



## The Sexual Revolution, 1960-1980

by Jeffrey Escoffier

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Gordon Rattray Taylor's sweeping generalization that "the history of civilization is the history of a long warfare between the dangerous and powerful forces of the id, and the various systems of taboos and inhibitions . . . erected to control them" goes so far as to be almost meaningless. Fluctuations in the regulation of sexual activity have taken place in many different historical periods and cultures. Usually such changes are local and limited to one aspect of sexual life. Given this context, the dramatic changes in American sexual behavior, mores, and attitudes that took place during the 1960s and 1970s are noteworthy indeed.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was recognized by the mass media almost immediately. Some early commentators believed that it was in fact the second sexual revolution, the first one having taken place in the period after World War I and culminating in the wild drinking and sexual pranks of the lost generation, which included such writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edna Saint Vincent Millay, and Ernest Hemingway, in the roaring twenties.

Nevertheless, the sexual revolution that took place in the latter half of the twentieth century was deeper, more sweeping, and longer lasting.

### **The Increased Numbers of Sexual Partners**

Central to the sexual revolution was the growing acceptance of sexual encounters between unmarried adults. Throughout this period young men and women engaged in their first acts of sexual intercourse at increasingly younger ages. The impact of earlier sexual experimentation was reinforced by the later age of marriage; thus, young men and women had more time available to acquire sexual experience with partners before entering upon a long-term monogamous relationship. In addition, the growing number of marriages resulting in divorce--and the consequent lessening of the stigma attached to divorce--provided another opportunity for men and women (to a lesser degree) to engage in non-monogamous sexual activity.

All three of these developments allowed the generation born between 1935 and 1945 to experience sexual activity with a larger number of sexual partners in their lifetimes than most men and women born earlier.

### **Shifts in Mores and Attitudes**

However, the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was even more marked by profound shifts in the mores and attitudes towards women's sexuality, homosexuality, and freedom of sexual expression. It was the culmination of three essential developments: the intellectual contribution of radical Freudian theorist Wilhelm Reich and the empirical sex research of Alfred Kinsey; the battles of pornographers, performers, and literary writers to secure the right of sexual speech; and the permissive context created by the social movements of the period, especially the counterculture movement, the women's movement, and the gay and lesbian liberation movement.



In her influential book *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), Helen Gurley Brown (above, in 1964) argued that women have as much right to non-marital sexual pleasure as men. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The changes in sexual behavior, mores and public attitudes that surfaced in the two decades after 1960 had their origins, like so much else during the 1960s, in key developments during the late 1940s and the 1950s. At the time, most thinking about sexual behavior, sex roles, and psychological development was influenced by the Freudian intellectual tradition. That intellectual lineage had sought to map the relations between biological energies (libido) and capacities (oral, anal, and genital sexualities) and the social forms established to regulate them, primarily monogamous heterosexual marriage.

The Freudian tradition focused on repression and sublimation to control unruly libidinal energies, transforming sexual energies into cultural energies. In some of his early work, Freud saw the costs of sexual repression, but he also believed that the libidinal energies were powerful and disruptive forces. Toward the end of his life, he came to believe that sexual repression and sublimation were necessary to the survival of modern society.

### **Wilhelm Reich and Alfred Kinsey**

Wilhelm Reich, one of Freud's most brilliant protégés, drew a more radical conclusion. He argued that sexual expression (primarily, the orgasm) was natural and that social control of libidinal energies by the family, institutionalized sexual morality, and the state was destructive. Reich believed that sexual repression profoundly distorted psychological development and led to authoritarian behavior (such as fascism).

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of Wilhelm Reich's thinking about sexuality on intellectuals and more indirectly on the general culture. The sexual revolution of the 1960s was initiated by people who shared many of Reich's beliefs (whether or not they got them from him directly) about the detrimental impact of sexual repression. Many of the first people on the barricades of the sexual revolution were inspired by Reich.

Reich's perspective on the social significance of repression was reinforced by Alfred Kinsey's empirical research. Kinsey's research showed the widespread ignorance and shame about sex promulgated by conservative sexual morality and religious beliefs. But his research also revealed patterns of sexual behavior theretofore unsuspected. Most importantly, it documented how Americans' sexual behavior deviated from their widely accepted norms.

His findings on homosexuality were among his most controversial and widely publicized. He found that homosexuality was much more common than anyone realized. By Kinsey's estimate, 37 percent of the male population of the United States had had at least one homosexual experience to orgasm between adolescence and old age. Kinsey's report on female sexuality also revealed evidence that showed that women were much more interested in sex that went beyond reproduction than most sociologists and psychologists had expected. The report dispelled a number of other myths about women and sex, among them that women had difficulty achieving orgasm.

