



Themes in World History

SEXUALITY IN WORLD HISTORY

Peter N. Stearns

SECOND EDITION

ROUTLEDGE

Sexuality in World History

This book examines sexuality in the past, and explores how it helps explain sexuality in the present. The subject of sexuality is often a controversial one, and exploring it through a world history perspective emphasizes the extent to which societies, including our own, are still reacting to historical change through contemporary sexual behaviors, values, and debates. The study uses a clear chronological structure to focus on major patterns and changes in sexuality—both sexual culture and sexual behaviors—in the main periods of world history, covering topics including:

- The sexual implications of the transition from hunting and gathering economies to agricultural economies;
- Sexuality in classical societies;
- The postclassical period and the spread of the world religions;
- Sex in an age of trade and colonies;
- Changes in sexual behaviors and sexual attitudes between 1750 and 1950;
- Sex in contemporary world history.

This new edition examines these issues on a global scale, with attention to anthropological insights on sexuality and their relationship to history, the dynamics between sexuality and imperialism, sexuality in industrial society, and trends and conflicts surrounding views of sex and sexuality in the contemporary world.

Peter N. Stearns is University Professor of History at George Mason University. He is the author of *Globalization in World History* (2nd edition 2015), *Childhood in World History* (3rd edition 2015), *Gender in World History* (3rd edition 2015), *Peace in World History* (2014), and *Human Rights in World History* (2012), all in this series. Other books include *A History of Shame* (forthcoming), *Guiding the American University: Challenges and Choices* (2015), and *Satisfaction Not Guaranteed: Dilemmas of Progress in Modern Society* (2012).

Themes in World History

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Sexuality in World History

Second Edition

Peter N. Stearns



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Acknowledgments

I have always enjoyed teaching about the history of sexuality, mainly because I deeply believe that history in a complex subject area like this improves our understanding of contemporary issues by showing how they have emerged from the past.

The challenge of balancing biological and psychological understandings of sex with changing historical contexts is deeply engaging as well. So I welcomed the chance to do this book and to broaden my own knowledge through the global framework. Given the rapid growth of historical research on sexuality, the opportunity now to offer a revised edition of the project is timely as well. My thanks to Vicky Peters, Eve Setch, and Elizabeth Clifford from Routledge, who encouraged the project, and most recently to Eve Mayer, who supported the revision project. Huge gratitude to Clio Stearns, who did a great deal of research for the book, and to Deborah Stearns who provided a critical reading and key suggestions. I benefited tremendously from the intelligent organization of Laura Bell, who processed the original manuscript, and from the contributions of Vyta Baselice to the second edition. My wife, Donna Kidd, put up with my recurrent chatter about a topic that is truly important but also, sometimes, quite amusing.

Preface to the Second Edition

The challenge of combining a history of sexuality with a world history framework informed the original edition of this book, and it continues in the current version. The result involves comparison among different approaches to sexuality, at several points in time, but also the consideration of some larger patterns of change.

The new edition updates the original in several respects, reflecting additional work on the history of sexuality in several societies. It adds a short chapter on anthropological approaches, and how these relate to historical work on the subject—particularly in illustrating the variety of possibilities humans have explored where sexual attitudes and behaviors are concerned. Treatment of recent developments expands attention to the various problems that have emerged or clarified with contemporary sexuality—including global debates about appropriate standards, for example concerning same-sex relationships. Finally, new or expanded analytical sections invite further debate over basic patterns: how agriculture introduced additional constraints on sexual behaviors, without preventing continued variety; and above all, the extent to which developments over the past 250 years suggested a newer, “modern” pattern that would contrast in turn with the Agricultural Age—both in reducing some characteristic constraints and in introducing new difficulties and controversies.

