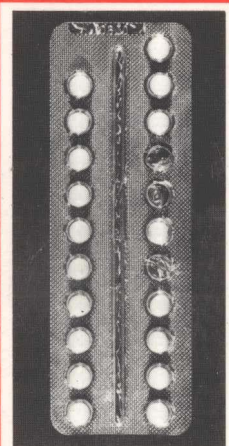


Themes in British Social History

Sex, Politics and Society

The regulation of sexuality since 1800

Jeffrey Weeks



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**For my Mother,
And in memory of my Father**

Preface

This book has had a long gestation, and is intended to sum up a great deal of original research and a wide reading in secondary material. But as the Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, noted, every work of synthesis inspires a new crop of specialised research, and I am clearly aware of the provisional nature of this work, and the host of fresh questions it raises.

It should be said, however, that this book was never intended as a detailed or exhaustive account of all the multifarious patterns of sexual behaviour. It is in essence, as the title and subtitle imply, a discussion of the forces that have organised and regulated sexuality within a particular historical period (roughly the period of industrial capitalism) in a particular geographical and political area (Great Britain, and chiefly that part south of Scotland). But I hope that some of the conclusions suggested will have a wider resonance. Its working premise, set out in some detail in Chapter 1, is that 'sexuality' is not an unproblematic natural given, which the 'social' works upon to control, but is, on the contrary, an *historical* unity which has been shaped and determined by a multiplicity of forces, and which has undergone complex historical transformations.

In order to account for some of the changes that have taken place, the book, while largely chronological in form, avoids a simple narrative structure. It revolves around three broad issues: the meaning given to sexuality in Victorian society; the construction of sexuality as an area of social concern, scientific investigation and reforming endeavour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and the place of sexuality in twentieth-century consciousness and social policy. In tackling these questions I am aware that I have ignored other domains of interest, and have bypassed other questions that might fruitfully have been discussed. My excuse is that my aim has been a modest, but I believe vitally important, one: to delineate the forces, ideas and social practices that have elevated sexuality into a prime focus of social concern over the past two hundred years.

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I have to thank all the librarians and archivists who assisted me, with especial thanks to the Departmental Record officer at the Home office who gave me access to hitherto unavailable files.

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I have to thank John Stevenson, editor of this series, and the publishers, for their immense patience and support for a project which grew longer and took longer as the years went by.

Micky Burbidge and Angus Suttie lived with the enterprise from start to finish. I can simply thank them.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
1 Sexuality and the historian	1
Histories of sex	1
Sexuality and power	6
The making of 'modern' sexuality	11
2 'That damned morality': sex in Victorian ideology	19
Victorian sexuality: myths and meanings	19
The domestic ideology	24
Sex and class	32
3 The sacramental family: middle-class men, women and children	38
Masculinity and femininity	38
Birth control	44
Childhood	48
4 Sexuality and the labouring classes	57
Middle-class myths, working-class realities	57
Traditions, illegitimacy and proletarianisation	59
The patterns of family life	67
Respectability and social control	72
5 The public and the private: moral regulation in the Victorian period	81
Forms of moral regulation	81
Private morality, public vice	84
Reform or control?	89

6	The construction of homosexuality	96
	Homosexuality: concepts and consequences	96
	Moral, legal and medical regulation	99
	Identities	108
7	The population question in the early twentieth century	122
	Population politics	122
	Maternalism	126
	Eugenics	128
	The influence of eugenics	136
8	The theorisation of sex	141
	A new continent of knowledge	141
	Sex, science and society	145
	Havelock Ellis and sex research	148
	The impact of Freud	152
9	Feminism and socialism	160
	Feminism and sex reform	160
	The morals of socialism	167
10	Sex psychology and birth control	180
	Sex psychology	180
	International movements	184
	Parenthood and birth control	187
11	Beliefs and behaviour 1914–39	199
	A ‘glorious unfolding’?	199
	Domesticity and family life	201
	Protecting purity	214
	Psychology and sex delinquency	221
12	The state and sexuality	232
	Population and family life	232
	‘Wolfenden’ and sexual liberalism	239

13 The permissive moment	249
'Permissiveness'	249
Youth	252
Women	256
Ideologies	260
The political moment	263
14 Currents and counter-currents	273
The limits of permissiveness	273
The new moralism	277
Alternatives	282
<i>Index</i>	292

Sexuality and the historian

Histories of sex

Sex in history, an American historian remarked in the early 1970s, is a 'virgin field'. 'Historians have been reluctant', he went on, 'exceedingly reluctant, to deal with such a delicate topic.'¹ Since that was written much has changed. The new 'social history' has challenged our ignorance of the subject. Family reconstitution and literary archaeology have revealed a mountain of more or less valuable information. Simultaneously the sexual radical movements of the 1970s have undermined our preconception of the 'naturalness' and inevitability of contemporary gender roles and sexual attitudes. So (to continue the metaphor) the territory now has flourishing settlements; there is a healthy interest in exploration. But what is still lacking is any general survey of the terrain. That, in part, is the purpose of this book.

