

Sexual liberation and sexual revolutions

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ABSTRACT

Sexual life became extricated from the constraints of marriage and reproduction in various Northern countries in the 1960s as a result of cultural transformations, scientific and medical discoveries, and the politicization of sexual matters. The blossoming of sexual liberation movements—successors to the sexual reforms of the interwar period, and more directly born from the struggles of 1968—contributed to the struggle for new possibilities for erotic sexual life. Over the years, the denunciation of sexual repression gradually made way for calls to recognize the diversity of sexual practices and identities. Feminist and homosexual movements largely drove these struggles, and especially helped to advance these questions on the legal level. These cultural, social, political, and scientific movements collectively made up the sexual revolution.



Cover of Actuel magazine, issue no.14, November 1971. Source: collection of the author.



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Between 1960 and 1980, sexual liberation movements flourished in Northern countries, and gave rise to what is commonly referred to as the sexual revolution. This liberation resided in the struggle for a sexual life that was not exclusively reproductive, and that was extricated from the institution of marriage. This revolution consisted of a profound change in mentalities, values, knowledge, and behavior toward a more optimistic and positive conception of sexuality, based on the acknowledgment of sexual pleasure as a source of fulfillment. This long-term process was founded on the cultural and scientific transformations initiated in the 1950s, before social and political movements established sexual matters as political questions that called for a liberating program. Conversely, sexual misery was seen as the product of the social, medical, legal, ideological, religious, and esthetic systems that sought to limit sexual life to a reproductive and conjugal framework, and that constituted sexual repression. The acceptance of sexual misery was seen as the basis for submission to authoritarian ideologies. The sexual revolution was thus based on the notion that the struggle for sexual liberation is a powerful political lever for social emancipation. It sought to create institutions, repeal or formulate laws and regulations, produce knowledge, and change mentalities with a view to legitimizing nonreproductive and nonconjugal sexual activity, along with the practices, relations, and identities that accompanied it.

The optimistic conception of sexuality was developed in the late nineteenth century, especially as a response to the repression of homosexuality—particularly fierce in Germany and Great Britain—with the publication of works by sexologists such as Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) from Great Britain or Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) from Germany, as well as through the thought of homosexual writers and artists. For the most politicized of these authors, the material and ideological obstacles to practicing a non-reproductive sexual life were an integral part of the machinery of social domination exerted by capitalism: *sexual liberation* became a central aspect of the emancipation of humanity. The World League for Sexual Reform (1921-1932) was one of the first international organizations that associated social emancipation with sexual liberation. In Germany, the Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) defended the notion of a sexual revolution in the 1920s. The philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) provided a philosophical foundation for these ideas in his book *Eros and Civilization*, published in the United States in 1955.

During the 1960 and 1970s, scientific and medical discoveries as well as legal changes transformed the conditions in which sexual life was practiced. The medical sciences broke their alliance with the morality of the Catholic Church by developing ideas and tools that provided genuine legitimacy to nonreproductive sexual life. Political movements such as feminisms and the first homosexual movements seized upon these discoveries to bring about legislative changes. In France, following the student movement of May 1968, which had a strong sexual dimension, it was chiefly the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF, Women's Liberation Movement) founded in 1970 and the Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire (Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action) founded in 1971 that included sexual battles within the struggle for emancipation.

The contraceptive pill, which was initially intended to control births for women in Southern countries, was sold in the FRG the year it was invented, and in the United States in 1956. In the ensuing years, feminist movements allied to certain parts of the medical establishment obtained the decriminalization of abortion in a few European countries. In 1966, the American sexologists William Masters (1915-2001) and Virginia Johnson (1925-2013) demonstrated in *Human Sexual Response* that orgasm—for both men and women—was a physiologically natural phenomenon, while their colleague Harry Benjamin (1885-1986) provided legitimacy in his *The Transsexual Phenomenon* for the possibility of changing sexual organs/gender using hormones and sex reassignment surgery. Masturbation was promoted as a “normal” sexual practice for adolescents by Dr. Jean Carpentier in his pamphlet *Apprenons à faire l'amour* (Let us learn to make love) published in 1971. In 1973, at a time when it was still considered to be a mental disorder, homosexuality was removed from the primary psychiatric classification in North America (DSM-III). Six years before that, it was no longer considered a crime in England or Wales. The censorship of pornography was loosened, especially in France in 1975, although pornographic films were still restricted to the ghetto of the adult industry, which was taxed heavily. Finally, the sale of medicine for erectile

dysfunction—which would be used as a male aphrodisiac (sildenafil sold under the name of Viagra in 1998)—represents the latest reincarnation of sexual liberation...for men.

The sexual revolution is still the subject of controversy: firstly with respect to use of the term “revolution,” as opposed to the more simple “modernization of sexuality”; and secondly regarding the consequences for women, which have been positive thanks to changes to legislation and mentalities, but also negative due to a new “tyranny of pleasure” that has made their situation worse.

Access to contraception, abortion, and divorce were obtained during the 1970s in most industrialized European countries. Sexual relations are no longer mandatory as part of marriage, and sexual life and procreation outside of marriage are no longer stigmatized, and are even asserted in certain cases. Same-sex unions and marriages were gradually recognized in most European countries, beginning with the Netherlands in 2001.

Nevertheless, ensuring the sexual liberties of the young, elderly, and handicapped persons, as well as full citizenship for homosexual, transgender, and intersex individuals, still largely remains to be won. Programs for sexual education intended for adolescents sometimes preach preconjugal sexual abstinence. Abortion is still illicit and access to it remains difficult in numerous countries, especially in certain European countries such as Poland, Malta, and Cyprus. Homosexuality and nonconjugal relations are still prohibited and subject to ferocious repression and ostracism. However, the primary benefit of sexual revolutions is to consider sexual fulfillment as a right as well as an individual and social value related to health, as promoted by the World Health Organization since 1975. The struggle for sexual liberation continues today, whether it is for sexual rights or sexual and reproductive health.

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