1 Introduction

The Whys and Hows of Sex History

The history of sexuality, tentatively emerging as a subfield for teaching and research about four decades ago, was predicated from the outset on using history to support contemporary understanding. The first topics stemmed directly from a realization—perhaps somewhat exaggerated—that modern sexual attitudes and behaviors were very different from those of the Victorian age just a century before. The obvious challenge was both to explore Victorianism, to see how it operated as more than a museum oddity, and to assess the reasons for its collapse and for the advent of quite different approaches. The history of sexuality has gone well beyond this framework since its early days, exploring a greater variety of societies and time periods, and modifying the disdain for Victorianism itself. But the interest in the nature of change, in beliefs and practices associated with sexuality, and the commitment to use history as a source of perspectives on complex current realities, remains very strong.

This is a book about sex in the past, and how sex in the past helps explain sex in the present. It deals with a variety of societies around the world, while talking about how sexual attitudes and behaviors are affected by larger global forces like the advent of agriculture or, later, urbanization. The book seeks as well to show how the many current problems associated with sex, including sometimes bitter global disputes about sexual issues, have emerged from larger historical patterns.

A study of sexuality in history can understandably evoke several skeptical responses, and these are best discussed explicitly and in advance.

—This is a frivolous topic, not worthy of historical attention compared to the really important features of human society in the past. Response: to an extent, of course, this is a matter of personal taste. Serious work on the history of sex is only a few decades old; traditionally, historians devoted themselves mainly to work on politics, diplomacy, great ideas, and possibly economic patterns. But understanding patterns of sexuality in the past helps illuminate a major aspect of human behavior, which should be justification enough for this expansion of history's topical range. Sex history connects also to other topics—like differences among social classes or gender patterns; recent work has emphasized the direct connections between power

2 *Introduction*

alignments and sexual ideas and practices. Governments often seek to regulate sexual behavior (not always with great success), and sex certainly figures in the impact of armies or colonial authorities—linking sex history directly with conventional historical topics. We increasingly realize how much rape plays into war and civil strife, another if particularly horrible linkage. Sex-related topics—gay rights, abortion, date rape—loom uncomfortably large in the current American political landscape, and historical perspective in these areas fills an obvious need. Score one for the relevance of sexuality history: the topic is not at all a frivolous aside in the history enterprise.

—This is an inconceivable topic (no pun intended), for sex is a basic behavior, biologically determined, so it has no real history. Response: this one is easy to disprove, though we will come back to this point in Chapter 2. Attitudes toward sexuality vary widely according to different social contexts—some societies in some periods disapprove vigorously of masturbation, to take one example, but then later ease off into greater permissiveness. Sexual culture, the values and beliefs applied to sex, obviously change over time, and this is an important part of the larger history. Distinctions between “normal” and “abnormal” sexuality are clearly constructed by particular societies; not surprisingly, a great deal of recent scholarship has been applied to this aspect, with attention among other things to relationships between homosexual and heterosexual evaluations. Actual behavior has a history too. Rates of adultery vary, depending on time period and larger social conditions. Ages of puberty change (which means that even biology is not an absolute constant), depending on nutrition and social context. Average age of menopause can vary as well. Relationships between sex and reproduction clearly shift, depending both on social norms and available technologies.

—This is a disgusting topic, certainly not fit for student audiences. Response: again, to an extent this is a matter of personal taste. The history of sex unquestionably involves issues that some people, even in our permissive society, still prefer not to discuss. I have deliberately referred to masturbation already; it’s an important aspect of sex history in some societies and times, but it’s not something usually discussed in history classes. My own belief is that it’s better to talk about sex, using history in fact as a way to explore key issues, than to cover it up. But there is no intention of being gratuitously shocking. Some sex histories have focused on exotic behaviors that don’t necessarily shed much light on what sex has involved for most people, and that’s not the approach taken in this book. Sex is an important aspect of the human condition, and its history can and should be explored in this framework, and not deliberately either to titillate or offend.

