



THE TROUBLE WITH **NORMAL**

SEX, POLITICS, AND THE
ETHICS OF QUEER LIFE

MICHAEL WARNER

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PREFACE

This book rises from the abstract to the concrete. It opens with general questions of ethics and moves to very local politics. In the later chapters, when it gets down to business, so to speak, it makes arguments that many will view as extremist, if not insane. For example, I argue that marriage is unethical. At a time when the largest gay organizations are pushing for same-sex marriage, I argue that this strategy is a mistake and that it represents a widespread loss of vision in the movement. In the fourth chapter, I go so far as to offer a principled defense of pornography, sex businesses, and sex outside the home.

Partly in order to convince the reader that I am not simply unhinged, I begin the book on a rather different note. The first chapter lays out a set of ethical principles that I take to be fundamental to political disputes around sex. It sets out an ideal of sexual autonomy and tries to imagine the

conditions under which that ideal could be met. It points to a number of ways that the politics of sexual shame makes that ideal impossible for variant sexualities. And it suggests that queer culture has long cultivated an alternative ethical culture that is almost never recognized by mainstream moralists as anything of the kind. I believe that the ethical insights of this sexual culture provide the best explanation of the political controversies that I later address in subsequent chapters: first, the increasingly popular call for gay people to see themselves as normal Americans; then, the campaign for same-sex marriage that has been the principal rallying point of the normalizing movement; followed by a chapter on the local politics of sex in New York City, where I live.

The analysis laid out in the opening of the book could also apply to many other examples. Although the work generally deals with conflicts in gay politics—not surprisingly, considering that my theme is the politics of sexual shame, and considering that local activism was the context that prompted me to write it—this subject involves a great deal more than the politics of the gay and lesbian movement, conventionally considered. Indeed, one of my contentions is that the movement has defined itself too narrowly. After the Clinton impeachment, nothing can be clearer than the degree to which a politics of sexual shame and conflicts over sex can be found across the full spectrum of contemporary life. From daily jostlings in home and workplace to the spectacular crises of national media politics, sex roils people; and the usual idea of what would be an ethical response is a moralism that roils them more. For this reason the world has much to learn from the disreputable queers who have the most experience in the politics of shame, but who for that very reason have been least likely to gain a hearing—either in the official policy cir-

cles where their interests are allegedly represented or in the theoretical and philosophical debates about morality, sex, and shame where their point of view can be most transformative.

Articulating that point of view in a way that people can hear is not always easy. I imagine everyone has had the experience of moving abruptly from one context to another and finding that a tone or an idea that worked in the first looks absurd or improper in the second. You could be gossiping in a corner and suddenly realize that everyone in the room is listening. You could be practicing a formal speech at home only to discover that it sounds pompous or corny. Finding the right thing to say can be of little use unless one can find the right register in which to say it. The gulf that this book tries to bridge is unusually wide. It explains why those who care about policy and morality should take as their point of departure the perspective of those at the bottom of the scale of respectability: queers, sluts, prostitutes, trannies, club crawlers, and other lowlifes. And it urges, for these people, a politics consistent with what I take to be their best traditions. If the result is a wavering register, a bit of growl in the falsetto, the indulgent reader will chalk it up to the nature of the problem that I have set out to address, and the peculiar kind of drag it requires.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ETHICS OF SEXUAL SHAME

Sooner or later, happily or unhappily, almost everyone fails to control his or her sex life. Perhaps as compensation, almost everyone sooner or later also succumbs to the temptation to control *someone else's* sex life. Most people cannot quite rid themselves of the sense that controlling the sex of others, far from being unethical, is where morality begins. Shouldn't it be possible to allow everyone sexual autonomy, in a way consistent with everyone else's sexual autonomy? As simple as this ethical principle sounds, we have not come close to putting it into practice. The culture has thousands of ways for people to govern the sex of others—and not just harmful or coercive sex, like rape, but the most personal dimensions of pleasure, identity, and practice. We do this directly, through prohibition and regulation, and indirectly, by embracing one identity or one set of tastes as though they were universally shared, or should be. Not only do we do this; we congratulate ourselves for doing it. To do

otherwise would require us to rethink much of what passes as common sense and morality.

