THREE FUNDAMENTAL impulses have nourished the field of the history of sexuality in modern Europe over the last thirty years. The original and most powerful of these was, in a sense, **archaeological**: the effort to excavate the material and imaginative universe of a past moment and reconstruct how human beings in a particular time and location experienced and made sense of sexual matters. The second major impulse, which began to gather force in the mid-1990s even as the archaeological impulse continued apace, could perhaps best be called **integrationist** (in the most positive sense of that word). This impulse took as axiomatic that there was no major phenomenon in modern European history that could not be more fully and deeply understood if attention to the history of sexuality was brought to bear on the study, from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to industrialization and European imperialism in Africa and Asia, to tsarism and Nazism, to post–World War II “Americanization” and the aftermath of communism. The third impulse has developed even more recently, as the density of information and conceptual insights accumulated over the years by the archaeologists and integrationists is finally making it possible for scholars to pursue projects that are **comparativist**. Having studied an ever wider array of national cultures—from the initial core of British and French and then also German and Swiss history to the histories of Italy, the Soviet Union, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, and Ireland, along with occasional, albeit still tentative, forays into Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Norway, Poland, Hungary, and Romania—historians of sexuality now find it feasible to use cross-cultural comparisons and connections within Europe, including transnational flows of individuals, ideas, and movements, as a tool for challenging facile presumptions about causation and for thinking through more clearly than before the combinations of factors that determine changes in sexual cultures.

The archaeological impulse was unquestionably inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, and it often remained deliberately agnostic about the causes of change. Nonetheless, the archaeologists were all the more profoundly historical for precisely that reason. They began from the idea that one purpose of history was to denaturalize the present, that sexuality itself had a history, and that all prior assumptions about
what sexuality was, how it worked, and how it might be related to other realms of existence could be called into question. And because sexuality—whatever “it” was at various times and in various places thought to be—turned out to be one of those realms where interpretations and experiences, discourses and feelings, fantasies and sensations became inextricable (faith, violence, and work might be three more), it was frequently historians of sexuality who refused to accept a dichotomy between representation and reality. Instead, they pioneered new ways of applying intellectual historical and literary critical methods to what had traditionally been social historical sources, and they analyzed legal frameworks and socioeconomic conditions in tandem with meaning-making processes. Poring over court records, medical texts, and Sunday sermons, as well as demographic statistics, popular magazines, legislative debates, and private correspondence, but also where possible supplementing these with oral history interviews and participant-observer ethnography, historians of sexuality became inventive in juxtaposing different kinds of data and in noticing unexpected silences and repetition compulsions alike. In struggling to understand what people did, what they thought while they were doing it, and how this was shaped by or diverged from social norms, they have generated insights that have relevance far beyond the field of sexuality. After all, not only what is considered appropriate or normal or good (in the eyes of God, or of the neighbors), but also what is considered exciting has varied enormously across time and place.

Among other things, these first historians of sexuality in modern Europe discovered that prostitution was utterly routine in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; that marriage and sexual desire once had very little to do with each other (and that it eventually took a great deal of ideological labor to eroticize marriage); that abortions were once popularly thought to be less immoral than the premeditated use of contraceptives such as pessaries and condoms (and they were most typically sought by married women who already had children); that “spermatorrhea,” what we would now call wet dreams, was once considered an incontrovertibly pathological condition that required vigilant self-monitoring and energetic medical intervention; and that belief in the propriety, or even the existence, of female orgasm, once thought necessary for conception, eroded for political reasons having nothing to do with science—in fact, 150 years before the scientific knowledge about women’s menstrual cycles had advanced to encompass the evidence that female orgasm was immaterial for conception.1

Since the 1980s, the archaeological impulse has been reflected most vividly and effectively in histories of (especially male) same-sex desires and practices. Without a doubt, this remains the most prodigiously productive area in the European history of sexuality, with countless studies qualifying or challenging outright either Foucault’s periodization or the comprehensiveness of the nineteenth-century paradigm shift he identified—from sodomy as a short-term activity that anyone could engage in to homosexuality as a long-term, personality-saturating identity. Nonetheless, the subfield’s central insistence on the historicity of the very categories of homosexual and heterosexual has been incontrovertibly demonstrated, and has been especially important for bringing a queer eye to studies of heterosexual masculinity.


3 An excellent recent example is Sean Brady, Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain, 1861–1913 (Houndmills, 2005). See also the earlier work by Lesley A. Hall, Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900–1950 (Oxford, 1991).
By the 1990s, whole new areas of inquiry had begun to open up. There were excellent studies on adultery, hermaphroditism, sex advice manuals, coitus interruptus, venereal disease, and masturbation; each used the subject under discussion to put forward wider arguments about how gender, desire, danger, and pleasure were interpreted and experienced differently in past times. Lesbianism began to acquire a far richer and more complex history, particularly in France, Switzerland, Germany, and Austria. Contraceptive strategies, especially in working-class culture in the first half of the twentieth century, continued to be a focus of sustained and productive interest. In addition, there were especially compelling studies on abortion practice and law in later time periods.


The Journal of the History of Sexuality was founded in the 1990s. Although global in its reach, it has published many important essays and reviews on European sexuality. And at the millennium’s end, there was the notable phenomenon of the first transnational textbooks. Robert Nye’s Sexuality brought together numerous primary sources and secondary scholarship excerpts for classroom use.\(^8\) Angus McLaren’s Twentieth-Century Sexuality was organized around the concept of recurrent “moral panics” over sex.\(^9\) The first volume of Franz X. Eder, Lesley Hall, and Gert Hekma’s two-volume anthology Sexual Cultures in Europe provided immensely useful assessments of trends in the history of sexuality in individual nations, while the second showcased impressive new work on thematic topics.\(^10\)

