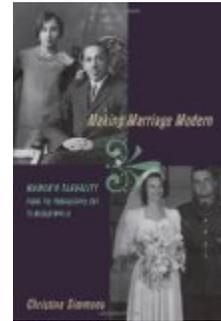


Christina Simmons. *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. ix + 306 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-506411-7.

Reviewed by Phyllis Thompson (Harvard University)

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Rewriting the Vows: Sex, Radicals, and the Pursuit of Companionship

Making Marriage Modern takes a close look at the way in which radicals and reformers, both white and African American, substantively refigured American concepts of women's sexuality, and thereby reshaped the meaning of heterosexual marriage at the beginning of the twentieth century. The agitators, scientists, and writers on whom Simmons focuses took aim squarely at the remnants of Victorian restraint and collectively created a new national ideal, the companionate marriage. Meticulously researched, the book draws on a rich body of social-scientific studies, marriage records, reformist propaganda, novels, and films. Simmons uses this material to frame and interpret the stories of the disparate groups of activists who sparked a lively public debate that lasted several decades and resulted in launching companionate marriage as the predominant vision of successful sexual partnership.

A historian of sexuality at the University of Windsor, in Ontario, Simmons's first article on companionate marriage was published thirty years ago, and portions of this book have appeared in different form over the past fifteen years. The intervening decades have seen the explosion of her academic field, although histories of heterosexuality remain relatively rare. More recently, the reemergence of a serious national debate about the meaning and purpose of marriage and about forms of sex education have positioned sexual freedom and the bonds of marriage within the spotlight of public examination. *Making Marriage Modern* thus joins a sophisticated

and fully articulated conversation that is taking place within the academy, in the popular press, and within the walls of government. As Nancy Cott established in *Public Vows* (2000), marriage is one of the primary regulators of American citizenship. In addition to shaping private life, it confers civil privileges and structures social relations; crucially, it has institutionalized the subordination of women. The stakes, then, of revising marriage are exceptionally high. To revise marriage is to a certain extent to redefine the individual in social, economic, political, and affective terms.

Historically centered on wealth, power, and property, marriage only came to be defined primarily in terms its central place in individuals' emotional lives in the nineteenth century. Victorian conceptions of marriage defined the ideal relationship between a husband and his wife as complementary—the well-known “separate spheres” model—yet fundamentally hierarchical. To early twentieth-century activists, this model represented an irredeemably old-fashioned straightjacket, and they struggled to dismantle the assumptions underpinning the repression of women, which they understood as the old model's core feature. While historians have added dimension to the stock caricature of the sexless Victorian lady, as Simmons points out, public moral values surrounding sexual self-control and purity (especially female) maintained great cultural power. The radicals she chronicles set out to change that.

The cultural context within which sex radicals appeared was conducive to their message. Women were joining the paid workforce at ever-greater rates, thus enacting the disintegration of the Victorian model of passive femininity. By the 1920s, the decade of Simmons' most extensive focus, American women had the vote, and the idea that they were purely private creatures had proved untenable. Urbanization, large-scale immigration, and industrialization had all transformed the mechanics of cultural life, and at the same time rendered quaint the morality of the past and its avoidance of public discussions of intimate relations.

White middle-class progressives, and social hygienists in particular, were the first to insist on a more open discussion of sexuality, in the name of preventing disease and ensuring the physical and emotional health of a working-class population they understood as threatened by urban temptations, loose foreign mores, and the exploitation and anonymity that accompanied an industrialized world. Social hygienists focused their efforts on women, the presumed arbiters of morality and sexual continence, and used science to bolster their arguments for sex education.

The meaning of sex itself came under scrutiny in the 1920s, when more marginal groups called for unprecedented degrees of individual freedom, and asserted the necessity of pleasure in sex. In the 1920s left-wing radicals and anarchists, bohemians, and feminists all took aim at the Victorian conceptions of marriage, in some cases advocating for "free love" and arguing for the dismantling of the institution itself. Radicals tended to argue for sexual expressiveness within the "respectable" classes; but, as Simmons points out, the privileges of non-monogamy and expressed desire were relatively available to men, and far riskier to women who indulged. The 1920s bohemian communities of Greenwich Village and Harlem tolerated a variety of sexual arrangements: open marriages, homosexuality, pre-marital sex. Meanwhile, feminists, most importantly Margaret Sanger, called for birth control as a means of limiting family size, improving health, and rebalancing domestic equality. All of these new sexual subjectivities relied on the idea of the "New Woman," increased social and economic independence among women, and the intellectual exchange specific to urban life.

These were fringe movements, however. Cultural consensus only crystallized with the arrival of the companionate marriage ideal, popularized by reformer Judge Benjamin Lindsey, who aimed to preserve marriage by

modernizing it. Proponents of companionate marriage tended to be concerned not, as the radicals had been, with the rights and health of the individual, but with the strength of the institution itself. Marriage, they argued, needed to adapt to modern times to survive. Contemporary science suggested that sexual intimacy was essential to marital health, and the companionate ideal itself additionally incorporated the modern values of youthful independence and of increased gender equality, calling for the use of birth control to space children (who would arrive only after a sexually satisfying early stage of marriage), and for the acceptance of divorce when necessary. Finally, the companionate marriage ideal put the couple themselves at the dead center of the idea of family, disaggregating them to some degree from more traditional forms of community and extended family.