It might as well be admitted that sex is a disgrace. We like to say nicer things about it: that it is an expression of love, or a noble endowment of the Creator, or liberatory pleasure. But the possibility of abject shame is never entirely out of the picture. If the camera doesn't cut away at the right moment, or if the door is thrown open unwontedly, or the walls turn out to be too thin, all the fine dress of piety and pride will be found tangled around one's ankles. In the fourth century B.C., the Athenian philosopher Diogenes thought that the sense of shame was hypocrisy, a denial of our appetitive nature, and he found a simple way to dramatize the problem: he masturbated in the marketplace. Many centuries of civilization have passed since then, but this example is not yet widely followed.

An ethical response to the problem of shame should not require us to pretend that shame doesn't exist. That, essentially, is what Diogenes wanted to do. Most defenders of sexual freedom still try some version of this response. They say that sexuality should be valued as pleasurable and life-affirming; or, some say, as a kind of spirituality. Still others see sex as a radical subversion of repressive power. Whatever truth may lie in these or similar ideas about why sex is good, I suspect that most people sense a certain hollowness to these anodyne views of sexuality as simply benign and pleasant. People know better, though they may not admit it. As Leo Bersani wrote in a classic essay of 1987, "There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it." Perhaps because sex is an occasion for losing control, for merging one's consciousness with the lower orders of animal desire and sensation, for raw confrontations of power and demand, it fills people with aversion and shame. Opponents of moralism, in Bersani's

view, have too often painted a sanitized, pastoral picture of sex, as though it were simply joy, light, healing, and oneness with the universe. Many of the moralists do the same when they pretend that sex is or should be only about love and intimacy. Either way, these descriptions of affirmative sex begin to sound anything but sexy. And no matter how true they might be, at least for some people, it is futile to deny the ordinary power of sexual shame.

So the difficult question is not: how do we get rid of sexual shame? The answer to that one will inevitably be: get rid of sex. The question, rather, is this: what will we do with our shame? And the usual response is: pin it on someone else. Sexual shame is not just a fact of life; it is also political. Although nearly everyone can be easily embarrassed about sex, some people stand at greater risk than others. They might be beaten, murdered, jailed, or merely humiliated. They might be stigmatized as deviants or criminals. They might even be impeached. More commonly, they might simply be rendered inarticulate, or frustrated, since shame makes some pleasures tacitly inadmissible, unthinkable. They might find themselves burdened by furtiveness, or by extraordinary needs for disclosure, or by such a fundamental need to wrench free from the obvious that the idea of an alternative is only the dim anticipation of an unformed wish. In any case, they will find it hard to distinguish their shame from its politics, their personal failings from the power of alien norms.

For most people, at least, the ethical response to sexual shame seems to be: more shame. The unethical nature of this response jumps out when we consider the moralisms of the past. The early-eighteenth-century tract *Onania*, for example, declares that masturbation is a sin “that perverts and extinguishes nature: he who is guilty of it, is laboring at the Destruction of his Kind, and in a manner strikes at the Creation

itself.” Reading this tortured logic, it’s easy to wonder: what were they thinking? More important: why were they so driven to control something that we now recognize as harmless, and by definition not our business? To most readers, I suspect, the irrationality of past moralisms is reassuring: we’re smarter than that now. But it could just as easily alarm us, since pronouncements about what kind of sex is or isn’t good for others are by no means a thing of the past. Religious groups no longer say much about God’s punishment of Onan for masturbation, but they still invoke biblical authority against gay people, sadomasochists, fetishists, and other alleged sex offenders. The secular arguments persist as well: though few people still think that the preservation of the species is a law of nature that has to be executed in every orgasm, they do still think that marital hetero sex has a rationale in nature, however Darwinian, and that it is therefore normative. These alibis of sexual morality crop up everywhere, from common prejudice to academic psychology. Popularized versions of evolutionary biology are enjoying quite a vogue now because they seem to justify the status quo as an expression of natural law.

