

# *rethinking*

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# SEXUALITY

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*Diane Richardson*

# RETHINKING SEXUALITY

Diane Richardson



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# RETHINKING SEXUALITY

*For Hazel*

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# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
 <b>Part 1: New Feminisms, Queer Positions and Radical Representations</b>	
1 Theorising Heterosexuality	19
2 From Lesbian Nation to Queer Nation: Sexual Politics and Social Change	35
3 'New' Feminisms for 'Old'?	51
 <b>Part 2: Sexual Citizenship</b>	
4 Citizenship and Sexuality	71
5 Extending Citizenship?	86
6 Theorising Sexual Rights	98
 <b>Part 3: Sexuality, Gender and HIV/AIDS</b>	
7 Feminism and the Challenge of AIDS	119
8 In/Visible Women and Dis/Appearing Men	127
9 Sexuality, Identity and Risk	139
 References	 150
Index	169

## INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the twentieth century there have been enormous transformations of sexuality. The 1960s was a particularly significant period of social change, despite the fact that the vast majority of people did not experience it as the 'sexual revolution' that it is often characterised as being. Reform of the divorce law took place in 1969, in the context of increasing marital breakdown, leading to a new Divorce Act and an immediate increase in divorce. The Sexual Offences Act, which liberalised legislation on male homosexuality, became law in 1967, as did the Abortion Act, which introduced the possibility for social as well as medical grounds for a legal termination, resulting in a rapid rise in the number of abortions. Alongside increased access to abortion, the 1960s saw important changes in attitudes to contraception. The 1967 Family Planning Act enabled local authorities to set up family planning clinics, which for the first time made no distinction between married and unmarried women. Not only could single women get information about contraception, but also during the 1960s a highly reliable contraceptive, 'the pill', became widely available, and its use spread quickly.

A more 'permissive' attitude to cultural representations of sexual themes was also apparent, aided by changes such as the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain's censorship of the theatre in 1968, which allowed more explicit references to sexuality on stage. In addition, there was a (re)emergence of social movements concerned with sexuality. The rise of the women's and gay liberation movements became a major social and political influence. Feminists emphasised how sexuality, commonly regarded as something that was private and personal, was a public and political issue. Lesbian and gay movements challenged negative understandings of 'homosexuality' and emphasised positive self-definitions, which enabled more and more people to come out and declare that they were 'glad to be gay'.

The 1960s also saw important developments in the theorisation of sexuality, which have had significant implications not just for how we think about sexuality, but also for social and cultural theory more generally. It seems rather trite to claim nowadays that sexuality is socially constructed. Yet this certainly was not the case thirty or even twenty years ago, when



essentialist understandings still held sway; not that these have entirely disappeared from view. When, for example, Mary McIntosh suggested in 1968, pre-Foucault, that we might think of homosexuality as a 'social role' rather than as a particular type of person, it was a major breakthrough. Such an idea was revolutionary in terms of the discourses of sexuality that were dominant at the time. However, it is now widely accepted by sociologists and social historians that the categories homosexual and heterosexual persons are a relatively recent social 'invention', deriving from the late seventeenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century in Europe (McIntosh, 1968/1996; Weeks, 1990).

It is this emphasis on the 1960s as a decade of social change, which often dominates our thinking about the transformations in sexuality that have taken place in the second part of the twentieth century. However, we ought not to exaggerate the extent of the changes that took place then, nor should we underestimate the dramatic shifts in the social meanings and organisation of sexuality that have taken place since. Over the last thirty years, divorce rates have risen dramatically in many parts of the world. In the 1970s in Britain, after divorce was made more easily available, divorce rates doubled, and current trends suggest it is likely that almost half of all marriages will now end in divorce (Jackson, 1997). The traditional nuclear family comprising a married heterosexual couple with dependent children is no longer the (hetero)norm of social living arrangements that it once was. More and more people are living together rather than getting married. More fundamentally, 'the couple' as the basic unit of society appears to be threatened, as more women are staying single, and the predictions are that the dominant trend will be to live alone. Reflecting these changes, there has been a steady increase in the number of children born outside marriage, as well as in the number of children being brought up by one parent. For example, by 1991 about a third of all children in Britain were born to women who were unmarried and a fifth of families with children were headed by lone parents, most of whom were women (Central Statistical Office (CSO), 1995). If the social context in which people are bringing up children is changing, then so too are the ways of having them as a result of access to new reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and the freezing of eggs, embryos and sperm. If contraception enables us to have (hetero)sex without reproducing, then new reproductive technologies are allowing more and more people to reproduce without having sex. This represents a further disruption of the reproductive model of sexuality.

