Introduction

The twentieth century is often called "the century of sex" and it is frequently understood as a time of increasing liberalization of sexual mores and attitudes. It is understandable that many retrospective observers look at the twentieth century in this way, and for a variety of reasons. These include: the growing perfectibility and availability of contraceptives; the advancement of homosexual rights; the greater acceptance of premarital sex as well as burgeoning importance ascribed to sex in marriage; and the more generally growing celebration of sexual pleasure – along with the ever more pervasive stimulation of desire in advertising and pornography as well as the exploding profusion of advice for intensifying partnered sex. Further evidence could be found in the relaxation of church teachings on sex, especially from the 1930s to the 1960s (and certainly in the increasing popular disregard for church teachings over the course of the entire century), or in the growing sensitivity to the need to combat sexual violence and coercion and greater appreciation for female sexual self-determination advanced by the women's movements of the 1970s to 1990s.

However, to tell only a narrative of gradual progress would be to misunderstand how profoundly complicated the sexual politics of the twentieth century in Europe actually were. Three issues are especially important to consider in detail. The first has to do with the recurrent *backlashes* against liberalization. It turned out to be remarkably difficult to achieve and to maintain liberalizing gains, and indeed some of the most important aspects of sexual rights, including access to contraception, or freedom from persecution for homosexual sex, were for extended periods extraordinarily fragile. The backlashes were sometimes coordinated at the state level – this is especially evident when we look at National Socialism in Germany and Austria, fascism in Italy, Spain, or Portugal, or Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Sometimes the backlashes were fostered by the churches. But they were also often carried by popular movements from below. What makes sexual conservatism appealing is thus a crucial subject that requires more study. The renewed ascent of various forms

of sexual conservatism and neofundamentalism within European Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in the early twenty-first century suggests how timely and necessary such an investigation can be.

A second matter is just as essential, and that has to do with the *problems* often embedded also within what were thought to be liberalizing efforts – together with the very difficulty we at times have in defining what a truly sexually free society would be. In some cases, we can look back and see what contemporaries could not, or did not care to, see – for example, the horrifically disdainful racism against the disabled and against people of color in many lands that was used for much of the twentieth century to justify the promotion of contraceptives. In other cases, we ourselves today remain challenged to make sense of such matters as the increasing commercialization of sexuality in the course of the twentieth century. Is the sexing of sales and the selling of sex liberating? Here there are as many answers as there are people, and more differentiated and thoughtful responses are needed in order to respect the diversity of human desires while also acknowledging the changes that commercialization has wrought in sexual relations and in people's ability to pursue (and, hopefully, find) whatever happiness means to them. And in yet other cases – whether over prostitution, for instance, or more broadly over the connections (or lack thereof) between sex and love – the disputes over how best to organize sexual politics remain ongoing and will undoubtedly persist into the future. Here the reconstruction of past conflicts over sexuality can be enormously helpful in reinvigorating our imaginations while also making us more modest in our assumptions about what is "natural" or "best."

And third, there is the related matter of *ambivalences*. Sex does not always make people happy. Quite apart from the recurring dark sides of sexuality in the form of rape, abuse, exploitation, hurt, and harassment – which also have their important histories, both with regard to what human beings have done to each other but also with respect to the campaigns fought against such pain and against the conditions that facilitate it – also consensual sex, after all, can be a site of many conflicting feelings.

In the course of the twentieth century, moreover, sex became burdened with enormous significance. Sex became perceived of as ever more central to individual identity. The growing interest – and success – in controlling fertility changed heterosexual experiences, albeit in often contradictory ways (as newly heightened expectations of pleasure, especially for women, and the hopes of separating sex from reproduction, collided with the challenges and sometimes unpleasantness of contraceptive strategies). At the same time, the growing professionalization of research into sex – in dialectical interaction with the self-representations of sexual

minorities – intensified preoccupation with questions of sexual orientation. Ordinary people increasingly understood and represented themselves not only as beings with sexual identities, but also as beings with sexual rights – whether to privacy or to public attention, to "normal" functioning or to the transgression of norms perceived as illegitimate, to intensity of experience or to safety from sexual harm.

