "services" of various brothels, identifying the ethnicity or the sexual practices of prostitutes with descriptions such as "Jew Louie" or "French Studio." The most enterprising madams kept track of patrons, sending them from time to time "announcements of change of address or a veiled suggestion as to the 'quality' of 'goods' on display." As the practice implied, sex for sale had become an integral feature of urban life, on a much larger scale than in the mid-nineteenth-century city where it originated.[18]

Prostitutes were available to serve the sexual needs of men of every class and ethnic background. Fifty-cent "crib houses" catered to casual laborers who sat on wooden benches waiting for a turn so quick that they barely took down their pants. One- and two-dollar joints might attract young clerks and other white-collar workers. Fancy parlor houses with ornate decor, racy music, and expensive liquor won the loyalty of the more economically privileged men. In these, the sexual transaction with a prostitute might be but one element in a long evening of ribaldry.

With their penchant for statistics and charts, Progressive-era investigators of commercialized sex have left convincing evidence that large numbers of middle-class men in cities and towns turned to prostitutes at least occasionally. In early-twentieth-century New York, five- and ten-dollar brothels outnumbered fifty-cent crib houses by almost two to one. The number of houses and of inmates per house, the frequency with which women in brothels turned tricks, and the prices that various houses charged suggest that many middle-class men bought sex at some time. Only the most obtuse could fail to notice its availability, while the separate spheres of the middle class provided men with the independence to partake of it without the knowledge of wives and other female family members. College students explored vice districts together; young male migrants to the city lived in rooming-house districts where prostitution was visible; men traveling on business could learn the location of brothels before they left the train station; members of social clubs visited houses of prostitution as a group. Those ubiquitous characters of the urban streets, the messenger boys and newspaper hawkers, were repositories of information about where to find what vice, and they sold their information boldly. In smaller cities close to the agricultural hinterland, the red-light districts even served the needs of that symbol of upright character, the farmer.

What it meant to patronize a prostitute, or how prominently it figured in the sexual life of middle-class men, remains sketchy. Excitement coexisted with guilt and anxiety, pleasure with disappointment. One young man, brought by his father to a fancy parlor house in New Orleans for his sexual initiation, later described the experience as a "mechanical procedure that . . . endured for perhaps a minute." Sex education surveys of the 1910s found that many younger men worried about their contacts with prostitutes, wondering whether they had contracted disease or whether their adjustment to marriage might prove more difficult because of the experience.[19] For some, buying sex was a youthful rite of passage that they quickly left behind; for others it might be an ongoing feature of their sexual lives, something that continued for years.

Just as ignorance about sexuality hampered the marital adjustment of turn-of-the-century women, regular recourse to prostitution might widen further the gulf between husband and wife that gender socialization created. As historian Ruth Rosen has pointed out, sex in the red-light districts was above all a commodity, not the stuff of romance or fantasy. The emphasis on speedy orgasm, the lack of emotional connection, and the absence of any expectation of mutuality made commercialized sex a poor training ground for middle-class bridegrooms. To the degree that young men's expectations were based on their encounters with prostitutes, they would bring to the conjugal bedroom a form of sexual expression badly out of line with what their wives might desire. On

the other hand, some married men may have continued to visit the districts precisely because they could not find in their wives the kind of sexual availability, or responsiveness, they wanted. The world of commercialized prostitution may have been, as some have argued, a "necessary evil" sustaining the civilized morality of the middle class, but it did so at the price of sexual discord in marriage.

Beyond questions of emotional and sexual compatibility, the extensive patronage of prostitutes by middle-class men injected a far more serious problem into their families. In the early years of the twentieth century, as medical knowledge of venereal disease improved, doctors and social reformers directed renewed attention to it. One committee of New York doctors estimated that as many as eighty percent of men in the city had been infected with gonorrhea, and from five to eighteen percent suffered from syphilis. A Boston doctor from the same era found over a third of a sample of male hospital patients admitting gonorrheal infection.[20] Whatever the actual incidence, such reports fed a perception of an epidemic of sexually related disease. Concerning its origins, few expressed any doubts: prostitutes served as transmitting agents that spread the scourge of venereal infection from red-light districts to respectable households. As long as middle-class men patronized prostitutes, their wives and fiancées would harbor anxieties about the safety of conjugal relations. Some might wishfully exempt their husbands and brothers from the taint of such immorality, but the existence of prostitution testified to the potential of men to display uncontrollable lusts at odds with the refined, spiritualized passion that the middle classes cherished.

When middle-class men did enter the red-light district, whether as customers or as reformers, they confronted the reality of sexual values that differed from their own. Much of the commerce in sex took place in neighborhoods also populated by masses of workers who lived beyond the reach of middle-class genteel morality. A new geographic distance, born of innovations in transportation such as the streetcar, separated social groups and magnified the sense of danger with which the business and professional classes viewed the working-class majority. In their own districts, immigrants, blacks, native-born white workers, and even rural dwellers evolved marital standards that reflected the conditions in which they lived. Large families, crowded living quarters, racial and ethnic tensions, economic hardship, Old World cultural traditions, and other circumstances all conspired to shape family forms that competed with those of the more prosperous.

For middle-class Americans who did catch a glimpse into the private lives of workers, perceptions were colored by their own moral universe. Social reformers who studied tenement districts and urban slums saw families

crowded into tiny apartments, with adolescent boys and girls sharing the same sleeping quarters, parents' beds in sight of their young children, and male boarders mingling with familiarity among wives and daughters. To college-educated social workers, this sort of family life did not recall the simplicity of the colonial or frontier experience, but instead seemed a source of "moral contamination," with the presence of boarders "always evil," and engendering immorality "of the grossest sort." Overcrowding forced a "crude realization of the sex relationship on young people at a very early age." Investigators in Wisconsin described a woman who took in lodgers as "practically the wife of all of them." In Philadelphia, New York, and other cities, middle-class observers commented on the presence of brothels alongside tenements that housed family groups. "At times children were playing in front of doors behind which prostitutes plied their trade," one exposé noted, and they would grin knowingly when a strange man sought admittance. Accustomed to ideals of purity, reticence, and a conjugal intimacy that rested on privacy, the middle class could see in these districts nothing but an alien, anarchic sexuality.[21]

Foreign as they appeared, the customs of the teeming working-class districts in fact pointed to a sexual morality and marital patterns of their own. For some immigrant groups, boarders might have the quality of kin, coming from their peasant villages or on the recommendation of trusted neighbors. The income they contributed to the family often provided the margin to keep a wife out of the factory, or a daughter in school. High procreation rates, common to the rural origins of many immigrants, insured additional wage earners and financial security for aging parents. The "promiscuous mingling" in apartments, hallways, and on street corners could serve as a kind of protection, keeping young girls under watchful eyes and guaranteeing that their virginity remained unviolated.

The sexual attitudes and customs of working-class groups varied according to the traditions they brought with them to urban living. Among southern black migrants, cohabitation and serial monogamy characterized the lives of many young adults. In his study of Philadelphia blacks, W. E. B. Du Bois attributed this pattern to "the difficulty of ~~earning in~~come enough to afford to marry." Though in some situations the practice fostered "centres of irregular sexual intercourse," with men and women changing partners after several months, in many other cases it evolved into "more or less permanent cohabitation." In time, these common-law marriages might be formalized with a wedding. For southern Italian immigrants, on the other hand, the virginity of daughters carried a high value. Unmarried females were carefully chaperoned, and even during courtship couples had little freedom to explore the erotic. As one Italian man recalled, "I used to go to her house. She sat on one side of the table, and I on the other. They afraid I touch." Three weeks before the

wedding, he and his fiancée went to the theater, accompanied by a bevy of relatives. "We came to the aisles of the theatre. My mother-in-law go first, my fiancée next, my little sister, my father-in-law. I was the last one. I had two in between . . . I was next to the old man." Briefly alone with his betrothed a few days before the wedding, he tried to steal a kiss. "No, not yet!" she replied. Extraordinarily low illegitimacy rates among Italian-Americans through the 1930s testify to the success of community pressures in preserving female chastity before marriage.[22]

The hard conditions of life that they faced, and the unusual demographic patterns of the early stages of immigration, often militated against the romantic attachments or the intense, spiritualized passion that the middle class valued. With single men often in the majority, women married very young; sometimes, adolescent girls came to America from eastern and southern Europe and from Japan to marry men they had not yet met, in matches made by parents or other kin. For many immigrant daughters, marriage symbolized not romance but "a step toward freedom . . . an opportunity to be rid of disagreeable work in the factory or the home." As one young boxmaker explained, "you never rest until you die . . . I will get out by marrying somebody." Early marriage, rural traditions, and lack of information about birth control guaranteed high procreation rates. Polish women in early-twentieth-century Buffalo bore an average of eight children; Italians, eleven. One Italian husband, whose first child arrived nine months after marriage and who fathered eleven more, fatalistically explained, "we got married and they come when they come. What could I do? I can't get rid of them." Poor living conditions and inadequate medical care increased the health risks of frequent childbearing, and must have made sex a burden fraught with anxieties for many immigrant wives. One young Jewish wife in New York, desperate to avoid future pregnancies, asked a doctor for help. "You want your cake while you eat it too, do you?" he replied. "Well, it can't be done. . . . I'll tell you the only sure thing to do. Tell Jake to sleep on the roof!"[23]

Conjugal intimacy was often hard to sustain. In the Lithuanian community of Chester, Pennsylvania, children commonly slept in the same bed with their parents, who would have intercourse hurriedly after the young ones fell asleep. Husbands expected their wives to be dutiful and responsible homemakers; wives hoped for a dependable provider in their mate. Respect often took precedence over romantic affection. One autobiographical novel of an Italian immigrant family described the wife as "relieved to know" that her husband "never failed her." Thankful for what she had, she accepted that "there is nothing but this, being born and growing up, working and marrying and having a home and children. That is all there is."[24] Sex-segregated patterns of leisure kept men out of the home in the evenings, passing time with male

acquaintances in neighborhood saloons. The presence of prostitutes and the absence of "respectable" women in most of these establishments testified to the double standard of morality that prevailed.

In the South of the same era, a rigid double standard also held sway among whites, a product of the racial caste system that developed in the generation after Reconstruction. The emphasis on female purity that characterized the antebellum planter class spread more widely among the white population. In large part, this ethos served as a means of both racial and gender control that allowed white men to attack their black counterparts for the flimsiest reasons and kept white women confined in their activities, with all of it resting on the access that white males had to black women. Though seldom openly acknowledged, it was widely understood that most white southern males "began their sexual experience with Negro girls, usually around the ages of fifteen or sixteen."[25] On Saturday nights throughout the South, young whites would descend on the black part of town for a quick fling. In some cases, interracial relationships might last for many years, with men fathering children and supporting mistresses, even as they seemed to lead upright lives with a white spouse and family. More often the relationships were casual and crassly exploitative.

White women, meanwhile, remained virtually untouchable, exemplifying a purity that was beyond corruption. How deeply they internalized this belief remains open to question, but one female novelist of the region, Frances Newman, wryly commented that "in Georgia a woman was not supposed to know she was a virgin until she ceased to be one." Men defended their daughters from sexual approaches. Reminiscing about turn-of-the-century Kentucky, the film director D. W. Griffith noted that "even a wink or a bashful nod towards a young lady would get one a good piece of hot lead or a kick in the pants." Among themselves, white men often joked that "until they were married, they did not know that white women were capable of sexual intercourse." Once married, men had to remain faithful, but "only after a fashion. They claimed," said Griffith, that "their wives considered it beneath them to be jealous of that sort of thing. If they had an affair with a woman of their own class, there was the devil to pay, but the other sort of thing was just a part of life." Against the backdrop of their illicit interracial liaisons, husbands might easily experience guilt at approaching their wives for sex, while women's tacit awareness of their men's hidden activities made the marriage relation in some cases a bitter one. Among themselves, white women frequently told jokes about the lasciviousness of black females, a practice that one observer called "the fleeting forms in which forbidden interests can be socially expressed." But, for the most part, they had little recourse to protest. Unlike northern wives who campaigned for social purity and a single standard, southern white

women remained quiescent. Not until the 1920s and 1930s would significant numbers of them rise up in protest.[26]

Sexual exploitation by whites combined with values surviving from slavery to shape the sexual ethos of southern blacks. Except among the small black elite, female chastity before marriage was not prized. The pregnancy that might occur from premarital experimentation did not carry a stigma, and women who had given birth out of wedlock did not find their opportunities for marriage compromised. While nuclear families predominated in black rural communities, many of them evolved out of what began as simple cohabitation, with legal marriage following after a time. As one older black woman from Mississippi explained, "a man is your husband if you live with him and love each other . . . [M]arriage is something for the outside world." The improvised lyrics of songs sung by blacks suggested a relaxed attitude toward sexual matters, in contrast to the mores of whites. As one verse popular among black miners and railroad workers in turn-of-the-century Alabama proclaimed, "White folks on the sofa / Niggers on the grass / White man is talking low / Nigger is getting ass." Extramarital relations could be tolerated for men, and in some cases for women, provided certain boundaries were respected. In the 1930s one seventy-year-old widow from the Deep South remembered her husband affectionately, despite his history of sexual affairs. "I was always first," she reminisced, "and he didn't buy something for no one unless he asked me." Sometimes, though, the internalized values of a racist social structure expressed themselves in the relations of black men and women. Women might compare black men unfavorably against the favors they received from a white lover, while some blacks of both sexes expressed a preference for potential spouses of lighter skin color than themselves.[27]

While the experience of urban immigrants and the interracial South were the most visible alternatives to northern middle-class norms, other variations also existed. In the backwoods regions of the Ozarks, for instance, rural couples adopted practices that would have shocked purity reformers. Many old-time planting rituals incorporated sexual intercourse, a practice believed to guarantee fertile fields and a good crop. Along the border of Missouri and Oklahoma in the 1890s, one husband and wife walked to their newly planted field at night. Stripping their clothes off, the husband would "have at it till she squealed like a pig." In one small rural community, a naked couple planted their flax before sunrise, repeating the phrase "up to my ass, and higher too." Then, they just "laid down on the ground and had a good time." Residents claimed it was an old Indian custom, though native Americans of the area could not recall any such thing.[28]

Leisure activities in the Ozarks sustained a raucous sexuality. At country dances attended by the young and married for miles around, fiddlers improv-

ised bawdy lyrics. Popular tunes had titles such as "Grease My Pecker Sally Ann," "Hard Pecker Reel," "Poontang on the Levee," and "Take Your Fingers Out of My Pants." One man from Fayetteville, Arkansas, recalled that at some square dances in the early twentieth century, "some of them white-trash was plumb vulgar . . . country gals would hang every stitch of their clothes on a nail!" One set of square dance calls went like this:

> Lead the ace and trump the king,
> Let me feel that pretty little thing,
> Up and at em, everybody dance,
> Goose that gal and watch her prance.
> Ladies do the shimmy, down goes her britches.
> In goes a little thing about six inches.