But the truly field-transforming events had to do with the move out of the “ghetto” of history of sexuality studies and its systematic integration with wider historical studies. Isabel Hull demonstrated conclusively that anyone wishing to understand the content or fate of the Enlightenment project in Germany had to take seriously how sex-related topics—from masturbation to infanticide—were debated; in so doing, she also gave to heterosexuality a history it had long been lacking.\(^11\) Laura Engelstein entirely reconceptualized the numerous reform projects of the late tsarist era in Russia, at once oriented toward the West and yet with distinctive local emphases; at the same time, she challenged Foucault’s insistent anti-liberalism.\(^12\) Robert Darnton and Lynn Hunt’s work on pornography during and after the French Revolution transformed thinking both about the nature of dissent under the ancien régime and about the French Revolution itself, but also explored the political import that pornography could have.\(^13\) Susan Pedersen’s pathbreaking 1991 essay on clitoridectomy in Kenya in the 1920s and progressive-minded British politicians’ helpless bewilderment over the conflicting demands of racial and gender justice spoke deeply to European and U.S. readers struggling over how best to respond to female genital cutting in their present, but also showed that the histories of African nationalist rebellion and decolonization could not be told without seeing the centrality of sex within them.\(^14\) Books by Luise White, Anne McClintock, and Ann Laura Stoler made it impossible to tell the stories of the colonial projects of Britain, the Netherlands, or France without recognizing not only the sexualization of colonial encounters in the European imaginary and the intricate imbrication of local sexual and economic arrangements, but also the literal pervasiveness of “cross-racial” sexual and familial intimacies of all kinds, ranging from concubinage and prostitution to housework and childcare, as well as, of course, the birth of countless métis children (and the resulting reconfigurations of social hierarchies and intimate relations alike

\(^8\) Robert A. Nye, Sexuality (Oxford, 1999).


\(^11\) Isabel V. Hull, Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

\(^12\) Laura Engelstein, The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994).


in both the metropoles and the colonies). Stoler used a focus on sexual and domestic arrangements to press her larger conceptual point that Europe was as much shaped by its colonial encounters in Africa and Asia as was the case vice versa.

Sex was suddenly everywhere at once. And it was not least the mass rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s and the subsequent international recognition that they were war crimes that gave intellectual and ethical legitimacy to the study of sexual violence in other wars. The 1990s saw the beginnings of a growing body of work both on sexual violence and on consensual cross-national sexual encounters during wartime and postwar military occupations. The first years of the twenty-first


16 See also Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, eds., Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); Ann Laura Stoler, Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule (Berkeley, Calif., 2002).


century also saw sustained efforts to rethink the sexual politics of Nazism (as well as Vichy France, Franco’s Spain, and Mussolini’s Italy) and to inquire into the place of sexual violence in the Holocaust.19

Strikingly, the turn to the early twenty-first century has also seen an efflorescence of studies of early-twentieth-century eugenics. This is undoubtedly due partly to the revival of interest in genetic perfectibility in recent years, but it has also spurred long-delayed public and government recognition in many nations of the grotesque abuses carried out under the rubric of eugenics in the first decades of the twentieth century. Here the emergence of the comparativist impulse has been particularly notable—and also valuable, as scholars working on Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Spain, France, Switzerland, Britain, and Austria as well as Germany have made it clear not only that eugenic approaches could be found in many nations across the ideological spectrum, including among anarchists, socialists, and feminists, but that indeed a eugenic framework constituted the epistemological common sense of the era.20 Increasingly, we are also coming to understand that eugenics itself was seen at the time as a modern solution to traditional problems, and that its antidemocratic, inhumane
aspects can rarely be neatly separated from its self-understanding as oriented toward human progress.\textsuperscript{21} Eugenacists were also among the earliest transnationally aware and transnationally networked activists in the area of what we might call sexuality management; the first international conference was held in London in 1912.\textsuperscript{22}

Yet another promising area of comparative study is sexuality in post-communist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{23} Often these works helpfully refer back to sexual policies, practices, and/or values during the communist era. There are also a growing number of works on sexuality in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{24} Nonetheless, additional close study of communist-era sexualities in Eastern Europe, both locally focused and comparativist, remains an urgent desideratum.\textsuperscript{25} Also noteworthy is the new attention both to east-west and to increasingly global border crossings in the post-communist era. This is especially seen in studies of prostitution, which find Eastern Europeans in Turkey, Russians in Norway, and Nigerians in Italy.\textsuperscript{26}


\textsuperscript{22} S. J. Holme, \textit{A Bibliography of Eugenics} (Berkeley, Calif., 1924), is a 500-plus-page bibliography demonstrating the early internationality of eugenics.


It is a matter of some irony, then, that despite the now-extensive integration of history of sexuality approaches into a wide variety of topical studies, one of the areas that we still understand the least is the long sexual revolution of the second half of the twentieth century—arguably the time period we should know best. And it is not only studies of Eastern Europe that are missing. Post-1945 developments in Western Europe have just since the turn of the millennium started to receive more careful scholarly attention.27

FOR TOO LONG, WRITING ABOUT SEX in the second half of the twentieth century has operated within a paradigm that assumed steady liberalization and the gradual overcoming of obstacles to sexual freedom. Rather than asking how liberalization happened, scholars oscillated between several presumptions: that the sexual revolution was sparked by the growth of a culture of consumerism and the medical-technological invention of the birth control pill in the early 1960s; that it was the logical result of courageous social movement activism on behalf of sexual liberties, legalization of abortion, and gay and lesbian rights; or that its success can be explained by the sheer overwhelming attractiveness of sexual freedom. Liberalization, however, is not a straightforward or unambiguous process. The paradigm needs to be challenged on multiple levels.