—All well and good, but sex is such a private behavior that its real history is impossible. Response: there are, without question, aspects of the history of sex that cannot be as clearly studied as one might like, because accurate data are simply not available. Behaviors that a society disapproves of are particularly resistant to history probes. Homosexual practices in some times and places are not easy to get at, to take an obvious example, though current

scholarship has pushed back some of the older limitations. While historians can deal with attitudes toward masturbation, and some aspects of their impact, we will never be able to talk about rates of masturbation from one period to the next; this is almost always a concealed practice. Another current challenge is intriguing. The massive promotional campaign for drugs to improve male sexual functioning—Viagra and the like—makes one wonder if male dysfunction has been increasing. New health issues, like higher rates of diabetes or high blood pressure and its medication, might cause new problems; and/or growing desire for sexual pleasure and a need to demonstrate sexual masculinity even in later age could account for the new interest. Or the whole thing may be a function of drug company hype. Great questions, but the fact is we can't know for sure: there is no tidy census of male erectile capacities in previous decades. There are, in other words, real limitations in what we can know historically (or even about sexual habits in our own times). But historians have discovered a great deal, and it is possible to talk about significant historical changes and continuities. Public attitudes, important in their own right, are easier to get at than behaviors; even many of the latter lend themselves to serious historical description and analysis. The subject is important enough that even a somewhat constrained historical treatment is worth the effort.

Casting a history of sexuality in world history terms heightens the problem of documentation. Different societies generate different types and amounts of relevant records. All societies have values that apply to sexuality—the subject is too important not to generate both laws and other conventions plus cultural commentary. So we can get at sexual cultures as soon as significant historical materials of any sort become available. The first known law code, from Babylonia, spent a great deal of time on sexual regulation, and early art also had strong sexual content—to take two examples. But material on sexual practice is much more varied. At least as important, for our purposes, is the fact that historians have studied sexuality far more extensively for some societies than for others, which means that not all the comparisons one might wish to develop are possible. Indeed, there is real opportunity for further work on the history of sexuality seen as a global and comparative topic, with strong potential for serious advances in historical knowledge (of the sort that have already paid off in research on several societies).

Still, the world framework, though not commonly applied to sexuality and certainly challenging, has its merits already, even in the present state of scholarship. All three of the main approaches developed for world history apply readily to sexuality, and gain additional richness when patterns of sexual culture and behavior are factored in. Different societies have different standards, so that comparison can reveal a great deal about how particular civilizations operated. Even the sensual content of art could differ greatly, as a comparison between statues of Hindu goddesses and women in Chinese art reveals quite easily. Contacts between societies—the second world history approach, after comparison—could also strongly affect sexual culture

and practice. Spanish colonists frequently fathered illegitimate children with Native American women, helping to establish a widespread incidence of sex outside of marriage that has continuing impact in Latin America. British colonial control of India, at the 19th-century peak of prudery back home, necessitated special exemptions from British law for the use of Hindu art on Indian postage stamps, revealing an unexpected complexity introduced by contact among two societies with very different public sexual values. Finally, both culture and practice have reflected some of the larger forces in world history. Global trade patterns, in our own day, help explain a new incidence of sex trafficking in several parts of the world. Diffusion of agriculture, much earlier in time, had dramatic impact on sexuality. Sex, not surprisingly given its importance, has been a vital part of the panorama of world history, and helps translate world history patterns into an understanding of ordinary human behavior and daily life.

The history of sexuality begins with the fact that, as many sociobiologists and anthropologists have noted, the human animal has some distinctive characteristics. Sex is, after all, a matter of animal behavior, though with human beings more is involved. Compared to many mammalian species humans have an unusual number of erogenous zones on their bodies, which obviously can encourage sexual stimulation. Although women of the species are fertile only a few days each month, their fertile periods are more frequent than those of many other mammals and they can be stimulated sexually even at non-fertile times, or after fertility has ended with menopause; their sexual activity is thus less dependent on a few annual points at which they are “in heat” than is true of many other animals. There’s another interesting distinction from most mammalian species (except for some chimpanzees): humans gain capacity for and interest in sexual activity before most young women are regularly ovulating, which means that they can indulge in sex for a few years with less likelihood (NOT, be advised, no likelihood) of pregnancy resulting. Human children display certain kinds of sexual awareness, at least of their own bodies.

