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## THE INVENTION OF SEXUALITY

... sexuality may be thought about, experienced, and acted on differently according to age, class, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation and preference, religion, and region.

Carole S. Vance (1984: 17)

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

When I first began writing about the history of sexuality I was fond of using a phrase from the American historian, Vern Bullough: that sex in history was a 'virgin field' [1]. This may have been a dubious pun but it was useful in underlining an important, if often overlooked, reality. 'Sexuality' was much talked about and written about but our historical knowledge about it remained pretty negligible. Those would-be colonizers who ventured into the field tended either to offer transcultural generalizations ('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', Rattray Taylor 1953: 13); or to subsume the subject under more neutral and acceptable labels ('marriage' and 'morals' especially). Sexuality seemed marginal to the broad acres of orthodox history.

Over the past few decades, however, much has changed, sometimes dramatically. There has been a major explosion of historical writings about sex. We now know a great deal about such topics as marriage and the family, prostitution and homosexuality, the forms of legal and medical regulation, pre-Christian and non-Christian moral codes, women's bodies and health, illegitimacy and birth control, rape and sexual violence, the evolution of sexual identities, and the importance of social networks and oppositional sexualities. Historians have deployed sophisticated methods of family reconstitution and demographic history, have intensively searched for new, or interrogated old, documentary sources, and made fuller use of oral history interviews to reconstruct the subjective or the tabooed experience. Encouraged by a vigorous grassroots history, fed by the impact of modern feminism and gay and lesbian politics, and made urgent by the impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis which required better knowledge of human sexual behaviours, there is now an impressive library of articles, pamphlets and books. Sex research, the sociologist Ken Plummer once noted, makes you 'morally suspect' (Plummer 1975: 4). But the history of sexuality is now in danger of becoming a respectable field of study, with a high degree of professional recognition, its own specialist journals, and an interested, even passionate, audience. Writing about sexuality no longer seems quite such a bizarre and marginal activity as it once did. There is even a dawning recognition that the history of sexuality tells us more than the where's, how's and why's of the erotic: it just might throw light on our confusing and confused present, in all its complexity.

But having said this, we are still left with a dilemma – as to what exactly our object of study is. I can list, as I did above, a number of activities that we conventionally designate as sexual; but what is it that connects them? What is the magic element that defines some things as sexual and others not? There are no straightforward answers to these questions. At the heart of our concern, clearly, is an interest in the relations between men and women. One particular form of their interaction is the process of biological and social reproduction. No historian of sexuality would dare to ignore that. But a history of reproduction is not a history of sex. As Alfred Kinsey bitingly observed:

Biologists and psychologists who have accepted the doctrine that the only natural function of sex is reproduction have simply ignored

the existence of sexual activity which is not reproductive. They have assumed that heterosexual responses are a part of an animal's innate, 'instinctive' equipment, and that all other types of sexual activity represent 'perversions' of the 'normal instincts'. Such interpretations are, however, mystical.

(Kinsey *et al.* 1953: 448)

Most erotic interactions, even between those we easily call 'heterosexual', do not lead to procreation. And there are many forms of non-heterosexual sex, amongst women, and amongst men. Some of these patterns involve intercourse of one sort or another. Others do not. Most have at least the potentiality of leading to orgasm. Yet some activities which are clearly sex-related (for example cross-dressing or transgenderism) may lead only to chance 'sexual release', or none at all. Not even intimacy seems a clear enough criterion for judging what is sexual. Some activities we quite properly describe as sexual (masturbation is a good example) do not, on the surface at least, involve any other person at all. Some aspects of intimacy have nothing to do with sex; and some sex is not intimate. In the age of cybersex, mediated anonymously through millions of network connections, bodily intimacy is in danger of being displaced altogether. Modern sociobiologists or evolutionary psychologists who wish to explain every manifestation of social life by reference to the 'timeless energy of the selfish genes', or the mating games of our remote ancestors on the African savannah half a million years ago, may see some biological logic in all of these activities. The rest of us, wisely in my opinion, are probably a little more sceptical. We are rather more than the 'survival machines – robots blindly programmed to preserve the molecule' that the populist biologist Richard Dawkins describes [2].