Among other things, reliance on the liberalization paradigm and its undergirding assumptions leaves us with few tools for making sense of moments of renewed sexual conservatism. These are frequent and include such transnationally significant phenomena as the emphasis on a return to domesticity and a preoccupation with sexual respectability, especially for women, in the 1950s; or the backlash against the sexual revolution evident by the late 1970s—thus before the appearance of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s; or the way the often incoherent and inadequate interpretations of HIV/AIDS, as much as the disease’s destructive realities, have reconfigured partnerships and sexual practices in the quarter-century since its arrival.28 Historians


28 The complex impacts of HIV/AIDS in Europe have been only unevenly historicized. Some of the earliest work remains the best. See especially Simon Watney, Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, 1989); and Michael Pollak, The Second Plague of Europe: AIDS Prevention and Sexual Transmission among Men in Western Europe (Binghamton, N.Y., 1994). See also the informative overview in Michel Hubert, Nathalie Bajos, and Theo Sandfort, eds., Sexual Behaviour and HIV/AIDS in Europe: Comparisons of National Surveys (London, 1998). For an especially impressive anti-transmission campaign—one that also took fantasies and pleasures into account—see the work of the Deutsche AIDS-Hilfe, including the informational flyer “SM: Für schwule Männer, die’s härter lieben” (Berlin, ca. 1990), directed at individuals in the S/M scene. For assessments of the changing epidemiological and social dynamics surrounding HIV/AIDS in Europe since the discovery of antiretrovirals, on the one hand, and the catastrophic spread of the pandemic in other parts of the globe, on the other, see two interviews with sociologist and sexologist Martin Dannecker: “Wider den Zwang zur Prävention—die Zeiten des ‘alten Aids’ sind vorbei,” Pro Familia Magazin 34, no. 4 (2006): 12–14; and
have further found themselves at something of a loss in making sense of the early-
twenty-first-century revival of sexual conservatism within some strands of European
Christianity and Islam (and to some extent also Judaism), as well as the somewhat
contradictory coexistence of this religion-inflected conservatism with an indisputably
sex-saturated public sphere. Indeed, both neo-fundamentalist strands of European
Islam and, most prominently in Poland, post-communist Catholicism frequently style
themselves as providing a necessary alternative to the libertine indulgence and li-
centious exploitation of sex supposedly so prevalent in the overly secularized West—
even as the West itself has become more ambivalent about the value of sexual free-
doms.29 These are all topics to which comparativist approaches would bring useful
insights through comparisons of developments within Europe as well as comparisons
with developments elsewhere on the globe, and also where transnational processes,
pressures, and interconnections need to be far more thoroughly investigated.30

After all, what is it that drives historical change in the realm of sexuality—this
realm that is at once so personal and private and so publicly scrutinized? Is it, as many
have presumed, primarily market pressures or technological developments? Or
could it be something as seemingly mundane as the party-political balance of power
within national governments? Do shifting popular values lead to pressure for legal
change, or is it the opposite? Are changes in sexual cultures a side effect of other
political conflicts, or do they themselves sometimes provoke a shift in power-political
constellations? How significant are religious traditions? How important are indi-
vidual activists for sparking society-wide transformations?31 How important are so-

29 On Western ambivalence about sexual freedom and the unexpected revival of sexual conservatism,
see Silvia Ballestra, Piove sul nostro amore: Una storia di donne, medici, aborti, predicatori e apprendisti
stregoni (Milan, 2008); and Gert Hekma, “Pro-Gay and Anti-Sex: Sexual Politics at a Turning Point in
the Netherlands” (unpublished manuscript, 2009). For reflections on the strengths and limits of thinking
about European (and U.S.) anti-homophobia and the often homophobic anti-imperialism in the Arab
world as mutually constitutive, see the reviews of Joseph A. Massad’s Desiring Arabs (Chicago, 2007)
1962; and by Khaled El-Rouayheb in Middle East Report/MERIP, no. 245 (Winter 2007): 44.

30 An intriguing recent example of a comparativist approach is provided by Agnieszka Graff, who
has studied the revival of sexual conservatism in post-communist Poland and found instructive analogues
in the conjunction of religiously inflected nationalism and subordination of women in countries such as
Ireland, Singapore, and Sri Lanka, and also examined the dialectical interplay between Polish national-
alis’s homophobia and anti-Western animus and the European Union’s self-construction as anti-hom-
ophobic. See Graff, “Women Sacrificed on the Altar of the Holy Mary,” interview with Piotr Najsztub,
Przekrój, no. 10 (March 8, 2007), http://polishpress.wordpress.com/2007/03/13/women-sacrificed-on-the-
altar/; and Graff, “Cornered by the ‘Lobby’: Political Uses of Homophobia and the Gay-Jew Analogy
in Poland’s Nationalist Revival,” forthcoming in Public Culture.

31 An interesting historiographical trend in the early twenty-first century is the renewed attention
given to individual activists—too long neglected, perhaps because of skepticism about the effectuality
(or even reality) of individual agency, but now pursued in a more sophisticated manner that also attends
to the ways in which individuals are produced by their historical moments as much as they shape them.
Most of this work, however, clusters around individuals and small groups in the late nineteenth and
especially the early twentieth century. See, e.g., Volkmar Sigusch, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs: Der erste Schwule
der Weltgeschichte (Berlin, 2000); the discussion of the abortion rights advocate Henri Gächter, active
in both Paris and Geneva in the early twentieth century, in Aline Gualeni, “La pratique de l’avortement
da Genève dans les années 30,” Revue médicale de la Suisse romande 120 (2000): 967–977; Stephen Brooke,
“A New World for Women? Abortion Law Reform in Britain during the 1930s,” American Historical
Review 106, no. 2 (April 2001): 431–459; Henny Brandhorst, “From Neo-Malthusianism to Sexual Re-
form: The Dutch Section of the World League for Sexual Reform,” Journal of the History of Sexuality
cial movements? And how important is generational change? Was the sexual revolution, for instance, motivated by a more general revulsion of the youth of Europe against their elders? But if so, how do we explain that older generation’s energetic participation in the sexual revolution? And what can we make of the finding that in the 1970s, almost half of the young British men polled in one survey objected to the birth control pill, specifically because it gave women sexual freedom?