A Missouri fiddler who remembered playing a hoedown called "Fucking in the Goober Patch" offered the opinion decades later that the dances had eventually died because "the folks that knowed 'em . . . got religion."[29]

Though Ozark ribaldry remained far beyond the ken of the genteel urban middle class, other sets of sexual values did not. By the early twentieth century, as Progressive reform efforts cast a spotlight on working-class life, middle-class Americans were confronting directly these alternatives to their cherished ways. The access that men had to women outside their social group would come under scrutiny, exposing the tensions and fragility of civilized morality. At the same time, the movement of middle-class women beyond their domestic sphere would lead some of them to question the ideals of the late nineteenth century. The marital pattern that social purity ideals encouraged would not withstand these pressures.

Women Outside the Family: Middle-Class Professionals and Working-Class Youth

Besides the challenge that diversity posed to middle-class mores, profound structural changes in economic life were instigating other broad shifts in sexual values that threatened the hegemony of civilized morality. By the turn of the century, the nation's economy was poised to move beyond the sober work ethic that had characterized nineteenth-century capitalist development. In its stead would come the values and institutions of a consumer society. Having built its railroads, exploited its mines and forests, and constructed the factory complexes that produced the materials needed by heavy industry, American entrepreneurs were ready to embark upon new directions. One symbol of this transition, the modern department store, made its debut in the 1880s and spread quickly in the succeeding decades. These "palaces of consumption"

enticed shoppers with a glittering array of products to buy.[30] Along with consumer industries, the retail trades and the service sector would gradually become the engines propelling the economy forward. In the process, a new ethic of consumption, self-gratification, and leisure would begin to appeal to growing numbers of Americans. As one group of purity reformers mournfully expressed it, just before World War I, "the commercialization of practically every human interest in the past thirty years has completely transformed daily life. . . . Prior to 1880 the . . . main business of life was living. . . . The main business of life now is pleasure."[31]

As part and parcel of these developments, one stands out in particular as significant in the evolution of sexual behavior and values—the growing presence of women in the public sphere. Much of nineteenth-century civilized morality depended on the separation of male and female spheres, and the distinctive character structures that this division sustained. The piety, purity, and spiritual passion of the middle-class wife rested upon her domestic role; her allegiance to it motivated her activism on behalf of social purity and the single standard. After 1880, the daily stuff of many women's lives underwent a transformation. For some, particularly middle-class wives, change coexisted with the survival of domestic values. Lower fertility rates left them time for activities besides childrearing and housekeeping and helped generate a women's club movement after the 1880s; department stores drew them to downtown areas to shop. For other women, the break with the past was sharper. By the end of the century, more and more daughters of the prosperous classes were attending college and pursuing careers in the professions after graduation. Meanwhile, for young working-class women, changes in the economy were substantially altering their occupational structure. In 1870, domestic service accounted for sixty percent of female employment, thus allowing working-class daughters to earn a living, yet still confining them to a familial setting. By 1900 the proportion had declined to one-third, and by 1920 it had dropped to eighteen percent. Meanwhile, factory, office, and retail jobs grew at a rapid pace, while the number of working women expanded far faster than the growth of the female population. Most of those working outside the home for wages were young and single, with the result that the sex-segregated world of the nineteenth century became less descriptive of their experience. All of these changes were to have important consequences for sexual expression.

One set of women who were moving outside the home were the college-educated, the daughters of comfortably situated business and professional families. In many ways paragons of propriety, they were nonetheless making life choices that departed from the complex of values that had defined proper womanhood for their mothers. In doing so, their experiences helped to reveal

the nature of the sexual system in which they were raised, as well as suggest the directions in which it was moving.

By 1900, a small but noticeable number of young middle-class women were enrolling in institutions of higher learning. The first generation of such women, in the 1870s and 1880s, provoked an outpouring of polemical literature about the perils intellectual work held for women. A college education would ruin a woman's health, these writers argued, and especially make her unfit for motherhood, the noblest calling of womanhood. Ignoring these warnings, the pioneers among female college students continued their education, and by the first decade of the twentieth century, their numbers were steadily increasing. Yet, their deviation from traditional female pursuits continued to evoke uneasiness. One prominent psychologist, G. Stanley Hall, wrote in 1904 that higher education threatened to produce women who were "functionally castrated . . . deplore the necessity of childbearing . . . and abhor the limitations of married life." A gynecologist of the same era simply predicted that these women would expand the ranks of the nation's "sexual incompetents."[32]

Although the development of women's intellectual powers did not result, as predicted, in shrunken wombs, nevertheless it was clear that college did seem to direct women away from marriage and motherhood. The first generation of graduates, especially, were endowed with a sense of mission. Having braved the opprobrium of society by attending college, they were not readily prepared to exchange for a life of domesticity the possibilities that an education had opened. Pioneers in the classroom, they went on to create similarly new opportunities for women in the world of work. Whether as faculty at women's colleges, residents of settlement houses, social workers, businesswomen, or journalists, they continued to make a place for themselves outside the home, beyond the boundaries of nineteenth-century domesticity. An extraordinarily high proportion of women graduates never married. Of women educated at Bryn Mawr between 1889 and 1908, for instance, fifty-three percent remained unwed. For Wellesley and the University of Michigan, the figures were forty-three percent and forty-seven percent. The proportion among those who went on for advanced degrees was even more lopsided: three-quarters of the women who received Ph.D.'s between 1877 and 1924 remained single.[33] Even among those who did marry, a significant percentage never had children. For a society that defined the female in terms of her maternal instinct, these "new women" were an anomaly, living proof of the fragility of middle-class values.

For many of these women professionals, however, remaining unmarried was not the same as being single. Among them could be commonly found pairs of women passionately attached to one another and committed to a lifetime together. Couples such as Katharine Coman and Katharine Lee Bates, Mary Woolley and Jeannette Marks, Jane Addams and Mary Rozet Smith, and

Florence Converse and Vida Scudder not only shared their lives, but moved within networks of similar women in settlement houses and women's colleges. Here was a female world of love and passion, different from the same-sex ties of the mid-nineteenth century in that its participants were freed from the bonds of matrimony, able to live and work independent of men.[34]

It is hardly surprising that many college-educated women would form relationships of passionate intensity with each other, socialized as they were into a world which valued female sensibility and female bonds. As young girls they could observe among their mothers, aunts, cousins and older sisters the importance of relationships between women. As late as the first decade of the twentieth century, magazine fiction aimed at adolescent girls and young women affirmed girlhood friendships and loyalty to one's women friends. One story in a popular magazine from 1908 described two girls in a boarding school who "had fallen in love . . . at first sight." Later in their relationship, "Carol came in, caught Jean, whirled her around, pulled her down on a cot, and gave her a warm kiss." In boarding schools and women's colleges, students developed crushes, fell madly in love, courted, wrote love notes, and exchanged presents. Although "smashing" was less common by the turn of the century, it had not yet died as a custom, and adolescent romantic love still enjoyed a lively existence in these female educational environments. Jeannette Marks, who taught at Mount Holyoke, described the women's colleges of the early twentieth century as "hotbeds of special sentimental friendships."[35] For women who now had the opportunity to earn an independent living and hence refrain from marrying, the choice to continue or pursue relationships with other women was a natural one.

Besides the pull that previous experience and socialization exerted, there were other compelling reasons that may have pushed college-educated women in the direction of a lifelong commitment to other women. As M. Carey Thomas, the president of Bryn Mawr, explained it, women scholars lived with a "cruel handicap. They have spent half a lifetime in fitting themselves for their chosen work and then may be asked to choose between it and marriage. No one can estimate the number of women who remain unmarried in revolt before such a horrible alternative."[36] Men of their class had not shared the heady intellectual atmosphere of women's colleges where students were encouraged to use their talents in the world. They had little sympathy for female aspirations and instead expected them to become dutiful wives, tending the home.

Stereotypes of the Victorian woman as sexually ignorant and passionless, as lacking in both desire and erotic interest, have obscured the nature and meaning of these middle-class female relationships. In many, many cases they were every bit as passionate, loving, and committed as our modern notions lead us to assume a heterosexual marriage would be. Unlike the hidden world of

working-class female couples in which one member passed as a man, these partnerships, which were sometimes labeled "Boston marriages," were visible to the outside world, and accepted by society. Women lived together, owned property jointly, planned their travels together, shared holidays and family celebrations with one another, and slept in the same bed. The temporary separations that might normally ensue in two busy lives elicited love letters of extraordinary emotional intensity. They provide a window into the passion shared by women lovers who have been euphemistically described as close friends and devoted companions.

One such relationship was that of Rose Elizabeth Cleveland (the sister of President Grover Cleveland) and Evangeline Marrs Simpson. The two met in 1889, when Cleveland was a forty-four-year-old spinster and Simpson a widow of thirty. A powerful attraction resulted, and over the next year or so, the women interspersed time together with periods of separation in which they wrote frequently. Early on in the relationship, Simpson urged Cleveland in desperate tones to "come to see me this night—my Clevy, my Viking, my Everything—Come!" At one point Simpson sent some photographs of herself to Cleveland, and the latter wrote back as she looked at the images of her beloved:

> my Eve looks into my eyes with brief bright glances, with long raptuous embraces . . . [H]er sweet life breath and her warm enfolding arms appease my hunger, and . . . carry my body in one to the summit of joy, the end of search, the goal of love! Here is no beyond!

Sometime later, Cleveland wrote again, this time pointedly framing her words in the image of one of the world's great love affairs:

> Ah, my Cleopatra looks a very dangerous Queen, but I will look her straight in those wide open eyes that look so imperial and will crush those Antony-seeking lips, until her arms close over . . . and she becomes my prisoner because I am her captain. . . . How much kissing can Cleopatra stand?

Although many years and another marriage for Simpson were to ensue before Cleveland's passion was to be fully requited, the two women sailed for Italy together in 1910 and lived there until Cleveland's death in 1918.[37]

It would be a distortion of the historical record to attempt to homogenize relationships that were so complex. Toward the end of her life, Vida Scudder, who had enjoyed for decades a loving partnership with the writer Florence Converse, commented that "a woman's life in which sex interests have never visited, is a life neither dull nor empty nor devoid of romance." Speaking of her own experience, she wrote that "the absence of [the sex] factor need not mean dearth of romance, or of intensely emotional significant personal relations. Of these, I have had more than I care to dwell upon." Even where overtly erotic behavior was involved, it might recede into the background. As one businesswoman, born in the 1880s, explained, "I have a woman friend whom I love and admire above everyone in the world. . . . The physical factor is only one minor factor in the friendship which is based on perfect congeniality and love."[38]

On the other hand, substantial evidence exists that overtly sexual relationships among unmarried college-educated women were not at all uncommon. One study of such relationships among students found that more than "mere friendship" was involved. "The love is strong, real, and passionate," wrote the author, and has "the same characteristics of intensity and devotion that are ordinarily associated with heterosexual love." In the 1920s, when Katharine B. Davis surveyed twelve hundred unmarried college graduates, she found homoerotic relationships to be common in both women's colleges and coeducational institutions. Twenty-eight percent of the women's college graduates and twenty percent of those from coeducational schools had experienced intense ties with other women that included a physical component recognized as sexual. Almost equal numbers had enjoyed intense emotional attachments that involved kissing and hugging. Davis observed that "apparently those women who go out into the world to work, like those who go to college, are more apt to form such attachments," but she was quick to point out that "very few" could be considered "psychopathic," a term that by the 1920s was increasingly being used to stigmatize homosexual expression. In general, these women tended to see their relationships as contributing to their well-being. One thirty-eight-year-old woman with a graduate degree in nursing called her partner "as much a real mate as a husband would be. I have come to think that certain women, many, in fact, possibly most of those who are unmarried, are more attracted to women than to men . . . [T]o mate with one woman is as natural and as healthful and helpful for them as are marital relations between husband and wife. In my own case it has had a decidedly softening and sweetening effect on my temper and general attitude."[39]

The middle-class women who were coming of age in the early twentieth century were at a turning point. Forming their ties in an age when their society still validated female bonding, they also lived in an era when same-sex relationships came under sharper scrutiny. By the end of the century, European writers such as Krafft-Ebing were describing same-sex relationships in medical terms, as signs of mental and physical degeneration. After 1900, some writers used female attachments to cast stones at women's aspirations for equality. "The driving force in many agitators and militant women who are always after their rights," one commented, "is often an unsatisfied sex impulse, with a homosexual aim." By the 1920s, Freudian theories of sexual development as

well as the writings of other sexologists had completed the redefinition of same-sex pairings as homosexual, and labeled them morbid and pathological. In the Davis study, evidence abounded that women were internalizing this shift in perspective. One woman wrote, for instance, that "the ethics of homosexual relationships is the most serious problem the business or professional woman has to face today. . . . In my city some business women are hesitating to take apartments together for fear of the interpretation that may be put upon it." Many women who felt their relationships had been valuable and good nevertheless defined them as "abnormal," "unnatural," or a "perversion." Davis attributed this conflict to the influence of social opinion about homosexuality. As time went on that opinion would harden and transform female couples, in the words of one of Davis's respondents, into "pariahs, dirty, evil things" in the eyes of the world.[40] In the meantime, however, these women had fully removed female sexuality from a procreative, marital context as they created lifelong partnerships that were romantic and often erotic.

While some daughters of the middle class were constructing an erotic life with other women, many more young working girls were exploring heterosexual relations beyond a marital setting as they labored in factories, offices, and retail establishments. Signs of this had already appeared in a few neighborhoods, such as New York City's Bowery, in the mid-nineteenth century, but as opportunities for employment outside the home expanded, the phenomenon gained new visibility in many more locales. Much of what we know about the premarital behavior of working-class youth comes from outside investigators, from the pens of middle-class reformers who saw only flagrant immorality in the sexually suggestive interactions of young working men and women. But used carefully, their observations help to fill out a portrait of erotic behavior that was public, nonfamilial, and part of a commercialized world of pleasure.