So what is a history of sexuality a history of? My rather disappointing answer would be that it is a history without a proper subject; or rather as Robert Padgug has suggested, a history of a subject in constant flux [3]. It is often as much a history of *our* changing preoccupations about how we should live, how we should enjoy or deny our bodies, as about the past. The way we write about our sexuality tells us as much about the present and its concerns as about this past.

We are not, of course, the first generation to speculate about the history of sexuality, nor the first to be so revealing about our preoccupations in doing so. Some sense of the past has always been an important

element for those that have been thinking about the meaning and implications of erotic life. In her book *Patriarchal Precedents*, Rosalind Coward has described the complex and heated debates in the last half of the nineteenth century about the nature of contemporary family and sexual forms (Coward 1983). Pioneering social scientists saw in sexuality a privileged site for speculations on the very origins of human society. From this flowed conflicting theories about the evolution and development of the various patterns of sexual life. Had the modern family evolved from the primitive clan, or was it already there, 'naturally', at the birth of history? Did our ancestors live in a state of primitive promiscuity, or was monogamy a biological necessity and fact? Was there once an Eden of sexual egalitarianism before the 'world historical defeat of the female sex', or was patriarchal domination present from the dawn of culture? On the resolution of such debates depended attitudes not only to existing social forms (marriage, sexual inequality, the double standard of morality) but also to other, 'primitive' cultures that existed contemporaneously with the Western in other (often colonized) parts of the world. Could we find clues to our own evolutionary history in the rites and behaviours of the aborigines, apparently stunted on the ladder of progress? Or did these people tell us something else about the variability of cultures?

We have still not fully escaped the effects of these evolutionist controversies. For much of the twentieth century racist practices were legitimized by reference to the primitive condition of other races – a position hallowed, no doubt unintentionally, by the founding father of evolutionary biology himself. In the last paragraphs of his *The Descent of Man* (1871), Charles Darwin commented on the blood of more primitive creatures flowing through the native peoples he had met on his early investigatory voyages. Even those who extolled the virtues of the sexual freedom of non-industrial societies fell back on a belief that their peoples were somehow 'closer to nature', free of the stifling conventions of complex modern society. Similarly, many of the feminist debates of the 1970s and 1980s about the permanence of patriarchal male domination recultivated the ground so feverishly worked over a century previously. Yet from the 1920s the older questions about the evolution of human culture were being displaced by a new anthropological approach, which asked different questions about sexuality.

This was associated in the first place with writers such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead. They recognized the danger of trying to understand our own pre-history by looking at existing societies. As a result, there was a new effort to try to understand each particular society in its own terms. This gave rise to a kind of cultural relativism in looking at other sexual mores, and a recognition of the validity of different sexual systems, however exotic they may have looked by the standards of twentieth-century industrial societies. This new approach was highly influential in helping to put Western culture, with all its discontents, into some sort of context. Moreover, by recognizing the diversity of sexual patterns all over the world, it contributed to a more sympathetic understanding of the diversity of sexual patterns and cultures within our own society. Social anthropology helped to provide a critical standard by which we could begin to judge the historical nature of our own norms and values. The most famous example of this genre, Margaret Mead's romantic (and now much criticized) picture of 'coming of age' in Samoa, was enormously influential in the 1930s in large part because it seemed to demonstrate that the (repressive) American way of dealing with the problem of adolescence was neither desirable, inevitable, nor necessary [4].

There were, however, difficulties. On the one hand, there was the danger of attempting to understand all sexual acts by their function, as finely tuned responses to the claims of society. For Malinowski a grasp of the laws of society needed to be matched by a scientific understanding of the laws of nature, and he paid homage to the sexological work of Havelock Ellis, and gave critical respect to Freud for helping him to grasp 'the universally human and fundamental' [5]. Malinowski saw cultures as delicate mechanisms designed to satisfy a basic human nature; in the process, the status of 'the natural' was not so much questioned as reaffirmed, though now it was less a product of evolution and more of basic instinctual needs. On the other hand, the endorsement of an 'infinite plasticity' of human needs by Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and their followers led not to a more historical account of sexual patterns but to a purely descriptive anthropology in which readers were offered wonderful, shimmering evocations of the sexual lives of other peoples, but little sense of why these patterns were as they were. In the absence of any theory of determinative structures or of historical processes, again essentialist assumptions surreptitiously reasserted themselves.