In general, moreover, as a result of reliance on the liberalization paradigm, we have been left with too little capacity for thinking effectively about the tangled texture of emotions that human beings have brought to sex in the last half-century. Quite apart from sexual violence and exploitation, consensual sex can, after all, be many things: a site of explosive, transformative ecstasy, delight, and excitement; of serene security and tenderness; of status confirmation or the pleasures of conformity to norms; of anguished longing, vulnerability, conflictedness, insecurity, or jealousy; or of boredom and ennui, even repulsion. It is to some extent because sex is complicated that human beings are so politically and socially manipulable in this area—although historians have rarely reflected openly on this complicatedness when trying to explain how sexual cultures change.

When we start to piece together and compare the evidence from primary documents as well as the still-sparse secondary scholarship on individual nations, we can see the apparently syncopated quality of sexual developments in Western Europe. Each unique national case helps us to see the others in a new light and to challenge the prevailing explanatory frameworks. Certainly nations are not self-contained, self-evident entities, and intensive ideological and juridical labor—as well as often considerable violence—goes into the shoring up of boundaries. Simultaneously, national cultures are themselves riven by differences between rural and urban environments, as well as by differences of class, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and generational sensibilities, not to mention sexual preferences of the most diverse kinds (and indeed concepts of what sex is and what it is for), even as there are often similarities evident in the cultures of contiguous nations, such that scholars fre-


32 For a brilliant initial answer to this question, see Elizabeth D. Heineman, “The Economic Miracle in the Bedroom: Big Business and Sexual Consumption in Reconstruction West Germany,” Journal of Modern History 78 (December 2006): 846–877. On the need to root the 1960s sexual revolution in pop-cultural changes in the 1950s (and even earlier), see also the crucial methodological reflections in Franz X. Eder, “The National Socialists ‘Healthy Sensuality’ Succeeded by the American Influence: Sexuality and Media from National Socialism to the Sexual Revolution,” in Bischof, Pelinka, and Herzog, Sexuality in Austria, 102–130.


34 The key argument of Paula Frederick’s historical sociological study “points to the continuing power of individual states to determine national policy,” and she finds “an overriding state logic with regard to sexual policy.” See Frederick, “Sexing the Nation: State Regulation of Prostitution and Homosexuality in Britain and the Netherlands in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2002), iii.

quently invoke the idea of “Scandinavian” or “Mediterranean” regional cultures when trying to make sense of sexual beliefs and practices. And yet the nation-state is a logical unit to analyze when we are trying to understand changes in laws and government policies; and for most of the twentieth century, it is striking how profound an impact laws have had in shaping national and local sexual cultures and individuals’ self-conceptions alike, as well as—for instance, in the case of restrictions on contraceptive products—the actual bodily experiences of sex. Indeed, the emergence of the Council of Europe and its European Court of Human Rights, founded in 1959 as a transnational legal entity but from the early 1980s on also intervening in sex rights cases, and subsequently the self-appointed role of the European Union in pressuring national governments to liberalize some sex-related laws (for instance, with regard to homosexual rights) while also encouraging the development of transnationally coordinated legislation designed to be more restrictive and/or protective (for instance, with regard to the combating of sex trafficking, with subsidiary consequences for age of consent laws and increased supervision of adolescent sexuality), only confirm the importance of the national legal frameworks in prior decades.36

In addition, it is noteworthy that much scholarship on the history of sexuality in the twentieth century attempts to tease out—with a comparative framework either implicitly or explicitly in mind—the distinctive aspects of national sexual cultures within Europe. However hesitant we might rightly be about the very notion of “national” sexual cultures, it must be observed that historians of European sexualities continue both to amass evidence and to proffer interpretations of differences between, for example, English and Scottish and French and Swedish and Swiss and

36 The European Court of Human Rights—since at least 1981, when Jeffrey Dudgeon took Northern Ireland to court for its ongoing criminalization of male homosexuality—has been a crucial resource for individuals to exert pressure on national governments for their restrictions of sexual rights and their inadequate laws for protecting individuals from non-consensual sexual acts and other violations of their sexual self-determination. See Michele Grigolo, “Sexualities and the ECHR: Introducing the Universal Sexual Legal Subject,” European Journal of International Law 14, no. 5 (November 2003): 1023–1044; Alastair Mowbray, “European Convention on Human Rights: The Issuing of Practice Directions and Recent Cases,” Human Rights Law Review 4, no. 1 (2004): 151–174; and Linda Rapp, “Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Portugal,” in gbqtq: an encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer cultures, http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/portugal2.html. On the European Union’s role especially in advancing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, see, e.g., Sophie Arie, “EU Goes Dutch on Gay Rights,” Guardian, September 25, 2003; and Matti Bunzl, “Queering Austria for the New Europe,” in Bischof, Pelinka, and Herzog, Sexuality in Austria, 131–144. On recent transnational efforts in Europe for renewed restriction of consensual youth sexuality in the name of preventing young people’s slide into prostitution, see Dagmar Herzog, “Post coitum triste est? Sexual Politics and Cultures in Post-Unification Germany,” German Politics and Society 27, no. 4 (2009): forthcoming; and Herzog, “175 für alle?” Männer, February 2008, 44–46. It is noteworthy as well that over the entire course of the twentieth century, it was specifically legal scholars and sex-political activists who were most interested in transnational comparisons of sexual cultures. This was true in the early-twentieth-century face-offs between moral purity-linked feminist advocates for the abolition of the regulation of prostitution and pro-regulation defenders of prostitution; both sides were internationally networked, and both sides regularly referred to laws and cultural mores in other nations in making their cases. The early to mid-1960s were another especially prolific moment for cross-cultural comparisons for both progressives and conservatives. See, e.g., the impressively global reach of information in (jurist and contraceptive rights proponent) Anne-Marie Dourlen-Rollier, La vérité sur l’avortement: Deux enquêtes inédites (Paris, 1963), 153–215; and (jurist and opponent of the decriminalization of homosexuality) Hans-Heinrich Jescheck, “Die Behandlung der männlichen Homosexualität im ausländischen Strafrecht,” Studium generale 19, no. 6 (1966): 332–346. On early transnational efforts (often misguided) to manage prostitution, see also Helen J. Self, Prostitution, Women and Misuse of the Law: The Fallen Daughters of Eve (London, 2003); Jean-Michel Chaumont, Le mythe de la traite des blanches: Enquête sur la fabrication d’un fléau (Paris, 2009).
Italian attitudes and practices and assumptions—so much so that the assertions, as well as the data they provide, generate a plethora of additional questions about cultural change as well as exchange. Indeed, it may be only in the post-communist and globally ever more interconnected and hypermediated present that such discernible differences at the level of the “nation” are finally eroding. And yet even in the present, as the comparative case of the United States and its rightward shift in sexual politics over the last fifteen years has made clear, nations still can take their own distinctive paths with regard to sex.37