Throughout the twentieth century, sexual matters also acquired growing political salience. Sexuality became a key element in processes of secularization and religious renewal, a main motor of economic development, and a locus of increasing government–citizen negotiation (whether in courtrooms, classrooms, military brothels, government-funded maternal welfare and marital guidance clinics, or street demonstrations). In a constantly reconfigured combination of stimulus and regulation, prohibition and exposure, norm-expounding and obsessed detailing of deviance, liberalizing and repressive impulses together worked to make conflicts over sexual matters consequential for politics writ large.

This amplified political significance of sexuality has to do – and this is difficult to express but crucial for our comprehension – with yet another intrinsic complexity of sexual matters: their ever-spreading intersections with almost all other domains of existence. One need only think of the vital role of sexual scandal in making newspaper reading a mass and not just an elite phenomenon in the 1900s–1920s. (Is voyeurism itself a sexual act?) Or we can consider the saturation of anti-Jewish rhetoric with sexual innuendo and the role of this sexualized rhetoric in making persecution of Jews seem morally acceptable in the 1930s–1940s. (Is there a libidinal element in cruelty?) Or we might reflect on the inseparability of antiwar protest from efforts at sexual liberation in the 1960s–1970s. (How can we make sense of this moment when so many human beings sincerely believed that making more love could also profoundly change the world for the better?) In these and other instances, we can recognize the poverty and inadequacy of the theoretical language and conceptual frameworks available to us. Yet, for all the diffuseness and elusiveness of the terms, looking back on the twentieth century as a whole from the vantage point of the twenty-first, we can also recognize that over the course of that century something like a semi-coherent entity – a complex of physiological and emotional impulses and sensations, acts and ideals – took shape and was designated as "sexuality" in the collective imaginary.

This book will use the subject of sexuality as a focus for thinking through broader challenges facing historians. Among other things, it will emphasize the epistemological problems raised by the topic: What exactly are the relationships between ideologies, social conditions, bodies, and emotions, and how might these relationships have changed over time?

How might we use the tools of comparative history and the similarities and differences across boundaries of nations (and transnational regions) but also the differences within nations (rural versus urban, middle class versus working class, diversities of religious adherence and subcultures) to find more compelling answers to difficult questions of causation, periodization, and interpretation? How are our assumptions about the history of sexuality in Europe challenged when we understand its inextricability from the histories of European colonialism and decolonization? How might we more effectively analyze transnational flows of people and ideas?

After all, what drives historical change in this realm that is at once so intimate and so publicly scrutinized? Is it primarily (as many have presumed) market forces and technological advances? Or is it 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? How important are individual activists for sparking society-wide transformations? How important are social movements? What is the role of religious teachings, of generational changes, of wars and military occupations?

What we know about the history of sexuality in Europe in the twentieth century certainly remains incomplete. Scholars of sexuality have been enormously inventive in seeking out sources and developing innovative strategies for reading them. They have pored over police and court and military records, medical texts and Sunday sermons, popular magazines and legislative debates, activist manifestos and meeting minutes, private correspondence and diaries, epidemiological and demographic statistics and sociological surveys, fiction and music and film. They have also produced data of their own through oral history interviews and participant-observer ethnography. Yet some countries have received far more coverage than others (England, France, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, for instance, have been researched more thoroughly than Italy, Austria, Ireland, or the Soviet Union, and we know more about those countries than we do about Scotland, Norway, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, or Yugoslavia). Some themes have also been studied far more than others. However ironically, we have often learned more about homosexuality than heterosexuality, more about abortion than contraceptive strategies or noncoital practices, more about prostitution than pornography, more about rape in wartime than in peacetime. And in the meantime, much of the scholarship has been organized conceptually around the puzzle of how individuals and groups made progress, or failed to make progress, in overcoming obstacles (the obstacle in question could be the technological inadequacy of mechanical or chemical means of

preventing pregnancy, the illegality of abortion or homosexuality, or the stubborn resistance to treatment of a particular disease).

