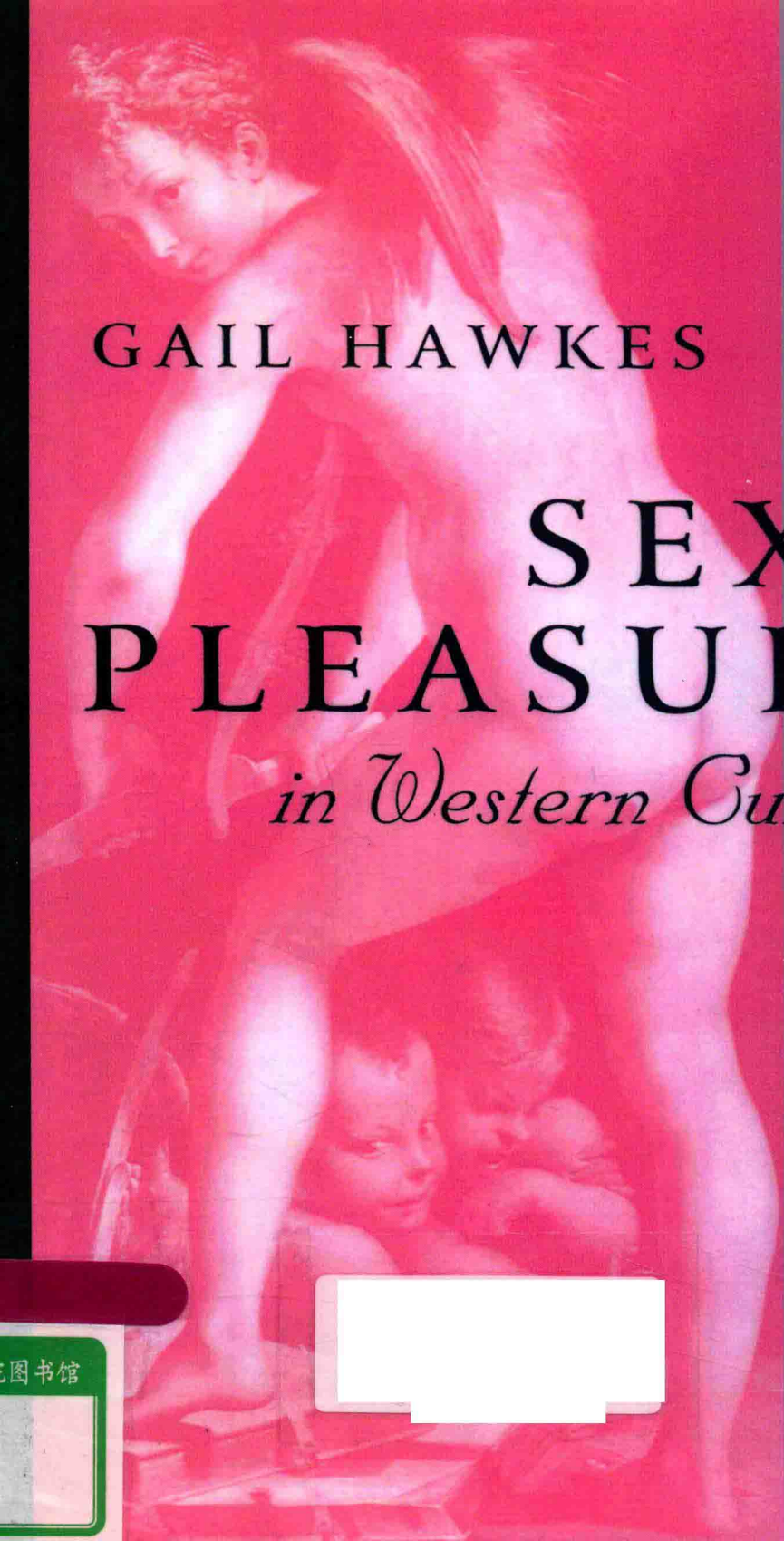

GAIL HAWKES

SEX & PLEASURE

in Western Culture

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Introduction

Death is an inevitable aspect of being human. So, in popular understanding, is sex. The inescapability of death is determined by our physicality. The inescapability of sex has a demonstrable social source. The inspiration for this book was to explore the mixed fear and fascination that the mere mention of 'sex' invariably provokes in the present. I have been interested in these mixed feelings for a long time, and earlier work suggested two things to me: first, that there was a set of ideas about sex and pleasure that persisted despite different social contexts and times; second (and more speculative), that this phenomenon suggested a strong link between sexual desire and the social order. These two ideas provide the foundation questions for this book. Why was sex considered a threat to social order, or, more simply, a 'social problem'? Did this apply to all 'sex'? Who defined it as such, and why? What were the consequences of this definition, and were they effective in reducing anxiety?

Since its birth, sociology has examined the interaction between the individual will and social forces. In this endeavour it has, until relatively recently, ignored the two most fundamental aspects for humankind – sex and death. Perhaps understandably, these two experiences have been shaded from scrutiny by the wide branches of biological definitions of both. Sex, like death, was primarily a biological fact. As such, neither was considered to yield much understanding of the ties that bind the individual to the social. A sociology of sex and of death began to emerge in the closing decades of the twentieth century. But much of this, especially the scholarship on sex, was to come from the tradition of interpretative sociology that emphasized

the experiential over the structural. There was less recognition of an ideological dimension of sexual desire and pleasure that operated at a less conscious level and that linked sensual experience to social order.

The concept of 'social order' is not a fashionable one, either inside or outside walls of learning, for it seems to prioritize a mechanistic process over that of individual will and consciousness. Durkheim made much of the invisible forces that shape and influence the actions of individuals in society. These, he insisted, were social in origin, their role to contain the essential unruliness of human