Perhaps we should call it moralism, rather than morality, when some sexual tastes or practices (or rather an idealized version of them) are mandated for everyone. All too commonly, people think not only that their own way of living is right, but that it should be everyone else’s moral standard as well. They don’t imagine that sexual variance can be consistent with morality. And they think that anyone who disagrees with their version of morality must be a fuzzy relativist. Their suspicion of sexual variance is pseudo-morality, the opposite of an ethical respect for the autonomy of others. To say this is not to reject all morality, as some conservatives would have us believe; it is itself a moral argument. After all, it would be

hard to constrain violence toward women, sissies, and variant sexualities if we thought that all morality were merely a version of the same coercion. Some shame may be well deserved.

The difficulty is that moralism is so easily mistaken for morality. Some kinds of sexual relations seem as though they ought to be universal. They seem innocently moral, consistent with nature and health. But what if they are not universal in fact, or if other people demonstrate a different understanding of nature and health? It would take an extraordinary effort to consider the views of these sexual dissidents with anything like openness, because the first instinct will be to think of them as immoral, criminal, or pathological. And of course they might be. But anytime it seems necessary to explain away other people's sex in these ways, the premises of one's morality could just be flawed. What looks like crime might be harmless difference. What looks like immorality might be a rival morality. What looks like pathology might be a rival form of health, or a higher tolerance of stress.

It would be nice if the burden of proof, in such questions of sexual morality, lay on those who want to impose their standard on someone else. Then the goal of sexual ethics would be to constrain coercion rather than shut down sexual variance. But things usually work the other way around. We do not begin with what the sports-minded like to call a level playing field. We live with sexual norms that survive from the Stone Age, including prohibitions against autoeroticism, sodomy, extramarital sex, and (for those who still take the Vatican seriously) birth control. This is a problem with any essentially conservative or traditionalist stance on sexual morality: what we have to conserve is barbaric. What we inherit from the past, in the realm of sex, is the morality of patriarchs and clansmen, souped up with Christian hostility to the flesh ("our vile body," Saint Paul called it), medieval

chastity cults, virgin/whore complexes, and other detritus of ancient repression. Given these legacies of unequal moralism, nearly every civilized aspect of sexual morality has initially looked deviant, decadent, or sinful, including voluntary marriage, divorce, and nonreproductive sex.

For many people, the antiquity of sexual norms is a reason to obey them. In *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), for example, the Supreme Court invoked the “ancient roots” of the prohibition against sodomy. Chief Justice Warren Burger noted that “decisions of individuals relating to homosexual conduct have been subject to state intervention throughout the history of Western civilization.” One might have thought that such a hoary pedigree of barbarism was all the more reason for skepticism, but of course that wasn’t Burger’s conclusion.

When a given sexual norm has such deep layers of sediment, or blankets enough territory to seem universal, the effort of wriggling out from under it can be enormous. The burden becomes even heavier when one must first overcome shame, or break with the tacit force of a sexual morality that other people take to be obvious. We might even say that when sexual norms are of very great antiquity or generality, as the prohibition against sodomy has been until recently and still is for many people, they are hardly intended as coercion. No one has to try to dominate others through them. They are just taken for granted, scarcely entering consciousness at all. The world was homophobic, for example, before it identified any homosexuals for it to be phobic about. The unthinkability of sodomy may just be cultural landfill, rather than an insidious plan concocted by some genius of heterosexual world domination. Yet the effect is the same: heterosexual world domination. In fact, the effect is worse, because anyone who might have an interest in sodomy won’t simply have to fight a known enemy, or overturn the prohibitions of the judges. He

(or she, in some states) will first have to struggle with the unthinkability of his or her own desire. When battles have no enemies in this way, victories are rare.