As clumsy and problematic as it may be, then, to think in terms of national sexual cultures, some interesting questions—as well as some preliminary answers—do emerge when we begin to pursue the analysis of causation comparatively within Western Europe. Among the puzzles that emerge are these: How is it that Switzerland had one of the most liberal divorce laws and the highest divorce rate in Europe at the start of the twentieth century, as well as bohemian sex-radical experiments, and also functioned as an international magnet for abortion traffic, but then went sexually conservative after World War I (and in many ways stayed conservative until the 1980s)? And how is it that the Netherlands remained a land, as one commentator put it, of “proverbial prudishness” until the 1960s, when the country rapidly radicalized and became the much-touted beacon of tolerance it is still celebrated as today (although the radical image may always have been an exaggeration, and although the Muslim challenge has also nowadays caused that vaunted tolerance to crack)?38 Why was German culture so much more sexually liberal than British culture in the first decades of the twentieth century, yet—while one nation turned fascistic and the other stayed democratic—both witnessed renewed conservatism in the 1950s?39 It seems likely that even though many Western European nations experienced turns to renewed conservatism in the 1950s, this conservatism took forms that were only superficially similar from one country to the next, and actually fulfilled quite different functions in post-fascist Germany, Austria, and Italy.

38 Comment on the Netherlands by H. G. Cannegieter in 1930, quoted in Brandhorst, “From Neo-Malthusianism to Sexual Reform,” 38. On Switzerland, see Caroline Arni, Entzweiungen: Die Krise der Ehe um 1900 (Cologne, 2004); Ina Boesche, Gegenleben: Die Sozialisten Margarethe Hardegger und ihre politischen Bühnen (Zurich, 2003); Gualeni, “La pratique de l’avortement”; Heinz Nigg, Wir wollen alles und zwar Subito! Die achtziger Jugendunruhen in der Schweiz und ihre Folgen (Zurich, 2001). For a tempered view of the Netherlands’ sex-liberal reputation, see the outstanding essay by Harry Oosterhuis, “The Netherlands: Neither Prudish nor Hedonistic,” in Eder, Hall, and Hekma, Sexual Cultures in Europe, 1: 71–90. For the more recent Dutch developments, see Ian Buruma, Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance (New York, 2006); and Hekma, “Pro-Gay and Anti-Sex.”

Meanwhile, moreover, it is not at all self-evident what sexual conservatism even means. While in some countries, including England, the 1950s were marked by a preoccupation with marital mutuality and heterosexual (also male) domesticity, and discussions of prostitution turned on the too-visible “nuisance” of street solicitation, attempts in Italy to close the state-regulated brothels popular under fascism were met with hysteria and with the argument, advanced by both men and women, that brothels protected the family and also offered young men an important site for learning about sexuality.\footnote{Self, Prostitution, Women and Misuse of the Law; Molly Tambor, “Prostitutes and Politicians: The Women’s Rights Movement in the Legge Merlin Debates,” in Penelope Morris, ed., Women in Italy, 1945–1960: An Interdisciplinary Study (New York, 2006), 131–146.}

Additional questions emerge with regard to legal shifts. How is it that predominantly Roman Catholic countries such as France, Belgium, Italy, and Spain have tended not to criminalize male homosexuality between consenting adults since the early nineteenth century (in other words, the law there made distinctions between sin and crime), while predominantly Protestant Britain and mixed-confessional but Protestant-dominated Germany continued to criminalize male homosexuality until the 1960s, and while primarily Protestant Sweden and Denmark decriminalized it in the 1930s and 1940s—even as the decriminalization of adult homosexuality in both Sweden in 1944 and Britain in 1967 was accompanied by exacerbated concern with youth same-sex activity?\footnote{See Fritz Bauer, “Sexualstrafrecht heute,” in Fritz Bauer, Hans Bürger-Prinz, Hans Giese, and Herbert Jäger, eds., Sexualität und Verbrechen: Beiträge zur Strafrechtsreform (Frankfurt am Main, 1963), 11–26; Hug, The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland, 204; Rydström, Sinners and Citizens, 167–168, 184–188, 267, 283.}

And why is it that gay rights movements emerged in the early 1970s at the same time in various nations despite extraordinary differences in those countries’ individual legal traditions with regard to homosexuality—and sometimes without knowing of each other’s existence?\footnote{For example, news of the June 1969 Stonewall rebellion in New York did not reach West Germany for at least a year. There, the movement was made possible by the decriminalization and then spurred by the film by Rosa von Praunheim and Martin Dannecker, Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation in der er lebt (1971). On the other hand, there were also soon translations of gay liberation texts circulated between France, Britain, and West Germany. Thus, for instance, documents from Libre disposition de notre corps, Special Issue, Tout! no. 12 (1971), appeared—along with commentary—under the title “Faggots and the Revolution” in the British journal Gayprints (London, 1972).}

What spurred Britain’s decriminalization of abortion in 1967, a year before France even decriminalized contraception (and eight years before France decriminalized abortion), while Austria decriminalized abortion in 1974, a year ahead of
France—under, and this is significant, a Jewish chancellor (it is unlikely that it would have happened under a Catholic)—in unmistakable looking-across-the-border emulation of pending developments in West Germany and France? It is perhaps noteworthy that Simone Veil, the government minister who took the lead in decriminalizing abortion in France, was Jewish as well, and a Holocaust survivor; indeed, she walked out of the parliamentary debates when one conservative delegate tried to compare abortions to Nazi crematoria. While most histories of abortion rights in France correctly emphasize the social movement in the streets, they neglect what contemporaries also knew: that Veil’s personal moral authority was indispensable to the success of the decriminalization campaign within the parliament, and so too was her core argument in favor of decriminalization—which had not so much to do with women’s self-ownership, but instead emphasized that the law itself was being disrespected and losing value because, in view of the 300,000–400,000 illegal abortions performed every year, it was so evidently being routinely flouted. Yet at the same time, we are left with the need to explain what happened in Italy in 1978, when successful arguments for abortion rights were made very much within a Catholic moral framework.