These simple but basic points mean that human sexual activity can be, and often is, rather frequent and may be less fully tied to reproductive effort than is true for many other species. The point about a partial gap between appetite and reproductive capacity almost builds in some possible experimentalism for adolescents and certainly some big societal issues about regulating these experimental impulses in turn. Indeed the whole human biological apparatus, where sex is concerned, quite literally inevitably imposes some needs for sexual regulation on the species, to make sure that sexual activity does not get out of control or become too disruptive either of individual lives or of social relationships. This is particularly true because humans have the capacity for more reproduction than most families or societies usually want. If a couple tries to maximize their reproductive behavior, having sex as early in life as fertility develops and continuing until it ends (for women,

with menopause), they will have on average about fourteen children. This is called the Hutterite formula, named for a religious sect in Canada that for several decades practiced this kind of unrestrained reproductive effort. And through history there have always been some couples who had family sizes at this level. But in most historical periods the Hutterite formula generates more children than can easily be raised or supported, so most societies develop some customs designed to encourage somewhat less reproduction, which in turn means either less sexual activity or some controls on sexual activity. Here too, the human sexual capacity quickly generates the need for social response. The precise nature of the response can, obviously, vary from one society to the next, and it can alter. This is part of the history of sexuality. But a tension between biological capacity and social needs is something of a constant, even though its specific manifestations change greatly over time.

Sociobiologists would add some other basics about human sexuality. They note that, like other animals, there are significant gender differences. Some have contended that males, constantly producing new sperm during their fertile years, are “naturally” bent on having as much sex with as many different partners as possible, to spread their genetic heritage; females, on the other hand, with a finite supply of eggs, and the burden of actually carrying children before birth, find it important to limit their partners and work toward assuring stability for the offspring they have. There is, according to this argument, a built-in gender distinction that will also play out in social arrangements, with men more eager, women more reticent. This may also help explain, though not excuse, some of the deployment of sexuality for male gender dominance, as in abuses of women during wartime. Historians would urge that this biological gender imperative not be overdone, because individuals and cultures can introduce a number of variants on any basic pattern; but it is worth keeping in mind. Men’s fertility usually lasts longer than that of women, which introduces some interesting issues for sexuality in later age. The overall point is clear: biology introduces important complexities into human sexuality, which in turn assures that the history of sexual attitudes and behaviors will be complex.

A few other biological issues should be noted. Some authorities argue that about 10% of the population is “naturally” homosexual. This is of course disputed by others who find homosexuality a matter of sin or psychological aberration. A few people are born with unclear gender sexuality traits, which means that many societies face an issue of what to do in such circumstances, how to define and manage what is currently called intersex or transgender. Here too, a standard phenomenon, in biological terms, calls for a whole variety of cultural responses, from one place and from one time to the next. Transgender issues, so important in the contemporary United States around debates over questions like bathroom designations, in fact have a rich and possibly revealing history. Biology obviously dictates the fact that interbreeding among close relatives produces a higher rate of genetically defective children than is otherwise the case, and presumably early societies

registered on these results; this explains the many efforts to prohibit sexual contacts among siblings and other primary kin. Again, biology intersects with human sexual history in many important ways.

The history of sexuality is not just about connections with biology, however. A great deal of scholarship in the past two decades, often inspired by feminism or gay rights advocacy, has looked at sex less in terms of behaviors and more in terms of power relationships and cultural construction—the force of social beliefs in defining sexuality in ways that benefit certain groups (upper classes; males)—while marginalizing others. Historians have become increasingly adept at questioning the social framework for sexual rules and taboos, as well as outright policies that bear on sexual behaviors, with some particular attention to uses of sexuality in defining larger relationships between genders.

