



How Sex Became a Civil Liberty

Leigh Ann Wheeler

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How Sex Became a Civil Liberty is the first book to show how and why we have come to see sexual expression, sexual practice, and sexual privacy as fundamental rights. Using rich archival sources and oral interviews, historian Leigh Ann Wheeler shows how the private lives of women and men in the American Civil Liberties Union shaped their understanding of sexual rights as they built the constitutional foundation for the twentieth-century's sexual revolutions.

Wheeler introduces readers to a number of fascinating figures, including ACLU founders Crystal Eastman and Roger Baldwin; nudists, victims of involuntary sterilization, and others who appealed to the organization for help; as well as attorneys like Dorothy Kenyon, Harriet Pilpel, and Melvin Wulf, who pushed the ACLU to tackle such controversial issues as abortion and homosexuality. It demonstrates how their work with the American Birth Control League, Planned Parenthood Federation, Kinsey Institute, *Playboy* magazine, and other organizations influenced the ACLU's agenda.

Wheeler explores the ACLU's prominent role in nearly every major court decision related to sexuality while examining how the ACLU also promoted its agenda through grassroots activism, political action, and public education. She shows how the ACLU helped to collapse distinctions between public and private in ways that privileged access to sexual expression over protection from it. Thanks largely to the organization's work, abortion and birth control are legal, coerced sterilization is rare, sexually explicit material is readily available, and gay rights are becoming a reality. But this book does not simply applaud the creation of a sex-saturated culture and the arming of citizens with sexual rights; it shows how hard-won rights for some often impinged upon freedoms held dear by others.

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