The laboratory research of William Masters and Virginia Johnson reinforced Kinsey's findings on female sexuality. Their books devoted more space to discussing female sexuality (in part, because it had been much less studied) than male sexuality and debunked numerous misconceptions founded on the idea that female sexuality was strictly analogous with or a reflection of male sexuality. They characterized male sexuality as one-dimensional because of the cycle of arousal, orgasm, and de-tumescence, whereas women were capable of sustaining a prolonged plateau of orgasmic experiences.

### **Battles over Obscenity and Pornography**

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s would never have taken place without a series of extended battles over obscenity and pornography. Those battles cannot be separated from the political and legal

battles for free speech and the First Amendment, but they also reflected vigorous economic competition. The publishing of pornography and sexually explicit literature was and perhaps has always been a profitable business; and in the United States it has at times involved organized crime.

Whatever the motivation of the pornographers, these battles helped to create a public space in American culture for sexual speech, a space where it was permissible not only to discuss patterns of sexual behavior but also to portray sexuality honestly and bluntly in fiction, on the stage, and in movies.

Pornographic representations of sexuality ranged from profound explorations of desire to highly stereotyped permutations of sexual positions. The sexual explicitness of pornography ranged from soft-core images of attractive models posing or running in the woods to gritty depictions of kinky sex acts in an alleyway. Pornography can reinforce the crudest stereotypes of sex roles, standards of beauty, or power dynamics, or it can contribute to the education of desire. It is a fantasy machine and a form of discourse about sex--and it can be both of these things at the same time.

The legal battles that took place in the 1960s and 1970s changed the meaning of obscenity. Supreme Court Justice Brennan's four part definition of obscenity (in *Roth v. United States of America*, in 1956) profoundly shaped the legal battle over pornography: "[1] Whether to the average person, [2] applying contemporary community standards, [3] the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole [4] appeals to prurient interests."

While Brennan declared "obscenity as utterly without socially redeeming importance," and ruled that it was not protected by the freedoms of speech and press, he also created an opening for the freedom of sexual speech when he noted that "sex and obscenity were not synonymous . . . . obscene material having a tendency to excite lustful thoughts," and that "All ideas, even ideas hateful to prevailing climate of opinion, have the full protection" of the First Amendment. The battle over obscenity and pornography created a public arena in which it became possible to discuss sex and to represent it both literarily and visually, and without which the sexual revolution is difficult to imagine.

### **Social Protest and Unrest**

The intellectual developments that originated with Reich, Kinsey, and Masters and Johnson and the political battles over obscenity and the First Amendment found fertile ground in the waves of social unrest and protest that washed across the country in the 1960s and 1970s. Especially important in this regard were the counterculture movement, the women's movement, and the gay and lesbian movement.

The cultural atmosphere of the 1960s, particularly what was referred to as "the counterculture"--associated with the rise of rock music, the increased use of marijuana, LSD, and other drugs among youth, widespread public displays of nudity, and a new openness about sexuality--contributed to the awareness of radical cultural change that was the social matrix of the sexual revolution.

The women's movement and changes in the understanding of female sexuality also played a central role in the sexual revolution. The women's movement grew out of several distinct sources. Since the end of World War II, married women had entered the labor force in dramatically growing numbers; and the inequities of the workplace--lower wages, limited upward mobility on the job, and the dual burden of job and domestic responsibilities--underscored for many women their relative lack of income and power.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was a response to this development. And the National Organization for Women (NOW) was a political development of this mainstream feminist perspective. Even before the appearance of Friedan's book, the growing economic independence of women had begun to encourage sexual independence as well. Helen Gurley Brown, pursuing a career in advertising, wrote *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), which took direct aim at the sexual double standard that required women to remain virgins before marriage while permitting men to engage in sex. A chatty advice book, *Sex and the*

*Single Girl* was an unlikely manifesto of sexual adventure for the unmarried woman.

The changing social environment presented more and more sexual opportunities. What were in earlier decades temptations soon became everyday possibilities. The institution of marriage was in a mounting crisis. By 1960 approximately half of all marriages could be expected to end in divorce. The growing influence of the idea of sex for pleasure rather than exclusively for procreation, and the availability of an easy and efficient means of birth control with the Pill, reduced the appeal of monogamous marriage as an institution with a monopoly on sex.

The attack on the double standard--by which it was acceptable for men to have sexual relationships either before or during marriage, but stigmatized women who did--freed women to engage in a greater range of sexual activities. In this context, there were few guidelines to help women and men negotiate their sexual relationships.