It is not least precisely as a result of reliance on a framework which assumes increasing progress toward liberalization over the course of the twentieth century that we have been left with too little capacity for thinking effectively about the tangled texture of emotions that human beings have brought to sex over the last century. Sex meant many different things to people. For some it was indeed a site of cruelty and violation. But also sex that was mutually willed could be experienced in extraordinarily varied ways: as a site of explosive, transformative ecstasy, delight, and excitement; of serene security, satisfaction, status confirmation, the pleasures of conformity to norms; of anguished longing, vulnerability, conflictedness, insecurity, jealousy; or of habit, duty, boredom – even repulsion. It is not least because sex is complicated that human beings are so politically and socially manipulable in this area – although historians have too rarely reflected openly on this complicatedness when trying to explain how sexual cultures change.

A task of this book, then, will be to try to reconstruct the ways people in the past *imagined* sex and what kinds of assumptions and emotions they brought to it. Not only what was considered appropriate or normal or good (in the eyes of God, or of the neighbors, or of those self-appointed experts, the doctors), but also what was considered anxiety-producing and – not least – what was considered sexually thrilling and satisfying has clearly varied considerably across time and place. Another task, however, will be to analyze how activists of all ideological stripes sought to change laws, attitudes, and practices. In other words, the aim is to explore how Europeans battled over the *ethics* of sex – and what the outcomes of those battles were.

1 Reconceiving sexuality 1900–1914

At the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, a number of factors came together to make sex a highly public topic. One factor was growing media attention to the issue of prostitution. This attention was intensified by military and government authorities' worry about the perceived spread of venereal diseases, and by public fascination with titillating stories of sex trafficking. The rise of a women's movement also spiked concern with prostitution. The movement challenged the entirety of the entrenched double standard of sexual morality, and above all expressed anger at the nonchalance with which authorities and the male public alike appeared to accept prostitution as simply a natural supplement to the institution of marriage. A second crucial factor was the growing desire for fertility control. Across European nations, couples sought to limit family size using a variety of measures and, despite the fact that contraceptive strategies often clashed with longings for pleasure, birthrates in all nations and all classes of society began dropping. Medical doctors and government authorities alike paid close attention to this phenomenon. Intersecting with these two developments was a third: an increasing voyeuristic public interest in scandals surrounding same-sex activities – many of them involving high-ranking military officials, members of the aristocratic elites, and celebrities. What once had been a rather unremarkable feature of some individuals' sexual habits became fodder for mass gossip. Same-sex scandals also fueled speculation about human sexual predilections more generally – as, at the same time, increased efforts at policing and repression of same-sex activities were met with newly organized resistance from individuals who came to think of their preferences as an important part of their identities.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in short, and in a multitude of ways, sex became political. The explosion of discussion, in turn, inescapably also influenced how sex was practiced. People's expectations – about love and physical sensations, about the purposes of sex and preferences while having it – all were profoundly affected. No less deeply affected were people's experiences.

Prostitution, venereal disease, and the double standard

For a long time, prostitution had been the "open secret" supplement to marriage. It had been quietly tolerated as a necessary evil or even a basic good. It was considered the normal way of things – both the accepted site for young men's initiation into sex and a recurrent side opportunity for men also after they were married. But around 1900, prostitution emerged as a focus for loud and vitriolic controversy. This was due in no small part to the perceived (in some cases quite real but often hysterically exaggerated) spread of venereal disease, especially syphilis, but also gonorrhea and soft chancre. And it was above all this fear of disease that initially prompted medical doctors to urge governments to be more active in sex education (or rather, *anti*-sex education) addressed both to adolescents in schools and to soldiers in the various nations' militaries.