Simmons proceeds to detail the three major types of marriages envisioned by marriage revisionists focused on the companionate ideal. She attends first to the "flapper marriage" model, which updated the traditional model by allowing for greater freedom on the part of women, and greater sensitivity from men, but preserved the essential sexual hierarchy that characterized the institution. African Americans developed a competing model, that of the more equitable "partnership marriage," which accommodated women's work outside of the home and called for increased male responsibilities within it. Finally, a narrow group of radical feminists called for marriages that emphasized female sexual agency and the right to fulfilling work outside the home, as well as the equitable and collaborative distribution of labor within it.

Simmons's final chapter deals, appropriately, with the sexual advice directed at participants in all these "modern marriages." For sexuality—pleasure, agency, choices, and desires—was central to each attempt to rewrite the script of life commitment. In a variety of ways each movement had sought to separate sex from reproduction, and to broaden the culturally available options for sexual expression. The most profound changes suggested applied to women's roles, to their degree of freedom and empowerment both outside the home and within the bedroom. Each group of activists, however, articulated their goals in different terms and with emphases keyed to their political aims and social limits.

In writing her history of these movements and the transformation they wrought in the meaning of marriage, Simmons pieces together debates about the meaning of an important set of issues—privacy, the meaning and purpose of intimacy, sexual pleasure, and equality for

women both within and outside of the home—and carefully delineates the positions of the participants. Scrupulous throughout about differentiating between the point of view of men versus women, whites versus blacks, and between various groups of reformers, Simmons makes a point of noting where social privilege or lack thereof tended to extend the gap between theory and practice, and never forgets the subject position of the group under discussion. She is especially attentive to redressing the imbalance of historical attention paid to white-led and black-led reform efforts and avoids the common trap of generalizing about norms across the lines of class and race. She provides separate accounts of the positions held by white and African American reformers, and carefully distinguishes between the social circumstances within which philosophical stances were taken. African Americans had, for example, far less invested in calls for sexual freedom, as a consequence of decades of being branded as oversexed: the black middle-class clung more carefully to conventional sexual propriety than did whites. The gender dynamics differed substantively too along racial lines: black writers and thinkers were less likely than white opinion-makers to hold women accountable for male sexual transgressions, and were necessarily more supportive of women's paid work outside the home.

Simmons does some of her most striking analysis when she demonstrates the way typologies in novels helped create new subjectivities by valorizing certain positions and rejecting others. She addresses the major works written by activists—such as Floyd Dell's *Love in the Machine Age* (1930)—but attends to works by many minor writers as well. This is especially helpful to her in establishing racialized subjectivity: close readings of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and less well-known works like Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929) help her identify hopes and fears that may have been clouded, or even unutterable, in other contexts. This is especially notable in a chapter on challenges to sexual norms, as fiction was, she claims, the only textual site within which a pro-sexuality voice could be safely expressed by African American women. Social realities in the embodied world, after all, ensured that the companionate ideal remained out of reach for many.

Indeed, the gap between the articulated ideal and the manner in which various populations internalized it and incorporated it into relationships helps explain the limits of the transformation in meaning the reformers achieved. For most of what activists and writers called for when they invoked the companionate ideal was much more difficult to put into practice than it was to proselytize. Shifting the sexual assumptions and mores of a society is no simple task: people do not easily set aside deeply rooted values. Perhaps even more importantly, in every family somebody, after all, still needs to make dinner and do the wash and put the children to bed. And somebody needs to earn market wages sufficient to pay the rent. A half-century later, when second-wave feminists, building on the work accomplished by the motley coalition of earlier activists, called for true marital equality, Americans had still not found truly comfortable compromises on these pragmatic, unavoidable issues.

Companionate marriage had left gender hierarchies intact, and it had done little to solve the pragmatic burdens that shape family life, but it did open first a discussion, and then a space for greater independence and satisfaction for women within the bounds of an ancient social framework. Along the way, in starting a conversation about sexual health and pleasure, and later about equal labor, the activists who promulgated the companionate ideal helped create the conditions of greater freedom for heterosexuals in their choice of life partner, improved access to birth control, and made strides in establishing gender equality within the framework of marriage. All of these changes were made at least in part via redefinitions of female sexuality, its meaning and attendant rights. The debate over both marital roles and sexual privilege continues; we see it in the work-life discussions known as the “mommy wars,” and in the discord surrounding the introduction of the HPV vaccine. In vividly telling the story of the activists who argued for new marital and sexual norms, *Making Marriage Modern* reminds us of both the truly radical claims made at the start of the twentieth century for individual freedom, equity, and pleasure, and of the fundamental conservatism that has dogged the institution of marriage, leaving it in important ways right where it was in 1920—at the center of a contentious, and profoundly important, national debate.

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