Human sexuality has been changing a great deal in recent decades. New levels of population pressure—global populations tripled in the 20th century, an unprecedented rate of increase—force new personal and social decisions about reproductive sex. New devices, like the pill, facilitate a growing separation between sex and reproduction, creating greater opportunities for recreational sex than ever before. Novel types of media, like movies and television, create opportunities for the visual portrayal of sexual stimuli never before experienced. Growing contacts among societies, thanks to global communication and commerce, inevitably create tensions as different sexual standards collide. New human rights ideas create debates over the treatment of certain kinds of sexual minorities, and while these debates are particularly vigorous in some societies, they can have some global resonance. Changing work and coeducational schooling patterns, with more and more women studying and working outside the home thanks to global industrialization and urbanization, create opportunities for sexually-relevant interactions but also for concerns about appropriate regulation of behavior—the novel modern concept of sexual harassment is one important response. And amid these and other fundamental changes, many societies and individuals react with indignation, seeking to defend against undue innovation in one of the most intimate but potentially sacrosanct areas of human life. One of the reasons that the history of sexuality gains significance involves the opportunity to analyze current patterns of change and reactions to change—using recent history better to understand our contemporary global selves.

One central tension is obvious, and while it is not brand new it is clearly taking on new relevance in the contemporary world. On the one hand, opportunities and possibly interests in sexual pleasure, including sexual diversity, have almost certainly been growing in recent decades, or at the very least public discussion has become more open. On the other hand, however—possibly in part as a result of this first trend—a list of sexual problems has been growing as well, including “date rape” and sexual abuse in many

current settings, bitter and often truly nasty quarrels about homosexuality within and among global societies, or the explosion of available pornography.

But the history of sexuality is not just a modern topic, and older patterns are interesting in themselves as well as providing vital backdrops to more contemporary concerns. Different regional reactions to common contemporary trends, for example, relate directly to sexual values systems developed often many centuries ago. At least a portion of the current problems list gains greater clarity from exploration of earlier patterns as well as recent trends. Historians indeed have debated how much change in sexuality results from “modern” conditions, how much continuity persists from earlier patterns and regional cultures—and addressing this topic requires attention to the earlier side of the equation, and not just recent adjustments.

This book begins with a brief discussion of some of the anthropological findings about sexuality, often in less complex societies. This provides some insights into sexual variety and the role of cultural norms, which can feed into historical inquiry directly. It also offers an introduction into some of the theoretical issues that play such a great role in relevant scholarship, for example from the standpoint of feminist theory. Inevitably this exercise involves some discussion of whether, in the past, some societies managed to express sexuality more successfully, with fewer personal and social hang-ups, than more complex societies would achieve. The thorny question of whether greater complexity, in more elaborate civilizations, additionally complicates sexuality is impossible to avoid.

We then turn, in Chapter 3, to the sexual implications of the transition from hunting and gathering economies to agricultural economies—a transition that had obvious impacts on behaviors and which, even more dramatically, encouraged development of new cultural norms. There is no question that agriculture changed the framework for sexual behavior considerably, in this first great transformation in the human economy. Gender differentiation increased, and sexual standards both reflected and promoted this complex process. Other anxieties associated with sexuality may have extended as well.

As agricultural societies matured, they developed various standards for sexuality, brought out by comparisons among the classical societies detailed in Chapter 4. Gender norms and approaches to homosexuality were among the key variables, but within agricultural civilizations differences of social class must also be considered.

The spread of the world religions introduced still further change, particularly during the postclassical period between about 500 and 1450 CE. Explaining the causes and impacts of change, and updating comparative findings, bring the history of sexuality closer to modern times. This postclassical period also saw an unprecedented surge of extensive travel, and many accounts dealt with sexual issues.