Public health experts expressed special concern about the need to combat venereal disease in European nations' overseas possessions: in northern and western Africa (in the cases of Italy and France), the East Indies (in the case of the Netherlands), Africa as well as India, Hong Kong, or Singapore (in the case of Great Britain), and yet other parts of Africa (in the cases of Portugal, Belgium, and Germany). Very frequently, colonized men of color were represented as unable to control their sexual impulses and thus more of a danger to efforts to stem the spread of infections. Notably, the elaboration of these distinctions really served to deny the prevalence of promiscuity among white European men. It was a transparent attempt to use racism to flatter those white men into restraining themselves and desisting from extramarital sex.

Also the growth of urban centers within Europe, with their increasingly large working-class populations, pushed the issues of working-class women's participation in prostitution as an additional (or, more rarely, sole) source of income and working-class men's own resort to prostitutes (middle-class men were not the only customers) into public awareness. Much discussion focused on the visible public "nuisance" of streetwalking and/or on the scandal of trafficking (in which innocent rural girls were imagined as lured to the big city and/or across national boundaries with promises of work but then were confined against their will in brothels).

Yet although stories about trafficking garnered avid attention in the sensationalist press, they were usually at best only partially true. They served as a kind of journalistic pornography under the fig-leaf of moral outrage – even as they could have very real legislative consequences. (For instance in Britain in 1885, based on an early set of these stories, legislation was passed in which the age of consent for girls was raised,

brothelkeepers were more readily prosecuted, and – through a complex conjunction of circumstances – an amendment was tacked on which criminalized male homosexual acts for more than eight decades.)

Particularly in Poland and Austria-Hungary in the first decade of the twentieth century, stories about trafficking (a profession frequently ascribed to Jews) served more as occasions for lurid anti-Semitic invective. The reality of extensive acceptance of prostitution among gentiles (Polish and Austro-Hungarian police and medical reports made clear how much and how unapologetically gentile men indulged), the economic calculation and initiative taken by women entering the sex trade, and the frequent connivance of their families were blatantly erased as the specter of the Jewish pimp and trafficker captured the frenzied popular imagination. In addition, in some countries – for instance again in Austria-Hungary (especially in Budapest, which was considered a hotbed of vice, as well as in Vienna), but also in Russia, Germany, and France – homosexual male prostitution, while sometimes considered a less likely source for the spread of venereal disease than female prostitution, also garnered increasing (variously alarmed or titillated) public attention.

In the early twentieth century, the strong involvement of medical men in public debates, in scholarly journals, or in negotiations with the military authorities or municipal or federal governments was ironic not least due to their inability to provide a cure for syphilis. Mercury treatments were recommended – and gruesomely painful – but ineffective (although the disease's tendency to go into phases of remission misled the experts for quite some time). It would not be until the discovery of the arsenic derivative Salvarsan in 1909 that syphilis was thought to become more effectively treatable. But although Salvarsan and its variants were more widely used in World War I and its aftermath, it too could be highly toxic, and recent researches have cast doubt on its efficacy as well. In any event, in the colonies the use of the cheaper and definitively ineffectual mercury continued well into the twentieth century. It would not be until the 1940s that penicillin became broadly accessible.

Some doctors at the turn of the century – for instance in Germany, which tended toward a more pragmatic public health approach – did urge distribution to soldiers of condoms (made at this time either from sheep's intestines or from rubber) as well as prophylactic injections of antiseptic liquids into the penis before or after intercourse with prostitutes. But many men resisted the use of condoms because they inhibited sensation, opting to rely on the idea that prostitutes' health had been regularly checked. Some medical doctors bluntly acknowledged that subjecting prostitutes to recurrent medical examinations only functioned to provide that sector of men who liked to visit them both "a maximum of

convenience and an – unfounded – sense of security."[1] But other medical and military authorities (for instance in Britain) pretended ignorance of the prevalence of visits to prostitutes among soldiers and preferred to urge officers to counsel premarital abstinence and marital fidelity instead. And many physicians remained in studied denial of the fact that the married clients of prostitutes frequently also infected their wives – with some doctors explicitly deliberating on how to keep wives ignorant of their condition. The main strategy remained the effort to keep prostitutes under police surveillance, inspect them regularly, and take them out of "circulation" if they showed signs of disease.

