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SEX IN CRISIS
THE NEW SEXUAL REVOLUTION
AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

DAGMAR HERZOG

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SEX IN CRISIS

THE NEW SEXUAL REVOLUTION
and the Future of American Politics

DAGMAR HERZOG

A Member of the Perseus Books Group
New York
Chapter 6

IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The Religious Right is a capacious tent in which many agendas and approaches have found a home. There are conservative evangelicals who promise worldly prosperity and success (if only you trust enough in God's plans). There are others who gird themselves for Armageddon. There are the vehement defenders of "Merry Christmas" and school prayer and the enemies of evolution and intellectualism and "liberal elitism." There are highly intellectual (and themselves elite) members of the Religious Right. There are those who see the culture clash with neofundamentalist Islam as the current big threat, and those who work to justify the ongoing war in Iraq as a properly Christian cause. There are those who raise money for and organize tourism in Israel not least in the expectation that at the End of Days a majority of Jews will convert to Christ. But right-wing evangelicalism achieved power in American politics primarily through its sex activism. And in fifteen years of steady effort, it
managed to undo the most important achievements of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.

This was accomplished, however paradoxically, through a selective appropriation and adaptation of key aspects of that old sexual revolution. A core component has been speaking in graphic detail both about sexual discontent and dysfunction and about the possibilities for ecstatically orgasmic and emotionally fulfilling bliss. Without the promise of pleasure, the Religious Right would not have found nearly as many adherents as it has; repression alone is not sufficiently appealing.

Evangelical sexual conservatives took up some of the main concerns of the feminist women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s. An interest in intensifying women’s sexual pleasure has been a central focus of evangelical sex advice from the start. Many women’s frustration at male fascination with pornography and emotional nonpresence during sex—another feminist theme—and the need to help men get comfortable with physical and emotional mutuality have also been taken up. So too have the classic women’s movement themes of concern about domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation of women been addressed. More recently, evangelicals have moved to adapt both feminist and mainstream advice about body image, in addition to generating a vast Christian dieting and addiction recovery industry. There is also an anti-authoritarian evangelical youth counterculture.

In its activism around issues of sexuality, the Religious Right has found ways as well to incorporate the insights of the new age men’s movement into its own program to transform an insecure, Internet-surfing bumbler into a virile he-man who is competent at both male-male friendship and rivalry and hot heterosexual romance. The movement has been wildly successful in part because of its extraordinary ability to present its own program as therapeutic. None of this, however, should distract from the fact that right-wing evangelicals have also been sadistic and punitive, eager to play to the most base human desires to feel superior to others who fail to live up to the expected norms.

While the roots of the Religious Right lie in antiblack racism (a history that has now been largely overcome but still goes woefully underacknowledged), it got its start in American national politics by organizing against abortion and homosexuality. In the wake of the legalization of abortion in Roe v. Wade in 1973, and in response to the growing public visibility of gays and lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s and their demands for an end to discrimination, evangelical conservatives could count on these two issues, along with more general calls for restrictions on sex education and the restoration of “traditional family values,” as their major fund-raising and mobilizing tools. All through the 1990s, playing to homophobic reflexes was one of the Christian Right’s most popular tactics. But nothing has been more successful in the early twenty-first century than its ability to hijack the national conversation about heterosexuality.

Initially, telling the heterosexual majority what to do was not even on the agenda. In the first half of the 1990s, the anti-abortion cause had been running into some difficulties. Americans had grown wary. They were beginning to harbor doubts about some of the movement’s more extreme tactics—like shooting doctors. Polls revealed that Americans of both genders remained able—by a slim but stubborn majority—to identify emotionally with the situation of women who sought to end their unwanted pregnancies. At the time, consensual heterosexual sex still seemed to most Americans like a pretty basic all-American right, and the assault on abortion felt like it could grow into an assault on whatever else anyone might want to do with their lives and bodies as well.
Since the turn of the millennium, right-wing evangelicals have become emboldened in new ways. A big boost came through the election in 2000 of George W. Bush, the first conservative evangelical Republican president. Putting individuals sympathetic to the Religious Right agenda into key positions in the federal government and pouring federal funds into projects developed by Christian conservatives inevitably transformed the power dynamics. Yet just as important were the advent of Viagra and the explosive growth of Internet porn—and the ensuing anxiety about the relationships between desire, performance, satisfaction, and intimacy.