Certainly more research remains to be done. But for now, we can at least safely venture four points:

1. Causation truly was different in each instance. Sometimes a change in popular values preceded legal change, and sometimes it was precisely the opposite. For example, it took a broad social movement to make possible the partial decriminalization of abortion in West Germany in 1976; politicians were positively terrified of the Catholic Church’s disapproval and would never have acted had there not been masses in the streets. But male homosexuality was decriminalized in 1969 in the absence of a social movement—not least because of a liberalization process within the conservative Christian Democratic Party—and it was that change that subsequently made possible the emergence of a gay rights movement, and also the reduction of popular anti-homosexual prejudice.

2. The enmeshment of sexual matters with other aspects of politics was often a crucial factor, as was the tipping of the party-political balance of power within a particular government. Even a very slim majority could have a big impact. Thus, for example, Switzerland’s post–World War I turn to sexual conservatism had everything to do with party-political dynamics and intensifying cooperation between Protestant and Catholic conservatives as part of a more general hostile and frightened reaction

48 Herzog, Sex after Fascism, 220–228.
to socialism, and particularly a socialist-led general strike held in 1918. Meanwhile, in the postwar era in the Netherlands, the persistence of sexual conservatism, itself initially the result of a turn-of-the-century triumph of religious moral purity forces against a nineteenth-century liberal elite, also had much to do with the uniquely Dutch “pillar” system, in which each constituency in society—Catholic, Calvinist, socialist—had its own social world and its own organizations, a dynamic that did not unravel until the 1960s, when liberalizations also took place within each pillar. But it also had to do with the fact that Dutch socialism was itself unusually sexually strict in comparison with socialisms elsewhere.

3. Scandals have been surprisingly important in redirecting national conversations about sex. This has been true for both intended and unintended scandals. Consider the case of Aleck Bourne in Britain in 1938. Bourne was a physician who publicly and deliberately performed an abortion for a rape victim in order to push the boundaries of the law. His acquittal created a case precedent according to which doctors could use their own judgment to perform abortions if they felt that a woman would become a “mental wreck” if the pregnancy was not terminated. It has also been true for subsequent unintended scandals, such as the one surrounding the anti-morning sickness drug thalidomide, which resulted in the births of 400 children with truncated limbs in Britain and approximately 8,000 worldwide. Britain was the first Western European country outside of Scandinavia to decriminalize abortion, and there is no question that this was a reaction to the “thalidomide babies” as well as a concurrent scandal of birth defects caused by rubella. And yet a different instance of consequential scandal was the “X” case in Ireland in 1992, when an outpouring of public sympathy for a fourteen-year-old victim of rape and abuse led to an exception being made in the country’s otherwise comprehensive criminalization of abortion. In general, it can be said that additional scandals erupting in Ireland over clergy abuse in the 1990s contributed significantly to the demise of unquestioning deference to Church authority and a reorientation in Irish discussions of sexual rights.

4. Transnational pressures do matter, and increasingly so. A classic example is

49 Another factor was the nationalization of what had been disparate cantonal laws with regard to sex-related matters, a process that lasted from the 1890s to the 1930s, and in which social purity-oriented, anti-prostitution activists from the women’s movement (inspired transnationally, especially by Josephine Butler in England, although tending toward greater sexual conservatism than Butler) got extensively involved. See Gerodetti, *Modernising Sexualities*.


51 Brooke, “‘A New World for Women?’”


Austria, which was unusual in both the Nazi era and the postwar period for criminalizing not only male homosexuality but also lesbianism. It was not until 1971 that homosexuality was officially decriminalized (until then, multi-year prison sentences were standard), but new legal strictures explicitly limiting queer associational life and media visibility until well into the 1990s made for a two-decade time lag in the emergence of gay and lesbian liberation in comparison with France, Britain, or West Germany. It was only in the context of debates over whether Austria was “modern” and “mature” enough to become part of the European Union in 1995 that the country did an about-face and embraced its queers as a symbol of cosmopolitan trendiness.54

Meanwhile, the research agenda for the future remains large. For example, a more effective integration of the histories of sex and religion is still badly needed. There is no question when we look at Western Europe that sexual matters were at the heart of popular processes of secularization for at least the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. Nothing so turned people off from religion as being told what to do—or what not to do—in bed, even as this dynamic again played out in a quite syncopated way, with differences evident not only between Catholic and Protestant and mixed-confessional countries, but also in countries in which religion had additional implications of ethnic or subcultural cohesion or nationalist pride. Clergymen and theologians were acutely aware that matters of sexual pleasure and fertility control were at the core of their parishioners’ concerns, with reactions ranging from severe internal conflict, to inevitably somewhat mendacious compromise formations, to complete alienation.55 This dynamic had much wider consequences. Among other things, fear about widespread gentile secularization in Germany was a major motivation for Christian clergymen’s support of Nazi antisemitism; Jewish sex rights activists offered something that millions of gentiles wanted, and then bore the brunt of a backlash against the spread of sexual liberalism.56

The intertwined histories of sex and religion are even more complicated, however, for we also find that there were sex-liberal movements among the Christian clergy. There were French priests in the 1930s, Dutch priests in the 1950s, and Irish priests in the 1960s who supported their parishioners’ desperate efforts to reconcile faith and family planning; West German bishops even formally challenged the Vatican’s stance on the birth control pill.57 Dutch, French, and British clergymen and

