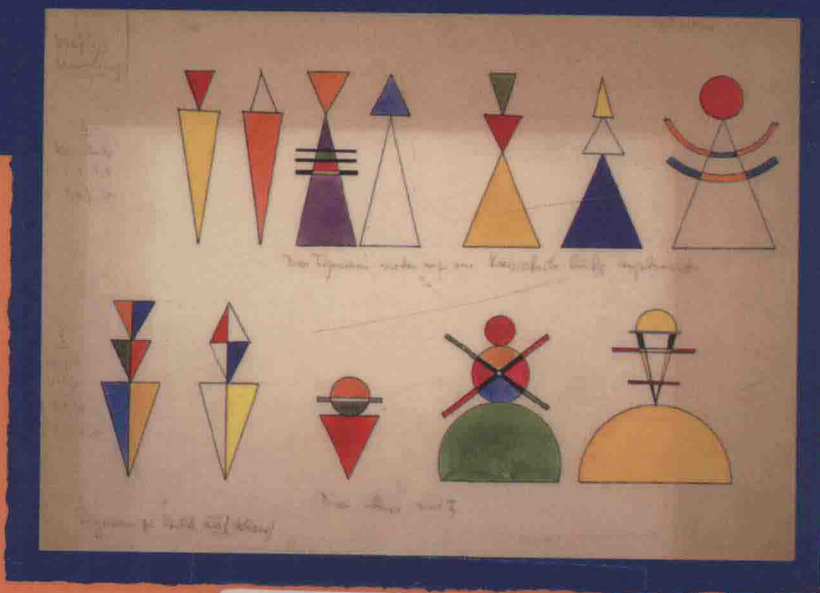


Making Sexual History



JEFFREY WEEKS

*Making Sexual
History*

Jeffrey Weeks

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Making Sexual History

For my mother

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book attempts two closely related tasks. First of all, it argues that in order to understand the world of sexuality we need to grasp that it is not made behind our backs, by Nature, History or Society. *We* are the makers of sexual history, in our everyday lives, in our life experiments, in the tangle between desire, responsibility, contingency and opportunity. We may not make it in circumstances entirely of our own choosing, but we have more choice than we often believe or seize. Secondly, in various essays, written over a number of years, it records my own efforts both to understand and to help to remake the history of sexuality.

Though the essays were written for different occasions, and varying audiences, I would suggest that they reveal a consistency of outlook, though a constantly developing rethinking of issues, which gives the collection a coherence and value beyond the contingencies of the first appearance of the chapters. The organizing theme is the relationship between writing about, and acting on, the history and social organization of sexuality: the process of making sexual history in an ever more complex world.

Part I is concerned with writers on sexuality, from Havelock Ellis to influential contemporaries. The persistent theme is less the truth or scientific validity of the topics these writers discuss than the social and political context in which they wrote, and the significance of their writings for shaping the meanings given to sex and intimacy. In an important sense, as we move through these writers, we can witness a major shift from an expert discourse to an activist discourse: from science to grass-roots sexology.

Part II is more concerned with the historical and sociological rethinking of what sexuality is (a 'historic invention'), and the ways in which the

erotic is being reinvented by the new sexual movements and day-to-day experiments in living. The impact of AIDS is a prominent theme, but so is the incremental change which has transformed personal lives.

Part III looks in more detail at recent examples of the everyday remaking of the sexual world: in the development of sexual communities, through the community-based response to HIV and AIDS, and in the emergence of 'families of choice'. The concluding chapter looks beyond the millennium, looming as I write, and argues that these grass-roots endeavours, everyday experiments in living, are both products and harbingers of profound changes in the opportunities open to us for living lives based on freedom, justice and choice rather than the harsh certainties of tradition. We live, I have argued elsewhere, in an age of uncertainty. That should not mean that we surrender to pessimism and despair. On the contrary, there are new opportunities to be grasped, new meanings to shape, better ways of making, and remaking, sexual history.