In all of its culture war campaigns, the Religious Right was most effective where it was able to formulate its arguments in secular terms. Christian conservatives certainly used pseudoscientific arguments about physical health in their battles for sexual conservatism. But nothing has been as useful as the adaptation of the language of psychological health, particularly the endlessly inventive invocation of the ideal of self-esteem.

None of us can block out entirely the many injunctions to accept ourselves but also improve ourselves, no matter how contradictory these goals are. The incessant talk about sex and self-esteem hooks into much wider therapeutic aspects of our culture: like a pendulum that constantly swings from telling us to make peace with ourselves and our situations as they are, in all their imperfect ordinariness, to telling us that we really must do battle with ourselves and our situations, that self-improvement is essential, and that greater happiness is always just around the corner. The Religious Right has managed to redirect much of the national conversation about sex—with lasting consequences that go way beyond biannual national election rituals—not least because it merged so thoroughly with the popular culture it claims to combat and despise.

Moreover, the refurbished focus on psychological damage in sexually conservative arguments manages to lend to the current state of the conversation a sense that it is both pro-woman and pro-equality—even when it is neither.

The abstinence campaigns are the most obvious example of the psychologizing strategy. Whether religious or secular in orientation, websites and books that plead for premarital chastity invariably contend that delaying the onset of sexual intercourse is a sign of heightened self-respect. Over and over, young people are told that self-restraint is self-empowerment. Scholastic or athletic achievement is presented as mutually exclusive with sexual activity; the prospects for a strong and happy future marriage are said to be in inverse relationship to premarital experience. Secular conservatives also use the language of self-esteem to make their case for a return to restraint.

The success of the Religious Right is most evident in the way many self-defined sexual liberals now rush to concede that a delay in sexual debut is desirable and that keeping the number of sexual partners in a lifetime to a minimum is an important sign of psychological health and self-valuing. Experience is no longer seen as a resource. Even those who advocate for comprehensive sex education feel the need to insist that “abstinence is a laudable goal” (Deborah Arindell of the American Social Health Association, an STD awareness group, in 2006), or that all they are asking for is “abstinence-plus” education (as in Representatives Barbara Lee and Christopher Shays and Senator Frank Launtenberg’s bipartisan Responsible Education About Life [REAL] Act, introduced in March 2007), or that abstinence is what they have been advocating all along but, alas, one must be realistic and include information about condoms and contraceptives (as in the arguments of the coordinator of sex education in the Baltimore school system interviewed on NPR in October 2007).
Even more momentous is the way the language of psychology has infused the discussion of abortion. Although the anti-abortion movement had seemed stalled in the 1990s, it has returned in new forms and found new adherents across party lines. It has also succeeded in putting in place numerous restrictions at the state level to limit women’s, especially young women’s, access to abortion. One-third of all women between the ages of fifteen and forty-five now live in counties in which abortions are not available; one-quarter of women must travel fifty miles to obtain an abortion, and in some parts of the United States the trip is hundreds of miles. Yet one in every two pregnancies in the United States is unplanned, and one in three American women will have an abortion in her lifetime; a significant percentage of these are women over age twenty-five who are already mothers. In few areas of sexual politics is there so wide a gap between the lived experience of ordinary people and what can be discussed in the public domain.

In 2007, in Gonzales v. Carhart, the Supreme Court upheld the Partial Birth Abortion Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 2003. This act criminalized certain methods of abortion that are used in fewer than 1 percent of all abortions performed (0.17 percent, for instance, in the year 2000)—and then only in order to preserve the health of the woman. But doctors now have good reason to fear that all second-trimester abortions could be interpreted as criminal. The language of the majority opinion authored by Justice Anthony Kennedy has even more significant implications for that vast majority of abortions that take place in the first trimester. The decision is likely to serve as the basis for state legislators’ efforts to introduce information into mandatory pre-abortion counseling sessions about the potential psychological damage having an abortion could supposedly do to a woman. The decision marks a key moment in the efforts of the Religious Right to portray restrictions on abortion not as limiting women’s fundamental right to control their reproductive capacities but rather as somehow beneficial to women. As Wanda Franz, president of the National Right to Life Committee, likes to say: “We think of ourselves as very pro-woman. We believe that when you help the woman, you help the baby.”

