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Artists and Scholars

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF
CULTURE & SOCIETY
PRESENTS



Leigh Ann Wheeler

Monday, September 25, 2006

1:30 p.m.

Mylander Room (207)

Bowen-Thompson Student Union

The Origins of "Sexual Expression": The American Civil Liberties Union and the First Amendment, 1920-1932

What is obscene? What material should be protected as sexual expression? Who should decide?

Such questions, as relevant today as ever, have confronted the ACLU since its birth in 1920. Founded to defend conscientious objectors, labor activists, and other political dissidents, the ACLU nevertheless began to address issues of sexuality (especially as they involved obscenity law) almost immediately—much earlier than scholars have recognized. ACLU leaders were neither the group of prudes described by historians, nor the band of libertines portrayed by critics. Rather, they were clerics and suffragists, opponents and advocates of birth control, lawyers and playwrights, monogamous spouses and "free lovers," artists and social workers. Professor Wheeler explains how and why this motley group hammered out compromises and cobbled together policies that laid the groundwork for what would become a uniquely American approach to sexuality—one that gave rise to a new category of protected "expression."

Leigh Ann Wheeler is Associate Professor of History and American Culture Studies at BGSU. Her research and teaching focus on the grassroots dimensions of public and private policy as well as the history of women, sexuality, censorship, obscenity, and reform in the United States. Currently a fellow at ICS, her work includes the book *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873-1935* (2004)—soon to be issued in a paperback edition. Dr. Wheeler recently received a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship to work on her next book, tentatively titled "Liberating Sex: How the American Civil Liberties Union Shaped Policy and Culture, 1920-2000."

Special Thanks to the Office of the Provost for Research and to the Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences for their support of this work. All events are free and open to the public. For more information, call (419) 372-0585