

HIU33115 Reading the Sexual Revolution (Gillian Frank)



Miss America Protest (1968) courtesy of Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History & Culture, Duke University

Revolutions are moments of radical cultural transformation where power relationships and social roles are reordered. They are moments of possibility and of danger. Second wave feminism, also known as the women's liberation movement, was one of the major engines of change in the sexual revolution. It is also the central focus of our module this year.

On January 24, 1964, a *Time Magazine* cover story proclaimed what many Americans already suspected: sexual values, sexual practices and sexual communities in the United States were changing rapidly. Over the next decade, academics, journalists, religious leaders, politicians, artists, activists, and everyday people evaluated and debated the origins, nature, and implication of this so-called "sexual revolution." Their concerns focused on youth, premarital sex, unwed cohabitation, unwed motherhood, contraception and abortion, commercialized sex, popular culture, gay rights, interracial romance and marriage, sex education, and much more.

What the sexual revolution meant, who the revolutionaries were, what they were revolting against, and whether this revolution was liberating or oppressive, was hotly debated among those living through it. In this module, we will examine a range of primary sources to study how Americans in the 1960s and 1970s were at once describing, prescribing, and resisting shifts in sexual values and sexual politics. As we will see, the term "sexual revolution" became the terrain upon which they did so.

Because of the breadth of complexity of the sexual revolution and the structure of this module, it is not possible to meaningfully examine this history in all of its diversity. Instead, to examine how Americans imagined and navigated the sexual revolution, we will refine our angle of vision to: women's liberation. Through it, we will look at a number of sources including court cases, media commentary, manifestos, advice books, and visual representations. In focusing on women's liberation, we will seek to understand a broader set of overlapping and contradictory changes to US culture, politics, genders and sexualities.