Gonzales v. Carhart is the first Supreme Court ruling to reverse the decriminalization of abortion guaranteed since Roe v. Wade. As Representative Jerrold Nadler of New York observed in the wake of the decision:

The Supreme Court has declared open season on women’s lives and on the right of women to control their own bodies, their health and their destinies. Overturning a decision only a few years old, the Court has, for the first time since Roe v. Wade, allowed an abortion procedure to be criminalized. What has changed since the Court last considered nearly identical legislation? The facts haven’t changed. The widely held opinion in the medical profession that this ban would endanger women hasn’t changed. The Constitution hasn’t changed. Only one thing has changed: Justice O’Connor retired and President Bush and a Republican Senate replaced her with a reliably anti-choice vote on the Supreme Court. It is clear today that the far-right’s campaign to pack the Supreme Court has succeeded and that women and their families will be the losers.

Justice Kennedy had himself in the past been a supporter of women’s right to choose. In this new decision, however, his word choices were especially telling:

Respect for human life finds an ultimate expression in the bond of love the mother has for her child. The Act recognizes this
reality as well. Whether to have an abortion requires a difficult and painful moral decision. ... While we find no reliable data to measure the phenomenon, it seems unexceptionable to conclude some women come to regret their choice to abort the infant life they once created and sustained. ... Severe depression and loss of esteem can follow.25

Despite the admission that there were “no reliable data,” and despite the concession that negative emotional consequences for the woman were not inevitable but rather “can” follow, the ideas of diminished female self-esteem and the prospect of post-abortion depression have, in this precedent-setting case, been elevated into judicial concepts.

Justice Kennedy’s words were largely based on a friend-of-the-court brief filed by the Justice Foundation, a conservative nonprofit litigation firm. The Justice Foundation brief included statements from 180 women who declared that their abortions had caused them feelings of despair and lasting regret. A typical statement was from Tina Brock of Nicholson, Georgia:

Little did I know when I made that choice to abort my baby 21 years ago that it would affect the rest of my life. Supposing to be [sic] a legal, simple procedure, my abortion sent me down a long road of severe depression. People need to know abortion hurts women!26

For several years, abortion opponents have been floating this idea that abortion is psychologically damaging. The office of Representative Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) conducted a survey of “crisis pregnancy centers” in which callers posing as seventeen-year-old pregnant girls encountered a range of fraudulent information, including the false advice that abortion raises the risk of breast cancer, negatively affects future fertility, and causes severe psychological distress. Waxman’s report noted that “significant psychological stress after an abortion is no more common than after birth.” But at one center a caller was told that in the year after an abortion the suicide rate “goes up by seven times,” while another center informed a caller that post-abortion stress was “much like” that seen in Vietnam veterans and “is something that anyone who’s had an abortion is sure to suffer from.”27

Anti-abortion activism has profoundly reshaped the national conversation and also deeply affected supporters of legal abortion. Despite the gap between lived reality and rhetoric, and while a (slim) majority of Americans still support the retention of Roe v. Wade, a majority also within that pro-choice group now call for more restrictions on access to abortion, especially for teens. For many, abortion is only understandable in dire circumstances; to more and more people, the mere desire to terminate an unwanted pregnancy does not sound like an acceptable reason to seek an abortion.28