The novelty of young women working outside the home threw men and women together in a variety of ways. On downtown sidewalks and streetcars, in offices, department stores, restaurants, and factories, and in parks at lunch hour, young men and women mingled easily, flirted with one another, made dates, and stole time together. Freed from the protection, or restraints, of their elders' supervision, young women encountered the sexual and romantic suggestions of male admirers. In city parks, "shocking occurrences by the score are reported," wrote one reformer. "Boys and girls of sixteen and seventeen are involved in these affairs." On the shop floor, a cigarmaker observed, men will "whoop and give . . . 'cat calls' " to their favorite female co-workers. Women exchanged information with each other at work, learning from those older, and passing on to their peers advice and hints about how to comport themselves in this unsupervised heterosocial environment. At one large retail

establishment, an investigator found "salacious cards, poems, etc., copied and passed from one to another." Those working in the new department stores became acquainted with a world of goods designed to arouse desire and attract the attention of admirers. Expected to dress well to impress customers, these retail clerks might "with fatal ease become involved" with male shoppers, or be "thrown with companions among her own ranks who are already committed to evil."[41]

Once the working day was done, working-class youth could take advantage of the commercialized amusements sprouting up everywhere. In cities large and small from the 1880s onward, enterprising businessmen opened dance halls, amusement parks, pleasure steamers, and nickel movie houses which offered to their patrons nighttime and Sunday diversions from the dreary world of wage labor. For young men and women, laboring at boring, monotonous jobs for fifty or more hours a week, and living in crowded tenement districts, the glitter and the glamor of the new amusements had an irresistible allure. These commercial pastimes differed from those of the middle class, and even from those of the working class of an earlier generation. Divorced for the most part from the family and neighborhood, they attracted a predominantly young, unmarried crowd of both genders, without the chaperonage of adults.

The dance hall perhaps best captures the mood and environment of this new world of commercialized pleasure. Unlike the bawdy resorts of midcentury, which no "respectable" woman would enter, these catered to mixed crowds who would arrive with groups of friends. Spreading through the downtown section of cities, in the midst of restaurants, theaters, and the workplaces where many youth passed their days, dance halls attracted the young with the sights and sounds of neon and popular music. As two social workers commented, "coming from the monotony of work, and from oftentimes dreary home surroundings, the dance-hall, with its lights, gay music, refreshments, and attractive surroundings, seems everything that is bright and beautiful." The music and dances in many of these halls owed their origins to black entertainers, whose styles had migrated north from the brothels and dives of New Orleans and Memphis where the musicians had originally found employment. Listening to the ragtime beats in one black establishment, a patron commented that "it was music that demanded a physical response." Willie Smith, a jazz pianist in pre–World War I Harlem, described the dances favored by the young. "Some of these," he said, "were pretty wild. They called them 'hug me close,' 'the shiver,' 'hump-back rag,' . . . 'the lovers' walk.' " Quickly taken up by white youth, these "tough dances" required the suggestive motion of "the pelvic portion of the body." Bodily contact was the rule. One reformer found that "couples stand very close together, the girl with her arms around the man's neck, the man with both his arms around the girl or on her hips;

their cheeks are pressed close together, their bodies touch each other." Songs with the "most blatant and vulgar" lyrics, according to Jane Addams, added to the air of sexual energy that permeated the environment.[42]

Erotic encounters were not confined to the dance floor. In one New York hall, "most of the younger couples were hugging and kissing, there was a general mingling of men and women at the different tables." At a Philadelphia locale favored by blacks, the men "slapped the girls on their bare legs, hugged some, petted others, and approached most of them in daring language." Liquor made available by neighboring taverns further weakened already loose inhibitions. One vice investigator observed that "young girls have been seen to yield themselves in wild abandon to their influence, and have been carried half fainting to dark corners of the hall, and there, almost helpless, have been subjected to the most indecent advances." By the early twentieth century these pleasure palaces had so won the allegiance of the young that commentators were referring to "dance madness." Adam Clayton Powell, a black minister in New York, deplored how "the Negro race is dancing itself to death."[43]

Nighttime dance halls were but one of a variety of institutions that sprang up in cities and that encouraged a new sexual ethic among working-class youth. By the early twentieth century, entrepreneurs were building vast amusement parks on the edges of metropolitan areas at the end of streetcar lines. The structure of these parks and the style of interaction that they encouraged mocked the genteel social rituals of middle-class America. Crowds of men and women mingled casually, while the rides and amusements encouraged spontaneous, often raucous behavior. One journalist described a day at New York's Coney Island as "a delirium of raw pleasure." The pitch for the Cannon Coaster blared, "Will she throw her arms around your neck and yell? Well, I guess, yes!" The Barrel of Love enticed patrons by proclaiming, "Talk about love in a cottage! This has it beat a mile." Little Egypt promised "one hundred and fifty Oriental beauties! . . . See her dance the Hootchy-Kootchy! Anywhere else but in the ocean breezes of Coney Island she would be consumed by her own fire!" Hidden air chutes might send the skirts of unsuspecting young women flying into the air, while rides such as the "human roulette wheel" threw men and women into each other's arms. Strangers conversed with one another. Groups of men and women made their acquaintance. Flirtations occurred, dates were made, and romances begun and ended. Meanwhile, in cities along the ocean or near lakes, steamers and excursion boats with private rooms allowed youthful lovers to escape the city for a day and indulge their romantic attachment for one another.[44]

Technological advances added to the choices awaiting working-class youth. At the turn of the century, nickelodeons displaying the newly invented motion picture—and, later on, movie houses showing feature films—quickly

captured the loyalty of a working class infected by "nickel madness." Soon, in tenement districts, motion pictures had "well nigh driven other forms of entertainment from the field," according to one writer. Crowds streamed in and out of the theaters, sitting together in the dark, watching the larger-than-life images on the screen. The content was often designed to arouse the sensual. As a New York newspaper reported,

> For the first time in the history of the world it is possible to see what a kiss looks like. . . . Scientists say kisses are dangerous, but here everything is shown in startling directness. What the camera did not see did not exist. The real kiss is a revelation. The idea has unlimited possibilities.

The nature of the physical environment, as much as the content of the moving pictures, excited sexual interest. Jane Addams found that in Chicago, where many working-class youth attended the movies almost nightly, "the very darkness of the room . . . is an added attraction to many young people, for whom the space is filled with the glamor of love making." Back rows rapidly became known as "lovers' lanes," and the theater became a meeting place for acquaintances old and new.[45]

These new popular amusements created not only a heterosocial environment charged with youthful sexual energy, but also a commercial relationship between male and female that mirrored the larger social context. Although admission to some, such as the dance hall and the movie house, was often minimal, a system of "treating" developed that allowed young women to partake of a wider range of evening pleasures. In part, this reflected the less than subsistence wages that many working women received. As a Chicago waitress explained, "If I didn't have a man, I couldn't get along on my wages." But it also revealed a gender-differentiated system of roles. A young man proved his worth, and impressed the object of his affection, by being able to treat a young woman to refreshments, a night on the town, a day of rides at the amusement park, an excursion on a lake steamer, or presents. If he could not afford to do so, he might find himself without companionship. "MAN GETTING $18 A WEEK DARES NOT FALL IN LOVE," said a Chicago headline in 1919, commenting on the perils of treating. Women faced their own set of pressures. They hoarded their resources to pay for the clothes, jewelry, fancy ribbons, and cosmetics which made them attractive. "A girl who does not dress well is stuck in a corner," one New York working girl observed.[46] Embedded within the system of treating were expectations of sexual exchange—what would a young woman give, sexually, in return for the favors of a man.

These changes on the part of the young did not occur without conflict. As we will see, during the Progressive era, the world of urban commercialized amusements, along with the related problem of prostitution, became the target

of middle-class reformers determined to clean up the cities and remake them to their own liking. But the behavior of young working-class women also involved a generational clash of values within their families, every bit as intense as that between classes, though without an organized, political shape to it. Parents, especially among immigrants, saw their children striking out in new directions, and were upset and confused by what they witnessed.

The conflict took many forms. For those young people living at home, their wages were often seen as part of a family economy, a contribution to the survival of the group. From daughters, especially, parents expected to have wages turned over to them, not squandered on trivial pursuits such as movies and dance halls, or on fancy store-bought clothes. Mothers watched as their daughters left home to go to work, where they learned all sorts of newfangled ideas. Daughters' behavior puzzled and disturbed older women who had come of age in an altogether different environment. Sons, too, were different. Although male youth traditionally had more freedom, the new generation of working-class men was departing from the patterns of their fathers. No longer satisfied with the sex-segregated environment of the neighborhood tavern, youth now spent their wages in the heterosocial world of commercialized leisure. "Where a man was in the habit of passing much of his time in a saloon . . . now he passes a portion, if not all of it, in the motion picture houses," claimed the Worcester *Sunday Telegram.*[47] Indeed, by the First World War, the saloon was becoming marked as the province of older men, an aging institution deserted by the young.

Observers at the time remarked on the stresses that the new world of pleasure was creating within working-class families. Acquiescence to the demands of the young provided cause for worry, as daughters, dressed in new finery, spent their evenings at dance halls and movie houses and met who-knew-what strange men. One Irish mother in New York complained about her daughter: "She stands up and answers me back. An' she's coming in at 2 o'clock, me not knowin' where she has been. Folks will talk, you know, an' it ain't right for a girl." A Mexican immigrant bemoaned the new values infiltrating the Chicano community in a ballad:

> The girls go about almost naked
> And call *la tienda* "estor" [a store]
> They go around with dirt-streaked legs
> But with those stockings of chiffon.
>
> Even my old woman has changed on me—
> She wears a bob-tailed dress of silk,
> Goes about painted like a *piñata*
> And goes at night to the dancing hall.

Insistence that wages be turned over, or that evenings be spent in a chaperoned environment, might easily provoke lies and rebellion. One immigrant father, a shopkeeper in Chicago, confessed that he dare not withhold money for the theater from his daughters for fear that "they would steal it from the till."[48] Sons might leave home, daughters might become pregnant or, worse, turn to prostitution to finance other more innocent pleasures.

Indeed, a chief source of the concern exhibited by both parents and middle-class reformers was the proximity of this nighttime world of amusements to the institutions of commercialized prostitution. Nearby saloons often sheltered prostitutes who would sometimes make their appearance at dance halls, as W. E. B. Du Bois discovered in his study of black Philadelphia. In Seattle, Japanese-American families lived alongside burlesque houses whose doors were "covered with the life-size paintings of half-naked girls." Such influences made it hard for girls to grow up as the "refined young maidens" their parents wished them to be. Innocent working girls, meanwhile, had little protection from "designing men." Many of the lodging houses in which single working men and women lived also were locales for casual prostitution. "The young man or young woman coming from the country to the city for the first time, seeking accommodations," Wisconsin investigators alleged, "is as likely to find lodging in such a disreputable house as in a safe and respectable house." Couples who met at a dance hall could retreat to one of the many cheap hotels, patronized by prostitutes, where men and women who lived with their families might rent a room to spend their evening alone together. Reformers barely distinguished these women, whom they labeled "clandestine prostitutes," from full-time sex workers. Yet, as one dance-hall habitué remarked, "some of the women . . . are out for the coin, but there is a lot that come in here that are charity." In other cases, working-class women did turn to prostitution at times, without making a permanent commitment to the trade. "The fact that she has earned money in this way does not stamp her as 'lost,' " said a 1911 federal report on working girls. "Occasional prostitution holds its place in their minds as a possible resource."[49]

It is difficult to know precisely the nature and the extent of sexual experimentation and indulgence that grew out of this youthful working-class environment. One suggestive piece of evidence is the change in the rate of premarital pregnancies. Having fallen to a low of ten percent in the mid-nineteenth century, the rate rose significantly to twenty-three percent in the decades from 1880 to 1910. Since scattered survey data from middle-class white women reveal a rate of premarital intercourse much lower than this prenuptial pregnancy rate, it is reasonable to conclude that the increase came mostly from working-class women, and that the incidence of premarital intercourse among them was naturally higher than the incidence of pregnancy.[50]

But what did this premarital experience mean? In many cases, no doubt, it reflected sexual coercion, as young women, without the protection that family and community once provided, found themselves unable to resist the demands of male suitors or workplace supervisors. In others, it evinced the desire of women for sexual pleasure and adventure outside the bonds of marriage. For some women, premarital sex may have occurred with a prospective husband only, and pregnancy may have been the desired result, a traditional way of surmounting family restraints upon marriage. But whatever the reason or the context, it seems clear that by the early twentieth century, young working-class women were engaging in a higher level of premarital sexual intercourse than had their mothers or their middle-class counterparts.

The nighttime culture of commercialized pleasure—from the dance halls and the system of treating that went with it, to the sexual liaisons of unmarried couples—was the most visible and most commented upon aspect of working-class sexuality. As such, it occupies a place of historical significance, for it represented an important shift in values and behavior. Yet, it would probably be a mistake to consider this culture typical of working-class youth, to assert that premarital experience was already the norm. Many working girls developed standards of their own that allowed for some sexual freedom but stopped short of sanctioning premarital coitus. One city missionary remarked that "young women sometimes allow young men to address them and caress them in a manner which would offend well-bred people, and yet those girls would indignantly resent any liberties which they consider dishonoring." Moreover, within the modern city, traditional values of premarital chastity for women survived, as well as courtship that took place with the knowledge and approval of parents and community, especially among immigrant groups. As Jane Addams observed of Chicago, "among the Hull House neighbors are many of the Latin races who employ a careful chaperonage over their marriageable daughters." Protection of female chastity could even coexist alongside the new world of heterosocial interaction. As one young Mexican woman who worked in a Los Angeles dance hall reported, "some men at times make propositions to me which are insulting . . . [but] my mother takes a lot of care of me so that I won't make any bad steps." Then, too, while most young working men might acquire sexual knowledge on the streets, with their peers, and through patronizing prostitutes, many of their female counterparts remained in a state of ignorance. One working woman, recalling her early years in a New England mill, told about the terror she felt when a male worker impulsively kissed her on the lips. "For two weeks I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep—I thought I was pregnant. My mother always said, 'Don't ever let a boy touch you!' He had touched me; he kissed me." Undoubtedly, she was not the only immigrant daughter who was coming of age with less-than-extensive sexual knowledge.[51]

Disparate as the experience of young working-class women and the college-educated single woman was, the two groups shared a common characteristic: each reflected the movement of women beyond the family into the public sphere. For the working girl this might be a temporary status, cut short by marriage and motherhood; for the middle-class professional, it often proved to be a permanent life choice. In both cases, economic changes made possible the exploration of intimacy and the erotic outside the boundaries of marriage.

Both of these cultures embodied another feature that bound their experience together historically. They highlighted the shifting foundations upon which the sexual values of the middle class rested. Buffeted by the transformations in class relations and everyday life that large-scale industrial capitalism was provoking, the middle class could expect that the commercialization of sexual pleasure among working-class youth would spread outward unless vigorously resisted. With it would come the collapse of the dichotomy between private and public that was so much a part of late-nineteenth-century civilized morality. Already, the burgeoning red-light districts allowed middle-class men to purchase sexual favors with ease. The invasion of legitimate entrepreneurs into the land of Eros promised more direct upheavals.