Historical explorations of sexuality are not of course new. Specialised studies of sex as a social experience have been appearing for almost a hundred years, since at least the time of the great pioneering sexologists and anthropologists of the late nineteenth century; and what appeared then were works which have been profoundly influential, not only in describing but in constructing and delineating the areas to be discussed. The aim of this chapter is to question the subject matter that they so confidently explored, for it is by no means clear what we mean when we raise the prospect of 'a history of sexuality'. The usual assumption is that sex is a definable and universal experience, like the desire for food, with the minority or unorthodox forms filtering off into distributaries, which may, or more usually may not, be navigated by the conscientious explorer. I want to suggest that it is the centrality given to this concept of sexuality that constitutes a problem for historians, for it ignores the great variety of cultural patterns that history reveals, and the very different meanings given to what we blithely label as 'sexual activity'.

In most historical works on the topic of sex there have been two broad approaches, though they are not mutually exclusive, and there has, in practice, been a considerable overlap between the two.² The first I would label the 'naturalist' approach, and the classic British example

is the highly influential work of Havelock Ellis, especially his majestic *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. This is a vast and still very valuable chronicle of sexual behaviour and beliefs, essentially descriptive in form, ostensibly classifying and categorising sexual forms that exist 'in nature'. Most works since, whether detailed monographs, or general cross-cultural surveys, have taken for granted the merits of such an approach, and the result had been an extremely important garnering of sexual knowledge. What it has not been able to do is provide a coherent explanation of the variations it often describes, nor account for changes in *mores* and consciousness.

The second broad approach is what Kenneth Plummer has labelled the 'meta-theoretical',³ and usually derives from a psychodynamic or neo- (or even would-be) Freudian theory. Psycho-history no doubt has its value, and can often provide valuable insights, but its major difficulty (the opposite of the naturalistic problem) is that by and large theoretical constructs take precedence over empirical evidence. The dangers of such an approach can be seen at its most extreme in Gordon Rattray Taylor's neo-Freudian interpretation of *Sex in History*: 'The history of civilisation is the history of a long warfare between the dangerous and powerful drives and the systems of taboos and inhibitions which man has erected to control them'.⁴ He develops a theory which accounts for changing attitudes in terms of largely unexplained swings between 'matrist' and 'patrist' cultures, leaving us with a grandiloquent but unsubstantiated cyclical theory of social change. Such an approach has been influential even amongst professional historians, so that Lawrence Stone, for example, hints at such a cyclical explanation in his own work on *The Family, Sex and Marriage*: 'In terms of both sexual attitudes and power relationships, one can dimly begin to discern huge, mysterious, secular swings from repression to permissiveness and back again.'⁵ Even such a sensitive cultural critic as Steven Marcus in *The Other Victorians* relies on a Freudian explanation, which by and large distorts rather than clarifies. In a prefatory motto for the book he quotes from Freud to the effect that 'perhaps we must make up our minds to the idea that altogether it is not possible for the claims of the sexual instincts to be reconciled with the demands of culture.'⁶ So Marcus's explanation of nineteenth-century pornography, for instance, is in terms of this conflict between the overpowering demands of the sexual drive and a social fabric disrupted by massive change.

What we have in both the approaches is an 'essentialist' view of sexuality; sex conceptualised as an overpowering force in the individual that shapes not only the personal but the social life as well. It is seen as a driving, instinctual force, whose characteristics are built into the biology of the human animal, which shapes human institutions and whose will must force its way out, either in the form of direct sexual expression or, if blocked, in the form of perversion or neuroses. Krafft-Ebing expressed the orthodox view in the late nineteenth century when he described sex as a 'natural instinct' which 'with all conquering force

and might demands fulfilment'. It is, we might note, a basically male drive. It is also a firmly heterosexual drive. William McDougall in the 1920s spoke representatively of the 'innate direction of the sex impulse towards the opposite sex'.⁷ Few have risked challenging this.