54 Matti Bunzl, Symptoms of Modernity: Jews and Queers in Late-Twentieth-Century Vienna (Berkeley, Calif., 2004).
56 Dagmar Herzog, “How Jewish Is German Sexuality? Sex and Antisemitism in the Third Reich,” in Neil Gregor, Nils Roemer, and Mark Roseman, eds., German History from the Margins (Bloomington, Ind., 2006), 185–203. Dutch (and Jewish) sex rights activist Leo Polak died in Sachsenhausen; some Jewish fellow members of the Dutch section of the World League for Sexual Reform survived the war, but Bernard Premelsa and Charlotte Polak-Rosenberg were murdered at Auschwitz. See Brandhorst, “From Neo-Malthusianism to Sexual Reform,” 64.
prominent laypeople were active in homophile rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s. And, not only in Italy but in Britain, Switzerland, and West Germany as well, arguments in the 1970s on behalf of abortion rights were also made within Christian theological frameworks. More recently, we find liberal pastors and rabbis presiding at gay and lesbian unions—as well as the phenomenon of out homosexual clergy.

The study of sexual politics and cultures could also benefit from being integrated with a closer examination of the consequences for the post-1945 era of the full force of the catastrophe at the center of the twentieth century in Europe. Fascisms of all kinds were inevitably also about the most intimate of invasions. The Third Reich was one immense experiment in reproductive engineering, relentless in its aggressive intrusions into both bodies and relationships. It is not only that homosexuality and abortion were criminalized and cruelly prosecuted. (It is remarkable how consistently these two matters function in various fascisms; indeed, more studies of the sexual politics of various fascisms, both individually and comparatively, would be hugely valuable.) And it is not only that every aspect of sexuality was policed through a racialized framework. Just as significant is that no other regime before or since has been so concerned with, and so successful at, manipulating yearning and pleasure, even as it pursued its genocidal agenda. And one thing that is especially noteworthy about the evolution of sexual cultures in post-1945 Western Europe is the longue durée post-fascist learning processes that took place. These were initially led by isolated, and often embattled, individuals in the later 1950s and early 1960s. But eventually they were carried by society-wide consensuses in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In those decades, Western Europeans came to see sexual and reproductive self-

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60 In Italy, for example, socialist deputies—especially Giancarlo Matteotti, who later worked with the sexologist-activist Luigi De Marchi—repeatedly argued for the right to contraception as a post-fascist imperative: they were recurrently blocked by Christian Democrats in cooperation with a Communist Party uniquely uncomfortable with challenging the Catholic Church. See Camera dei Deputati, *Proposta di legge*, no. 421, November 27, 1953, http://legislature.camera.it/dati/leg02/lavori/stampati/pdf/04210001.pdf; Camera dei Deputati, *Disegni di legge e relazioni*, no. 49, July 23, 1958, http://legislature.camera.it/dati/leg03/lavori/stampati/pdf/00490001.pdf; as well as the 1965 Italian Constitutional Court decision, no. 9, available at http://www.giurcost.org/decisioni/1965/0009a-65.html; Leonard Swidler and Edward James Grace, eds., *Catholic-Communist Collaboration in Italy* (Lanham, Md., 1988); Wanrooij, “Carnal Knowledge”; and Francesca Vassalle, “The Politics of Contraception in Postfascist Italy” (seminar paper, History Department, Graduate Center, City University of New York, May 2007). In West Germany, Jewish re-émigrés (the jurist Fritz Bauer, the sociologist-philosopher Theodor Adorno, and the historian of religion Hans Joachim Schoeps) were singularly important in articulating the case for a new sexual morality based on the values of consent and privacy. See Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*. For the post-occupation Netherlands, see Hekma, “De Wederopbouw.” On France and the perceived need to undo Vichy-era sex-related legislation, see Mossuz-Lavau, *Les lois de l’amour*; and Martel, *The Pink and the Black*.

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62 The initial restoration of sexual conservatism in the postwar era was not just a reaction to economic deprivation and postwar chaos, and not just a manifestation of Cold War anticommunism; it also had a great deal to do with the boost in prestige enjoyed by Christian Democratic parties, due not least to a transnationally popular postwar interpretation of Nazism as either a result of or a contributor to secularization processes—an interpretation especially well suited to erasing from view the churches’
determination as a fundamental human right—indeed, to understand it as being among the most important post-fascist values that any society could cherish and defend.\textsuperscript{62} And it is only within the first decade of the twenty-first century that the ideals of sexual and reproductive self-determination have been extended to the physically and cognitively disabled. Here, too, especially in Germany, the discussion is profoundly shaped by the shadows of the fascist past.\textsuperscript{63} Exploring how the defense of sexual and reproductive rights was articulated as an anti-fascist obligation in nations whose dictatorships extended beyond the end of World War II—post-Franco Spain, post-Salazar Portugal, and post-junta Greece, for example—would greatly enrich our understanding as well.\textsuperscript{64}

Yet it may also be confusion over the not always easily compatible results of processes of secularization and post-fascist imperatives to unlearn racism and respect ethnic and religious diversity that has left Western Europeans so hamstrung in the face of European Islam. The early years of the twenty-first century find Europeans recurrently reaching for anti-Muslim language—criticizing Islam for its supposedly constitutive “misogyny” and “homophobia,” for instance, or blaming the 2005 riots in the banlieues of Paris on West African habits of “polygamy”—rather than being able to defend sexual liberality on its own terms.\textsuperscript{65} Sensationalist public and media discussion has turned on such issues as honor killings, demands for bridal virginity, female genital cutting, and arranged or “forced” marriages, on the one hand, and “fake” binational marriages entered into solely for the purpose of acquiring European citizenship, on the other. The entire complex of issues surrounding European identities and citizenships, with all the accompanying assumptions about appropriate inclusions and exclusions, now rests with remarkable frequency on sex-related concerns. In addition, there is mounting hysteria evident both in policymaking circles and in the media about the decline of native European birthrates in com-