The forms of intimacy pioneered by college-educated female couples presented a different sort of threat. Though they lived discreetly, these women nonetheless demonstrated the possibilities of love and passion entirely beyond a procreative framework. Despite the sharp decline in fertility among middle-class women, the prescriptive importance of the maternal in their world view prevented sexuality from being fully detached from reproduction. The call of feminists and social purity advocates for voluntary motherhood, while it had affirmed female passion, highlighted the extent to which procreation still figured in women's view of themselves. In constructing viable lives without motherhood, female couples offered an implicit challenge to the delicate structure of middle-class civilized morality. No wonder that apologists for marriage were beginning to attack these relationships as morbid and unnatural.

Thus, by the early twentieth century, the sexual values of the middle class were on the edge of a decisive transformation. Old and new coexisted in an uneasy balance. That tension would make the first two decades of the century a time of conflict, as defenders of the past and proponents of change contended for hegemony in sexual matters.

CHAPTER 9

Crusades for Sexual Order

FOR black Americans of the early twentieth century, Jack Johnson was a popular hero at a time when such figures were sorely needed. Denied the ballot in the South, faced with segregation in public facilities, and confronted by an epidemic of brutal lynchings, blacks could take delight in the exploits of the young fighter. Johnson triumphed over dozens of white boxers and, in 1910, was finally awarded the heavyweight crown.[1]

Unable to defeat him in the ring, proponents of white supremacy found another means of bringing his downfall. Johnson was known for his sexual relationships with white women. His second wife had been white, and he had numerous affairs with others, including a Chicago prostitute named Belle Schreiber. In October 1912 Lucille Cameron, a young woman who had left her family in Minnesota to seek employment in Chicago, visited Johnson's popular nightclub, the Cafe de Champion. After Johnson promised her employment and commenced a sexual liaison, Cameron's distraught mother had charges of abduction brought against him. The trial provoked an angry response throughout the nation's press. White southerners hinted that if Johnson visited their section of the country, they would dispense with him quickly; the black press railed against him for giving credence to white supremacist claims about black male sexuality. But Lucille adamantly refused to testify, and after the indictment was dropped, the couple married.

The authorities had one more weapon to fire against Johnson, however. In 1910, Congress passed the Mann Act, which forbade the transportation of women across state lines for "immoral" purposes. A response to the white slavery scare that was sweeping the nation, it was supposed to prevent the illicit trafficking in women for purposes of forced prostitution. When federal agents persuaded Belle Schreiber to testify that Johnson had paid for her travel from

Pittsburgh to Chicago for immoral purposes, the way was paved for an indictment. In May 1913 an all-white jury convicted Johnson, who was sentenced to one year in prison.

Johnson's trial and conviction serve as convenient symbols for the conflicts over sexuality that surfaced in the early twentieth century. The cracks in the mold of civilized morality had become so wide as to almost demand a resurgent political response. Working-class youth were eager patrons of a nighttime world of commercialized amusements that mocked middle-class sexual ideals. The educated new woman was forsaking marriage. Middle-class families had dramatically reduced their fertility, calling into question the primacy of motherhood in women's lives and smoothing the way for them to venture beyond the domestic hearth. Prostitution was running rampant in American cities, while the wages of sin seemed to be an epidemic of venereal disease. Since the 1870s, purity advocates of various stripes—Anthony Comstock and his associates, female activists of the WCTU, and zealous ministers publishing their shrill sermons—had addressed these and other issues of sexual morality. But the growth of Progressive reform after 1900 offered far more fertile soil for a sexual politics to take root and grow. In particular, white middle-class reformers targeted what they considered working-class immorality as they sought to shore up the decaying foundations of late-nineteenth-century values. Sexuality became a vehicle for exercising control over the lower classes, especially immigrants in the urbanized North and blacks in the rural South. The range of political responses that took shape—a social hygiene movement to halt the spread of venereal disease, campaigns against white slavery and prostitution, and the wave of lynching that accompanied segregation in the South—suggest the depth of concern over sexual issues at the turn of the century.

The Social Hygiene Movement

Historians have debated the meaning of Progressivism at great length. A nationwide response by the middle class to the vast changes provoked by industrial capitalism, Progressive reform called upon the state to intervene as never before in the country's economic and social life. It addressed issues that ranged from the need for playgrounds and housing codes in urban slums to checking the power of monopolistic trusts. As a number of writers have pointed out, the Progressive movement embodied sharply conflicting impulses—social order as well as social justice, efficiency along with uplift, faith in the power of education as well as a determination to coerce the recalcitrant. Issues of sexual behavior and morality easily lent themselves to these contrasting tendencies. Some reformers urged education to check the spread of vice and disease, while others organized campaigns of repression. Calls for rehabili-

tating the victims of commercialized prostitution coexisted with efforts to punish sexual delinquents. Sponsorship of "healthful" amusements occurred simultaneously with movements of censorship. But, however diverse the program, the Progressive era witnessed the emergence of a full-blown sexual politics. And, unlike the sexual reform efforts of the previous century, which had relied largely on moral suasion and individual self-control, early-twentieth-century crusaders unabashedly sought state regulation to achieve their goals.

Of the many issues inviting attention, venereal disease was one that especially aroused reform energies. In the late nineteenth century, advances in medical science increased knowledge of both gonorrhea and syphilis. Doctors learned more about how the diseases were transmitted, their progression, and their long-term consequences. Since improvement in treatment and cure came more slowly, it was perhaps natural that some physicians would focus on the question of prevention. Despite the efforts of nineteenth-century social purity crusaders to address the problem, reticence about sexual matters still placed major obstacles in the way of forthright discussion of venereal disease. Although the improved social stature of the medical profession in the early twentieth century made it an ideal candidate for the job, any campaign against the diseases promised to clash with key elements of middle-class moral codes.[2]

A New York physician, Prince Morrow, sounded the alarm for a "social hygiene" movement to stem the spread of syphilis and gonorrhea. Having received medical training in Europe, where venereal infection was already treated as a public health matter, he published in 1904 a medical text, *Social Diseases and Marriage,* the first comprehensive scientific treatise on the subject in English. That same year he delivered a major address before the Medical Society of the County of New York in which he issued a plea for organized action among doctors. The power of Morrow's work came in its focus on marriage. He shocked his audience with the statement that "there is more venereal infection among virtuous wives than among professional prostitutes." Morrow wrote at great length about the results: sterility among women, congenital blindness in infants, syphilitic insanity, chronic uterine inflammation, and general physical infirmity among young married women who had once been pictures of good health. All of these "innocent infections," he argued, could be traced "back to their original source in that irregular sexual commerce known as prostitution." Morrow estimated that fully sixty percent of the male population had at one time or another contracted syphilis or gonorrhea. Echoing nineteenth-century feminists, he placed the blame not on the female prostitute, but on "masculine unchastity." "The male factor," he punned, "is the chief malefactor."[3]

Although Morrow insisted that sexually transmitted diseases were medical rather than moral problems, he also recognized that social customs, institutions, and prejudices severely complicated the work of conscientious doctors. At the time Morrow wrote, some hospitals refused to accept patients with venereal disease, while many doctors were reluctant to call in the wives of infected men for treatment. "At first glance," he told his New York audience,

> it might appear that the prophylaxis of these diseases, as of other infectious diseases, dangerous to the public health, lies exclusively within the province of the medical profession. But experience has shown that this class of diseases cannot be dealt with as a purely sanitary problem. . . . In their essential nature they are not merely diseases of the human body, but diseases of the social organism. . . . To correct these evil conditions, there should be a union of all the social forces which work for good in the community.[4]

As long as shame and censure remained attached to venereal infection, Morrow argued, patients afflicted with it would avoid treatment. As long as propriety blocked open discussion of the diseases and their transmission, men would remain ignorant of the dangers of sex with prostitutes, women would enter marriage uninformed about the risks they faced, and doctors would stand by silently, refusing to intervene.

Morrow's solution was to launch a social hygiene movement. In 1905 he formed in New York City the Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis. Within a handful of years, similar groups had taken shape across the country, from Spokane to Philadelphia, and from Jacksonville to Milwaukee. Members held public meetings and conferences, published and distributed social hygiene pamphlets, and lectured widely. They spoke before local medical associations, state conferences of charities, federations of women's clubs, and professional associations. They enlisted the cooperation of the WCTU and the YMCA, state boards of health, superintendents of schools, and teachers' organizations. Their goal, as Morrow put it, was an unrelenting "campaign of education" to wipe out the ignorance and the prejudices that allowed venereal disease to infect the nation. As the movement gathered momentum, its membership as well as its aims broadened. By the time of the First World War, educators and social workers swelled the ranks of the American Social Hygiene Association, the new umbrella organization of the movement. They advocated not merely education against venereal disease, but also state-mandated blood testing before marriage, required reporting of cases of infection, and a comprehensive program of sex education that would enlist families, churches, civic institutions, and, especially, the public schools in an effort to fashion a truly hygienic code of sexual life.

The social hygiene movement mixed new and old together into a somewhat

contradictory brew. In their insistence on frank and open discussion of sexual matters, reformers self-consciously placed themselves in opposition to the repressive strain of nineteenth-century politics represented by Comstock. As Maurice Bigelow, a professor of biology at Columbia University's Teachers College, put it in 1916, "we must cease to foster the secrecy created by an atmosphere of obscenity, and the study of sex must be brought into the light of day." Advocates of sex education condemned the unwillingness of parents to talk to their children about sex, arguing that the habit of silence and evasion "tends to give a wrong direction and a vicious tendency" to the sexual instinct. A number of writers went as far as to suggest that even young girls should receive instruction. Some also subscribed to a nonprocreative sexuality. Bigelow took issue with older sex-advice manuals which used "the terms 'sex' and 'reproduction' as if they were synonymous. This is no longer so in human life," he asserted, "for while reproduction is a sexual process, sexual activities and influences are often quite unrelated to reproduction." Reflecting what was already true of many middle-class marriages, Bigelow suggested that the "possibilities of affection" that physical intimacy might engender were important enough to justify contraception. The alternative, he wrote disparagingly, was "sexual asceticism between husband and wife."[5]

New as the public affirmation of separating sexuality and reproduction seemed, the social hygiene movement remained wedded to the traditions of civilized morality. Like the social purity advocates of the late nineteenth century, reformers strove hard to combat the double standard that condoned male patronage of prostitution. Morrow, for instance, was adamant that instruction about sex "should include as a cardinal feature a correction of the false impression instilled in the minds of young men that sexual indulgence is essential to health and that chastity is incompatible with full vigor." Sex might have nonprocreative purposes, but only husband and wife might properly indulge in it. Male continence before marriage and temperate sexual expression within were the highest ideals. In his *Ten Sex Talks for Boys* (1914), Irving David Steinhardt, a member of the Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis, informed his readers that sexual intercourse "should never be indulged in before marriage. . . . THE SEXUAL RELATION IS ABSOLUTELY UNNECESSARY TO YOU OR TO ANY OTHER MAN." Reminding his youthful audience that sexual relations were a synonym for "marital relations," he told them to confine it to the institution to which it belonged. Although sex education advocates dismissed the shrill pronouncements of some nineteenth-century writers that youthful masturbation led to insanity, one pamphlet cautioned that it "can never be said to be practiced moderately, and it is not to be recommended," while Bigelow claimed scientific support for the statement that "the habit may weaken the nervous system and indirectly affect general

health." Boys who wished to "grow up strong in body and mind" were advised to refrain altogether. Social hygiene writers offered advice on how to avoid temptation. "The lad who plays vigorously, even violently," one author alleged, "who can 'get his second wind,' turn a handspring, do a good cross-country run, swim the river, possesses a great bulwark of defense against sexual vice, especially in its secret forms." Finally, Bigelow spoke for much of the movement in his defense of innate male and female differences. Despite his and others' advocacy of a single standard, he described men's sexual instincts as "characteristically active, aggressive, spontaneous and automatic," and alleged "physiological and psychological reasons" for "masculine aggressiveness and . . . leadership in affairs of the heart."[6]

Despite their allegiance to these older standards, social hygienists still provoked a heated response from defenders of civilized morality. One gynecologist, speaking at an American Medical Association meeting, described the topic of venereal disease as so "attendant with filth" that "we besmirch ourselves by discussing it in public." In 1906, when Edward Bok, the editor of the *Ladies Home Journal,* published a series of articles on venereal disease, he lost seventy-five thousand outraged subscribers. Later, as reformers began advocating sex instruction in the public schools, some administrators took up their pens in opposition. The superintendent of schools in New York City believed it would lead to "spiritual havoc and physical ruin," but had "too much faith in the good sense of the American people to believe that it will ever be generally and regularly taught in American schools." Even William Howard Taft, the former president, felt compelled to address the issue. In a speech delivered in Philadelphia in 1914, he described sex education as "full of danger if carried on in general public schools. . . . I deny," he continued, "that the so-called prudishness and the avoidance of nasty subjects in the last generation has ever blinded any substantial number of girls or boys to the wickedness of vice or made them easier victims of temptations."[7]

The legacy of activists was as mixed as their philosophy. During the Progressive era, they made little headway in getting sex education into the schools. But they publicized the concept widely, produced a great deal of pamphlet literature, and won important converts, such as the National Education Association, which in 1912 endorsed sex education. Not until the 1920s and beyond would they make real progress toward their goals and see some elementary sex instruction integrated into the curriculum. They were more successful in provoking government intervention, as states began to require blood tests before marriage and pass mandatory reporting laws. In the short run, however, the effort to educate the public about venereal disease led to unintended consequences. Although Morrow opposed campaigns of repression against vice, believing that they would only scatter the problem more widely,

the insistent discussion by social hygienists of prostitution as the source of infection provided fuel for precisely such a response.

The Attack on Prostitution

Although organized agitation against prostitution stretched back to the 1830s, the Progressive-era crusade dwarfed all of its predecessors. No longer the province of outsiders struggling to build a constituency, the campaigns in the decade before World War I released unprecedented energies. Businessmen and male civic leaders joined feminists and ministers in an effort to eradicate commercialized vice. They gained a hearing in the halls of Congress as well as in state legislatures and municipal governments. Their efforts would permanently alter the face of prostitution in America.

