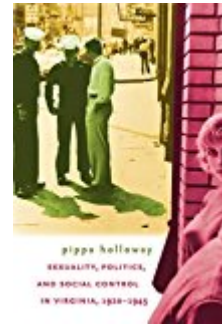


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pippa Holloway. *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920-1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xi + 258 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3051-2; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5764-9.



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Published on H-Women (March, 2008)

This is an aptly titled book. Pippa Holloway's deep research into Virginia politics, at both state and city levels, allows her to demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that state regulation of sexual behavior and reproduction was an important means of social control in early twentieth-century Virginia. More specifically, she shows that a small group of white elite males consistently and consequentially built social policies that reflected their belief that African Americans and poor whites posed sexual dangers to the state. Sexual regulation, she argues, helped draw and enforce a line between the "governing class" and the "class that was governed" (p. 6).

Holloway nuances this broad picture of social control by white elites in two ways. She is careful to depict and explore disagreements within the governing class to show "how it resolved differences within its ranks," and she is equally careful to describe the ways that changes in the larger political context influenced which "visions of sexual regulation prevailed" (p. 3). Holloway's deft handling of the relationship between continuity and change makes for a convincing argument that the overall function of sexual regulation remained constant, although its focus changed considerably between 1920 and 1945. She notes that "white elites raised the possibility of sexual threats in different ways to define themselves as the class that could use the state to restrict others" (p. 6). Thus,

the introduction of film censorship and the active pursuit of eugenic sterilization in the 1920s gave way to blood testing for venereal disease as a prerequisite for marriage in the 1930s and to the regulation of prostitution as part of the fight against venereal disease during the Second World War, but the core reality remained the same. Across the decades, "white elites directed the authority of the state at those with the least ability to fight back," the disenfranchised majority whose putative lack of sexual self-control seemed to testify to the folly of allowing them to participate in governing themselves (p. 2).

At this most general level, Holloway's story is a depressingly familiar one. It is not news that the state has served to support the power of the elite white men who compose it, and for historians of medicine, sexuality, and race, there will be few surprises in the particulars of Virginia's regulatory practices. And yet, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia* offers a valuable perspective on this material. It is unusual to find histories of state formation that treat sexual regulation as a major strategy for the maintenance of social order. Holloway's contribution lies in her presentation of sexual regulation policies as *simultaneously* about sex—including all the complex beliefs about race and class with which it is connected—and about the state. The implications of her project, thus, extend considerably beyond the facts

she offers. For instance, Holloway's research establishes that the conventional description of southern states as minimally intrusive on the lives of their citizens is ideological; while it is true that Virginia's governing class generally refused to enact, fund, or enforce policies likely to intrude on the sexual expression of its elite peers, it is also the case that that same class routinely regulated "in minute detail" the sexual expression of non-elites (p. 16). Holloway further makes clear that such regulatory projects were not detritus from the region's plantation past, but rather were central to its economic and governmental modernization; Virginia modernized its state apparatus, in part, by subjecting the disenfranchised to increasingly stringent sexual discipline in the name of greater efficiency and health for all. If Virginia's government was small in its budget and its electorate throughout the period under study, it was nonetheless increasingly invasive in its reach into the homes and bodies of black and poor Virginians.

One of the strengths of Holloway's study is the clarity with which she depicts this political situation as the result of disagreement, negotiation, and activism among upper-class whites. The hierarchical and undemocratic nature of Virginia's political life did not just happen, and it was not simply a legacy from the past. It was actively crafted as an essential part of the modern state apparatus. On the one hand, Virginia was ruled by a small and "fairly homogeneous group of white elite males [who] worked to advance a shared economic and political agenda. They sought docile but productive workers, an economic system that perpetuated vast disparities in wealth, and the subordination of African Americans" (p. 7). Yet, on the other hand, these larger agendas stimulated and authorized an expanded governmental regulation of sexuality that elites refused to tolerate for themselves. "Laws restricting civil liberties raised no red flags when they affected 'marginal' elements of the population.... But when the government reached into the lives of a broader segment of the population, a segment that included the state's elites, governmental authority was contested and limited" (p. 48). Holloway argues that movie censorship was far more controversial than eugenic sterilization, because middle- and upper-class Virginians often went to cinemas but were rarely committed to the institutions in which involuntary sterilizations took place; blood testing before marriage became law only after the draft bill was amended so as to lighten its touch "on the presumably well-behaved upper classes"; and wartime plans to curb venereal infection by imposing curfews for juveniles "met with suspicion and opposition," because the

curfew could not be aimed only at the poor and black youth who were believed to be the ones "potentially getting into trouble" (pp. 125, 164).

