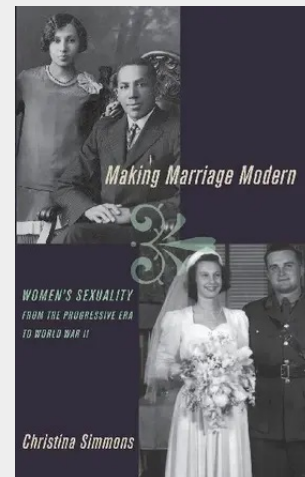


Making Marriage Modern

Making Marriage Modern explains the fierce debates among whites and African Americans about American women's sexuality in the early twentieth century that set an older motherhood-centered ideal against a modern female style and produced a new conception of marriage that prevailed until the challenges of the Women's Liberation Movement. This contentious public conversation included social hygiene reformers in the 1910s anxious about venereal disease who called for scientific sex education but still hoped to prop up the motherhood ideal. At the same time birth control activists and sex radicals demanded women's right of choice over childbearing, rejected marriage, or asserted the right to interracial relationships or homosexuality. The book emphasizes the subsequent program of more conventional reformers, who by the 1920s hoped to contain the potential for women's independence from men and marriage portended by conditions of modern life. Their new vision, "companionate marriage," incorporated birth control, easier divorce, greater respect for wives, and an intensified sexual intimacy requiring women's active participation and pleasure. In its most popular version companionate marriage involved free-spirited flappers who did not seriously challenge male authority or women's ultimate focus on children and domesticity. The book also treats other more equitable versions. Feminists (white and black) proposed a more thoroughgoing equality of work and sex, and some African Americans promoted a "partnership marriage" that often included wives' employment. Feminist and more traditional perspectives also competed within the sexual advice literature that flooded onto the market in the 1930s. Making Marriage Modern argues that, despite the unsettling of an older femininity, deep and persistent structural inequalities between men and women limited efforts to create gender parity in sex and marriage. Yet these cultural battles also subverted patriarchal culture and raised women's expectations of marriage in ways that grounded second-wave feminist claims.

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