More generally, over the last three decades we have witnessed shifts in understandings and acceptance of 'homosexuality'; we have seen the emergence and diversification of sexual identities such as lesbian, gay, transgender, queer and, latterly, pomosexual; and new social movements have fundamentally challenged traditional frameworks for understanding sexuality. Feminist theory, for example, has problematised heterosexuality and redefined lesbianism; while queer has challenged the insider/outsider

sexual binary as inherently unstable. We have faced a global AIDS epidemic and its consequences and, largely as a result of feminist campaigning groups and research, begun to publicly acknowledge the extent of sexual violence and abuse and its impact on survivors. We have also seen a rapid commodification and commercialisation of sexuality to the point where, in many parts of the world, sexuality suffuses and saturates social, economic, political and cultural life.

It is claimed that a transformation of intimacy is underway, a new and radical democratisation of sexuality, in which the meanings and practices of sexual/intimate relations are changing rapidly (Giddens, 1992). One could also argue, following this, that we are witnessing a certain disruption and destabilisation of heterosexuality. In addition to the social trends in marriage and cohabitation described above, there are other indications that the normalised and naturalised status of heterosexuality is being challenged. The passing of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act in the USA, for example, represented an attempt to confine the definition of marriage to heterosexual couples only. While this clearly re-enforces the privileged status of heterosexuality, it is nonetheless significant that marriage needs defending as a heterosexual concept. It is unthinkable that such a defence would have been deemed necessary in the 1960s. Similarly, Section 28 of the Local Government Act, which became law in Britain in 1988, stated that a local authority shall not 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. Despite the law's hostile and discriminatory treatment of lesbian and gay relationships, what is interesting is how much it reveals about social change and the hegemony of heterosexuality, in terms of the felt necessity to legally reinscribe 'family' as heterosexual.

We are, then, well poised at the turn of the century to rethink sexuality in light of the sorts of transformations that I have mentioned. In this book, I hope to contribute to this process. My aim is to examine the new ways of understanding sexuality and 'sexual politics' that are emerging, through a critical awareness of some of the major theoretical and political debates in the last thirty years. At the same time, I am conscious of the sheer scale and enormity of this goal and the fact that, as a consequence, no one book could ever hope to do justice to such a project. Bearing this in mind, I have decided to focus on three main areas which will allow an opportunity to consider in detail some of the major challenges in thinking about sexuality that have occurred in recent years. The areas that I have chosen are all ones that have had a significant impact on an international scale, as well as at the level of individual identities, practices and lifestyles. They are also ones that I have written about over a considerable period of time, and which have been fundamental to debates about sexuality across different social movements, from the moral right to feminism to queer. This is the rationale for structuring this exploration or rethinking of sexuality around the three themes of heterosexuality, citizenship, and AIDS.

## Part 1: New Feminisms, Queer Positions and Radical Representations

The first section of the book deals with some of the theoretical developments and social transformations which have contributed in significant ways to our changing understanding of sexuality and of 'sexual politics' over the last thirty years. I should state at the outset that I do not intend to attempt a review of the history of ideas about sexuality since the 1960s. Rather, what I want to attempt is to map out some of the key themes and ideas that have emerged during this period and track their development as they resurface and re-emerge in different forms and in different historical and political contexts. My aim, in what is, in part, an attempt to identify theoretical histories of sexuality, is to highlight continuities, as well as differences, in past and present theorising.