Many women viewed marriage as the stronghold of male domination. Such a perspective was supported by various economic factors: the income inequalities that favored men over women, the limited employment opportunities for women, and other institutionalized benefits. Nevertheless, both men and women in their struggles with one another sought to reshape marriage, to explore new sexual territories, and even to create new institutions that allowed for new ways of relating to one another; open marriage, mate swapping, swinging, and communal sex allowed men and women to forge new kinds of sex lives.

### **The Homosexual Civil Rights Movement**

By the late 1960s, there were already many signs that homosexuals were in the process of creating a civil rights movement, inspired, in part, by the African-American struggles of the 1960s, but the Stonewall Riots of 1969 crystallized a broad grass-roots mobilization across the country. The movement that emerged after Stonewall resulted from the underground homosexual subculture of the 1950s and 1960s and the radical politics and counterculture of 1960s youth.

The homosexual culture of the 1950s and early 1960s reflected its bitter consciousness of the oppressive stigma against homosexuality in its flamboyant, irony-charged camp humor, but it was not political. Gay culture in the 1950s was invested in protecting the "secret" of an individual's homosexuality and expressing it only in a symbolic or heavily coded way. Cultural resistance to the heterosexual norm was expressed through cross-gender performances and sex role-playing.

The new gay liberationists, however, had little appreciation of the traditional gay and lesbian life of the 1950s and the 1960s. Instead of protecting "secrecy" as the right to privacy, gay liberationists gave political meaning to "coming out" by extending the psychological-personal process into public life.

To "come out of the closet" was to do the very thing most feared in the gay and lesbian culture of the 1950s. By placing "coming out" at the center of its political strategy, the gay liberation movement tended to mobilize those people who felt more emotionally committed to living a full-time life as homosexuals rather than those who experienced homosexual desire only sporadically or who experienced desire for both men and women.

The 1970s were considered, according to gay novelist Brad Gooch, the "Golden Age of Promiscuity." The gay male community had developed a rich culture of "easy sex," sex without commitment, obligation, or a long-term relationship. Many gay men did not regard impersonal sex as qualitatively better than personal sex, but rather as a more expedient means to have sex. Some gay men pursued it as an end in itself--for the adventure and variety of sexual experience--rather than as a substitute for personal sex. They rejected conceptions of impersonal relationships as superficial, tawdry, depressing, or pathological, and instead saw them as fun, enjoyable, and exciting.

The new freedom of the sexual revolution allowed gay men to create opportunities for easy sex in bathhouses and sex clubs. These venues provided safe spaces without fear of outsiders intruding or arrest, an ample supply of sexual partners, a physically comfortable space, and a socially structured environment that focused the interactions between participants.

In *The Homosexualization of America, The Americanization of Homosexuality* (1982), gay social critic Dennis Altman has argued that gay men and lesbians had their greatest impact on society's concepts of sexuality and relationships. "The growing preoccupation of society as a whole with sex," Altman wrote, "the collapse of old beliefs and standards, means that the very outlaw status of the homosexual makes him or her a model of new possibilities that have meaning for others." The Western idea of marriage, he suggested, "is disappearing as a universal norm . . . . The search to reconcile unlimited sexual freedom and the emotional security of committed relationships is no longer a peculiarly homosexual problem."

### **The Impact on Community Life and Social Institutions**

A revolution in sexual behavior and mores is bound to have impact on many social institutions and other aspects of community life, of which courtship, marriage, parenting, cohabitation, and divorce are only the most obvious. The sexual revolution inspired many experiments in daily living such as open marriage, mate swapping, and *ménage à trois*.

But it also inspired larger scale experiments such as communal living, the planning of orgies, and the establishment of commercial sex clubs for both heterosexuals and homosexuals. The sexual revolution also opened up new sexual possibilities and gender roles for individuals, including bisexuality, homosexuality, S/M (somasochism), and transsexuality. Communities emerged around these new sexualities and gender possibilities.

### **The Shift in How We Think about Sexuality**

The sexual revolution of the late twentieth century produced a profound shift in the way we think about sexuality, how we conceive of sexual repression, and also how we regard the effect of social factors. On one level, the development of ideas proceeded from the tremendous strides in sex research--the Kinsey Reports, the studies by Masters and Johnson, and the technological advances in birth control.

But on another level, the ideas grew out the everyday lives of the men and women who had sex, who rejected codes of behavior that their parents had upheld, who resisted the etiquette that governed polite language, who discovered ways to express their sexual fantasies in magazines, books, photography, and film, and who found ways to exploit sexual imagery to sell commodities.