My debts to friends and colleagues over many years are too many to list here. The essays themselves testify to specific intellectual debts. I want to thank, however, all the editors and publishers who helped navigate the individual pieces to original publication, and who generously allowed me to republish here. I must thank Peter Aggleton, Chris McKeivitt, Kay Parkinson and Austin Taylor-Laybourn, who were my research, and writing, colleagues on the 'Voluntary Sector Responses to HIV and AIDS' project, discussed in chapter 10. I owe Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan an immense debt for their friendship and collegiality in working on the 'Families of Choice' project, whose findings are outlined in Chapter 11. The British Economic and Social Research Council funded the research for both projects, and I am deeply grateful for their generosity and wisdom at a difficult time for funding sex-related research. My colleagues at South Bank University provided the usual academic distractions, but also a deep support, for which I am grateful. I owe especial thanks to Donna Thompson for her calm and deliberate administrative backing at all crucial times. Matthew Waites proved a loyal and thoughtful ally in helping me to make the final choice of these essays, and in helping me to make them suitable for publication here. I owe him many thanks.

Micky Burbidge, as always, has shown me the power, strength and durability of loyal friendship over many years, and I can only record my enduring gratitude. My partner, Mark McNestry, has lived with every moment of the construction of this book with patience, care, fortitude, and the ultimate compliment, trust. Its completion was momentarily delayed by the peculiar traumas and joys of a home move. I would not

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Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	vii
Introduction: Making Sexual History	1
PART I Contested Knowledge: Writers on Sexuality	15
1 Havelock Ellis and the Politics of Sex-Reform	17
2 Mary McIntosh and the 'Homosexual Role'	53
3 Dennis Altman and the Politics of (Homo)Sexual Liberation	75
4 Guy Hocquenghem and <i>Homosexual Desire</i>	86
5 Foucault for Historians	106
PART II Histories of Sexuality	123
6 Sexuality and History Revisited	125
7 AIDS and the Regulation of Sexuality	142
8 An Unfinished Revolution: Sexuality in the Twentieth Century	163

PART III	Making History	179
9	The Idea of a Sexual Community	181
10	Community Responses to HIV and AIDS: The 'De-Gaying' and 'Re-Gaying' of AIDS	194
11	Everyday Experiments: Narratives of Non-Heterosexual Relationships	212
12	Millennium Blues and Beyond: Sexuality at the <i>Fin de Millennium</i>	233
	<i>Index</i>	247

Introduction: Making Sexual History

Who makes sexual history? A generation ago the question would have been absurd. It was taken for granted that the truths of sex were timeless. Attitudes, legal forms, religious injunctions, moral codes, literary expressions, subcultural patterns might change, but the substratum of erotic energy and gendered (as it was not then called) relationships remained locked into biological necessity, beyond the realms of history or social science. There was a world of social life, susceptible to understanding through learning the laws of society or of historical necessity; and there was the domain of the essential, graspable only through uncovering the laws of nature. As a result, historians and sociologists (the two categories I could myself identify with) left the quest for sexual knowledge to others: psychologists, mythologists, anthropologists, sexologists could delve, but my own disciplines largely stood aloof. Ken Plummer as late as the 1970s (Plummer 1975) noted the lamentable absence of a sustained sociology of sexuality, and I began my own work on the modern history of sexuality in Britain, what became *Sex, Politics and Society* (Weeks 1981/1989), with a similar sense that this was *terra incognita*.

Today that has all changed, in large part at first as a result of the efforts of self-proclaimed sexual dissidents: the new feminist and lesbian and gay scholarship led the way in politically charged interventions, recovering a lost or ignored history or experience, and inventing or reinventing the idea of women's history, lesbian and gay history and the like. More recently senior scholars from more traditional backgrounds have engaged seriously with the sexual (and of course many of the pioneering explorers are today themselves senior members of the academy). Now bookshops groan with shelves of books on the history, sociology,

psychology, literature, philosophy, theory, theologies, practices and politics of sexuality. Publishers large and small have (more or less) profitable lists. Universities run courses. Many of us thrive on an extensive international conference circuit. There has been an unprecedented discursive revolution in writing about sexuality, gender and the body.

