

## From Same-Sex Acts to a Homosexual Identity?: Historiographical Debate on the Formation of Modern Sexuality in the United States

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In the United States, the last three decades have witnessed a burgeoning and sophisticated body of scholarship in the history of sexuality, dedicated to demonstrating that sexuality has a history, and that the meanings attributed to sexual practices are historically and culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. Historians of sexuality have been profoundly influenced by the writings of French social theorist Michel Foucault, particularly his assertion that the notion of sexual identity is in fact a significantly recent product in history. In *The History of Sexuality*, originally published in 1976, Foucault illustrated how the meanings of same-sex acts and desire transformed from a set of forbidden acts to the expression of an identity in Western society over the nineteenth century. Foucault's insight has led many historians to depict the concept of hetero/homosexual identity as the most distinctive marker of "modern sexuality." One of the central issues among historians has been when and how the shift in the interpretation of same-sex desire and acts occurred in the United States. Some recent studies, however, have questioned whether this shift really ever occurred, as decisively as Foucault seemed to suggest.

This article explores the contours of scholarly debate on the emergence and dominance of modern sexuality in the United States, and addresses how we can make sense of this rich but often internally contradictory literature. It argues that, while the understanding of same-sex desire as a distinct homosexual identity is often described as the principal indication of modernity, recent influential studies have redirected the discussion to the creation of the modern homo-heterosexual dichotomy based on sexual object choice. This article also maintains that the transition from premodern to modern sexuality is, and will remain, incomplete. The modern homo-heterosexual binary and fixed sexual identities are in fact unstable constructs, which need constant watch and the ruling out of disruptive meanings behind sexual acts that might otherwise expose their fictions.