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.