The politics of shame, in other words, includes vastly more than the overt and deliberate shaming produced by moralists. It also involves silent inequalities, unintended effects of isolation, and the lack of public access. So sexual autonomy requires more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them. Having an ethics of sex, therefore, does not mean having a theory about what people's desires are or should be. If the goal is sexual autonomy, consistent with everyone else's sexual autonomy, then it will be impossible to say in advance what form that will take. Even bondage can be a means of autonomy—or not. Moralism cannot; it can only produce complacent satisfaction in others' shame. The taken-for-grantedness of dominant sexuality has the same effect, as does the privatization or isolation of sexual experience.

For some gay men and lesbians, the alternative to the cramping effects of shame in our culture is to "celebrate diversity." I must confess that whenever I see this slogan I think: why? It sounds like a slogan for a shopping mall. Diversity might or might not be a good thing, depending on context. Culture requires common references and norms, as the slogan itself reveals by telling us all to celebrate the same thing. But in the case of sexual norms, it makes sense. Individuals do not go shopping for sexual identity, but they do have a stake in a culture that enables sexual variance and circulates knowledge about it, because they have no other way of knowing what they might or might not want, or what they might become, or with whom they might find a common lot.

Edith Wharton tells a story of asking her mother, just before her marriage, what to expect on her wedding night. She was told not to ask such a stupid question. "You've seen statues," her mother said. We call this Victorian repression, but what it repressed was something that Wharton only came to desire much later. The term "repression" is often applied retrospectively in this way. There is a catch-22 of sexual shame: you don't think of yourself as repressed until after you've made a break with repression. We forget that even very standard sexualities—in this case, matrimonial heterosexuality—require not just free choice but the public accessibility of sexual knowledge, ideally in a more useful form than statues.

Women and gay people have been especially vulnerable to the shaming effects of isolation. Almost all children grow up in families that think of themselves and all their members as heterosexual, and for some children this produces a profound and nameless estrangement, a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame. No amount of adult "acceptance" or progress in civil rights is likely to eliminate this experience of queerness for many children and adolescents. Later in life, they will be told that they are "closeted," as though they have been telling lies. They bear a special burden of disclosure. No wonder so much of gay culture seems marked by a primal encounter with shame, from the dramas of sadomasochism to the rhetoric of gay pride, or the newer "queer" politics. Ironically, plenty of moralists will then point to this theme of shame in gay life as though it were proof of something pathological in gay people. It seldom occurs to anyone that the dominant culture and its family environment should be held accountable for creating the inequalities of access and recognition that produce this sense of shame in the first place.

Most people, I hope, have had the experience of discovering deep pleasure in something they would not have said pre-

vously that they wanted. Yet the prevalent wisdom, oddly enough, seems to be that variant desires are legitimate only if they can be shown to be immutable, natural, and innate. If that were true, then statues would be enough. People wouldn't need an accessible culture of sex to tell them anything they deserved to know. Then again, it would be hard to justify *any* kind of sexuality on these grounds. It would be hard, for example, to justify the morality of marriage by finding a gene for it; it is a conventional legal relation. Because moralism so often targets not just sex but knowledge about sex, people come to believe, nonsensically, that moral or legitimate sex must be unlearned, prereflective, present before history, isolated from the public circulation of culture.

This is one reason why so many gay people are now desperately hoping that a gay gene can be found. They think they would be more justified if they could show that they had no choice, that neither they nor gay culture in general played any role in shaping their desires. Some conservatives, meanwhile, trivialize gay experience as "lifestyle," as though that warrants interfering with it. Both sides seem to agree on an insane assumption: that only immutable and genetic sexualities could be legitimate, that if being gay could be shown to be learned, chosen, or partly chosen, then it could be reasonably forbidden.

The biological, cultural, and individual factors in sexuality seem to be far too tightly woven for either side's reductive hopes. One of the genetic studies inadvertently illustrated this point. The study tracked the sexual preferences of identical twins reared apart, hoping to see whether genetic and individual factors could be distinguished. The researchers found a very striking case of male twins, separated from early childhood, both of whom shared the same sexual preference: masturbating over photos of construction workers. I don't imagine