However, as the sexual revolution increasingly succeeded, it also increasingly undermined the credibility of Reich's narrow focus on repression and its naïve faith in the "naturalness" and the "goodness" of liberated sexuality. It soon became evident that changes in sexual behavior and mores were shaped by social actions and social movements.

Two American sociologists at the Kinsey Institute, John Gagnon and William Simon proposed a view of sex as profoundly social. They discussed sex by using the metaphor of a script to link everyday patterns of social interaction to larger cultural symbols and frameworks. They saw sexual conduct as a scripted activity that incorporates lines, cues, roles, cultural myths, and symbols to guide and shape sexual interactions.

French theorist and historian Michel Foucault explored the cultural and historical implications of the social constructionist theory (as it later came to be called) of sexuality. In his book, *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault launched an attack on what he called "the repressive hypothesis." The main point was that sexual conduct was not shaped only by repressive mechanisms, as Freud, Reich, and others had argued, but also by a process of discourse, culture, and social interaction. Sexuality was not an "essential"

characteristic of human nature or gender, but a thoroughly social-historical construction. Like Gagnon and Simon, Foucault argued that the self is socially constructed, and that sexuality is shaped through the bodily coordination and symbolic interaction of social subjects.

Thus, the revolution that had begun under the sway of Wilhelm Reich and his ideas about sexual repression had through its very success shown the limitations of his way of thinking about sexuality, the function of orgasm, and sexual repression. The sexual revolution was a success because sexuality was amenable to the actions of both social groups and of individuals in social contexts. The sexual revolution had wrought its enormous changes because of the social and discursive processes identified by Gagnon, Simon, and Foucault. Thus, as the sexual revolution changed sexual conduct and mores, it also opened up a new way of thinking about sex.

### **The Counter-Revolution and Safer Sex**

In time, the sexual revolution provoked a profound and powerful counter-revolution led by the religious right, one of whose fundamental goals is to turn back the sexual revolution. The counter-revolution spawned new organizations, elected political representatives, passed legislation, fought to de-fund sexually progressive programs and to fund sexually conservative programs. Battles between sexual progressives and religious conservatives continue to take place. What many commentators have called "the culture wars" are, in part, a counter-attack on the sexual revolution.

The sexual revolution also encountered obstacles of another sort: sexually transmitted diseases (STD). The diseases spread by sex are numerous and ancient: gonorrhea, syphilis, genital warts, genital herpes, hepatitis B. Starting in the late 1970s, there were a growing number of reports about STD. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* produced cover stories on herpes.

The gay male communities in particular were swept by waves of gonorrhea, syphilis, and Hepatitis B. The discovery of an AIDS epidemic among gay men in the early 1980s provoked a major crisis in the gay community and its sexual politics. Medical researchers and gay leaders struggled to find ways of stopping the epidemic without completely excluding all sexual activity.

Eventually a number of gay activists invented "safer sex." Practicing safer sex, gay men could engage in sex, using condoms, without transmitting the virus (HIV) that causes AIDS. Soon, safer sex was adopted by public health educators and AIDS activists as the basis for HIV prevention. Safer sex and traditional public health treatment programs for the older STDs have since reduced the spread of these diseases considerably.

### **Conclusion**

The sexual revolution was not merely a revolution in sexual behavior per se--measured by sociologists as an increase in the lifetime number of sexual partners--but also a cultural revolution that was intertwined with many other significant social changes. Women's sexuality was redefined, and new stress was laid on clitoral orgasm and sexual satisfaction. A culture of sexual experimentation (swinging, S/M clubs, singles bars) emerged that contributed to the evolution of new sexual norms.

The women's movement, the counterculture, the development of new lifestyles, lesbian and gay liberation, a greater acceptance of pleasure, and all kinds of improvements in the quality of life overlap with the sexual revolution. Many cultural and political changes resulting from the sexual revolution are still working themselves out. However, there is no doubt that the sexual revolution of post-World War II America has changed sexual and gender roles permanently.

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### **About the Author**

**Jeffrey Escoffier** writes on glbtq history, politics, culture, sexuality, music, and dance. One of the founders of *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, he has published widely. Among his books are *American Homo: Community and Perversity* and a biography of John Maynard Keynes in the Chelsea House series on the Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians. He co-edited (with Matthew Lore) Mark Morris' *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato: A Celebration*. His most recent book is *Sexual Revolution*, an anthology of writing on sex from the 1960s and 1970s. He is currently working on a book on sexual politics and writing about the production of pornography.