What we have then, is a clear notion of a 'basic biological mandate' that presses on, and so must be firmly controlled by the cultural and social matrix. Such an approach has the merits of appearing commonsensical, according with our own intimate experiences. And it has largely been unquestioned until recently in the work of most theorists of sex, from naturalists and Freudians to taxonomists like Alfred Kinsey (in his concept of 'sexual outlet') and the research clinicians such as William Masters and Virginia Johnson (in their descriptions of physiological responses). Moreover, the instinctual (or 'drive reduction') model has been embraced by all shades of opinion, from the conservative moralist anxious to control this unruly force to the Freudian left (Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm) wanting to 'liberate' sexuality from its capitalist and patriarchal constraints.

Against this, J.H. Gagnon and William Simon have argued in their book *Sexual Conduct* that sexuality is subject to 'socio-cultural moulding to a degree surpassed by few other forms of human behaviour',⁸ and in so arguing they are building both on a century of sex research and on a century of questioning the notion of 'natural man'. Over the past few decades, in particular, in structuralist anthropology, psychoanalysis, and Marxist theory, there has been a major theoretical effort to challenge the naturalness of the 'unitary subject' in social theory, to see the individual as a product of social forces, an 'ensemble of social relations', rather than as a simple natural unity. 'Sexuality' has in many ways been most resistant to this challenge, precisely because its power seems to derive from our biological being, but there have recently been several sustained challenges to sexual essentialism, from quite different theoretical approaches: the interactionist (associated particularly with the work of Gagnon and Simon, and in Britain Kenneth Plummer); the psychoanalytic (associated with the reinterpretation of Freud initiated by Jacques Lacan, and taken up by feminist writers such as Juliet Mitchell); and the discursive, taking as its starting point the work of Michel Foucault.⁹ Between them they have posed formidable challenges to our received notions of sexuality, challenges which historians are duty bound to confront and respond to.

Despite their different approaches, and in the end different aims, their work converges on several important issues. Firstly, they all reject sex as an autonomous realm, a natural force with specific effects, a 'rebellious energy' which the 'social' controls. In the work of Gagnon and Simon, it seems to be suggested that nothing is intrinsically sexual, or rather that anything can be sexualised (though what creates the notion of 'sexuality' itself is never answered). In Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud, sexuality, or rather sexual desire, is constituted in language: it is the law of the Father, the castration fear, and the pained

entry of the child into the 'symbolic order', that is the world of language and meaning, at the Oedipal moment, which instigates 'desire'.

In Foucault's work 'sexuality' is seen as an historical apparatus, and 'sex' is a 'complex idea that was formed within the deployment of sexuality': '*Sexuality* must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge gradually tries to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct.'¹⁰

It is not fully clear what are the elements on which these social constructs of sexuality play. In the psychoanalytic school, there is the notion of the 'component instincts' which are unified in the complex process of acculturation, though the issue is complicated by a transhistorical concept of the Oedipus complex which, it is argued, is basic to all culture, or in Juliet Mitchell's version, patriarchal culture. Gagnon and Simon (and Plummer) seem to accept the existence of bodily potentialities on which 'sexuality' draws, and in this they do not seem far removed from Foucault's version that what 'sexuality' plays upon are 'bodies, organs, somatic localisations, functions, anatomo-physiological systems, sensations, and pleasures', which have no intrinsic unity or 'laws' of their own.¹¹ In other words, they are unified only through ideological constructs ('scripts' in the terms of Gagnon and Simon), and it is these that constitute 'sexuality'.

Secondly, then, what links the anti-essentialist critique is a recognition of the social and historical sources of sexual definitions. In the feminist appropriation of Lacan this can be seen as a result of patriarchal structures, and the differential entry into the world of language of the human male and female. But this as I have suggested poses massive theoretical problems, particularly in the attempt at a materialist position which would locate variations within changing social relations. The problem here is that the *transhistorical* account of the Oedipal crisis and the consequent focusing on the eternal problems of the shaping of sex and gender already presupposes the existence of basic drives which are outside culture. On the other hand, both the interactionists and Foucault make clear the historical specificity of Western concepts of sexuality. Gagnon and Simon suggest that: 'To earlier societies it may not have been a need to constrain severely the powerful sexual impulse in order to maintain social stability or limit inherently anti-social force, *but rather a matter of having to invent an importance for sexuality*'.¹² The mechanisms of this 'invention' are not specified but the stress is important. Foucault makes a much clearer, though controversial, historical specification and locates the rise of the 'sexuality apparatus' in the eighteenth century, linked with identifiable historical processes.