desires for gratification. Without these guiding forces, the bonds that tie individuals to each other, and ultimately to the 'whole', would disintegrate and chaos would result. However, what constitutes these bonds, how strong or flexible they are, is a topic for enquiry and explanation. Further, across time there is one feature that remains constant: the bonds that cement become identifiable only when they are challenged. They become more visible in order either to reinforce social norms or to adjust social bonds to the changed circumstances.

This book explores the social construction of ideas about sex, desire and pleasure, as part of the broader process of social order. It takes a broad sweep approach, rather than being inclusive of all cultural and historical variations and details. The intention is to provide a historical landscape whose signposts deal with the past and the present in each epoch. Theoretically there are three themes. First, as Marc Bloch demonstrated, the past can contribute much to an understanding of the present. Second, the sociological imagination, used in this way, can unearth and demonstrate the coexistence of change and continuity in social history. Third, the early Christian association between sin and sex kept the sexual body central to social control, where it remains today.

I begin by offering a 'bird's-eye view' of the sexual landscape of the new millennium, a term almost forgotten despite its huge currency at the close of the last century. The Prologue deliberately ignores scholarly work on sex and pleasure since this often barely impinges on the daily consumption of sexual desire and pleasure. Instead, examples from popular culture from the UK, Australia and North America are used to illustrate different 'levels of consciousness' about desire and pleasure against which individual choices and experiences occur. Looking more closely at this backdrop, which we largely take for granted, there is evidence of boundaries around modes of sexual pleasures even in a context where, at first glance, anything goes. This opening section 'flags up' three ideas for readers

to keep in mind as they progress through the chapters. First, prevailing normative ideas are flexible. This allows the same acts to be viewed positively or negatively, depending on the context. Second, speaking about sex, whether encouraging or condemning, is endemic and apparently obligatory. Finally, there is a tacit recognition of the potentially disruptive potential of encouraging sexual desire.