The new drive against prostitution first surfaced in the form of a white slavery panic. Between 1908 and 1914, purity crusaders and others published dozens of sensationalistic tracts alleging a widespread traffic in women that sold young girls into virtual slavery. Replete with case histories, vivid illustrations, and strong advice to parents, these books described the subterfuges used by panderers to lure innocent victims to their fate. The procurer, a dark and sinister alien-looking figure, stalked the countryside in search of unsuspecting village girls. "The small towns and villages afford the most lucrative fields for men . . . engaged in the business of pandering girls," wrote Clifford Roe, a leader in the movement to expose the trade. Winning their confidence with pledges of love or the promise of employment, these pimps seduced unsuspecting women to abandon their homes and follow them to the city. Women who left the farm on their own to find employment in the city were entering, according to one tract, "a forest haunted by wolves." All of the new institutions of commercialized leisure were just so many hunting grounds where women might be snared. Migrants from the countryside received warnings against "the men who frequent dance-halls and excursion boats, ever on the alert for their prey." Movies, restaurants, and even ice-cream parlors were "dangerous places for young girls to attend unescorted." A common message echoed through the pages of most of these accounts: "Stay rather at home where all is pure, beautiful and really grand, for no artisan can build forests and mountains like the great Creator has given you; no artist can paint the growing grain and the flowers as beautiful as he. The crowded smelling [street] car can not supplant the good old horses and carriage." The paeans to rural innocence appealed to a native-born middle class distressed by the spread of an urbanized capitalist society. They ignored, however, the reality of sexual life in the hinterland. The sexual violence portrayed by Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy,* for instance, belied the image of an idyllic countryside.[8]

White slave tracts, followed by novels, plays, and movies capitalizing on the same theme, attracted an avid audience. One play, *Little Lost Sister,* opened to packed houses in 1913. *Traffic in Souls,* a film, secured thirty thousand viewers for its opening week in New York. The popularity of the genre suggests that Americans were receptive to the message of the crusade. But many may also have seen the white slavery issue as an avenue for sexual titillation. Some exposés, such as H. M. Lytle's *Tragedies of the White Slaves* (1912), were graced with lurid, multicolored covers. The title page of another proclaimed, "Beautiful White Girls Sold Into Ruin . . . Illustrated with a Large Number of Startling Pictures." A third promised "Startling Revelations, Thrilling Experiences, and Life Stories" in chapters with such titles as "Adventures of a Libertine."[9] Perhaps the authors believed they needed to shock citizens into action; or perhaps the white slave panic served other, less respectable purposes, like the lurid anti-Catholic tracts of the antebellum era. In any case, the genre expanded the public discourse on sexuality even as it served more immediate, protectionist goals.

Whatever the motivation, the white slavery scare provoked a political response at the national, state, and local levels, eliciting legislative remedies. In Washington, the specter of an international traffic in women added to the current of nativist sentiment that was demanding restrictions upon immigration. Legislation of 1903 and 1907 affecting immigration had already touched upon the issue of prostitution. The former punished those who imported women for the purposes of prostitution; the latter permitted the deportation of immigrant prostitutes. But, as outrage over white slavery escalated, government studies reflected the mounting concern. They described an extensive international business in women's bodies, with immoral women as well as innocent girls being imported to the United States by the thousands every year. Foreigners became the scapegoats for the sexual anxieties of the native-born. "The vilest practices are brought here from continental Europe," a report to the Senate in 1909 warned, including "the most bestial refinements of depravity." Federal investigators claimed that "large numbers of Jews scattered throughout the United States . . . seduce and keep girls. Some of them are engaged in importation . . . [and] they prey upon young girls whom they find on the streets in dance halls, and similar places." The traffic in women, the report concluded, "has brought into the country evils even worse than those of prostitution." Diseased alien women, through their male clients, had infected "innocent wives and children" and "done more to ruin homes than any other single cause." In 1910, Congress enacted legislation that vastly widened the net into which immigrants might fall. Not merely prostitutes and procurers, but anyone "who is employed by, in, or in connection with any . . . music or dance hall or other place of amusement or resort habitually frequented by

prostitutes, or where prostitutes gather," might henceforth be deported. In that same year, Congress also enacted the White Slave Traffic, or Mann, Act, which made it a federal offense to transport women across state lines for "immoral purposes." Over the next eight years, the Justice Department obtained almost twenty-two hundred convictions for trafficking in women.[10]

Most antiprostitution activity, however, occurred at the local level. Between 1910 and 1915, at least thirty-five cities and states conducted major studies of prostitution. The penchant of Progressive-era reformers to define social problems through statistical calculation makes these reports a vast compendium of detailed information about commercialized vice. Investigators roamed the red-light districts and tenement areas of cities and towns, accumulating lists of places where vice occurred, and counting the establishments. In Philadelphia, the vice commission found solicitation occurring in "saloons, cafes, restaurants, hotels, clubs, and dance halls. . . . Many public dance halls, moving picture shows, and other amusement centers are the breeding places of vice. . . . The public parks are among the worst." A statewide study by the Wisconsin legislature pinpointed parlor houses, assignation houses, roadhouses, immoral hotels, rooming and lodging houses, cafes, chop suey restaurants, saloons with bedroom connections, and dance halls. Not surprisingly, New York City captured the prize for the most numerous establishments, with over 1,800 "vice resorts" and an estimated fifteen thousand prostitutes in Manhattan in 1912. But Philadelphia could boast 372 such places, Baltimore over 300, and the small Wisconsin communities of Watertown and Janesville, 19 and 14, respectively. Prostitution appeared to exist wherever investigators chose to look.[11]

The commissions emphasized how deeply embedded commercialized vice was in contemporary America. They attacked the "Devil's Siamese Twins" of liquor and lust. Saloons competing for business would provide lewd entertainment to attract male clients, and back rooms where prostitutes could take their customers. Hotel operators and rooming-house owners found it more profitable to rent accommodations to streetwalkers by the hour or the night. In tenements, working-class families lived alongside prostitutes who consorted with customers as children played in hallways and on the streets below. Young men and women coming from the country to the city for employment might unsuspectingly find lodging in a disreputable house. In railroad stations, prostitutes boldly accosted businessmen as they arrived in the city. Everywhere apparently, prostitutes operated freely without interference from the law.

Anti-vice crusaders tried a variety of techniques to destroy the social evil. Besides the tools of investigation and publicity, they held marches and outdoor prayer meetings in the heart of the red-light districts. Female rescue workers visited brothels to persuade inmates to leave. In Baltimore, when local pressure

failed to move the police to action, reformers turned to the governor's office. A few days after the release in September 1915 of a scathing report on commercialized vice in the city, police invaded the red-light district and shut it down forever. One popular method used by reformers reflected their willingness to turn to the state for more than investigation and publicity. The so-called red-light abatement law allowed private citizens to file complaints against houses of prostitution, eventually leading to permanent injunctions and the sealing of buildings found to harbor prostitutes. First enacted in Iowa in 1909, it had been copied in thirty-one other states by 1917.[12]

In attacking the social evil, the crusaders against prostitution revealed a philosophical kinship with the social hygiene movement. Again and again, the reports of vice commissions described commercialized sex as a problem spawned by men, for the profit and pleasure of men. Investigators attacked the double standard. "The present day demands chastity of men equal to that demanded of women," wrote the Wisconsin legislators. Many of the studies tried to counter the beliefs that sustained a promiscuous male sexuality. "That sexual intercourse is necessary to health," wrote the Philadelphia commissioners, "is a superstition." Men were told that continence before marriage was both possible and desirable, that nothing in "male nature" compelled them to exercise the sexual "muscle."[13] Antiprostitution forces took issue with the conspiracy of silence that left children ignorant of the ravages of venereal disease, and they urged parents to instruct their children in sexual hygiene.

The First World War brought social hygienists and anti-vice crusaders together in more than an ideological unity. As with so many other reform movements of the Progressive era, the war allowed reformers to enter the precincts of government, as they lent their energies to the Wilsonian war effort. But military mobilization bent Progressivism to its own ends, emphasizing efficiency over uplift, and social order over benevolence. Sex reformers found that only part of their agenda was implemented, and that in some respects the war provided them with the form rather than the substance of their goals.

Within days after Congress declared war in April 1917, Newton Baker, the Secretary of War, created the Committee on Training Camp Activities (CTCA) to see that the young draftees would be ready not only to fight the Germans but to resist the moral dangers that life away from home might throw in their paths. Sex reformers and purity crusaders flocked to the CTCA. Through it, they descended on military camps to provide GIs with wholesome recreation, instruct them on sexual hygiene, and clothe them, as Baker put it, with an "invisible armor" for their protection overseas. CTCA members lectured the troops on the importance of continence. "Sex organs do not have to be exercised or indulged in, in order to develop them or preserve virility," said one. "Forget them, don't think about them, or dwell upon them. Live a good

vigorous life and they will take care of themselves." Posters and pamphlets distributed among the troops warned of the dangers of venereal disease and made the avoidance of prostitutes a litmus test of patriotic zeal. One poster of the U.S. Public Health Service announced that "The Government Has Declared War On Venereal Diseases." A widely circulated pamphlet, *Keeping Fit To Fight,* informed soldiers that "WOMEN WHO SOLICIT SOLDIERS FOR IMMORAL PURPOSES ARE USUALLY DISEASE SPREADERS AND FRIENDS OF THE ENEMY." It called the soldier in the hospital with venereal disease "a slacker." The CTCA combined propaganda with more tangible methods to keep soldiers from prostitutes. Pressure was placed on cities near military bases to close their red-light districts, and the army established five-mile "pure zones" to keep prostitutes away from the camps. Reformers were determined that the toleration that the military had formerly displayed toward prostitution, during the Civil War and in the West, would not be repeated.[14]

As American troops began making their way to Europe, sex reformers were heartened by the actions of the top command. General Pershing, the head of the American Expeditionary Force, had countenanced prostitution during the army's incursion into Mexico in 1916, but he took strong measures to prevent the spread of venereal disease within the AEF. Soon after his arrival in Europe, Pershing announced that "sexual continence is the plain duty of members of the AEF, both for the vigorous conduct of the war and for the clean health of the American people after the war. Sexual intercourse is not necessary for good health, and complete continence is wholly possible." Worried about the loss of manpower that VD might cause, he established early in July 1917 treatment centers in every command, and made the failure to report exposure to infection a court-martial offense. To prevent malingering, he later provided treatment at the front. In December 1917, in response to a five hundred percent increase in VD rates among soldiers stationed at St.-Nazaire, Pershing placed brothels and saloons in port cities of debarkation off limits to soldiers and stationed MPs around them.[15]

Ultimately, however, the wartime experience proved disappointing and disillusioning for reformers. The army exhibited more concern about conserving manpower than inculcating sexual purity among the troops. The first signs of conflict came over the treatment meted out to women suspected of prostitution near army bases in the states. The military suspended writs of habeas corpus, arrested women en masse, and forcibly held more than fifteen thousand in detention centers for periods averaging ten weeks. No men were arrested for patronizing prostitutes. These actions especially angered women activists involved in the war effort who viewed the prostitutes, most of whom were working-class and many of whom were unemployed, as the victims of male lust. Moreover, evidence suggests that CTCA activities in the camps never

sank deeply into the psyches of most recruits, whose working-class origins placed them at a distance from the purity ideals of middle-class crusaders. As one observer noted,

> the fact is that the soldier is very much more unmoral than when he entered the army. . . . [S]horn of modesty, morals, sentiment, and subjectivity . . . men will sit til late at night . . . and talk about women—but this talk is of the physical rather than the emotional, of the types, the reactions, the temperaments, . . . the degrees of perversity, the physical reactions, the methods of approach—in fact, as if it were a problem in physics rather than morals . . . [It is] an attitude applicable not only to the public woman, but to all women in general.

Or, as labor leader Samuel Gompers more simply put it, in disparaging the work of moral reformers during the war, "real men will be men."[16]

Neither did reformers fare well in Europe. As the war progressed, it became clear that, for the army, venereal disease was a problem of physical vigor, not masculine ethics. Despite various prohibitions, soldiers on leave continued to contract VD, and so the army came to rely on chemical, rather than moral, prophylaxis. In the interests of efficiency, the army began distributing prophylactics to soldiers for self-administration. By the end of the war, the military had dispensed at least several million treatments. Reformers viewed the army's policy as pandering to the grossest forms of immorality.

When all is said and done, what had the Progressive-era sex reformers—the anti-vice investigators and the social hygienists—accomplished? On the surface, at least, their achievements seem considerable. By 1920, the red-light district had passed into history; the system of commercialized prostitution that reigned in American cities for almost half a century was destroyed. Reformers, too, had made major legislative inroads into how society dealt with the problem of venereal disease. After World War I, states began enacting mandatory reporting laws and requiring blood tests before marriage, and the U.S. Public Health Service had created a Division of Venereal Diseases. But, at a deeper level, the most cherished goals of reformers remained elusive. The red-light districts closed, but prostitution did not end. Instead, it changed its form and locale, with the streetwalker and the call girl becoming more typical. The new structure made the working-class prostitute more vulnerable to police harassment, and shifted control of her day-to-day life from the madame who ran the brothel to the male pimp who controlled her street activities with the threat, sometimes fulfilled, of violence. Ideals of male continence won little acceptance, and rather than raising male behavior to the level of a ladylike womanhood, the 1920s began initiating a revision of what was deemed proper for women.

In retrospect, the passions aroused by commercialized sex appear so in-

tense that one wonders whether it stood for something more in the minds of the anti-vice crusaders. Indeed, although prostitution was the chief target of activists, the reports issued by vice commissions point to deeper concerns. Besides the full-time inmates of brothels, investigators waxed livid at the behavior of the much larger number of "clandestine prostitutes," or "charity girls," single women adrift in the city who worked in factories, offices, and department stores during the day and exchanged sexual favors with men at night. Newark investigators, for instance, found "a large number of girls and young women who sin sexually in return only for the pleasures given or the company of the men with whom they consort. . . . They have no ethical standards and believe . . . that they have a right to the pleasures they can gain from their bodies." Similarly, reformers in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, reported with dismay "more charity girls on the street than prostitutes. . . . They dress modestly . . . but are decidedly bold in their flirtations. There appears to be a regular lot who are well known. . . . Their conversation was often unrepeatable." Statements such as these reflect the disapproval with which proponents of sexual purity looked upon any displays of female sexual desire outside of marriage. They so little understood it that they could only define it as a point on a slippery slope of moral ruin that would descend, inevitably, to full-time prostitution. Crusaders against vice had so internalized nineteenth-century assumptions about female purity that they even discounted the testimony of prostitutes themselves about why they engaged in sex for sale. For example, when George Kneeland studied prostitution in New York City, like William Sanger in the 1850s he found woman after woman who gave plausible reasons for entering the life. A former domestic said that she was "tired of drudgery as a servant. . . . I'd rather do this than be kicked around like a dog in a kitchen by some woman who calls herself a lady." A one-time factory worker told him, "there is more money and pleasure in being a sport." In response, Kneeland wrote that "few girls ever admit that they have been forced into the life as 'white slaves.' " Apparently, it was easier for him and others to believe in a vast underground traffic in women than to accept that working-class women might choose sex either for money or the excitement it brought.[17]

This concern with female immodesty led reformers to attack not only the red-light districts, but also any other aspects of American life that seemed subversive of genteel civilized morality. They campaigned for the closing or licensing of dance halls and movie theaters, censorship of film production, and prohibition. At a rhetorical level, they urged American parents, especially those outside the major cities, to keep their daughters at home, out of the work force, and away from the big cities where temptations beckoned and procurers stalked the streets. All in all, it seems plausible to argue, as one student of these years has, that prostitution served as "a master symbol, a code word, for a wide

range of anxieties."[18] The entry of women into the work force, the breakdown of the separate spheres that underlay earlier norms, and the commercialization of much of American life (including pleasure) that came with the spread of capitalist social relations, all contributed to the crisis that fed the Progressive era's sexual politics. With the boundary between pure and fallen women dissolving, crusaders desperately sought to hold the line against further change.