The originality of contemporary attempts to develop a historical approach to sexuality lies in their willingness to question the naturalness and inevitability of the sexual categories and assumptions we have inherited. The sociologists/social psychologists Gagnon and Simon have talked of the need which may have existed at some unspecified time in the past to *invent* an importance for sexuality – perhaps because of underpopulation and threats of cultural submergence (Gagnon and Simon 1973). The French philosopher Michel Foucault has gone further by attempting to query the very category of 'sexuality' itself:

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 tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct.

(Foucault 1979: 105)

Foucault's work has made a vital contribution to recent discussions on the history of sexuality precisely because it burst onto and grew out of work that was creatively developing in sociology, anthropology, and in radical social history. It helped to give a focus for questions already being formed. To questions about what shaped sexual beliefs and behaviours, a new one was added, concerning the history of the idea of sexuality itself. For Foucault, sexuality was a relationship of elements and discourses, a series of meaning-giving practices and activities, a social apparatus which had a history – with complex roots in the pre-Christian and Christian past, but achieving a modern conceptual unity, with diverse effects, only within the modern world.

The most important result of this historical approach to sexuality is that it opens the whole field to critical analysis and assessment. It becomes possible to relate sexuality to other social phenomena. Three types of question then become critically important. First: how is sexuality shaped, how is it articulated with economic, social and political structures, in a phrase, how is it 'socially constructed'? Second: how and why has the domain of sexuality achieved such a critical organizing and symbolic significance in Western culture; why do we think it is so important? Third: what is the relationship between sex and power; what role should we assign class divisions, patterns of male domination and racism? Coursing through each of these questions is a recurrent

preoccupation: if sexuality is constructed by human agency, to what extent can it be changed? This is the question I shall attempt to deal with in succeeding chapters. The first three I shall examine in turn in the rest of this chapter.

## THE 'SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION' OF SEXUALITY

The commonly used term 'the social construction of sexuality' has a harsh and mechanistic sound. But at its heart is a quite straightforward concern, with 'the intricate and multiple ways in which our emotions, desires and relationships are shaped by the society we live in' [6]. It is basically about the ways in which sexualities have been shaped in a complex history, and in tracing how sexual patterns have changed over time. It is concerned with the historical and social organization of the erotic.

In practice, most writers on our sexual past have assumed that sex is an irresistible natural energy barely held in check by a thin crust of civilization. For Malinowski:

Sex is a most powerful instinct . . . there is no doubt that masculine jealousy, sexual modesty, female coyness, the mechanism of sexual attraction and of courtship – all these forces and conditions made it necessary that even in the most primitive human aggregates there should exist powerful means of regulating, suppressing and directing this instinct.

(Malinowski 1963: 120)

'Sex', as he put it in another paper, 'really is dangerous', the source of most human trouble from Adam and Eve onwards (Malinowski 1963: 127).

In these words we can still hear echoes of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's view at the end of the nineteenth century of sex as an all-powerful instinct which demands fulfilment against the claims of morals, belief and social restrictions. But even more orthodox academic historians speak in rather similar language. Lawrence Stone, for instance, in *The Family, Sex and Marriage* sensibly rejects the idea that 'the id' (the energy of the Freudian unconscious) is the most powerful and unchanging of all drives. He suggests that changes in protein, in diet, in physical exertion and in psychic stress all have an effect on the organization of sex. Yet he still

speaks of 'the super ego' (our internalized system of values) at times repressing and at other times releasing the sexual drive, which eloquently reproduces the ancient traditional picture of sexuality as a pool of energy that has to be contained or let go (Stone 1977: 15).