As a consequence of this concept of an historical construction of sexuality, a third point of contact lies in the rejection, both by the interactionists and Foucault, of the notion that the history of sexuality – especially in the nineteenth century – can fruitfully be seen in terms of

'repression'. Foucault is most explicit on this, arguing that what he terms the 'repressive hypothesis' regarding Victorian sexuality is misleading: because it points to too narrow an interpretation of the family; because it avoids class differentiation; and because it is based on a negative rather than positive concept of power. Gagnon and Simon have been less historically specific, but both interactionists and Foucault tend to the view that sexual behaviour is organised not through mechanisms of 'repression' but through powers of 'incitement', definition and regulation. More specifically, both approaches stress the central organising role of sexual categorisation and the various social practices that sustain the categories. So, for instance, the definitions of 'normality' and 'abnormality' are clearly social definitions but so are such descriptions as 'homosexual', 'paedophile', 'transvestite', and so on, and these can act as mechanisms of control. Though neither the interactionists nor Foucault make much of the point (the first leaning towards an essentialist view of gender, the latter showing little theoretical interest in the issue), this also points to the importance of categorisation along lines of gender; the construction, in other words, of categories of masculinity and femininity, building on obvious biological differences, but reinforcing these through ideology and various social practices. In the case of Gagnon and Simon and those influenced by them (such as Kenneth Plummer), the theoretical framework derives from Meadean social psychology, which sees the individual as having a developing personality which is created in an interaction with others; and from labelling theories of deviance, which concentrate on the public processes of stigmatisation. In the case of Foucault, it derives from his belief that it is through 'discourses', ensembles of beliefs, concepts, organising ideas, that our relation to reality is organised. The significance of both approaches is the challenge they gave to the 'naturalness' of what appear as basic divisions.

Fourthly, however, in all three tendencies there is a curious relationship to history which makes their easy assimilation into historical research difficult. Symbolic interactionism, by stressing the subjective and the impact of particular labelling events, has almost invariably displayed an ahistorical bias. The psychoanalytical school, almost by definition has based itself on supra-historical assumptions which have been almost valueless in detailed analyses. Foucault, and those influenced by him, have displayed a great scepticism about the possibilities of a conventional history: Foucault stresses that his work is basically aimed at constructing a 'genealogy', the locating of the 'traces' of the present rather than reconstructing the past. It is basically a 'history of the present', a concept which poses problems of its own.¹³

Each of the approaches has nevertheless proved stimulating to historians. The interactionist approach has, for instance, been very important in explorations of 'deviant' or unorthodox sexuality, particularly directing researchers to the significance of labelling events and the importance of subcultural responses.¹⁴ Its strengths – the stress on the

subjective and the significance of individual meanings – have however been the obverse of its weakness, which is precisely the absence of any wider historical theory. The neo-psychoanalytic approach has offered a most important emphasis on psychological structuring in the creation of historically specific forms of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and has encouraged a break away from discussions in terms of social ‘roles’, with all that concept’s inherent functionalism. But its full deployment demands – and to some extent is now getting – a greater historical specification than many devotees of psychoanalysis would regard as altogether orthodox or proper.

Foucault’s work also offers a series of difficulties, in part relating to his lack of concern with those issues that precisely engage the other approaches: individual meanings and psychological structuring. But despite this, Foucault’s essay on *The History of Sexuality* does offer a most stimulating challenge to traditional historical accounts, partly because of its undermining of conventional approaches, partly because it is an aspect of a much wider intellectual effort, whose implications are likely to be of major importance. Foucault’s approach and analyses have also to some degree informed this work and for that reason alone deserve a critical appraisal. The following section therefore explores some of the implications of Foucault’s work.

Sexuality and power

Michel Foucault is not the first to say many of the things he argues. His conclusions often overlap with those produced by other theoretical approaches, including, amongst others, the interactionist and labelling theories. His historical conclusions also articulate closely with the empirical research of recent social historians, particularly those influenced by feminism and the radical sexual movements. But his speculation – so far only seen in outline, in a methodological (and often polemical) essay rather than in a series of detailed studies – point to what I believe to be the correct questions even if he does not provide all the right answers. And the central point is the one captured in the English title of his work: *The History of Sexuality*. The definite article is important, for what it suggests is that the modern notion of sexuality – both the importance we assign to it, and the theoretical unification it implies – is an historical construct of the past few hundred years. The fundamental question, as posed by Foucault, is how is it that in our society sex is seen not just as a means of biological reproduction nor a source of harmless pleasure, but, on the contrary, has come to be seen as the central part of our being, the privileged site in which the truth of ourselves is to be found.