The twin concerns of prostitution and venereal disease also fed into the stream of American racism. By the early twentieth century, the tides of immigration had shifted decisively to southern and eastern Europe, bringing Italians, Jews, and Slavs to the United States. Much "scientific" theory at the time viewed these groups as inferior nonwhite "races." Despite the statistical evidence that most prostitutes were native-born women, reformers placed the blame for vice on alien men and women who were corrupting the nation's purity. "It was the foreigner," said Clifford Roe, "who taught the American this dastardly business."[19] Not only moral depravity but physical disease threatened the vigor of Anglo-Saxon stock. Social hygienists commented frequently on the sterility and birth deformities that venereal disease caused. At a time when the belief in the inheritability of moral character was strong in American thought, the fight against prostitution, white slavery, and venereal disease fed into eugenics campaigns to sterilize the "unfit." Between 1907 and 1917, sixteen states passed sterilization laws designed to prevent reproduction of those whom proponents viewed as undesirable. Meanwhile, alongside the movements for social hygiene and against commercialized vice, white supremacists emitted shrill cries of "race suicide," as middle-class Protestant women seemed unable, or unwilling, to match the high fertility of foreigners. Pointing to South Africa as the model of what might happen to the Caucasian race, one sociologist in 1907 wrote that whites there "stand aghast at the rabbit-like increase of the blacks." Theodore Roosevelt lambasted the Yankee middle-class woman who avoided childbearing as a "criminal against the race."[20] The sexual politics of urban Progressivism played to the fears of native-born Americans who worried about the threat that immigrants of allegedly inferior racial stock posed to their cultural hegemony.

The Southern Rape Complex: Race, Sex, and Gender in the New South

Urban Progressives were not the only Americans for whom sex and race were entwined. At the turn of the century, white southerners were joining forces to create "Jim Crow," a system of segregation that consigned blacks to an inferior caste-like status. Buttressed by law, custom, and violence, the

separation of the races revolved in part around an elaborate set of sexual fears and myths that seemed to render Jim Crow immune to attack. As one outside observer described the system at its height, "sex becomes in this popular theory the principle around which the whole structure of segregation of the Negroes—down to disenfranchisement and denial of equal opportunities on the labor market—is organized. . . . Every single measure is defended as necessary to block 'social equality' which in its turn is held necessary to prevent 'intermarriage.' "[21]

By the end of the nineteenth century, it was clear that the promise of racial equality that Reconstruction seemed to offer was not to be fulfilled. As white Democratic rule returned to the South and as northern interest in the former slaves waned, blacks were left to protect their own interests. For a time an uneasy equilibrium in race relations ensued, but it was soon shattered by the discontent of farmers whose agitation in the 1880s and 1890s raised the specter of an interracial alliance of the dispossessed. Throughout the South, the white elite fomented racial hatred. Mob violence against blacks and their allies rose sharply, while Democrat-controlled state legislatures devised methods to keep blacks from voting. By the First World War, the southern states had enacted a vast array of laws that rigidly segregated the races in the public sphere.

From its start, the system of Jim Crow relied on lynching as its ultimate weapon of enforcement. Between 1889 and 1940, at least thirty-eight hundred black men and women were lynched in the former Confederacy and the border states, while many other instances likely went unreported; during the 1890s, the number of victims averaged two hundred per year. The way the act occurred marked it, in the words of one commentator, as "not merely a punishment against an individual but a disciplinary device against the Negro group."[22] An extralegal act of violence, lynching was designed to instill terror in an entire community. Rarely spontaneous, it often took the form of a public spectacle. Newspapers sometimes aroused passions against an intended victim for days in advance; sheriffs connived with mob leaders; crowds gathered to watch the execution and sometimes participated in mutilating the body; a site might be chosen that made the event visible to the local black population; and newspapers often published pictures of the corpse.

Despite the long history of violence against blacks, the epidemic of lynching might have provoked some outrage had it not been accompanied by a rationale with enough emotional power to silence white criticism. Apologists for lynching raised the specter of rape, the brutal assault of white women by sexually crazed black men. "The crime of lynching is not likely to cease until the crime of ravishing and murdering women and children is less frequent than it has been of late," one observer commented in 1904. An inflamed rhetoric fanned the fires of white animosity, rationalizing the most wanton violence.

"No law of God or man can hold back the vengeance of our white men upon such a criminal," an Atlanta journalist wrote. "We will hang two, three or four of the Negroes nearest to the crime until the crime is no longer done or even feared in all this Southern land we inhabit and love." An anonymous East Texas man declared that "God will burn . . . the Big African Brute in Hot Hell for molesting our God-like pure snowwhite angelic American Woman." The defense of white womanhood even insinuated its way into the discourse of white political leaders. Ben Tillman, a senator from South Carolina early in the twentieth century, claimed that "civilized men" were justified in the desire to "kill, kill, kill" the "creature in human form who has deflowered a white woman." As late as 1930, a southern senator shaped his reelection campaign around a defense of lynching. "Whenever the Constitution comes between me and the virtue of the white women of the South," said Senator Cole Blease, "I say to hell with the Constitution!"[23]

The rhetoric of lynching obscured the reality of the phenomenon. Besides the extralegal nature of the act, most lynchings in fact had little to do with even allegations of sexual assault; fewer than a quarter of the reported killings involved the charge of rape or other sexual offenses. In some cases, the victim was a successful black shopkeeper or businessman. His execution served as a grisly reminder to southern blacks to stay in their place. In other cases, a dispute over wages or some other kind of assertive behavior might provoke a group of whites to target a black for murder. Often, it was not the rape of a white woman, but the sexual assault of a black woman, that set a lynching in motion. In Mississippi in 1918, two young black brothers visited a white dentist who had forced himself on a pair of black teenage girls, impregnating one of them. When the dentist was murdered a few days later, a white mob lynched all four of the young blacks. The pregnant girl, sixteen-year-old Alma Howze, was so near motherhood that, according to one eyewitness, "the movements of her unborn child could be detected." The following year in Georgia, a seventy-two-year-old black man was lynched after he shot and killed a white man who was sexually attacking his black neighbor. Berry Washington was "hanged to a post, his body shot into pieces, and left hanging there." In Oklahoma, whites hung Marie Scott, whose brother had killed the white man who raped her.[24]

The fears and outrage that the rape charge elicited among whites was such that, initially, few responded to the moral challenge that lynching posed. Instead, the accusation of rape encouraged the demise of white support for racial equality. At best, white leaders shifted the onus onto blacks and urged them to stem the tide of sexual assaults. But, more often, commentators accepted the truth of the charge and sought an explanation for the propensity of black men to commit sexual offenses. Phillip Alexander Bruce, a white

historian at the time, claimed that black men found "something strangely alluring and seductive . . . in the appearance of the white woman; they are aroused and stimulated by its foreignness to their experience of sexual pleasures, and it moves them to gratify their lust at any cost and in spite of every obstacle." Frances Willard, the influential leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, blamed "the grogshop . . . the Negro's center of power. Better whiskey and more of it," she wrote, "is the rallying cry of great, dark-faced mobs," whose drunken exploits menaced "the safety of women, of childhood, [and] the home . . . in a thousand localities." Reflecting the dominance of racial theories of heredity, some attributed the allegedly uncontrolled sexual expression of the black man to evolutionary traits initially developed as a means to offset the high death rate in Africa. In a strange twist, one medical writer enmeshed in hereditarian thought even argued against lynching because the low mentality of blacks rendered it ineffective as a deterrent. "Executed," he wrote, "they would be forgotten; castrated and free, they would be a constant warning and ever-present admonition to others of their race." But, whatever the convoluted logic or rationale, the starting point seemed to be an acceptance of the claim that southern black men were assaulting white women.[25]

Not surprisingly, some black leaders did raise their voices in protest, attempting to expose the hidden motivations behind racial violence. Frederick Douglass, the former abolitionist leader, saw the charge of rape as rooted not in fact but in the efforts of white supremacists to perpetuate Negro subordination in the face of new social conditions. After the Civil War, he wrote,

> [T]he justification for the murder of Negroes was said to be Negro conspiracies, Negro insurrections, Negro schemes to murder all the white people, Negro plots to burn the town. . . . [T]imes have changed and the Negro's accusers have found it necessary to change with them. . . . Honest men no longer believe that there is any ground to apprehend Negro supremacy. . . . [A]ltered circumstances have made necessary a sterner, stronger, and more effective justification of Southern barbarism, and hence we have . . . to look into the face of a more shocking and blasting charge.

In Douglass's view, the cry of rape was intended to paralyze the allies of blacks in the North and South, to arrest "at home and abroad, in some measure, the generous efforts that good men were wont to make for his improvement and elevation." Ida B. Wells, a black newspaper editor in Memphis, went further. Outraged by a series of lynchings that had occurred, she wrote a polemic in her paper, the Memphis *Free Speech,* in 1892. "Nobody in this section believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men assault white women," she charged. Instead, Wells implied that the problem stemmed from the behavior of white

women who enticed black men to make sexual advances. Later, she refined her argument, exposing in the process a hidden sexual dynamic of southern life:

> With the Southern man, any mesalliance existing between a white woman and a colored man is a sufficient foundation for the charge of rape. The Southern white man says that it is impossible for a voluntary alliance to exist between a white woman and a colored man, and therefore, the fact of an alliance is a proof of force. In numerous instances where colored men have been lynched on the charge of rape, it was positively known at the time of lynching, and indisputably proven after the victim's death, that the relationship sustained between the man and the woman was voluntary and clandestine, and that in no court of law could even the charge of assault have been successfully maintained.

At the time, her words so inflamed the white community in Memphis that a mob destroyed her press and offices, and Wells was forced to escape the South for her own safety.[26]

Opposition to lynching soon became a primary motive stimulating black organizational activity, especially among middle-class women. Soon after leaving Memphis, Wells began addressing groups of black women around the country. Her labors eventually sparked the formation of a Negro women's club movement. Just as white women of the era were creating new forms of voluntary association to protect themselves from male lust, their black counterparts jumped into politics to expose and resist the dual injustices of racial and sexual violence. Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, frequently took up her pen in response to apologists for mob violence. In 1904, when one writer in the *North American Review* used the rape charge to demonstrate the unfortunate consequences of black aspirations for "social equality," Terrell acidly replied that the "only form of social equality ever attempted between the two races, and practised to any considerable extent, is that which was originated by the white masters of slave women." She placed the blame for lynching squarely on the surviving ethos of slavery. "The white men who shoot negroes to death and flay them alive, and the white women who apply flaming torches to their oil-soaked bodies today, are the sons and daughters of women who had but little, if any, compassion on the race when it was enslaved." Meanwhile, the true victims of rape, she charged, were the "prepossessing young colored girls [who] have been considered the rightful prey of white gentlemen in the South."[27] Outrage over lynching played an important role in the formation, in 1910, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. An alliance of blacks and some white reformers in the North, the NAACP targeted lynching as the most grotesque result of American racism.

Although lynching served the purpose of perpetuating black subordination

in every sphere of life, the southern "rape complex," as one historian has called it, also shaped a social hierarchy of gender and a system of sexual values that lasted at least until the 1930s. Black men faced the threat of lynching; black women suffered sexual exploitation; white women lived in a state of fear and anxiety. As the assumption of black men's uncontrollable passions permeated the psyches of white women, a "nameless terror" took hold, circumscribing their freedom of movement, and foiling aspirations to break out of their domestic roles. "Nowhere in the country are we safe," wrote one. "Even on the public highways, the situation has become so serious" that "the fragile and helpless woman, innocent of any wrong," feared for her security. Meanwhile, the combination of illicit male sexual activities and suppressed female desires among southern whites added a violent erotic element to both the charge of rape and to lynching. Sexual mythology fed the fantasies of white mobs. Describing one Florida lynching, an anonymous observer wrote that "the crowds from here that went over to see [the victim] for themself said he was so large he could not assault her until he took his knife and cut her, and also had either cut or bit one of her breast [*sic*] off." Juxtaposed against these allegations of black sexual brutality was the reality of lynching crowds who mutilated a victim's genitals, and sometimes fought for souvenirs. The descriptions of lynchings, the way the rape charge was bandied about, and the behavior of mobs has convinced Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, a student of the phenomenon, that "rape and rumors of rape became a kind of acceptable folk pornography in the Bible Belt."[28]

By the 1920s some white southern women were rejecting the "protection" they received and abandoning the submissive roles that led them to acquiesce to mob law in the name of their purity. In large part, their campaign against lynching grew out of challenges directed at them by black women. As southern women participated in efforts at interracial understanding after World War I, blacks raised the lynching issue again and again. For instance, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, an educator from North Carolina, told a group of white women in 1920 that she and her sisters "lay everything that happens to the members of her race at the door of the Southern white woman. . . . We all feel that you can control your men. . . . [S]o far as lynching is concerned . . . if the white women take hold of the situation . . . lynching would be stopped." When critics of lynching formed the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, they explicitly rejected the traditional justification for it:

> Public opinion has accepted too easily the claim of lynchers and mobsters that they were acting *solely in the defense of womanhood.* Women dare no longer to permit the claim to pass unchallenged nor allow themselves to be the cloak behind which those bent upon personal revenge and savagery commit acts of violence and lawlessness.

Their actions dismayed many. "You may have yourself a nigger if you want one, but do not force them on others," one letter writer informed the organization. Another revealed the underlying motivation of lynching when he said, "if you want a Negro man, OK. Otherwise lay off white supremacy." Even with the campaigns against lynching, support for it died slowly. Anti-lynching bills were regularly blocked in Congress in the 1930s, and as late as 1939, sixty-four percent of the respondents in a survey of white southerners thought lynching justified in cases of sexual assault.[29]

The simultaneity of lynching in the South and the attacks on immigrants by some Progressive reformers place in bold relief the ways sexuality figured in the maintenance of social hierarchies. Southern whites justified the violent subordination of blacks as necessary to protect white womanhood. Northerners, fearing the growing numbers of immigrants, blamed the "enslavement" of young white girls and the infection of middle-class wives with venereal disease on alien procurers and foreign prostitutes. In both cases, the emotional power of their rhetoric came from a sexual ideology that exalted the purity and refinement of white women even as it constricted the social roles available to them. As the twentieth century wore on, changing sexual mores and new roles for women would alter the ways that the erotic served as a method of enforcing inequality.