Because the book deals with specific time periods, each chapter begins with a brief reminder about the key characteristics of the age. The first chapter reaches far back into time, to the distinctive association between sex pleasure and social order in classical Greece. In Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* I found obvious illustrations of this, as well as fascinating grounds for distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable sexualities. The work of other classical scholars is used to summarize the distinctive features of sexual expression and their social roles for both men and women. Chapter 2 reviews the evolution of early Christian teachings about sex and the body. It emphasizes the early connection between sex and sin, and the danger represented by the irrational desiring body. Chapter 3 deals with the long era of the Middle Ages. While recounting the dominant role of the Church in controlling sexual behaviour, it also acknowledges the impact of secular ideas, especially from the spheres of medicine and both high and popular cultural practices. This expanded social context is continued in chapter 4, which discusses the ideas and influences of the Renaissance – the rebirth of knowledge, of secularism, of the love of the body and of its capability – on sexual mores and ideologies. Chapter 5 charts the twin developments of modernity and modern understandings of the sexual body. Sexual modernity made explicit what had been implicit throughout the account – sexual behaviour had profound implications for social life as well as for individual spiritual life. It also firmly established the sexual body as a legitimate object of attention for the modern medical profession. Chapter 6 identifies the twentieth century as the *sexual century*. This may seem counter-intuitive to the theme of this book, since all might be seen as sexual centuries. But it was in this period more than any previously that *natural* sex was deemed in need of proper *education*. Past anxieties had concentrated on identifying aspects of sexual desire and pleasure that were unnatural or abnormal. It was these characteristics that were a threat to the social order. But in the twentieth century 'normal' but uneducated heterosexuality was the subject of scrutiny and concern. The sexual century was also one of increasingly detailed and distinct discourses about sex from a *variety* of sources. This was also when sexuality became a political issue and a

foundation for movements of liberation. By its close, sexual choice was a key marker for the self-identifying individual of late modernity.

The text ends with a review of the themes that have been recurrent and also reflects on the future implications of the fragmentation of categories that, still, normatively control sexual desire and sexual pleasure.

Prologue: The Sexual Landscape of the New Millennium

It is not the intention of this section to move directly into academic debates about sex and pleasure and their relationship to social order. The prologue follows an old theatrical tradition where a monologue sets the scene for the more structured performance that follows. In this respect I wanted first to draw the reader's attention to the *existence* of a sexual landscape and second to *display* its most distinctive features. Through this display, we are invited to look again at aspects of our social surrounds that we often take for granted. Especially this is the case in the fragmentation of discourses about sex. Our existence in the landscape often blurs our clarity of vision of the immediate surrounds. This effect is intensified in contemporary life by two aspects of late modernity. First, our social world is comprised of a rapidly increasing number of overlapping yet distinct spheres with which we all interact at varying levels. Second, the speed at which we are compelled to pass through these spheres blunts our critical faculties. In what follows we will retake the journey through the landscape, stopping to consider in more detail aspects of these sexual spheres that are not immediately obvious. We will focus on the presence of contradictions that are hidden by this fragmentation of spheres. In this way we will be identifying a key theme throughout the book: that the relationship between social construction and social order is often neither obvious nor direct. This becomes clearer in social contexts that are dominated by strong belief systems. In late modernity the secular belief system is dominated by the promotion of individual choice and individual authoring of self. Forms of social control, therefore, will be framed by this imperative and thus not appear overtly as control but rather the opposite – freedom. In the

last half of the twentieth century, this word characterized much of what was said about sex. However, this was a freedom that was permitted, rather than being assumed or chosen.