Anti-abortion activists worked long and hard to present abortion, not as a last-resort method of fertility control when other forms of contraception have failed or have not been used, but rather as a horrific form of murder. It has become clear in the last several years that the aim is not just to stop abortion. If that were the aim, then anti-abortion activists would do much better if they vigorously promoted contraceptives, handed out sex toys, and recommended a variety of imaginative noncoital “outer-course” practices that produce glorious sensations but do not result in pregnancies. Instead, the aim is to infuse with shame all sexual expression and experience outside of heterosexual marriage. Neither of these campaigns would be nearly as effective if they were presented solely in religious terms.
The discussions over sex in Europe start from entirely different premises. No politician or public health official in Europe would ever seriously debate whether condoms are an effective means to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS infection. German billboards frankly proclaim, The only people who are perverted are the ones who don’t use condoms.29 Nor is there a public outcry in European countries over the suitability of public HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns for safe sex that mix humor and explicitness or that take nonmarital heterosexual or homosexual activity as a given. A billboard in German train stations shows a brightly colored, bouncing condom that asks: Having an affair? Take me with you!30 An Italian billboard features a working-class senior citizen who uses condoms and has had 8,127 ascertained encounters and not one STD.31 The French may be slightly more discreet, opting for the slogan: Paris protects love. But posters at bus stops across Paris consist of photos of traffic signals where the green lights are condoms.32 In 2005 center-right (and Catholic) French president Jacques Chirac proposed that a condom vending machine be placed in every French high school.33

There was no great public debate when the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland legalized prostitution. The aim was to provide prostitutes with access to police protection and to reduce their vulnerability to pimps and sex traffickers; in addition, the understanding was that consensual adult behavior should in any event not fall under the purview of the law. Austria and, more recently, Hungary and Slovenia have decriminalized prostitution for similar reasons.34

Nor was there extensive controversy when, in recent years, first-trimester abortions were decriminalized in Portugal and made more widely available in France and Switzerland.35 Throughout western Europe, and despite the Catholic Church’s opposition, access to abortion is taken by popular majorities as a non-negotiable aspect of half the human race’s right to manage its reproductive potential when contraceptives fail. When, in 2007, the Archbishop of Canterbury expressed concern that abortions in England were too easily available, his critics responded that the prevalence of abortions was a signal that British women were taking motherhood more seriously than in the past and were more carefully choosing when to have their children.36 Meanwhile, abortion rates among teens in particular are notably lower in European countries than they are in the United States. This is coupled with higher rates of contraceptive use.37

The European Union recognizes same-sex unions across national boundaries and has made official rejection of homophobia a key marker of the suitability of candidates for European Union offices and of nations for European Union accession.38 The mayors of both Paris and Berlin are openly gay, but their gayness is unremarkable and politically irrelevant.39 Spain has recently joined Belgium and the Netherlands in legalizing not just same-sex unions but same-sex marriage.40 The Italian government recently ran an anti-homophobia billboard campaign.41 And perhaps most importantly, the European Court of Human Rights takes as foundational the view that guaranteeing a citizen’s ability freely to determine his or her own intimate relations is an intrinsic component of a democratic society.42 A scholar summarizes the court’s stance this way: “Both the right to desired sexuality and the right to freedom from undesired sexuality must be safeguarded. Only then is human dignity in regard to sexuality fully and completely respected.”43 Sexual violence, coercion, abuse, exploitation, and harassment are not illegal because they are immoral, but because they are violations of another human being’s rights to sexual self-determination.44
Adolescent sex education campaigns take both one-night stands and deeply romantic love affairs as perfectly reasonable activities for youth, and adolescents from the age of sixteen on are assumed to have the right to sexual expression free from adult interference. The aim of sex education is to facilitate negotiation skills over practices and to emphasize the importance of consent. "Only when both want it" is a key slogan. Europeans typically view teen sexual exploration and experimentation as a natural and healthful stage of human development. French, German, and Italian popular magazines directed at teenagers routinely offer explicit discussions of the pleasures of petting and caressing as well as reports on what intercourse feels like the first time. Government-sponsored ad campaigns go out of their way to promote condom use for adolescents. Teens can get free condoms, medical care, and advice at youth clinics, all without parental consent. In Europe, youths' rights to confidentiality are considered as important as those of adults.

Europe and the United States still have comparable rates of teen sexual activity, but it is the American teenage girl who currently has a higher likelihood of pregnancy. Although teen birthrates have finally dropped somewhat in the last several years, they have declined much less steeply since the 1970s in the United States than they did in western Europe. The U.S. teen pregnancy rate (84 out of every 1,000 girls) is more than three times higher than Sweden (25), Denmark (23), and Finland (21), and more than four times higher than Germany (16) or the Netherlands (12).