Despite the intensity of the anti-vice campaigns of the Progressive era, it appears, in retrospect, that they represented a last gasp for nineteenth-century middle-class respectability. Even as reformers mounted their assault upon the vice districts and targeted blacks and immigrants as symbolic villains, other forces were at work pushing sexual values in a decidedly modern direction. In the years before World War I, among doctors, sexual theorists, cultural radicals, feminists, and others, new ideas, new social relations, and a new kind of sexual politics emerged that would help to shape in the succeeding decades a distinctively different sexual order.

CHAPTER 10

Breaking with the Past

EARLY in 1915, Anthony Comstock entered the studio of William Sanger, an architect living in lower Manhattan. The month before, an agent of Comstock's Society for the Suppression of Vice had approached Sanger in search of a copy of *Family Limitation,* a birth control pamphlet written by Sanger's wife, Margaret. The unsuspecting architect responded to the plea, only to be confronted a few weeks later by Comstock, arrest warrant in hand. The tireless obscenity foe was less interested in William than in Margaret, whose militant espousal of women's right to birth control (a phrase she herself had coined) mocked Comstock's lifelong work. Margaret Sanger had fled to Europe the year before to avoid prosecution under the federal obscenity law, and Comstock informed William that *"if I would give your whereabouts I would be acquited."* William replied that he could wait "until Hell froze over before that would occur."[1]

William's trial did not take place until September, but in the meantime, Comstock's action unleashed forces for which he was not well prepared. Throughout the country, politically radical women began agitating for open discussion of contraception, with the anarchist Emma Goldman commencing a nationwide speaking tour. Eugene Debs, the leader of the Socialist party, wrote to Sanger in Europe, encouraging her to return and promising that "we now have some means of defense and we can call a pretty good-sized bunch of revolutionists to arms." Meanwhile, William was found guilty in September and sentenced to thirty days in jail, an outcome which impelled Margaret to return to New York. Her upcoming trial stimulated further protests, including scores of letters to President Wilson from British intellectuals and a plan by Elsie Clews Parsons, a Columbia anthropologist, to have women who had

practiced birth control "stand up in court" and make a public declaration. Faced with such an opposition, the federal prosecutor dropped the charges against Sanger rather than risk making her a martyr. As for Comstock, he did not live to see Sanger escape prosecution. He had caught a chill at William's trial, contracted pneumonia, and died before Margaret returned from Europe.[2]

The support that the Sangers received, as well as Comstock's passing from the scene, suggest that on the eve of World War I, America was entering a new sexual era. Margaret Sanger's fight for birth control, so different from nineteenth-century feminist advocacy of voluntary motherhood through abstinence, indicates one aspect of this reordering. At least some middle-class women were unwilling to sacrifice sexual expression in the interest of fertility control. But there were additional signs of a new sexual order as well. Among doctors and other theorists of sexuality, the shift toward a philosophy of indulgence marked the demise of nineteenth-century prescriptions about continence and self-control. New ideas about sex coincided with a new sense of sexual identity among some Americans. Finally, middle-class cultural radicals, emboldened by the critique of political and economic institutions that left-wing agitators promoted, self-consciously broke with the marital ideals of their upbringing as they sought to construct new forms of personal relationships. All of these signs of change pointed toward acceptance of a sexual ethic that encouraged expressiveness.

Ideas and Identities

The writings of Sigmund Freud perhaps best symbolize the new direction that sexual theorizing took in the twentieth century. Freud's visit to America in 1909, to lecture at Clark University, introduced his work to a number of intellectuals and professionals. Before long he was being translated and published in America; by the mid-1910s, popularizers were presenting Freudian ideas to a larger audience. Whatever subtlety or complexity his theories possessed took a backseat to the concepts that infiltrated the middle-class imagination: the notion of infantile sexuality, the drama of sexual conflict in the family, the case histories of female patients who seemed to suffer from the denial of their sexual desires, the idea that the sexual instinct permeated human life and might change the course of civilization. Above all, Americans absorbed a version of Freudianism that presented the sexual impulse as an insistent force demanding expression. "The urge is there," wrote an American analyst, A. A. Brill, "and whether the individual desires or no, it always manifests itself." The readers of *Good Housekeeping* were told that the sex instinct sought "every kind of sensory gratification. . . . If it gets its yearning it is as contented as a

nursing infant. If it does not, beware! It will never be stopped except with satisfactions."[3] The implications seemed clear: better to indulge this unruly desire than to risk the consequences of suppressing it.

Although Freudianism proved more enduring in its influence, in the short run the writings of the English sexologist Havelock Ellis had a greater impact. The object of censorship in England, his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (six volumes of which were published between 1897 and 1910) quickly found an American readership. Described by historian Paul Robinson as the first of the sexual modernists, Ellis assaulted almost every aspect of the nineteenth-century sexual heritage. For Ellis, sexual indulgence did not pose the threat to health or character that preoccupied many earlier writers. Rather, he described it as "the chief and central function of life . . . ever wonderful, ever lovely." Ellis equated sex with "all that is most simple and natural and pure and good." He asked his readers: "Why . . . should people be afraid of rousing passions which, after all, are the great driving forces of human life?"[4] As with mass-circulation presentations of Freud, Ellis seemed to be advocating gratification rather than self-control.

Ellis did in fact seek to legitimate a broader range of sexual opportunities than the marital heterosexuality sanctioned by his nineteenth-century ancestors. He questioned the institution of marriage, calling it "essentially rather . . . a tragic condition than a happy condition." A legal document, he wrote, could not guarantee the mutual attraction and intensity of passion which alone brought contentment. Ellis advocated a period of "trial marriage" before couples made a lasting commitment, and he recognized as well that some might need variety in sexual partners. He also wrote approvingly of masturbation as an "autoerotic" form of relaxation and a method of initiating adolescents into knowledge of sex. Perhaps most daringly, Ellis wished to remove the stigma attached to homosexual behavior. "Sexual inversion," as he termed it, was a congenital condition, as natural for its practitioners as heterosexual relations were for the majority. Because he viewed it as inborn, Ellis believed that the laws criminalizing homosexual behavior were archaic and unjust, and he supported efforts to repeal them. Overall, as Robinson has noted, Ellis's defense of a variety of sexual practices reflected the belief that the world needed "not more restraint, but more passion."[5]

Even where Ellis's views seemed indebted to nineteenth-century assumptions, as in his acceptance of male and female differences and his attribution of spiritual qualities to sexual passion, he managed to draw vastly different conclusions. Though he rejected notions of female passionlessness, he did claim distinctive sexual modes for each gender. Men were characteristically active, aggressive, sexually insistent, and easily excited, while women, if not quite passive, needed the attention and stimulus of the male to be aroused.

"Modesty," Ellis wrote, "may almost be regarded as the chief secondary sexual character of women on the psychical side." He described modesty as "rooted in the sexual periodicity of the female" and "an inevitable byproduct of the naturally aggressive attitude of the male in sexual relationships."[6] But instead of marshaling these assertions in support of male sexual restraint, Ellis interpreted them as serving to encourage courtship between male and female. And, when man and woman did engage in sexual activity, Ellis saw the slower arousal of the woman as requiring extensive foreplay so that she, too, would experience satisfaction.

Ellis was not the only modern writer on sex to attract an American readership. The English utopian socialist Edward Carpenter and the Swedish theorist Ellen Key also had a devoted following. In the United States, William J. Robinson, the editor of two medical journals, penned book after book about sexuality. Robinson spoke out strongly against the nineteenth-century emphasis on continence. In a letter to a prominent supporter of the social hygiene movement, Robinson made his disagreement with its sexual philosophy abundantly clear:

> You speak the language of the tenth century; I speak the language of the 20th, or perhaps, the 25th. You speak the language of gloom and reaction; I speak the language of joy and progress. . . . You believe that the sexual instinct was given to man and should be used by him for procreation purposes only. I believe that such a belief borders on insanity. . . . You believe that extramarital relations are a sin and a crime. I believe they . . . may be unwise for many reasons, but are not more sinful or criminal per se than the gratification of any other natural instincts, such as eating or drinking.

His approach to sex logically pushed him toward support for birth control, which he viewed as the key both to a better society and to the liberation of sexuality from the shackles of prudish ignorance. In this regard, Robinson heralded the beginnings of an important shift within the medical establishment from late-nineteenth-century opinion.[7]

The significance of Freud, Ellis, and other twentieth-century theorists involved more than their advocacy of sexual expression. The shift from a philosophy of continence to one that encouraged indulgence was but one aspect of a larger reorientation that was investing sexuality with a profoundly new importance. The modern regime of sexology was taking sex beyond a procreative framework, beyond, too, its role in fostering intimacy between husband and wife. In doing so, some writers emphasized the social character of sex, as did an American doctor who said "it is sexual activity that governs life. . . . It is the basis of all society." But, more commonly, theorists attributed to sexuality the power of individual self-definition. As Ellis phrased it, "sex

penetrates the whole person; a man's sexual constitution is part of his general constitution. There is considerable truth in the dictum: 'A man is what his sex is.' "[8] In these terms, sex was becoming a marker of identity, the wellspring of an individual's true nature.

Nowhere, perhaps, can this change be seen more clearly than in the new definitions and new social experiences that characterized same-sex relationships, especially among men. By the end of the nineteenth century, medical writers were turning their pens to "sodomitical behavior" and the "crime against nature" which previously had been the province of law and religion. In the process, they came to see homosexuality not as a discrete, punishable offense, but as a description of the person, encompassing emotions, dress, mannerisms, behavior, and even physical traits. As Michel Foucault has described this evolution, "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."[9]

Beginning in the 1880s in the United States, and somewhat earlier in Europe, physicians began writing about the cases of "contrary sexual impulse" that came to their attention. The phenomenon appeared new and strange to them, and as they charted this unfamiliar sexual territory, they searched for words adequate to label it—*urning, tribad, invert, homosexual, third sex,* among many others. Little agreement existed about its cause or its meaning. At first, medical theorists leaned toward the hypothesis that homosexuality was a degenerative disease, an acquired form of insanity. By the early twentieth century, especially as the writings of Havelock Ellis gained wider currency, opinion had shifted toward a congenital model, and a rough consensus developed that sexual "inverts" were born that way. Not until the 1920s, when Freudianism swept competitors from the field, would the pendulum swing back to the position that homosexuality was an acquired condition. Reflecting the centrality of gender in nineteenth-century sexual arrangements, many early students of the phenomenon tended to define it not as homosexuality, but as "sexual inversion," a complete exchange of gender identity of which erotic behavior was but one small part. George Beard, an eminent American physician, wrote in 1884 that when "the sex is perverted, they hate the opposite sex and love their own; men become women and women men, in their tastes, conduct, character, feelings, and behavior." Or, as one anonymous male patient in the first decade of the twentieth century described this outlook, "my feelings are exactly those of a woman. . . . As near as I can explain it, I am a woman in every detail except external appearances."[10]

Whatever the point of view that doctors adopted, it seems clear that their writings were responding to real changes in the social organization of same-sex eroticism. By the turn of the century, the spread of a capitalist economy and the growth of huge cities were allowing diffuse homosexual desires to congeal

into a personal sexual identity. Labor for wages allowed more and more men, and some women, to detach themselves from a family-based economy and strike out on their own; the anonymous social relations of the metropolis gave them the freedom to pursue their sexual yearnings. Some men and women began to interpret their homosexual desires as a characteristic that distinguished them from the majority. Slowly they elaborated an underground sexual subculture. Unlike the normative passionate friendships of the nineteenth century, or the isolated female couples in which one partner passed as a man, these women and men were self-consciously departing from the norm and creating a social milieu that nurtured their emergent sense of identity.

Abundant evidence survives from observers and participants that between the 1880s and the First World War, a sexual minority of sorts was in the making. Again and again, doctors reported the information supplied by patients that "there is in every community of any size a colony of male sexual perverts" or that "in many large cities the subjects of the contrary sexual impulse form a class by themselves." Meeting places proliferated. After a foray into the sexual underworld of New York City in 1890, a medical student from North Carolina found that "perverts of both sexes maintained a sort of social set-up in New York City, had their places of meeting, and [the] advantage of police protections." The furnished-room districts of large cities provided a setting where working women might form relationships with each other, while descriptions of the red-light districts suggest that some prostitutes formed lesbian attachments. In Harlem after the First World War, the cross-dressing lesbian Gladys Bentley performed in men's attire, and served as something of a magnet for other lesbians and male homosexuals. Several clubs along the Bowery allowed cross-dressing men and women to socialize. In many cities, men openly solicited one another on certain streets well known as "cruising" areas. In Newport, Rhode Island, "everybody who sat around [the YMCA] in the evening . . . knew" that it was a gathering spot for the sexually different. In the nation's capital, black men met "under the shadow of the White House . . . in Lafayette Square." One man wrote in 1908 that in cities such as Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, and New Orleans, "certain smart clubs are well-known for their homosexual atmospheres." He reported that "steam-baths and restaurants are plentifully known—to the initiated," and that in some places homosexual resorts were masked as literary clubs, athletic societies, and chess clubs. In San Francisco, the area surrounding the Presidio military base had become recognized by the 1890s as "a regular visiting place!"[11]

Two features of this inchoate subculture especially stand out. First, many of the pre-1920 commentaries remarked on the pervasive transvestism and other evidence of inverted gender behavior among the participants. In Chicago, for instance, in 1911, vice investigators found men who "mostly affect

the carriage, mannerisms, and speech of women [and] who are fond of many articles dear to the feminine heart."[12] The frequency of such observations points to the continuing salience of gender in shaping an individual's sense of sexual meaning, and to how the erotic remained attached to conceptions of gender. Second, the meeting places tended to be sites of either moral ambiguity in American society or of transient relationships. Boardinghouses, waterfront areas where sailors congregated on leave, red-light districts, bohemian communities such as Greenwich Village, transvestite clubs paying the police for protection, military bases with soldiers far from home, YMCAs housing travelers, theaters that hosted touring companies: all of these constituted places freed from the bonds of family and community, able to tolerate deviance from the moral rules of respectable society.

Standing outside the norms of their society, these early pioneers of a homosexual identity faced enormous hurdles in creating a viable life for themselves. For one, the subculture that some were creating remained hidden and difficult to find. As a woman of twenty in the mid-1880s, Mary Casal felt that "I was the only girl who had the sex desire for woman." Years later, having stumbled upon others, she wrote, "How much suffering would have been saved me and what a different life I would have led if I had known earlier" that there were many others like herself? For some women who embraced this self-conscious sexual identity, the need to find others effected subtle changes in the older tradition of passing. Rather than try to escape detection through a successful masquerade, they only partially adopted male styles. One thirty-eight-year-old woman, according to a doctor's report, "proclaims her characteristics in the most flagrant way through her manner of dress which is always the most masculine. . . . [S]he frequents public places dressed in a manner to *attract* general notice." For most men and women, the threat of punishment and social ostracism conspired to keep their sexual proclivities a carefully guarded secret. As Francis Matthiessen, soon to become a renowned literary critic, wrote to his male lover in the early 1920s, "we would be pariahs, outlaws, degenerates," if the world were to know. "This is the price we pay for the unforgivable sin of being born different from the great run of mankind." Yet, in spite of the fears and the penalties, love could thrive. "Oh what a sweet and sacred thing it is to love and to be loved!" a Detroit man wrote soon after World War I:

> to hold within one's arms the visible representation of that beautiful spark which daily seems to grow brighter and more wondrous, to remove one's thoughts from the realm of self and let them dwell rapturously and selflessly upon some beloved companion, to press his glorious body close to one's own, to feel the warm, red blood pulsing deliciously through both, . . . to pillow one's head upon his breast, to touch one's lip to his hair, his eyes, his lips! Is Paradise more wonderful?[13]

The lyricism of his description suggests the strength of motive that led many to pursue their sexual desires even in the face of a hostile society.