These approaches assume that sex offers a basic 'biological mandate' which presses against and must be restrained by the cultural matrix. This is what I mean by an essentialist approach to sexuality. It takes many forms. Liberatory theorists such as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse tended to see sex as a beneficent force which was repressed by a corrupt civilization. Sociobiologists or contemporary evolutionary psychologists on the other hand see all social forms as in some unspecified way emanations of basic genetic material. Yet they all argue for a world of nature which provides the raw material we must use for the understanding of the social. Against all these arguments I want to stress that sexuality is shaped by social forces. And far from being the most natural element in social life, the most resistant to cultural moulding, it is perhaps one of the most susceptible to organization. Indeed I would go so far as to say that sexuality only exists through its social forms and social organization. Moreover, the forces that shape and mould the erotic possibilities of the body vary from society to society. 'Sexual socialization', Ellen Ross and Rayner Rapp have written, 'is no less specific to each culture than is socialization to ritual, dress or cuisine' (Ross and Rapp 1984: 109). This puts the emphasis firmly where it should belong, on society and social relations rather than on nature.

I do not wish to deny the importance of biology. The physiology and morphology of the body provides the preconditions for human sexuality. Biology conditions and limits what is possible. But it does not cause the patterns of sexual life. We cannot reduce human behaviour to the mysterious workings of the DNA, the eternal gene, or 'the dance of the chromosomes' (Cherfas and Gribbin 1984). I prefer to see in biology a set of potentialities, which are transformed and given meaning only in social relationships. Human consciousness and human history are very complex phenomena.

This theoretical stance has many roots: in the sociology and anthropology of sex, in the revolution in psychoanalysis and in the new social history. But despite these disparate starting points, it coheres around a number of common assumptions. First, there is a general rejection of sex as an autonomous realm, a natural domain with specific effects, a

rebellious energy that the social controls. We can no longer set 'sex' against 'society' as if they were separate domains. Secondly, there is a widespread recognition of the social variability of sexual forms, beliefs, ideologies, identities and behaviour, and of the existence of different sexual cultures. Sexuality has a history, or more realistically, many histories, each of which needs to be understood both in its uniqueness and as part of an intricate pattern. Thirdly, we must abandon the idea that we can fruitfully understand the history of sexuality in terms of a dichotomy of pressure and release, repression and liberation. Sexuality is not a head of steam that must be capped lest it destroy us; nor is it a life force we must release to save our civilization. Instead we must learn to see that sexuality is something which society produces in complex ways. It is a result of diverse social practices that give meaning to human activities, of social definitions and self-definitions, of struggles between those who have power to define and regulate, and those who resist. Sexuality is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency.

Nothing is sexual, Plummer has suggested, but naming makes it so (Plummer 1975). If this is the case it follows that we need to move gingerly in applying the dominant Western definitions to other cultures. Both the significance attributed to sexuality and attitudes to the various manifestations of erotic life vary enormously. Some societies display so little interest in erotic activity that they have been labelled more or less 'asexual' (Messenger 1971). Others use the erotic to open up sharp dichotomies, between those who can be included in the community of believers, and those who must be forcibly excluded; between those open to salvation, and the sinners who are not. Islamic cultures have, it is claimed, developed a lyrical view of sex with sustained attempts at integrating the religious and the sexual. Bouhdiba writes of 'the radical legitimacy of the practice of sexuality' in the Islamic world – as long, that is, as it was not homosexual, 'violently condemned' by Islam, or involved extra-marital activity by women, who might be condemned to death under Sharia law (Bouhdiba 1985: 159, 200). The Christian West, notoriously, has seen in sex a terrain of moral anguish and conflict, setting up an enduring dualism between the spirit and the flesh, the mind and the body. It has had the inevitable result of creating a cultural configuration which simultaneously disavows the body while being obsessively preoccupied with it.

