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978-0-521-64689-5 - Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation

Alan Hunt

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GOVERNING MORALS

A Social History of Moral Regulation

This evocative and broad-ranging book traces the history of moral regulation in Britain and the US from the late seventeenth century to the present day. Specific coverage is given to movements such as the Society for the Reformation of Manners and the Vice Society, the sexual abuse and anti-pornography movements, and contemporary self-help movements. Hunt argues that the main impetus for moral regulations often stems from the middle classes, rather than those with institutional power, but most significantly they provide classic instances of the intimate link between the 'governance of others' and the 'governance of the self'. Using the work of Foucault, this book analyses how projects of self-regulation can manifest themselves into the regulation of others. Concurrent with this is the rise of health discourses, which play a central role in contemporary discussions of moral governance.

Having previously taught in England, Alan Hunt is now Professor of Sociology and Law at Carleton University. His previous books include *Governance of the Consuming Passions* (1996), *Foucault and Law* with Gary Wickham (1994), and *Explorations in Law and Society* (1993).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521646895

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First published 1999
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication data

Hunt, Alan, 1942– .
Governing morals: a social history of moral regulation.

Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 64071 7.

ISBN 0 521 64689 8 (pbk).

1. Conduct of life – History. 2. Ethics – History. I.
Title. (Series: Cambridge studies in law and society).

ISBN 978-0-521-64071-8 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-64689-5 paperback

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PREFACE

This venture took shape slowly and, as is often the case, it came about through the conjunction of rather different lines of inquiry. In my first venture into historical sociology I was concerned to try to make sense of why it was that great social and political energy had been expended during the rise of urban societies in attempts to regulate conspicuous consumption through the enactment of sumptuary laws (Hunt 1996). It became clear that such projects were exemplars of projects of 'moral regulation', which involve practices whereby some social agents problematise some aspect of the conduct, values or culture of others on moral grounds and seek to impose regulation upon them. While moral politics is often complexly linked to the pursuit of economic or other interests, such politics is never reducible to a smokescreen or cover for more mundane class or sectional interests. There is an irreducible core in which people are mobilised and drawn into action by the passionate conviction that there is something inherently wrong or immoral about the conduct of others.

Once moral regulation had been identified as a distinctive form of discursive and political practice, it became clear that a great deal of what I had previously thought of under the generic label of politics could better be understood as moral politics. Thus the long-running battles that have transected societies over poverty involved the moralisation of the poor; whether in the name of charity, philanthropy or welfare the poor did not escape the moralising brush that castigated their morals, their idleness or their degeneracy. It was apparent that the great energies invested in attempts to regulate some aspect of sexuality cannot be engaged with without taking account of the moral imperatives and preoccupations that stimulate and sustain them. In addition my interest was engaged by the fact that many of these projects were not initiated by state agencies or institutions, but bubbled upwards from what have aptly, but somewhat imprecisely, been termed the respectable classes.

As I began to explore some early moral regulation movements, I became increasingly conscious that moral regulation was playing an increasingly active part in contemporary life. Moral politics was everywhere, and not just in traditional fields such as prostitution, alcohol

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and obscenity (now renamed pornography). Most startling was the realisation that, tempting though it was, it was inadequate to view the clamour of moral indignation as just part of a conservative backlash that had sought to sweep aside the presumed 'permissiveness' of the 1960s and 1970s. Moral politics was being generated from all across the political spectrum. Alongside the moral traditionalism of religious fundamentalism, with its appeal to family values and sexual austerity, moral campaigns were promoted by social forces with self-consciously transformative agendas. Radical feminism attacked pornography, sexual abuse and harassment in the name of progressive goals of transformed gender relations. Race activists promoted projects to criminalise racial abuse and hate-speech. In addition, it was apparent that while state agencies were prominent in a series of decreasingly successful 'wars' on drug use, most projects of moral reform came from below and not just from the respectable classes.

It was at this stage that my project took shape. I was struck by the intractability of many of the controversies engendered by contemporary moral politics exemplified by the degeneration of the abortion debate into fire-bombings, assassinations and vigilantism. There seemed little point in adding another contentious voice to the babble of current controversy over any of these moral conflicts. Instead I decided that it might be possible to throw some light on contemporary conflicts by undertaking a study of earlier moral reform campaigns. Not only would this provide potentially useful comparisons, but it would be much easier to sustain some critical distance. While I am intuitively unsympathetic to eighteenth-century campaigns to impose Sunday observance on a recalcitrant population, I do not feel the same strong commitments as I do over abortion, pornography and the other fields of today's moral politics.

While there have over the last three decades been a number of studies of individual moral regulation movements, little attempt has been made to compare and contrast these projects. It is my hope that the comparative dimension of my study will open up fresh approaches to making sense of the moral politics of our own time. In addition, while earlier studies operate with a generic, all-purpose concept of moral regulation, my aim is to contribute to breathing fresh life into the general theoretical debate that has, more recently, been taking place over the utility of the concept of moral regulation.

In venturing into unfamiliar subject matter and periods my task was made easier and my route faster by the patient and unhurried assistance of library workers in Britain, the United States and Canada; to them all my thanks. I acknowledge with appreciation a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada which enabled me to carry out this project.