Between 1500 and 1750, the big story is the development of new contacts and migration patterns (including the forced migration of the Atlantic slave trade), and the results on sexual behaviors. Criticisms of the sexual practices

of various societies become clearer amid accelerating interaction, and these could have significant results.

Beginning definitively in the 18th century, initially particularly in the Western world, forces of urbanization, early industrialization, and rising consumerism had important results in changing both sexual behaviors and sexual attitudes. Historians begin to talk about “sexual revolutions,” with the later 18th century marking a crucial first step. At the same time, growing Western influence and outright imperialism saw new efforts to impose sexual standards on other societies, sometimes with unintended consequences. The period 1750–1950 was a complicated one, in the global history of sexuality—evidenced among other things by frequent gaps between professed standards and actual behaviors. Two chapters cover, first, the complex transformations brought about by industrialization—in the West, but also Japan and Russia; and second, global patterns and reactions, often associated with imperialism.

The final section, dealing with the past several decades, focuses on the interaction between new global pressures affecting sexuality, building on the increasingly intricate contacts among different parts of the world, and regional reactions ranging from revolutionary innovation to traditionalist resistance to change. Global trends include the influence of new media, such as the movie industry; the spread of birth control devices and practices; and the ongoing acceleration of urban and industrial growth. They also include new scientific claims and findings, affecting for example the definition of homosexuality. Feminism also developed some global outreach, and while feminism expressed complicated thoughts about sexuality it could shape new attitudes to issues like rape, female circumcision, or prostitution, or legitimate new expectations among women themselves. More recently still, gay rights movements strive for global response. Global trends did not, however, create a single global model for sexual culture or sexual practice. Key societies responded to regional forces, like the surge of communist revolutions that gripped several nations, or the impact of wars and civil strife, while religious leaders attempted to reassert their role in guiding sexual propriety. Comparison remains essential, as global factors encounter varied mixtures of accommodation, resistance, and enthusiastic embrace. Arguments about sexuality, within and among global societies, constitute a significant global reality in the early 21st century. Two chapters here, the first on overall sexual trends over the past century, the second focused more directly on sexual conflicts and problems, seek to sort out the major contemporary patterns and their relationship to earlier frameworks.

Beyond the sequence of periods suggested in the major chapters, this book also intends to further a debate about *patterns* of change. As noted, Chapter 3 will discuss the wide implications of the agricultural economy for sexuality: agriculture did not generate uniformity in sexual practices and ideas, but it did introduce new constraints. The end of the Agricultural Age—the focus of the last four chapters—clearly modifies the characteristic

constraints, while also introducing a great deal of confusion and dispute about appropriate values. Is there, beyond the confusion, an outline of a modern or industrial pattern of sexuality, that is—again amid considerable tension—replacing the agricultural model? Our discussion will suggest a probable pattern, and the advantages and disadvantages it involves, but tentatively: change is sufficiently recent, and challenged, that it is surprisingly difficult to be sure.

The overarching point, and the key reason to study the history of sexuality, involves the connections between current sexual behaviors, values, and often bitter debates, and interactions and legacies from earlier periods. Older traditions, launched for example by major religions, continue to shape reactions. During the past two centuries, furthermore, virtually all societies have been confronted with huge alterations in the factors affecting sexuality—including birth control and media representations—and are still trying to adjust. Not surprisingly, the process generates deep-seated divisions and controversies, within and among societies, on issues ranging from premarital sex to homosexuality to how many body parts should be easily visible on television or beaches. The subject is a vital one to human life; and it colors contacts among societies as well, making sexuality one of the flash points in contemporary global discourse. And all of this is best understood through the discipline that combines the study of change with comparisons among different societies—that is, through history. The history of sex is arguably interesting in itself, and it is truly inescapable as it sheds light on a complex and contested set of changes that directly connects present to past.