Within the wide parameters of general cultural attitudes, each culture labels different practices as appropriate or inappropriate, moral or immoral, healthy or perverted. Western culture, at least as codified by the Roman Catholic and evangelical traditions, continues formally at least to define appropriate behaviour in terms of a limited range of acceptable activities. Monogamous marriage between partners of roughly equal age but different genders remains the most widely accepted norm (though not, of course, necessarily or even today generally the reality) and, despite many changes, the most readily accepted gateway to adulthood, and sexual activity. Homosexuality, on the other hand, despite remarkable shifts in attitudes over recent generations, still carries in many quarters a heavy legacy of taboo. Homosexuals may be accepted today, Dennis Altman remarked in the early 1980s, but homosexuality is not, and in a climate where a health crisis around HIV/AIDS easily led soon afterwards to a moral panic about gay lifestyles, this rang true [7]. Much has changed, even since the 1980s, but traditional homophobic norms and values remain deeply embedded.

Other cultures, on the other hand, have not found it necessary to issue the same injunctions, or develop the same dichotomies. The anthropologists Ford and Beach found that only 15 per cent of 185 different societies surveyed restricted sexual liaisons to single mateships. Kinsey's figures suggested that beneath a surface conformity Western practices are as varied: in his 1940s sample, 50 per cent of males and 26 per cent of females had extra-marital sex by the age of 40 [8]. Even more unsettling was the evidence that the heterosexual/ homosexual binary divide, which has done so much to define Western attitudes since the nineteenth century, was something less than universal.

Marriage has not been inevitably heterosexual, even before contemporary claims for the recognition of same-sex partnerships. Amongst the Nuer, older women 'marry' younger women; and there is a great deal of emerging evidence that even in early Christian Europe male partnerships were sanctified by the Church almost as if they were marriages (Edholm 1982; Boswell 1994). Homosexuality has not been universally tabooed. There have been various forms of institutionalized homosexuality, from puberty rites in various tribal societies, to pedagogic relations between older men and youths (as in Ancient Greece), to the integrated transvestite partnerships (the berdache) among native Americans, and transgendered identities amongst other peoples, from

Brazil to the Philippines (Herdt 1994; Parker 1991, 1999; Parker *et al.* 2000).

Many in the West, not least in the formal positions of the Roman Catholic Church, still tend to define the norms of sex in relationship to one of the possible results – reproduction. For long centuries of Christian dominance it was *the only* justification of sexual relations. Other cultures, however, have sometimes failed even to make the connection between copulation and procreation. Some societies only recognize the role of the father, others the mother. The Trobriand Islanders investigated by Malinowski saw no connection between intercourse and reproduction. It was only *after* the spirit child entered the womb that intercourse assumed any significance for them, in moulding the character of the future child (Malinowski 1929).

Sexual cultures are precisely that: culturally specific, shaped by a wide range of social factors. By definition, there can be no such thing as a culture which ignores the erotic. Each culture makes what Plummer calls 'who restrictions' and 'how restrictions'. 'Who restrictions' are concerned with the gender of the partners, the species, age, kin, race, caste or class which limit whom we may take as partners. 'How restrictions' have to do with the organs that we use, the orifices we may enter, the manner of sexual involvement and sexual intercourse: what we may touch, when we may touch, with what frequency, and so on (Plummer 1984). These regulations take many forms: formal and informal, legal and extra-legal. They tend not to apply in an undifferentiated way for the whole of society. For instance, there are usually different rules for men and women, shaped in ways which subordinate women's sexuality to men's. There are different rules for adults and children. These rules are often more acceptable as abstract norms than as practical guides. But they provide the permissions, prohibitions, limits and possibilities through which erotic life is constructed.

Five broad areas stand out as being particularly crucial in the social organization of sexuality: kinship and family systems, economic and social organization, social regulation, political interventions, and the development of 'cultures of resistance'.