This is less obvious than it might at first seem. As the sociological study of sexuality has grown and developed from the early pioneering research of the 1960s, which paved the way for the development of social constructionist understandings (Gagnon and Simon, 1967, 1973; McIntosh, 1968/1996), to the increasingly large and diverse body of work that exists today, we find that the lineage of ideas is all too often lost. There is a common tendency, evident in both queer writing and aspects of 'new' feminism, to construct attempts to rethink sexuality as representing a distinctive break with the past. I would argue that this is far too simplistic an understanding of the developments in the theorisation of sexuality that we have witnessed in the latter part of the twentieth century.

This relationship of past to present thinking is something that is explored throughout the book. It is an issue, however, that is particularly pertinent to Part 1, where the focus is on the impact that feminist analyses have had on ways of thinking about sexuality since the 1970s, moving on to a discussion of recent developments in both feminist and queer theory. A common theme running through this period, and one that has been central to the work of feminist and queer writers, is that of theorising heterosexuality.

In Chapter 1, I offer an analysis of attempts to problematise heterosexuality, both in the past and more recently, by questioning the assumed normativity and naturalisation of hetero(sex) and relations. Not only does a focus on heterosexuality allow us to comment upon and engage with the question of the relationship of past to present thinking, it also represents one of the most important developments in the theorisation of sexuality and, potentially, of social and political theory more generally. I draw attention to this in considering the possibilities for rethinking social knowledge in ways that challenge, for example, notions of the body, desire, family relationships, as well as conceptual binaries such as the public/private divide and the idea of the sexual and the social as separate spheres.

In the 1990s a new perspective on sexuality, and sexual politics, emerged fuelled by the impact of HIV and AIDS on gay communities and the

anti-homosexual feelings and responses that HIV/AIDS revitalised, especially among the 'moral right'. Its name was 'queer'. Embracing a poststructuralist approach to understanding gender and sexuality, queer theory is centrally concerned with the homo/heterosexual binary and the ways in which this operates as a fundamental organising principle in modern societies. Chapter 2 looks at the contribution of queer theory to the theorisation of sexuality. In addition, it examines the way in which queer is often contrasted with feminist and lesbian and gay politics of the 1970s and 1980s. Typically, queer is positioned as in opposition to past gay/lesbian/feminist theorising. I argue that we need to question this characterisation through an analysis of the relationship between queer and previous research and theorising about sexuality, in order to establish where there are possible interconnections, as well as differences in approaches. In this way it will be possible to more accurately map social changes and shifts in thinking about sexuality.

Of particular significance for the development of our understanding of the relationship between queer and feminism is a rethinking of the distinction between sexuality and gender. In some theories such as, for example, in Catharine MacKinnon's (1982) work, sexuality is understood to be constitutive of gender; in others gender is regarded as underpinning sexuality (Jackson, 1999). We may, of course, theorise gender and sexuality as two analytically separate domains as does Gayle Rubin (1984/1993) and others who have been influenced by her work, such as the doyenne of queer Eve Sedgwick (1990). Alternatively, we may reject all of these approaches in favour of developing the notion that sexuality and gender are inherently codependent. Tamsin Wilton (1996: 137) exemplifies this position when she states that:

The interlocutions between discourses of gender and the erotic manifest a complexity that I suggest indicates that they may not usefully be distinguished one from the other.

While I would agree with Wilton that our contemporary understandings of sexuality and gender are such that there can be no simple, causal model that will suffice to explain the interconnections between them, I believe, as does Butler (1997b), that we do need to develop a way of thinking about sexuality and gender that does not collapse the two. The articulation of new ways of thinking about sexuality and gender in a dynamic, historically and socially specific, relationship is one of the main tasks facing both feminist and queer theory.