American teens not only have more abortions than European teens. American teenagers also have a higher rate of sexually transmitted diseases than their European counterparts. The rate of HIV infection among American teenagers is higher than it is among European teens: "Approximately 50 young people a day, an average of two young people every hour, are infected with HIV in the United States." The United States continues to have the highest level of teen pregnancies in the industrialized world, and of the 19 million cases of STIs annually in the United States, almost half afflict young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.

As New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof has written:

While teenagers in the U.S. have about as much sexual activity as teenagers in Canada or Europe, American girls are four times as likely as German girls to become pregnant, almost five times as likely as French girls to have a baby, and more than seven times as likely as Dutch girls to have an abortion. Young Americans are five times as likely to have HIV as young Germans, and teenagers' gonorrhea rate is 70 times higher in the U.S. than in the Netherlands or France.

The prevailing American view that premarital sex and "risk" are intrinsically linked is inaccurate. As one Swiss-authored essay in the Journal of Adolescent Health reported in 2006: "In many European countries—Switzerland in particular—sexual intercourse, at least from the age of 15 or 16 years, is considered acceptable and even part of normative adolescent behavior." Switzerland has one of the lowest rates globally of abortion and teen pregnancy. Like most other European nations, Switzerland offers comprehensive sex education, unimpeded access to contraceptives, and confidential health care. As another Swiss commentator put it, "The main difference is that in the States sexual activity is considered a risk. Here we consider it a pleasure." The Canadian government, like most European governments, takes the view that sexual intercourse is typical for teens
and officially informs parents not to be alarmed but rather to talk frankly with youth about consent, contraceptives, and disease prevention as well as body image and emotions.\(^6^6\)

It would be fair to conclude that European teenagers are more comfortable with sex and their own sexuality than their American counterparts. They are not educated to experience the guilt, shame, anxiety, and taboo-breaking melodrama that Americans—teens and adults—tend to bring to their sexual encounters. The United States also has the highest rate of sexual coercion in the industrialized world.\(^5^7\)

Survey after survey shows that despite early serial experimentation, love and faithfulness in Europe definitely remain “in.” A recent study shows that U.S. teenagers on average actually have more partners than either European or Canadian teenagers.\(^5^8\) Europeans have exhibited no decline in their ability to handle romance or maintain enduring passion and love with one other special person. At the same time, they do openly accept that long-time partnership is not an ideal for everyone; there is also widespread recognition that, over the course of a lifetime, individuals might seek to move between monogamy and nonmonogamy.\(^5^9\)

European sexual cultures are far from perfect. The rise of Islam within Europe has particularly challenged Europeans to defend their own more liberal sexual values without reaching for racism in response, and in this they have frequently failed; from Britain to France to Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria, hostility to Islam has been expressed specifically in arguments over issues relating to sexuality.\(^6^0\) In the Netherlands and in several of the German states, it has been the conservative and Christian Democratic politicians who have proposed that foreign nationals from predominantly Muslim countries who apply for Dutch or German citizenship should not only be re-

quired to demonstrate their knowledge of Dutch or German history and laws but also affirm their comfort with both homosexuality and female sexual independence.\(^6^1\)

Still, the conversations in Europe begin from the conviction that autonomy and self-determination in sexual expression and in the formation and maintenance of intimate relationships are themselves key measures of a good and just society, no matter if the subject is adolescent sexuality or marriage, same-sex unions or reproductive choice, prostitution or disease prevention. Europeans also believe that the personal is private, and sex-related matters simply do not determine elections as they have done in the United States in recent years.