Further Reading

Recent publications include Raewyn W. Connell and Rebecca Pearse, *Gender in World Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); Oliver Janz and Daniel Schonpflug, eds., *Gender History in a Transnational Perspective: Networks, Biographies, Gender Orders* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014); Jeffrey Weeks, *What Is Sexual History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Kim Phillips and Barry Reay, *Sex before Sexuality: A Pre-modern History* (London: Polity Press, 2011).

James W. Howell, William E. Burns, Victoria L. Mondelli and Cherrie A. Gottsleben, eds., *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Love, Courtship, and Sexuality*, 6v. (Greenwood, CT: Greenwood, 2008), is a valuable reference work, though frustratingly selective from a global standpoint. Also useful for consultation: the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, published by the University of Texas Press. See also: Lisa Duggan, “From Instincts to Politics: Writing the History of Sexuality in the U.S.,” *Journal of Sex Research* 27 (1990): 95–109 and Katherine Crawford, “Privilege, Possibility, and Perversion: Rethinking the Study of Early Modern Sexuality,” *Journal of Modern History* 78(2) (2006): 412–33.

A vital work in the field is Michel Foucault and his *History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), which encouraged new kinds of theoretical explorations and minimized an earlier tendency to rely on dubious distinctions between the normal and the abnormal.



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Part I

Preface

Sexuality before Modern Times

Sexuality, not surprisingly, was a vital part of human life and society from the long hunting and gathering phases of human existence to the rise of agriculture and the centuries-long agricultural period of history. The special characteristics of particular civilizations show clearly in distinctive approaches to sexual standards, representations, and (to a degree) behaviors. The advent of major religions had a definite impact on sexuality, in some cases providing new justifications and norms for patterns that had already been established, in other instances introducing considerable change—for example, in approaches to homosexuality.

There is no such thing as “traditional” sex, to be contrasted with modern sex—though we will later discuss the possibility that there are nevertheless some “modern” patterns. Too much change occurred before modern times; too much variety existed to permit any simple generalization. The great transformations in sexuality, and the reasons for these transformations, that resulted from the rise of agriculture and then (though to a lesser degree) the impact of new religions form a key theme in the chapters that follow—and here we will in fact emphasize some broadly common features. Chapter 3 deals directly with the shift from a hunting and gathering to an agricultural economy, and how sexuality changed, at least to a significant extent, in response. And then Chapter 5 focuses directly on the major world religions, and how new ideas about divine precepts and new spiritual goals might affect sexuality still further.

Differentiation is vital as well, however, along with patterns of change. Both early societies and classical civilizations varied widely in what they believed about sex, how they regarded female sexuality, and how—and how frankly—they represented sex in art. Comparing major differences, both within and among major world societies, while also tracing the common results of agriculture and the most widespread religions offers a challenging but intriguing agenda—along with allowing for some basic biological and psychological constants in a species whose fundamental characteristics were set by the time *homo sapiens sapiens* emerged by or before around 120,000 BCE.

Change, diversity, commonalities—all these complex patterns can be identified even in an overview of major sexual developments in the long pre-modern phases of the human experience. An underlying question cannot be avoided as well: did human sex display greater freedom and openness in early societies, only to encounter greater constraint and repression as economies became more complicated, formal governments emerged, and more systematic religions took hold? The answer, frankly, is not clear-cut, and the question merits serious discussion. Some early attempts to generalize about a contrast between carefree indulgence and later deterioration have been widely criticized, and it may be that a more accurate picture flows from a realization that different societies, over time, identified different kinds of problems, to which sexuality had to be adjusted. Certainly, as the next chapter suggests, the range of anthropological findings and debates remains impressive, and helps set the stage for a more focused historical inquiry.