In Britain in the late 1990s another important trend in 'sexual politics' emerged, as a number of writers claimed to offer a 'new' feminism for a new generation of women. This is a feminism that has been characterised as more popularist, more inclusive, more willing to embrace power, more tolerant in crossing political boundaries, a feminism that belongs to men as well as women, conservatives as well as socialists, and seeks a 'new

separation' of the personal and the political. Natasha Walter's book entitled *The New Feminism* offers up just such a picture. Although Walter's work can be critiqued on many levels, the widespread publicity accompanying the book and her follow-up collection a year later, plus the fact that she appears to have 'claimed the ground' as a voice for a new generation of feminists, make it a useful case study. At a fundamental level, she regards the 'new' feminism as a mainstream, majority movement:

If feminism in the nineteenth century was defined by its outsider status, in that feminists then were forced to speak from the edges of society; and feminism in the seventies and eighties was defined by its sense of difference, in that feminists then wanted to mark out a separate space for themselves; so feminism at the beginning of the twenty-first century is defined by its insider status. (Walter, 1998: 177)

The 'new' feminism also differs from earlier feminist movements in that it is not associated with 'sexual politics'. Walter (1998: 251) declares: 'The new feminism does not want to follow women into the bedroom or examine their private sexual lives.' Her argument is that feminism has overpoliticised our personal lives and overpersonalised the political sphere. Walter rejects, or at least ignores, the vast body of feminist work that now exists which critiques the public/private dichotomy, highlighting how this is frequently employed to 'construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and suppress gender and sexual difference preserving traditional patriarchal and heterosexual power structures' (Duncan, 1996b: 128). Walter is not buying into this, she wants the distinction between the public and private reinstated: 'So the new feminism must unpick the tight link that feminism in the seventies made between our personal and political lives' (Walter, 1998: 4).

This could imply that the 'new' feminism has little to say about sexuality, beyond seeking to ensure that women who experience sexual violence or abuse find redress and support. However, sexuality infuses Walter's book and ideas, in so far as heterosexuality permeates the concept of the 'new' feminist. (The index has no reference to homosexuality, lesbian, gay or queer; and only one to 'lesbian sexuality'.) Moreover, it is a particular, albeit institutionalised, form of 'new' heterosexuality that feminists will apparently be expecting:

The new feminist will probably still have her eyes on marriage, although she takes for granted that it will be a partnership of equals rather than a relationship with a dominant and subordinate partner . . . Such a young woman also takes contraceptive and abortion rights absolutely for granted, in order to control her fertility as far as possible. (Walter, 1998: 186)

It is, of course, precisely because many women in both developed and developing worlds still *cannot* take such things for granted that feminists continue to highlight sexual and reproductive issues as central to



understanding gender inequality and the social control of women. In many parts of South America, for example, deaths from illegal abortions are one of the main causes of death in women of childbearing age. In countries such as Britain, where abortion is legal, it remains a major issue for the many women who find it difficult to obtain an abortion on the National Health Service, either as a result of the attitude of their doctors or cuts in health funding, and who do not have the funds to have an abortion carried out privately.

The aim of 'new' feminism, we are told, is the pursuit of political, social and economic equality, rather than liberation: 'Feminism is about equality for women, nothing more nothing less' (Walter, 1998: 41). More specifically, the 'concrete goals' that are emphasised include the reorganisation of work, with a national network of childcare and the encouragement of men to share equally in the responsibilities in the home, a reduction in poverty and a legislative and welfare system that supports rather than discriminates against women, especially those facing sexual and domestic violence. In this sense, 'new' feminism appears to be saying many of the same things that 'old' feminists of the 1970s were. A major difference, however, is in the political analysis – or rather the lack of it. 'New' feminism, I would argue, is feminism without the politics: feminism-lite. It asserts the need for a more equal society, but is without a theoretical foundation by which it is possible to identify strategies for achieving social change. As Lynne Segal (1999: 228) also notes:

But quite how [new] 'feminism' will manage to deliver, once it remedies its ways and adopts 'a new, less embattled ideal', remains mysterious. Walter's analysis promotes no particular, collective political formations or affiliations. We are simply told: 'We must understand that feminism can give us these things now, if we really want them.' Fingers crossed!