The decades from 1960 to 1980 in the UK, the US and Australia were marked by the legalization of once illegal or stigmatized sexual behaviour. This included contraception to the unmarried; abortion; homosexuality between consenting adults; divorce on much less punitive grounds; and a relaxation of the censorship laws on explicitly sexual printed matter. Though the extent to which these were radical changes varied between states and between countries, there was an overall acceptance of the need to adjust levels of sexual morality in the post-war context. Second, there was a groundswell of movements for sexual liberation. Women, lesbians and gays demanded sexual freedom as an integral part of their democratic citizenship rights, using their desiring bodies to make a political as well as a personal statement. While these movements were effective in placing sexual rights on the political agenda, the extent to which they resulted in real freedom and autonomy was limited.

Sexual liberation was a double-edged sword. Certainly it alleviated the embarrassed secrecy that fed ignorance and discouraged open discussion about sexual matters. But it also fed campaigns by conservative movements about sexual promiscuity, the disintegration of the family and the corruption of youth. Talking about sex was not something that could be left to just anyone. The consequences might be the erosion of moral distinctions in sexual behaviour. Accordingly, specialized medical professionals retained their position of leadership, being the only legitimate outlet for sexual knowledge and sexual 'instruction'. In these professional discourses, and echoed in popular media, a number of key social norms were emphasized. First and foremost sex remained something one did in private and within the structure of a stable relationship, preferably marriage. It was, of course, heterosexual and coital. Positions or practices that increased pleasure were encouraged, but only insofar as they contributed to vaginal orgasm. Women's sexuality was nurtured and encouraged, their erotic training and expertise gradually over the century gaining an obligatory status. Clear normative distinctions were made between private and public sexual intimacy and expression. The 'proper place' for this exercise of 'sexual freedom' was behind closed doors, safely encased within the private and domestic sphere. Conversely, the experience of sexual pleasure and the expression of sexuality in public continued to be stigmatized and marginalized as morally corrupt and obscene.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, this distinction became muddled, both conceptually and in reality. A number of fea-

tures mark this change. First, sex and sexuality ceased to be the exclusive domain of the professional and the expert. The importance of official production and dissemination of sexual knowledge was replaced by the importance of choice and consumption of sex and sexuality. The detached expertise that was on offer in publications written by 'sexperts' was replaced by a new way of speaking about sex that inverted the priorities of the immediate past. Professional expertise was replaced by effectively marketing techniques of good sex by sexual entrepreneurs. Second, the once clear moral distinctions between sex in the private and the public sphere were dissolved. Anonymous sexual encounters, once marked as the defining feature of prostitution, began to be offered as entertainment and celebrated as the essence of a successful leisure experience. Advances in information technology drove the development of reality television that made good commercial use of offering voyeuristic opportunities to viewers while encouraging exhibitionist sexual displays between their contestants. Anonymously available erotic and pornographic material expanded with globalized access to internet technology.

This commodified eroticism breached the public–private divide in two senses. First, it offered the viewer a virtual entry into the intimacy of the bedroom – once the most private of spaces. Second, opening this space offered a legitimate context within which to condone sex disengaged from any commitment or emotional ties. Such sex, of course, has a very long history and remains formally defined as prostitution. But in the postmodern world this stigmatized connection has been severed by the fragmentation of contexts. This fragmentation defuses once clear moral boundaries around public and private sex. Indeed, any suggestion that the marketed commodified product is to be confused with 'real' sex – that is, heterosexual, and in stable relationships – is rejected as irrelevant.

New discourses of public and private pleasures

The distinction between 'the public and the private' is a fundamental one in sociology. As Norbert Elias has illustrated, what social activities fitted various categories differed depending on the historical period. This was most evident when comparing premodern and modern societies, where acts considered appropriate in the public sphere came to be inappropriate. In premodern times, Elias tells us, it was considered socially acceptable to share a bed at an inn with a total stranger of either sex. Similarly, public and intergenerational nakedness was not seen as immoral or, necessarily, associated with