There are signs now that grassroots resistance to the Religious Right’s sexual program has been mounting across the United States—and that the resistance is getting more confident as well as creative. In cities and towns across the nation, there have been growing numbers of parents fighting back against the abstinence education movement and demanding comprehensive education. At Shamrock Middle School in DeKalb County, Georgia, parent protest succeeded in getting the abstinence curriculum “Choosing the Best” (which receives millions in federal funds and relies on fear- and shame-based messages as well as conveying, as one critic put it, “misinformation, and biased views of marriage and sexual orientation”) shelved. Parents argued that the curriculum was bringing religion into the schools and demanded that administrators explain why the curriculum “was accepted without first reviewing its scientific accuracy.” In a high school in Sarasota, Florida, after conservatives tried to ban Planned Parenthood from the schools...
on the grounds that its programs included information on condoms and contraceptives, the school decided to run dual sections of its life management skills class to satisfy both sets of parents, one based on abstinence and one on comprehensive sex education. In Lansing, New York, parents complained that a "pregnancy center" program allowed into the public schools had a "moralizing tone" and used dirty sneakers "to symbolize lost virginity." The parents also pointed out that "the program's emphasis on marriage made children of non-traditional families uncomfortable." The school board voted to remove the programs.\textsuperscript{62}

At the state level, there are also promising attempts by governors and legislatures to preempt the worst effects of the "conscience clause" laws that allowed pharmacists to refuse to fill prescriptions for emergency contraception (or any contraception). As of 2006, California, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, and Nevada all required pharmacists to fill all legal prescriptions.\textsuperscript{63} In November 2007, a New Jersey law went into effect that prohibits pharmacists from refusing to fill prescriptions "solely on moral, religious or ethical grounds."\textsuperscript{64} Comparable bills that require pharmacists to dispense birth control may also be passed in Missouri, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.\textsuperscript{65} Related to this trend are the pharmacy board decisions in 2006 in Illinois and Massachusetts that obligated the major pharmacy chain Wal-Mart to provide emergency contraception (EC) in the wake of the FDA's 2006 approval of the over-the-counter marketing of EC to women age eighteen and older.\textsuperscript{66}

In 2004 there were only three states (Pennsylvania, California, and Maine) that refused federal funding for sex education in the schools owing to the federal requirement that the schools teach abstinence. By the end of 2007, eleven more states had announced their refusal of federal funds for sex education. One of these was New York, which in 2006 had received more abstinence funding from the federal government than any other state besides Texas and Florida. Governor after governor, invoking the federal government's own commissioned 2007 study finding that abstinence programming had essentially the same outcomes as comprehensive programming in terms of both sexual debut and rates of unwanted pregnancy and disease, made the simple argument that abstinence education was not working. Some governors asserted that they would offer comprehensive education because that was what was best for the youth in their state. As a spokesperson for the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States said, "This wave of states rejecting the money is a bellwether. . . . It's a canary in the coal mine of what's to come." And as another comprehensive sex ed advocate observed: "I think this could be the straw that breaks the camel's back in terms of continued funding of these programs. . . . How can they ignore so many states slapping a return-to-sender label on this funding?"\textsuperscript{67}

The success of the American Civil Liberties Union and a broad array of gay and lesbian rights organizations in making the case for same-sex partners to marry is also encouraging. Although civil unions remain an inadequate substitute for the right to marry, it is excellent news that the intensity of the debate about same-sex marriage and the quality of the arguments put forward in its defense have made the American public more comfortable with the compromise solution of civil unions and thereby have made politicians more comfortable endorsing this solution as well. Already in 2004 a majority of Americans approved of civil unions; the numbers have risen since then.\textsuperscript{68} Although an unconscionable amount of pain is still being inflicted at the local level in seemingly never-ending controversies over whether and how homosexuality may be discussed in sex education classrooms, all polls suggest that the balance of opinion is
tipping against homophobia, not just toward tolerance but even
toward an openly affirmative comfort with diversity of sexual
orientation.

The most promising shift across the United States may be the
younger generation's growing comfort with contraceptive use. Al-
though the United States still has the highest teen pregnancy rate
in the developed world, the rate has recently gone down. A mere
14 percent of the decline in the teen pregnancy rate can be attrib-
uted to increased abstinence among teens, and that increased ab-
stinence is largely to be found in the fifteen- to seventeen-year-old
category; fully 86 percent of the decline is due to increased use
of contraception, especially among the seventeen- to nineteen-
year-old set. Even though a distressingly high proportion (32 per-
cent) of American teens have absorbed the false information
put out by sexual conservatives that condoms do not protect
against HIV, condom use among sexually active adolescents has
gone up. In 2005, 63 percent of sexually active high school
youth reported using a condom during their most recent sex, an
impressive increase over the 46 percent who reported doing so
in 1991. Nonetheless, there are still 20 percent of sexually ex-
perienced female teens in the United States who use no method
of pregnancy prevention at all, compared to 33 percent who use
the birth control pill; these are shocking statistics when com-
pared with female teens in France (59 percent on the pill versus
12 percent using no method at all) and Germany (73 percent on
the pill versus 1 percent using no protection).