One might, of course, want to argue that we could understand this shift in feminist thinking as part of a broader trend within western democracies towards 'third way' politics. This can be seen in the British context of 'New' Labour, for example, where it might be argued that the politics has been taken out of Politics: Blairite government is Politics as governance.

In Chapter 3 I examine how the characterisation of different strands of feminism is important in rethinking feminist theory over the last thirty years and in developing feminisms of the future. In the context of this book, it is important to look at this issue given the important contribution that feminist theorising and activism have made to the transformations of sexuality that have taken place since the 1960s. Because it is radical feminist theories, especially of sexuality, that are frequently critiqued by contemporary writers, I have used this strand as a case study in order to explore the implications of stereotyping traditions of feminist thinking as 'old' and 'new'. I focus more specifically on the attribution of essentialism,

variously defined, and puritanism, as well as the claim that radical feminism makes 'victims of women'.

## Part 2: Sexual Citizenship

The second section of the book is concerned with rethinking sexuality in a different way. Rather than trying to tease out the interconnections between past and present social movements and theoretical approaches, these chapters describe the rapid growth of 'a politics of sexual citizenship' that has occurred in recent years in most western countries. These developments represent a shift in the meaning and focus of 'sexual politics'. The prioritisation in research and collective activism that took place in the 1960s and 1970s was around identity. We are now witnessing the expansion of political campaigns and literature concerned with issues of family and intimate relationships (Donovan et al., 1999). Debates about, and campaigns to secure, various rights of citizenship on the same basis as those of heterosexuals are increasingly the 'main story'. The AIDS epidemic has been significant in this shift in gay politics, bringing into sharp relief the lack of legal recognition for non-heterosexual relationships, with consequences for access to pensions, housing, inheritance and other rights, as well as the need for health and social care services that are accepting of, and appropriate to, lesbian and gay relationships. Other specific concerns have also fuelled this rethinking of lesbian and gay struggles such as, for example, Section 28 which, Weeks (1991) argues, mobilised and politicised many non-heterosexual communities, especially in its attempts to exclude lesbians and gay men from what is thought to constitute 'a family'. As I argue below, there are, however, broader social trends that we need to consider, which have also had an important impact on this move towards a 'politics of sexual citizenship'.

The concept of citizenship, along with questions of social exclusion and membership, has (re)emerged as one of the key areas of debate within both political discourse and the social sciences. A central theme of these developments is that citizenship is a contested concept: it can be used in a variety of ways with different implications for understanding the context in which various forms of social exclusion occur. This expansion of the idea of citizenship is evidenced in the diversity of arenas in which citizenship is being claimed and contested. Despite an almost exclusive focus on the public sphere in traditional interpretations of citizenship, it would seem that people's everyday practices are increasingly becoming the bases for discussing citizenship. Consider, for example, the concept of healthier citizenship. As 'good citizens' we are enjoined to take care of and assume responsibility for our own health and, especially in the case of women, any future children that we may have. In addition to patterns of eating and drinking, the 'private' and intimate practices of sexuality are also part of the realms in which healthy citizenship is constituted. Thus, for example,

sexual health promotion, whether understood in the context of concerns about the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS or the prevalence of unplanned pregnancies in certain sectors of the community, emphasises the importance of practising safer sex. That is to say, safer sex is now one of the responsibilities incumbent upon responsible and self-governing citizens.

At the same time that citizenship has (re)emerged as a dominant theme within social and political theory, social movements concerned with the organisation of sexuality and gender have increasingly drawn on the language of citizenship. We live in an age when the politics of citizenship increasingly define 'sexual politics'. Globally, we are witnessing gay and lesbian movements (and sometimes bi /sometimes transgender) which demand 'equal rights' with heterosexuals in relation to age of consent laws, to healthcare, rights associated with social and legal recognition of domestic partnerships, including the right to marry, immigration rights, parenting rights and so on. In a similar vein, there are groups campaigning for 'transsexual rights' including the right to 'sex change' treatment on the National Health Service, the legal right for birth certificate status to be changed and, related to this, the right to marry legally. Recently, there have been attempts to place 'sexual rights' on the agenda of disability movements, especially in relation to disabled people's rights to sexual expression (Shakespeare et al., 1996). We can even see some evidence of the language of citizenship being used in movements or campaigns whose politics are definitely not about seeking formal equality with heterosexuals. An example of this is the focus on prostitution as a human rights issue by some radical and revolutionary feminists (Jeffreys, 1997). As I suggested above, what these examples highlight is a shift in recent considerations of citizenship from what was previously an almost exclusive focus on the public towards an inclusion of issues that have long been associated and conflated with the 'private'.