A second major reason for the preoccupation with prostitution at the turn of the century was the rise of an – increasingly transnationally networked – women's rights movement which challenged the so obviously pervasive sexual double standard. The women's movement joined a rising "moral purity," anti-vice activist movement which involved both men and women. Purity activists declared that men should be able to control their lusts and they also used fear of disease to encourage greater continence. Feminists and purity activists of the era made a variety of (at times overlapping, at times mutually conflicting) arguments both about how governments should handle prostitution and about the nature of human sexuality. Increasing success of these activists in acquiring public notice in the press and in petitioning national parliaments to shut down brothels (as of 1895, for instance, abolitionists proudly announced they had succeeded in convincing governments to close all brothels in Norway and many in Denmark and the Netherlands) in turn prompted defenders of prostitution – or at least those who accepted prostitution as an inevitable part of life – to develop counter-strategies of their own.

The escalating debate – and the spotlight it shone on proletarian habits – had unexpected consequences for the women who made occasional money by selling their bodies. Among the urban working classes, there had often been a rather blurry line between prostitution and casual sex – and between both of these and longer-term premarital and extramarital relationships. Generally, those working-class women who pursued prostitution had done so only seasonally and for a few years, as just one additional source of income along with laundering, waitressing, seamstressing, sales, domestic service, or factory or agricultural work.

[1] Albert Eulenberg, a doctor in Berlin, quoted in *Zur Geschichte einer Petition gegen die Errichtung öffentlicher Häuser in Wien: Protokoll der Frauenversammlung vom 20. Februar 1897 im alten Wiener Rathause* (Vienna: Allgemeiner Österreichischer Frauenverein, 1897), 27.

It was an unfortunate irony that precisely the intensified attention given to the phenomenon due to the battles between abolitionists and pro-regulationists caused working-class women to have more difficulty both with balancing occasional prostitution with other kinds of work and with leaving prostitution for marriage and/or respectable jobs.

For and against regulation

Most European states at this time did not officially criminalize prostitution. Rather they insisted that it be state-regulated, with prostitutes limited to certain areas of towns and subjected to the recurrent medical examinations. There was considerable variety in the details. Some states permitted only brothels (tellingly they were often called "houses of tolerance") but prosecuted streetwalkers. Other states permitted streetwalking as long as prostitutes registered with the police and submitted to regular health checks. Yet others technically maintained the criminalization of prostitution but did not prosecute women who submitted to medical controls. In all cases unregistered prostitutes – of which there were thousands, in some cases tens of thousands, in larger cities – were perpetually liable to police harassment and criminal prosecution. Police across European cities frequently treated any working-class woman as potentially suspect and had no qualms about hauling women into custody and forcing them to be subjected by doctors to brutal vaginal checks with speculums (instruments that often enough had not been sterilized and thus themselves could spread disease), subsequently also often sending them to jail or hospital. This was the so-called "regulationist" system, modeled on the one first developed by Napoleon during his wars of conquest in the early nineteenth century.

Arguments about the costs and benefits of this system criss-crossed peculiarly on the ideological spectrum. Some activists called for even more stringent penalties for prostitution and especially for those (madams, pimps, traffickers) who profited from it; pro-regulationists defended the system as the sensible middle ground; and an increasing number, called "abolitionists," wanted to do away entirely with this system of state-run, police-supervised regulation of prostitution – but their motives varied. Some professed sympathy for prostitutes as among the most impoverished and exploited of working-class women. But many saw in regulated prostitution an affront to morality – a system which failed to stem the spread of disease but simply permitted men to feel encouraged in their persistent infidelities, with the government functioning as a kind of enabler – and they hoped with their activism to