Two recent events, the removal of subsidies for contraceptive
pills at college campus health care centers (which also brought
to light the news that 39 percent of college women rely on oral
contraceptives) and the unplanned pregnancy of Britney Spears's
sixteen-year-old sister, have brought the voices of articulate
young college and high school women onto the pages of major
news outlets, unabashedly expressing their commitment to con-
traceptive use. They have also created a larger space for both peer
and familial conversations about the issue. As of 2007, the
mainstream media still quote abstinence advocates in counter-
point to advocates of comprehensive education, but the two
sides are no longer treated as equally valid. The main effect of
the reporting has increasingly been to expose the enormity of
the gulf between how Americans actually live their daily lives
and the intimidating histrionics of the Religious Right.

Despite these signs of progress, much remains to be recovered
in the wake of our new sexual revolution. At present, Americans
still experience a hypersexualization of our culture paradoxically
coexisting with decreasing comfort with our own bodies and re-
lationships. As former president of Planned Parenthood Faye
Wattleton once observed with regard to this American cultural
schizophrenia around sex:

We're basically an illiterate society sexually. We're not well edu-
cated. We're not much better educated than our parents, and
even though sex is merchandised and exploited, there is very lit-
tle sexuality education available in American schools. It is al-
most as though we had to repay our guilt for exploiting sex so
explicitly in our society by preserving a shroud of ignorance.

Above all, Religious Right rhetoric and activism have des-
trated the foundational moral concepts of self-determination
and consent. These should be the cornerstones of all ethical and
legal reflection with respect to sexuality. Not sexual orienta-
tion, not marital status, not the number of partners, not the
practices one prefers to engage in: none of these should be the
basis for debates over sexual morality and sex-related law. Among
the many precious values that have been lost in the new
sexual revolution—including an appreciation for human diversity; a determination to protect the rights of minorities; an understanding of pleasure and happiness as in themselves moral goods; a respect for the privacy of others; and a sense of curiosity rather than threat in the face of the intricacies of sex and love—the greatest loss comes from the confusion over self-determination and consent. These values are eroded every time someone treats prostitution and sexual slavery as indistinguishable, treats homosexuality and child abuse as morally comparable, lumps together promiscuity with sexual coercion, or refuses to include discussion of how to ask for and recognize consent and how to negotiate practices in sex education and anti-date-rape programming.

What remains missing from the general mix is a defense of sexual rights that does not privilege those who match the norm over those who do not, that does not lie about the complexities of human desire, that does not need to pretend that sex is perfect every time (if only you follow the rules and/or buy this product), and that does not root sexual rights only in the negative imperative to reject sexual victimization but also affirms humans' rights to sexual expression, sexual pleasure, and the freely chosen formation of intimate relationships. What's missing is the basic idea that sexual rights are human rights—for adolescents, for sexual minorities, and for individuals both within and outside the institution of marriage.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the product of collective effort. I am immensely grateful for the collaborative brainstorming energies directed my way. Will Lippincott, agent extraordinaire, and Lara Heimert, spectacular editor, were there from the start, offering their energy and thoughtful critical acuity every moment I needed them. They were pushing me always to think harder about what has been going on in this country over the last decade and a half, and about how to explain that especially to people who know they have been feeling uncomfortable yet can’t quite find the right words to express the sense that something is wrong—but also how to make clear that, as one of my (as it happens conservative Republican and Catholic) midwestern students put it, "things do not need to be the way they are."

One of my most important albeit diffuse debts is to the remarkable number of strangers who, in taxis or trains or planes, at street corners or in building corridors, in weight rooms or grocery stores, at banks or in doctor’s offices, having randomly, politely, learned what I was working on, felt moved to share with me intense episodes from their lives as well as their thoughts and feelings (including anger, confusion, and frustration) about God,