\textsuperscript{62} See Helmut Graupner, “Das späte Menschenrecht (Teil 1)—Sexualität im europäischen und österrei-


cischen Recht,” \textit{Sexuologie} 11, nos. 3–4 (2004): 119–139. Another important issue is European
nations’ further development of laws to include not just greater freedom for individual sexual self-
determination, but also protection against violations of that individual self-determination. See, e.g., for
Belgium Liesbet Stevens and Marc Hooghe, “The Swing of the Pendulum: The Detraditionalisation of
the Regulation of Sexuality and Intimacy in Belgium (1973–2003),” \textit{International Journal of the Sociology

\textsuperscript{63} An early articulation of the right to sexuality for the disabled can be found in Ernst Klee, \textit{Be-


hindert—Über die Einteignung von Körper und Bewusstsein: Ein kritisches Handbuch} (Frankfurt am Main,
1980), 201–203. See also the discussion in Carol Poore, \textit{Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture}
(Ann Arbor, Mich., 2007); the work of the family planning clinic Balance in Berlin, http://www.fpz
berlin.de/uploads/Beratungsangebot%20f%C3%B6r%20Behinderte%20Menschen%20mit%20Fehlbildungen.pdf;
as well as the extraordinary poster campaigns of the organizations Pro Infirmitas in Switzerland (2001–2008)
and Lebenshilfe e.V. in Germany (“Anders in Gesellschaft,” 2008).

\textsuperscript{64} For preliminary evidence on Spain, see Werner Altmann, “Zwischen Diktatur und Demokratie:
see Mario de Queiroz, “Europe-Rights: Condom-Laden ‘Abortion Ship’ Finally Heads Home,” \textit{Inter Press
Service}, September 13, 2004; on Greece, see Gonda van Steen, “Margarita Papandreou: Bearing Gifts to
the Greeks?” \textit{Journal of Modern Greek Studies} 21, no. 2 (October 2003): 245–282. For the role
of the Catholic Church in maintaining restrictions on sexual rights in the aftermath of fascism, see Duarte

\textsuperscript{65} See “Le ministre de l’emploi fait de la polygamie une ‘cause possible’ des violences urbaines,” \textit{Le

But the apparently enduring appeal of depersonalized sex is something that historians could perhaps be considering as well.69 Sex, after all, might be said to be syncopated in yet another way, if we also think about the complicated pushes and pulls of excitement, satisfaction, longing, or rejection.

The turn-of-the-millennium present is seeing some major reconfigurations in the very nature of what counts as sex: from the impact of the invention of Viagra in 1998 and its subsequent imitators/competitors, to the apotheosis of Internet porn and cybersex with the accompanying curious mix of possibilities for bodily detachment and intensification, to the prosaic but genuine difficulties of squeezing time for sex into the lives of exhausted multitaskers. The mid-1990s found sexologists documenting abrupt declines in felt levels of libido among both women and men across Western cultures, although the increasingly histrionic reportage on this matter in the early twenty-first century remains difficult to disentangle from the market interests in raising consumption of libido- and arousal-stimulating products.70 Some observers have claimed to find in the new millennium an increasing “onianization of sex,” with growing numbers of people more concerned with the ego trip of being a hot object of desire than with the physiological sensation of orgasm, and/or with orgasms themselves functioning as trophies of self-reassurance in a battle with another body rather than as the pleasurable by-product of interaction with another being who is passionately desired in his or her particularity.71

But how new is all this, really? Classicist David Halperin pointed out years ago that in ancient times, sex was not assumed to be an interpersonal activity. Nonmutuality was considered normative. Sex was something done to, not with, another

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69 For a telling earlier episode of controversy and perplexity over the appeals of depersonalized sex, see the debate over peepshows in Switzerland (an import from the U.S. and West Germany) in the late 1970s: “Über Sex-Discount,” Volksrecht, January 6, 1979; “Stürzli-Sex-Modell: ‘Das ist natürlich ein komisches Gefühl,’” Ostschweizer AZ, July 2, 1979; and Werner P. Wyler, “‘Eine Massenabfertigung sexueller Bedürfnisse,’” Luzerner Neueste Nachrichten, June 16, 1979. For the ongoing and profoundly political relevance of conflicts over the appeals of depersonalized sex, see the important critical analysis of Sweden’s 1999 law criminalizing the purchase (not sale) of sexual services: Don Kulick, “Four Hundred Thousand Swedish Perverts,” GLQ 11, no. 2 (2005): 205–235. For the contrasting view that the purchasing of sexual services deserves to be criminalized as well as culturally shamed, see Maria-Pia Boethius, “Das Ende der Prostitution in Schweden?” Streit 1 (2001): 6–10. And along related lines, for the argument that the Swedish model should be emulated on the grounds that it reduces the profitability of sex trafficking, see Aghatise, “Trafficking for Prostitution in Italy.” On the transformations in the prostitution industry and in the very nature of what is being sold in the prostitution transaction in the postmodern present, see Elizabeth Bernstein, Temporarily Yours: Sexual Commerce in Post-Industrial Culture (Chicago, 2007).

70 See, e.g., the discussion of trends in both France and Germany in Ingrid Füllér, “Vom Verschwinden der Lust: Warum schlafen viele Paare nicht mehr miteinander?” Frankfurter Rundschau, no. 304 (December 31, 1994). On the early twenty-first century, see Herzog, Sex in Crisis.

person.72 Ruth Mazo Karras has made a comparable argument for the European Middle Ages.73 What all this suggests is that historians of modern Europe would do well not only to be in conversation with historians working on other parts of the globe, but also to remember to be in conversation with historians of earlier eras.74

72 David M. Halperin, One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love (New York, 1990), 29–33.
73 Ruth Mazo Karras, Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others (New York, 2005).
74 A new critical synthesis of the research on sexuality in late medieval and early modern Europe is now available: Katherine Crawford, European Sexualities, 1400–1800 (Cambridge, 2007). See also the superb concise overview and bibliography on early modern sexualities in Merry E. Wiesner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2000), 51–101.

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