Despite the current presence and past history of social movements campaigning for 'sexual rights', little theoretical attention has been given to sexuality and its relationship to citizenship. Recently, however, a new body of work on sexuality and citizenship has emerged. This includes work in legal theory (e.g. Robson, 1992; Herman, 1994; Stychin, 1998), political theory (e.g. Phelan, 1994, 1995; Wilson, 1995), geography (e.g. Bell, 1995; Binnie, 1995), education (e.g. Lees, 2000), literary criticism and cultural studies (Berlant, 1997; Isin and Wood, 1999) and sociology (e.g. Giddens, 1992; Plummer, 1995, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Weeks, 1998), as well as work which has raised the question of sexuality in a social policy context (Cooper, 1995; Carabine, 1996a, b; Donovan et al., 1999).

It might be claimed, given its relative newness as a field of inquiry, that it is too soon to map the shifts in understanding of citizenship that we are witnessing as a result of the inclusion of debates around sexuality. However, I would argue that it is possible to begin to identify a number of broad themes or strands within this emergent literature, which although



interrelated draw upon different epistemological concerns. Over the next three chapters I will deal with each of these concerns in turn. The first relates to those analyses which are primarily concerned with the question of whether, in addition to being informed by ideas about gender, class and race, notions of citizenship are grounded in normative assumptions about sexuality.

Chapter 4 addresses this question, through an examination of definitions of citizenship as a set of civil, political and social rights in the tradition of the British sociologist T.H. Marshall (1950), as social membership, both of a nation-state and social membership conceptualised more broadly (Turner, 1993a), as cultural rights (Stevenson, 2000), and in terms of consumerism (Evans, 1993). In each case, I aim to demonstrate how claims to citizenship status are closely associated with the institutionalisation of heterosexual, as well as male, privilege. In response to my argument, Bryan Turner (1999: 32) has stressed the link with parenthood and citizenship as being more significant than that with heterosexuality. He claims that:

The liberal regime of modern citizenship privileges parenthood, rather than heterosexuality as such, as the defining characteristic of the normal citizen and as the basis of social entitlement. That is, it recognises reproductive parenting as a foundation of modern citizenship and therefore homosexuality has been traditionally condemned because it fails to support citizenship as a buttress of the nation state . . . It is the absence of successful parenting in reproduction, not homosexuality, which challenges the Marshallian model.

I agree with Turner that in extending our theoretical frameworks in this new field of study we need to address in more detail the relationship *between* parenthood and heterosexuality, and the significance of this for understanding the construction of citizenship. However, and following on from this, unlike Turner who seems to want to attach a privileged position to parenthood as determining of citizenship status, I believe it is important to retain a theoretical apparatus that allows, indeed requires, us to think about how heterosexuality and parenthood are in a dynamic relationship with one another. Consider, for example, the extent of social resistance to lesbian and gay marriages and, more especially, of lesbian and gay parenting. What does this tell us? Indeed, where domestic partnerships between lesbians or between gay men have been legally recognised, it is frequently the case that one of the limits to gaining access to such forms of citizenship status is parenthood. In Scandinavia, for example, registration of partnership legislation specifically denies same-sex couples the right to adopt children. (This theme is taken up in Chapter 6.) Alternatively, if we reflect on the increasing diversification of forms of family and parenthood, we might also begin to identify where heterosexuality is a primary determinant of citizenship as distinct from parenthood *per se*. For example, contrast the married heterosexual couple with no