Radical Lives, Radical Politics

While some Americans constructed an underground sexual subculture based upon a sense of shared identity, others departed from nineteenth-century orthodoxy in more visible, dramatic ways. In the decade before World War I, the ideas of the new sexual theorists took root among small groups of American radicals whose articulateness gave them an influence out of proportion to their numbers. Based in Greenwich Village, these homegrown bohemians self-consciously adopted a new sexual ethic and style of personal life. Their involvement in radical causes, whether as socialists, anarchists, or feminists, imparted a fervor to their erotic experimentation which they defined as an essential, innovative component of revolutionary struggle.

Central to the ideology of these cultural radicals was a belief in the necessity of a new, emancipated woman who could meet man on an equal footing in sexual, as well as in other, matters. For the men in these circles, Edward Carpenter expressed the goal well in *Love's Coming of Age* when he wrote of a future in which "marriage shall mean friendship as well as passion" and "a comradelike equality shall be included in the word love." Floyd Dell, an important figure in the bohemian world of the Village, phrased it more mundanely in an autobiographical novel. "I want a girl that can be talked to and that can be kissed," says the main character.[14] These views implied an end to the delicacy, purity, and domesticity that characterized the nineteenth-century model of femininity. Her successor would leave the private sphere of the home to fill a place in the public world of work and politics, bringing that equality to affairs of the heart.

Such an ideal assumed that women harbored strong sexual instincts and that sexual passion was as much a part of woman's nature as man's. And, indeed, the cultural radicals of the period seemed to play the part well. In recalling those days, Sherwood Anderson wrote of a "healthy new frankness . . . in the talk between men and women, at least an admission that we were all at times torn and harried by the same lusts." From women writers, too, came a more forthright portrayal of female passion. As Gladys Oaks, a socialist writer, expressed it in a poem titled "Climax":

> I had thought that I could sleep
> After I had kissed his mouth
> With its sharply haunting corners
> And its red.

But now that he has kissed me
A stir is in my blood,
And I want to be awake
Instead.

Oaks's verse had moved a long distance from the female sentimental literature of the nineteenth century.[15]

Echoing Ellis's views, these bohemian radicals also dispensed with the sanctity of marriage and the ideal of lifelong monogamy. Like earlier free lovers, they termed the marriage-based family a shackle that bound women to men in a property relationship. Unions based on sexual attraction and emotional compatibility, they argued, did not need the approval of church or state, and ought to be dissolved at the wish of either member. But unlike their predecessors, they did not believe that a coupled relationship, whether in marriage or not, demanded sexual exclusivity. Variety in partners, Ellis had suggested, might serve as fuel for the passions; psychological, or emotional, fidelity was more significant than sexual fidelity.

These beliefs led the bohemian community to engage in a good deal of self-conscious experimentation with relationships, not all of which was successful. Perceiving themselves as revolutionary innovators pioneering a new form of personal life, they tried to live true to their theories. But the ideal, in Ellen Key's words, of "a union in which neither the soul betrayed the senses, nor the senses the soul," often proved elusive. Women and men both found it difficult to discard their socialization in other than rhetorical ways. The writer Neith Boyce, in a letter to her husband, Hutchins Hapgood, detailed the pain that the new morality entailed for her:

> I have an abiding love for you—the deepest thing in me. But in a way I hate your interest in sex, because I have suffered from it. I assure you that I can never think of your physical passions for other women without pain—even though my reason doesn't find fault with you. But it's instinct and it hurts. The whole thing is sad and terrible, yet we all joke about it every day.[16]

For his part, Hapgood encapsulated the tensions in bohemian life when he titled his autobiography, *A Victorian in the Modern World.* He, along with other male radicals, discovered that sexual freedom with emancipated women carried too high a price. What he most wanted was a wife who would minister to his needs.

The failure of bohemian radicals to model their revolutionary ideals of personal life ought not obscure the critical role they played in pulling America into a modern sexual era. They were few in number, but their work as novelists, playwrights, poets, and journalists guaranteed that in some form the ideas they espoused—of Ellis, Freud, Key, and Carpenter—would reach a larger audience. If Americans were not quite ready to abandon marriage, many were prepared to accept revised notions of female sexuality and to reassess the place that sexual expression held in a happy life.

One can see evidence of the shift in white middle-class values in the patterns of nightlife that some were adopting. The heterosocial world of commercialized amusements that working-class youth enjoyed was spreading to the middle class, though in tamer, more respectable form. By the 1910s, cabarets were becoming the rage. Adapting the syncopated dance music of black entertainers to a different clientele, the cabaret allowed men and women to mingle informally outside a domestic setting. The new dance styles became so much the fashion that many of these clubs began holding afternoon "tango teas" to teach the latest steps. Under the pretext of shopping, wives and daughters would attend these daytime sessions, taught by men hired for that purpose. The atmosphere was suggestive of illicit sexuality. As *Variety* commented in 1914, "if the cabaret could talk, or the waiters tell all they know, the state would have to open a few extra courts to keep up with the rush for divorces."[17] Meanwhile, the movie industry was entering a new era as entrepreneurs constructed lavish theaters to appeal to a middle-class audience. As the motion picture traveled uptown, out of the working-class neighborhoods that first housed it, it spread its romantic sensuous imagery, and further encouraged the departure of women from a protected domestic context. By 1920, the distinctive spheres that sustained nineteenth-century sexual values were in a state of disarray. Elaine Tyler May's study of divorce cases from 1880 and 1920 confirms this assessment. In the earlier period, a woman's participation in public amusements marked her as disreputable. By 1920, many women saw such activities as part and parcel of modern life.[18]

Along with the changes in patterns of leisure, a new kind of sexual politics was taking shape. The Greenwich Village radicals wove their theories in an intense milieu of socialist agitators, labor leaders, and feminist organizers. The environment encouraged a translation from personal experimentation to social activism. Out of these circles emerged not only modern ideas but an innovative politics of sexuality far removed from the purity crusades and antiprostitution campaigns that swirled around them.

Birth control, the issue that signaled the shift, is most closely associated with the name of Margaret Sanger. As a thirty-year-old housewife and mother of three living in the suburbs of New York, she attended a socialist lecture in Manhattan in 1910 and became so excited that she persuaded her husband to move to the city. Sanger plunged rapidly into the life of New York radicals, and her apartment became a gathering place for activists and agitators such as Bill Haywood, a militant union leader; the journalist John Reed; and Alexander Berkman, a fiery anarchist agitator. Work as an organizer for

Haywood's Industrial Workers of the World led to her first arrest, while her training as a nurse put her in a critical role in the evacuation and care of children during the celebrated textile workers' strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912 and 1913.[19]

Her experience and activities were pushing Sanger toward the issue of birth control. On one side, sexual freedom for middle-class radical women rested on their having access to contraception. On the other, Sanger was appalled by the misery of working-class women who had virtually no control over their fertility, and bore child after child despite grinding poverty. At the time, Sanger could draw on little in the way of tradition in devising a political response. For an older generation of feminists, birth control had meant not contraception but voluntary motherhood, the right to say no to a husband's sexual demands. Male radicals, wedded to a socialist tradition that exalted the working-class family and excoriated capitalism for corrupting it, by and large saw fertility control as a trivial issue, a distraction from the class struggle. Sanger was left to cut her own path.

In November 1912, Sanger began a series of articles on female sexuality for the New York *Call,* a socialist newspaper. After postal officials confiscated the paper for violating the Comstock anti-obscenity law, Sanger departed for Europe where she gathered contraceptive information and devices. Returning to New York determined to challenge the constitutionality of the Comstock statute, she began publishing her own magazine, *The Woman Rebel.* Though it ranged widely over many topics, Sanger made female autonomy, including control over one's body and the right to sexual expression, the centerpiece of the magazine. "It is none of Society's business what a woman shall do with her body," she wrote.[20] For a time, she managed to elude the postal inspectors, but when she wrote and distributed a pamphlet, *Family Limitation,* Sanger found herself charged with nine counts of violating the law, and facing forty-five years in prison. In October 1914, she fled the country, escaping to Europe where she imbibed the ideas of Havelock Ellis and other sex radicals.

Sanger's escape did not bring an end to the birth control issue; rather, in her absence, organizing efforts mushroomed. Emma Goldman, the anarchist agitator who had spoken often about sexual freedom, began to incorporate the topic of birth control into her lectures. In March 1915 in New York City, she openly discussed various methods of contraception. In August, a similar speech in Portland, Oregon, led to her arrest. Setting aside her conviction, a circuit court judge provided a harbinger of changes to come when he wrote that "the trouble with our people today is that there is too much prudery. . . . We are all shocked by many things publicly stated that we know privately to ourselves, but we haven't got the nerve to get up and admit it."[21] An arrest in New York the following year gave Goldman the opportunity to deliver in

the courtroom an impassioned speech on birth control that elicited cheers and applause from the audience. Meanwhile, Sanger's work had opened the issue within the Socialist party. By early 1915, socialist women and others had distributed over one hundred thousand copies of *Family Limitation.* Activists formed local birth control leagues around the country, raising the level of agitation considerably.[22]

Returning to the United States in October 1915, Sanger demanded a trial. Her case was now a cause célèbre, with prominent women planning to issue a mass declaration attesting to contraceptive use, and British intellectuals wiring President Wilson to intervene. When the federal prosecutor decided to drop charges, Sanger embarked on a speaking tour of 119 cities, made possible by the organizing efforts that had taken place during her exile. In October 1916 she defied the law again, this time by opening a birth control clinic in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, and providing contraceptive information without a physician's presence. Arrest, trial, and jail followed, only to give the birth control controversy its greatest publicity ever. Sanger and other radical women had created an issue whose time had come.

One can hardly overestimate the importance of this emerging birth control movement. It signaled a profound shift in the sexual norms that had reigned supreme among the middle classes for half a century. To advocate fertility control for women through access to contraceptive devices rather than through abstinence implied an unequivocal acceptance of female sexual expression. It weakened the link between sexual activity and procreation, altered the meaning of the marriage bond, and opened the way for more extensive premarital sexual behavior among women. As birth control became more widely available and used, it also broadened the roles women might choose, as biology proved less and less to be destiny.

By the 1920s Americans were clearly entering a new sexual era. Many of the features that would characterize the coming system were already apparent. The new positive value attributed to the erotic, the growing autonomy of youth, the association of sex with commercialized leisure and self-expression, the pursuit of love, the visibility of the erotic in popular culture, the social interaction of men and women in public, the legitimation of female interest in the sexual: all of these were to be seen in America in the twenties.

Among the many changes during this period, two stand out as emblematic of this new sexual order: the redefinition of womanhood to include eroticism, and the decline of public reticence about sex. By 1920 the separate spheres, so critical in the construction of nineteenth-century middle-class sexual mores, had collapsed. Women were engaged in the public world, not vicariously through the moral uplift they provided for husbands and sons, but as workers,

consumers, and, finally, as voters. Their participation was not equal, to be sure. But leaving the domestic hearth, even to the extent that they had, carried with it enormous implications for sexual values. Ideals of piety and purity withered as women and men met in a variety of settings. The growing autonomy of women opened up new possibilities for them to pursue the erotic; new conceptions of female sexuality both reflected and encouraged this shift. Female purity lost much of its power as an organizing principle for enforcing sexual orthodoxy as young women and men together explored the erotic. Premarital experience would alter the expectations that individuals brought to marriage, with sexual attraction becoming the bond drawing men and women to one another. Gender differences, though they persisted, would cease to be the fulcrum around which ideas about sexuality turned. Instead, sex was becoming, in the view of modern theorists, a common characteristic that motivated both men and women, and expressed one's deepest sense of self.

Alongside these changes lay the decline of reticence, another characteristic of nineteenth-century civilized morality. By comparison with the past, American society in the 1920s seemed to embrace the sexual. Sex was something to be discussed and displayed, whether through popularizations of Freud, the true-confession magazines, or the romantic imagery of Hollywood films. As one popular magazine described it just before World War I, "sex o'clock" had struck in America.[23] This new presence of the erotic in the public realm, not as an illicit underground but as an accepted feature of daily life, still lacked the explicitness and the pervasiveness that came to characterize American mores in the 1960s and 1970s. But the gulf between private expression and public silence had narrowed considerably. And, ironically, the anti-vice crusaders of the Progressive era, partisans of an older order, had contributed to the new explicitness.

To search for an explanation for this reorientation is more difficult than to describe it. Certainly, one feature that stands out is the gradual shift toward a consumer economy. One does not need to rely on conspiratorial motives nor adopt a crude determinism to say that profound economic changes were reshaping American values. An ethic that encouraged the purchase of consumer products also fostered an acceptance of pleasure, self-gratification, and personal satisfaction, a perspective that easily translated to the province of sex. Such notions would gradually replace the nineteenth-century preoccupation with the control of sexual impulses through individual self-management. Instead, expression and fulfillment became the watchwords. This emphasis on personal gratification coincided with the loss of control over most other aspects of public life. Politics seemed distant and outside the influence of most individuals; huge corporations exercised power over the business of making a living; the sprawling metropolis appeared beyond the control of its inhabitants.

The body, seemingly, remained one's own. It, at least, could be a source of fulfillment. It, at least, might remain a realm of autonomy. Although several more decades would have to pass before this perspective permeated the society, already by the 1920s circumstances were present to encourage acceptance of the modern idea that sexual expression was of overarching importance to individual happiness.

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18. Burnham, "Medical Inspection," pp. 203–218; Pivar, *Purity Crusade,* chap. 2. Pivar identifies two women's groups that favored the licensing of prostitutes in the 1890s, one in Boston and one in Illinois (p. 119).

19. On rescue homes, see Pivar, *Purity Crusade,* pp. 95, 107–10, and Freedman, *Sisters' Keepers,* chap. 7; also on homes, including Cameron House, see Peggy Pascoe, "Gender and the Search for Moral Authority: Protestant Women and Rescue Homes in the American West, 1870–1930," Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1986.

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Chapter 10. Breaking with the Past

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