As I argue later in the book, writing about sexuality can be dangerous, but it is also constitutive: through the web of meaning we writers about the erotic weave in our intricate ways not only are beliefs and behaviours shaped, but the very definition of what sexuality is can be refined and then radically rethought. After Michel Foucault (1979) we have become accustomed to seeing 'sexuality' as an invented ensemble of related but disparate elements sometimes only contingently related to bodily needs or desires, and 'performed', as Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has suggested, in power-laden situations. After Plummer (1975, 1995) we have become aware of the impact of stigma in defining the boundaries of acceptability, and the impact of sexual 'stories' in both voicing and giving meaning to erotic activities. A vast literature on sexual identities, to which I myself have contributed (Weeks 1977/1990, 1985, 1991, 1995), has conclusively demonstrated the power of culture in giving definition to what or who we are, even as cultures of power are at last recognized as central to the construction, legitimization and delegitimization of patterns of sexual interaction. Now even the body and its pleasures, which Foucault saw as the last point of resistance to the controlling apparatus which delimited the erotic, are seen as part of a 'reflexive project' in which thoughts and meanings – even virtual reality – have as much weight as physiognomy and genetic imprinting (see Giddens 1991).

So we need to explore how sexual history is written because its contribution to how sexuality is lived is central. Hence my own preoccupation with theories of sexuality, and the construction, and contestation, of sexual knowledge, from Havelock Ellis to the present. Unless we can understand what they (we) were trying to do it becomes impossible, I believe, to understand fully the web in which we are entangled.

Yet most people live their sexual lives without a sense of history (or at least a detailed knowledge of the history of sexuality), and certainly without reading books on sexual history. Whatever the genuine theoretical breakthroughs of thinking of the erotic in terms of 'performativity', inventions, narratives or fictions (see Weeks 1995), we must always be aware that sexuality is lived as well as written about. The ultimate makers of sexual history do not dwell in the ivory towers of academe but on the ground, or perhaps, better, in the bedrooms or even at what AIDS researchers call the PSEs (public sex environments), negotiating their everyday lives as best they can in the circumstances in which they find themselves. The writers of sexual history must necessarily balance

their theories with an understanding of practices, weighing their discursive analysis against an analysis of how discourse is lived.

Transformations

My own practice as a professional social scientist, grounded in a historical training and performing as a sociologist, dabbling in a host of other intellectual activities, but specializing in the sexual, has been tempered by my own practice as a sexual being and my wider socio-cultural belongings and political engagements and alignments. This nexus has demanded simultaneously a commitment to traditional canons of scholarly achievement and to the perceived truths of my experience. I have sought, in my own way, to be both a truth-teller and a yeah-sayer, to analyse and to tell my personal stories and preoccupations. My local, particular experience has not been purely individual, however, because I profoundly believe that personal life and macro-historical trends are inextricably combined. In the contingencies of everyday life we can see the impact of world-historical events; and through our understanding of the long-term shifts in social and economic transformation we may grasp the limits and possibilities of change in the sphere of the intimate. The changes in our own private lives are part of wider, collective transformations. The challenge lies in teasing out the hidden connections, making sense of what often seems incomprehensible, or merely idiosyncratic.

Of course, such thoughts were only latent in my mind when I began what has become, despite my original best intentions, a career in sexual studies, an intellectual sex-worker if you like. At the beginning of the 1970s I was completing a postgraduate study in political theory, an exploration of early twentieth-century socialist pluralist writings (the work of the British Guild Socialists largely), to which I gave the title 'The Search for Community'. The title seemed apt for that particular piece of research, but in a peculiar way it became a leitmotif in my subsequent intellectual career – and personal life. For it was another definition of community that grabbed me as I finished the study – the new idea of a gay community, condition for and product of the eruption of lesbian and gay activism after 1970. Working at the London School of Economics from October 1970, in my first academic research job, I soon got drawn into the London Gay Liberation Front, which had its first meetings there. It is not too extreme or exaggerated a description when I say that everything changed for me from then on: my personal life and commitments, my political engagement and eventually my intellectual trajectory and research agenda. It was, in Anthony Giddens's (1991) graphic phrase, a 'fateful moment' which forced a reordering of my

personal narrative and the way I saw the world. I came out with a bump, and eventually harnessed my innate romanticism and latent utopianism to a new sense of what was possible. I assumed a new personal identity, found a new sense of belonging, and became committed to a new political project. And I began research on sexuality and sexual history.