Holloway's reconstruction of contests over regulation in Virginia demonstrates her considerable skill at uncovering, ordering, and deriving meaning from the fine details buried in myriad archival materials. She is slightly less deft at contextualizing her findings in relation to existing historical literature and to larger theoretical debates. Like many other talented political historians, Holloway sometimes seems so committed to establishing who did what that she forgets to ask herself challenging questions about what those acts meant, what values they expressed, and how they instantiated deep beliefs about the way the world works or should work. In principle, I have no objection to purely political histories, but, in practice, I think this particular project was hampered by Holloway's quite narrow definition of her object and methods of study.

The limits of a conventional political analysis for the history of sexuality are especially clear in terms of the meaning of whiteness to Virginia's governing class. For example, Holloway demonstrates that while most elite Virginians resisted any state encroachment on their liberty, some were eager to enact just such encroachments. Walter Plecker, of the state's Bureau of Vital Statistics, seems to have been fanatically invested in white racial purity. Thus, in the mid-1920s, he made considerable efforts to redefine Native Americans as "colored" people to guarantee that no one with partial black ancestry could slip through the legal loophole allowing a person with one Native American great-great-grandparent to marry a white person. Even though his proposal included a provision to ensure that elite Virginians descended from John Rolphe and Pocahontas would be counted as white, this plan met with vehement opposition from Plecker's peers. Holloway offers this as an example of the state's attempt to regulate the sexuality of white elites as well as of blacks and the poor, and concludes that resistance to Plecker's proposal was resistance to the state's intrusion into elite bedrooms.

But, why frame this conflict as being about "sexuality"? For Plecker, documenting one's lineage was an exercise in racial definition; might it not have been so for his interlocutors as well? Other elite Virginians resisted his proposal; does that mean they were less committed to white racial purity than to their collective class immunity from state surveillance? Could some members of Virginia's ruling class have been more interested in polic-

ing the distinction between classes than those between races? If not, might the opposition to Plecker's proposal record a belief that freedom from state surveillance was as fundamental to the meaning of whiteness as pure Anglo ancestry? Because Holloway does not push her data hard enough to ask and to answer such questions, her admirably meticulous research yields less insight into the racial dimension of sexual regulation than it might have.

Similarly, Holloway does not develop a critical understanding of sexuality as a research subject. Thus, she tends to treat marriage law as the equivalent of silent films; because her sources document that the state regulated both, she treats both as instances of "sexuality." But, surely, getting married is a different kind of experience than going to a movie, just as regulating marriage represents a different kind of state intervention than censoring film. One has a great deal to do with the consolidation and transmission of property and privilege, while the other engages the politics of representation and fantasy. Wider reading and a more diverse interpretative toolkit could have assisted Holloway in identifying and exploring such differences within "sexuality," and so yielded a more nuanced, but still empirically grounded, account of state intervention in the sexual field. For example, lesbian/gay history and queer theory could have told Holloway that if Virginia's elites had nothing to say about keeping perversion under control, that fact alone is worth

interrogating, as silence can be a powerful disciplinary technique. The histories of medicine and sex education could have helped her think about the larger cultural reasons specific forms of venereal disease control were promoted at some times and defunded at others. Disability studies might have pushed her to think about eugenics and involuntary sterilization of the feebleminded in terms of their address to the nonsexual body, and possibly, thereby, have moved her toward a clearer exposition of the ways in which state regulation sutured sexual reproduction to race and class.

In short, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia* offers a beautifully detailed, clearly written political history of the state's efforts to regulate sexual expression in the early twentieth-century South. It also offers a cautionary example of the risk historians run when they eschew interdisciplinary interpretation and commit themselves unreservedly to empirical accounts of the past: if the data you find in the archives tends to confirm what other historians have already discovered, it is extremely difficult to present the fruits of your labor in a way that moves readers to valuable insights. It is to Holloway's credit that she has responded to this unfortunate reality by emphasizing the significance of sexual regulation to state expansion and social control. Her book makes a genuine contribution to our understanding of state development in the modern South.

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**Citation:** Julian Carter. Review of Holloway, Pippa, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920-1945*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. March, 2008.

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