

Sex, State, and Society
Faculty Seminar for 2010-2011
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The seminar offers an historical perspective for understanding why sex and sexuality remain such volatile issues in contemporary politics around the globe. The task of defining the boundaries between sex and the state poses acute problems to western legal traditions grounded in contract theory and natural rights. Recent scholarship in literature and history identifies the early modern era, roughly 1500-1815, as the pivotal moment in the emergence of current assumptions about sex, sexuality, and the state. The emancipation of human desire from the Christian theology of sin between the 16th and 18th centuries moved the policing of sex into the hands of state and society. This remark explains the preoccupation with sex in all spheres of human activity including law, literature, morality, medicine, political economy, and government. These sites allow us to study the discourses and practices that invested sex with cultural force in distinct times and places.

The topic is inspired, but not constrained, by the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault developed a conceptual framework for considering the relations between new forms of subjectivity and new modalities of power in the Western world. Moreover, he identified human sexuality as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power.” The seminar will explore and interrogate the categories that guide Foucault’s model such as discipline, biopower, police, sexuality, perversion, and normality. In addition to Foucault, we will read theoretical works (Pierre Bourdieu; Judith Butler; Norbert Elias; Sigmund Freud; Carole Pateman) and historical studies (Valerie Finucci; Laura Gowing; Thomas Laqueur; Joan Scott; Dror Wahrman). We will also devote time to critical readings of texts by Astell, Diderot, Rousseau, and Wollstonecraft. Topics and readings will accommodate the interests of the participants who will be encouraged to share works in progress related to the seminar.