Foucault’s recent work has been dominated by an explicit preoccupation with ‘power’, and in his *History* he argues that the apparatus of sexuality is of central importance in the modern play of power. His

work at the same time marks a break with conventional theorisations of power. Power is not unitary, it does not reside in the state, it cannot be reduced to class relations; it is not something to hold or use. Power is, on the contrary, omnipresent, it is the intangible but forceful reality of social existence and of all social relations. Foucault is not interested in a grand theory of power, but in the 'concrete mechanisms and practices through which power is exercised'.¹⁵ Power, that is to say, is not a single thing: it is relational, it is created in the relationships which sustain it.

Although he is unwilling to specify in advance any privileged source of power, there nevertheless underlies his work what has been described as a 'philosophical monism', a conception of a 'will to power' forever expanding and bursting forth in the form of a will to know. What Foucault is interested in is the complex of 'power-knowledge', the way in which power operates through the construction of particular knowledges. The French title of the first volume of his *History* sums up his preoccupation: *La Volonté de Savoir*, 'The will to know'.

It is through 'discourse' that power-knowledge is realised. Foucault is not interested, that is to say, in the history of mind but in the history of discourse. What he is suggesting is that the relationship between symbol and symbolised is not only referential, does not simply describe, but is productive, that is it creates. The history of sexuality becomes, therefore, a history of our discourses about sexuality. And the Western experience of sex, he argues, is not the inhibition of discourse, is not describable as a regime of silence, but is rather a constant, and historically changing, deployment of discourses on sex, and this ever-expanding discursive explosion is part of a complex growth of control over individuals through the apparatus of sexuality.

But behind the vast explosion of discourses on sexuality since the eighteenth century there is no single unifying strategy, valid for the whole of society. And in particular, breaking with what has become an orthodox Marxist problematic, he denies that the recent history of sexuality can be simply interpreted in terms of the 'reproduction' of capitalist social relations and labour power. In the *Introduction* to his *History of Sexuality* Foucault suggests four strategic unities, linking together a host of practices and techniques of power, which formed specific mechanics of knowledge and power centring on sex: a hysterisation of women's bodies; a pedagogisation of children's sex; a socialisation of procreative behaviour; a psychiatrisation of perverse pleasures. And four figures emerged from this preoccupation with sex, four objects of knowledge, four types of human subjects, subjected; targets of and anchorages for the categories which were being simultaneously investigated and regulated: the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult. The thrust of these discursive creations is control; control not through denial or prohibition, but through 'production', through imposing a grid of definition on the possibilities of the body. 'The deployment of sexuality has its reasons for

being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way.¹⁶

This is obviously related to Foucault's analysis of the genealogy of the disciplinary society, a society of surveillance and control, which he sets out in his book *Discipline and Punish*, and to his argument that power proceeds not in the traditional model of sovereignty (that is negatively, 'thou shalt not') but through administering and fostering life (that is positively, 'you must').¹⁷ In the emergence of 'bio-power', Foucault's characteristic term for 'modern' social forms, sexuality becomes a key element. For sex, argues Foucault, is the pivot of two axes along which the whole technology of life developed: it was the point of entry to the body, to the harnessing, identification and distribution of forces over the body; and it was the entry to control and regulation of populations. 'Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species.'¹⁸ As a result, sex became a crucial target of power organised around the management of life rather than the sovereign threat of death.

There are several problems in this approach. In the first place there are difficulties with Foucault's view of power which, as one critic put it, 'remains almost as a process, without specification within different instances'.¹⁹ A notion of power which goes beyond, say, class reductionism is obviously useful in attempting to grasp the history of the subordination of women, or the regulation of unorthodox sexualities, but if power is everywhere it is difficult to understand how it can be resisted or broken out of. 'Where there is power, there is resistance', Foucault argues, but nevertheless, because of this, 'resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power'.²⁰ Indeed, the very existence of power relies on a multiplicity of points of resistance which play the role of 'adversary, target, support or handle in power relations'. It is difficult to resist the conclusion – which Foucault actually denies²¹ – that the techniques of discipline and surveillance, of individuation, and the strategies of power-knowledge that subject us, leave us always trapped. His emphasis on the growing importance of the 'norm' since the eighteenth century is one index of the problem. He notes that 'Another consequence of this development of bio-power was the growing importance assumed by the action of the norm at the expense of the juridical system of the law.'²² In stressing the importance of the norm, Foucault is pinpointing a vital aspect of social regulation, though his comments are not new. On the one hand they have clear antecedents in the more mundane observations of liberal historians that the development of an individualistic society in the nineteenth century led to an increase of conventionality. On the other hand, it is not far distant from the theories developed by the Frankfurt School of Marxists in the 1930s (and Foucault acknowledges his debt to them) about the internalisation of bourgeois values. But in emphasising the role of the norm he is quite consciously diminishing the role of the state – at least as expressed in its