sexual desire. By contrast, in the family home of modernity, activities that took place within the four walls of 'the home' came to be seen by definition as private and intimate. Privacy became the key moral requirement as well as the key distinction between the private and public. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century the search for profits fed an advertising industry growing in wealth and in its power to influence the self-perception of the all-important consumers. These new commentators of modern life made good use of the normative boundaries implied by the public–private divide. For example, advertisers avoided any direct acknowledgement that, in these private spheres, people had sex. The stereotype of the 'cornflake box family' required sex for its existence, but this was never acknowledged. Any reference to bodily functions, especially those that involved excretion, were sidestepped coyly, referred to only by inference or by elaborate euphemisms. So, for example, when after more than fifty years of use sanitary towels and tampons were considered acceptable advertising copy, the 'blood' they absorbed so efficiently was in fact blue water. Advertisements for lavatory cleaners in the UK were not permitted to show the bowl, only the cistern. Actors portraying characters in depictions of 'the family' were rarely, if ever, seen in bed together.

This construction of the home as the guardian of privacy and of modesty depended for its effectiveness on corresponding constructions in the public sphere. In premodern contexts urinating and even defecating in the public space was permitted. In the public sphere of modernity bodily functions were more or less outlawed or, at least, confined to clearly designated areas. The public toilet of modernity provided a designated socially acceptable context for a private act in the public space. Similarly the only acceptable context for public sex was within the walls of brothels. Sexual acts or images designed to induce sexual desire were morally demarcated in legally restricted spaces. Two examples will make the point. Erotic imagery is the mainstay of 'men's magazines'. Sealed in plastic from unsuitable eyes, these have an established presence in the newsagents and drugstores of modernity. Their purchase presented a social and moral challenge: the public admission of sexual needs. The act of choosing and of purchasing – in other words, the essential preliminary to consumption of sex in some form – involved exposing oneself to moral scrutiny and judgement. The request for condoms or for contraception in family planning clinics similarly makes a public statement about sexuality. As one research respondent commented to me about attendance at a family planning clinic, 'everyone knows why you're there'. 'You're there' because you desire sexual gratification and pleasure. But social mores make it difficult to acknowledge this need. Embar-

rassment results from crossing the threshold of intimacy and privacy with which acceptable sex was associated and by which it was defined. In late modernity the normative division between sex in private and in public has been eroded and even eradicated in some contexts. Instead, it has been replaced with intersecting yet distinct spheres that fragment both social meaning and normative judgement. Three examples from the sexual landscape will illustrate this claim: advertising sex, entertainment sex and unauthorized sex.

Advertising sex

Under the pressures of close competition for very similar products in the world market, globalizing capitalism recognized the necessity to use the power of sexual imagery in new ways. 'Traditionally', naked women's bodies were used to attract male attention to products related to blue-collar male work. The most famous of these were the Pirelli calendars that could be found on the walls of any car workshop, or indeed any workplaces with a preponderance of male employees. The association of such images with car tyres or power tools was clearly intended to encourage the guilty and secret enjoyment in a specific and enclosed context. This 'convention' contained erotic titillation within close and male-dominated confines, even before the challenges of feminism towards such commercialized objectification.

By contrast, from the 1990s explicit sexual imagery appeared on prime-time television, on billboards and hoardings in public thoroughfares and in mainstream magazines of all genres. The marketing targets likewise range across gender and age boundaries. The bodies are as likely to be men as women, in poses that conform to conventions of homoeroticism. The range of products they sell has expanded to include cars, chocolates, perfumes, food, drinks and clothing – especially underwear. But the most distinctive feature of advertising sex, apart from its wide range and increasing explicitness, is the appeal it makes to the active experience of sensuality. Cars are sold to both sexes not by their mechanical features but by the pleasurable sensations experienced through bodily contact with them. The carnality is conveyed by body language, facial expression and pounding music backgrounds. The Citroën Xsara campaign using Claudia Schiffer performing an elegant striptease and throwing her lace knickers out of the driver's window arguably began this trend. Similarly advertisements for ice-cream filmed in the bedroom directly associate the experience of eating the product with the experience of