Of course, though it seemed like – indeed was – a deeply personal experience, it was also a profound collective experience. Through a new social involvement, I began remaking my sense of self, but the new identity I embraced was the product of a transformation of historical possibility that we are still working through, though in quite different ways from those we anticipated in the early 1970s. With decent hindsight it is now possible to see that what I, and many others, lived through was the first burst of what has now become a firestorm of change that is literally changing the world.

My experiences then opened an ongoing conversation between academic knowledge, political and ethical commitments and personal life which has continued to this day. The essays in this book, written at various periods in response to research interests and ongoing changes, are a reflection of this continuing dialogue. Let me now, therefore, try to outline the main concerns of my own historical and sociological practice, the making of sexual history.

As I suggested earlier, we need to address two fundamental questions: how we conceptualize, and know, the sexual; and how we live it – ‘make it’ in every sense. This has shaped three preoccupations which have dominated my work, and provide the framework of this book: with the construction and reconstruction of sexual knowledge; with rethinking the history of sexuality; and with the everyday making of sexual history. In the rest of this chapter I shall attempt to explore each of these themes with reference to my own work, and in particular the essays in this book.

Reconstructing sexual knowledge

Sexuality emerged as a subject for serious study at the end of the nineteenth century, signalled most clearly by the development of a separate discipline devoted to it: sexology, the would-be science of desire (Weeks 1985). Havelock Ellis (see chapter 1) was one of its pioneers in the English-speaking world, and I became interested in him originally for two reasons. First, he was in his earlier life part of that circle of British socialists and radicals that in the 1880s began to try to link up the woman question and the problem of sexuality with wider questions of social and cultural transformation (a group I had first encountered when I began my postgraduate research in socialist theory). He was a particip-

ant in the Fellowship of the New Life out of which came both the Fabian Society and the first Labour prime minister, but which was originally concerned with 'the subordination of material things to spiritual' and 'the cultivation of a perfect character in each and all'. He was a close friend of the South African feminist Olive Schreiner, and became a hero to many other feminist leaders. He was a friend of the socialist propagandist and pioneering advocate of homosexual love, Edward Carpenter. Heterosexual himself, though with a minor sexual 'perversion' of his own, urolagnia (pleasure in urination), he married a lesbian, and with John Addington Symonds he wrote the first 'scientific' book on homosexuality, *Sexual Inversion*. There was interest enough here!

But I came to realize that Ellis represented more than simply a complex and fascinating life. He seemed to me to embody the influence of sexology on progressive thinking in the twentieth century. His theories on homosexuality, as an inborn inversion of the sexual instinct, his way of writing about the subject, with abundance of cross-cultural, even cross-species, examples, his cautious advocacy of decriminalization and of social toleration, seemed to epitomize the liberal approach that was dominant when I was first coming to terms with my own sexuality. His views on women, equal but different, sexual but needing to be 'kissed into love' by the more aggressive male, had also, in the post-war world, become hegemonic. I was fascinated, therefore, by this paradox: how a man who had come out of a radical milieu, not, other things being equal, all that different from the one I was involved in, could become the icon of a liberal sexual ideology that by the 1970s I was committed to opposing because of its drastic limitations. How could a perceived radical of the 1890s seem not only *passé* but positively reactionary by the 1970s?

From this sense of dislocation came an insight which structured much of my later work: that sexology not only attempted to understand the sexual world, but actually helped to shape it. This was clearly the case, it seemed to me, with regard to homosexuality. In defining the homosexual as a distinct type of person, Ellis was one of those who helped the twentieth century to believe that homosexuals were different from heterosexuals, that they were separate types of sexual being. I argued, then, that work such as Ellis's was a major element in the constitution of a separate homosexual category, which in turn has fundamentally shaped the identities of self-defined homosexual people, women and men, throughout the twentieth century. Subsequently, a number of feminist writers have gone further, in excoriating Ellis as the definer of female sexual subordination (Jeffreys 1985). Such was the power of the word.

Of course, the reality was rather more complex than this simple summary. Ellis did not invent a separate homosexual experience. He learnt of