2 Anthropological Findings

A Sampling

Anthropologists, exploring a variety of societies in the contemporary world, have been particularly creative in uncovering the range of human sexual practices. Much of their work has focused on relatively uncomplicated societies—for example, often lacking a formal state; sometimes centered on a hunting/fishing and gathering economy rather than agriculture, though inquiries have ranged beyond this. Anthropological data on sexuality accumulate from direct observation, usually involving extended visits in the society under examination. Issues inevitably arise from the observer status—are culturally unfamiliar attitudes and behaviors being interpreted correctly? And anthropologists are typically reluctant to generalize, creating a host of individual case studies rather than sweeping comments on the nature of human sexuality. Further, it is not always clear *why* particular societies have chosen the path they follow: basic causation is not usually part of the anthropologists' agenda. But their accumulated findings are compelling nevertheless: human beings have devised a surprising variety of approaches to sexuality. These conclusions inevitably and properly affect historical analysis even though, as we will see, relationships between the two disciplinary approaches are complicated. What follows is intended to suggest some key examples of anthropological analysis, not a complete survey of what is by now an extensive field.

Margaret Mead: A Revealing Debate

In 1928 a pioneering American anthropologist, Margaret Mead, published her book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, to what turned out to be a substantial public as well as scholarly audience—at least a wider public picked up on elements of her dramatic argument, even if they did not always read the book directly. The focus was on adolescents in Samoa and other South Pacific societies, and how their behaviors contrasted strikingly with what Mead saw as prohibitively restrictive sexual practices back home, as she drew out moral implications for the contemporary United States.

Mead saw Samoa as a clear illustration of the primacy of culture in determining sexual behavior, as she emphasized the indulgence with which young

people were treated in this seemingly exotic society. She also saw Samoa as a clear refutation of any idea that men and women had different sexual needs or potentials for pleasure. Biology paled, she argued, before the power of social norms—and it was a different kind of culture that was doing America wrong. In the South Seas, anxiety resulting from sexual constraint was kept to a minimum because of widely permitted promiscuity for young men and women, and the absence of any particular value assigned to virginity or abstinence before marriage. Samoan girls, in obvious contrast to their American counterparts, could freely seek sexual pleasure and express themselves openly, in ways that were mentally healthy and prepared a well-adjusted adulthood that would not be confined by rigid family or gender roles and rules.

The picture was charming, and it surely stimulated some useful thinking about contemporary American habits at a time, as we will see in Chapter 7, when new debates were opening up about 19th-century Victorian constraints. But Mead's picture also drew challenge, not only from those who thought that adolescents, and particularly adolescent girls, should be discouraged from sex, but from other scholars who doubted her claims that societies could differ so profoundly over matters of sex and gender. In the 1980s, after Mead's death, a variety of critics, headed by Derek Freeman, took aim at her conclusions and methods. Freeman claimed that Mead had actually not studied the girls she generalized about very precisely, and that some of them had in fact deliberately lied to her because they so enjoyed her fascination with their tales of sexual license. Freeman and others claimed that later research on Samoa showed a high valuation of sexual fidelity, with far less promiscuity than Mead had claimed. Critics also worried about Mead's interest in using norms from one culture to launch moral coaching of another, very different society.

But Freeman and his colleagues did not have the last word. After a flurry of discussion another generation of anthropologists turned to a review of the data and additional Samoan research. They did find fault with some of Mead's particular methods, but on the whole they confirmed her conclusions about the distinctiveness of the Samoan approach—at least, when compared to the contemporary West. Further they noted that since the time of Mead's studies, many Samoans had more fully converted to Christianity, which indeed introduced new constraints on adolescent sex—an interesting development in itself—but which should not be taken to represent earlier traditions. (Even Freeman had noted that a large minority of contemporary Samoan female adolescents continued to engage in premarital sex, and to brag about it privately—up to 20% as early as fifteen years of age.) Freeman's overall argument in the process was increasingly dismissed as not only inaccurate, but irresponsible and vengeful. In a more definitive study, by Paul Shankman in 2009, himself an expert on Samoa, Mead's findings have in the main been confirmed.

Admittedly, debate continues on the edges, particularly around the extent to which Mead had been hoaxed a bit in a culture that greatly enjoys playing