## (1) Kinship and family systems

Kinship and family systems *appear* as the most basic and unchanging forms of all – pre-eminently the ‘natural’ focus of sexual socialization and experience. The taboo on incest, that is the prohibition of sexual involvement within certain degrees of relationship, seems to be a universal law, marking the passage, it has been often argued, from a state of nature to human society: it has been seen as constitutive of culture. (It is also the basis for our most enduring myth – that of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother, and then had to pay the painful price of this infringement of the Law.) Yet the forms of the taboo vary enormously. In the Christian traditions of the Middle Ages, marriage to the seventh degree of relationship was prohibited. Today, marriage to first cousins is allowed. In the Egypt of the pharaohs, sibling marriages were permitted, and in some cases so were father–daughter marriages, in the interests of preserving the purity of the royal line (Renvoize 1982). Today, father–daughter incest is amongst the most tabooed of activities. The existence of the incest taboo illustrates the need of all societies to regulate sex – but not how it is done. Even ‘blood relationships’ have to be interpreted through the grid of culture.

The truth is that kin ties are not *natural* links of blood but are social relations between groups, often based on residential affinities and hostile to genetic affinities. Marshall Sahlins has argued that:

human conceptions of kinship may be so far from biology as to exclude all but a small fraction of a person’s genealogical connections from the category of ‘close kin’, while at the same time, including in that category, as sharing common blood, very distantly related people or even complete strangers. Among these strangers (genetically) may be one’s own children (culturally).

(Sahlins 1976: 75)

Who we decide are kin and what we describe as ‘the family’ are clearly dependent on a range of historical factors. There are many different family forms especially within highly industrialized, Western societies – between different classes, and different geographic, religious, racial and ethnic groups. Today many people speak of ‘families of choice’, based on friendships networks and chosen kin. There are ‘non-heterosexual

families’ as well as traditional families residing next to each other, more or less in harmony. Family patterns are shaped and re-shaped by economic factors, by rules of inheritance, by state interventions to regulate marriage and divorce, or to support the family by social welfare or taxation policies. All these affect the likely patterns of sexual life: by encouraging or discouraging the rate of marriage, age of marriage, incidence of reproduction, attitudes to non-procreative or non-heterosexual sex, acceptance of cohabitation, or single parenthood, the relative power of men over women, and so on. These factors are important in themselves. They are doubly important because the family is the arena in which most people, certainly in Western cultures, gain some sense of their individual sexual needs and identities, and if we follow psychoanalysis, it is the arena where our desires are organized from a very early stage indeed. As kin and family patterns change, so will attitudes and beliefs concerning sexuality.

## (2) Economic and social organization

As I have suggested, families themselves are not autonomous, natural entities. They, too, are shaped by wider social relations. Domestic patterns can be changed: by economic forces, by the class divisions to which economic change gives rise, by the degree of urbanization and of rapid industrial and social change [9]. Labour migrations have, for example, affected patterns of courtship and have helped dictate the incidence of illegitimacy rates, or the spread of sexual diseases. The proletarianization of the rural population in early nineteenth-century England helped to contribute to the massive rise of illegitimacy during this period as old courtship patterns were broken by economic and industrial dislocation – a case of ‘marriage frustrated’ rather than a conscious sexual revolution. Work conditions can dramatically shape sexual lives. A good example of this is provided by the evidence for the 1920s and 1930s in Britain that women who worked in factories tended to be much more familiar with methods of artificial birth control, and thus could limit their family size to a greater degree, than women who worked solely in the home or in domestic service (Gittins 1982).

The relations between men and women are constantly affected by changes in economic and social conditions. The growing involvement

of married women in the paid workforce from the 1950s and 1960s in most Western countries has inevitably affected the patterns of domestic life, even if it has yet to transform beyond recognition the traditional division of labour in the household. Increasing economic opportunities for women have been important elements in the 'rise of women' since the 1960s, perhaps the most important social transformation of the twentieth century. It has gone hand in hand with greater recognition of the sexual autonomy of women.

Such changes are no longer confined to the highly industrialized heartlands of the North of the globe. The processes of globalization are sweeping away old economic, social and cultural boundaries. Many of its manifestations are not new. Mass movements of peoples, within countries, and across states and continents, have been amongst the dominant forces of the past few hundred years – through colonization, the slave trade, the disruptive effects of war, voluntary migration, and enforced resettlements. All these have disrupted traditional patterns of life, and settled sexual values and behaviours, as men and women, adults and children have been brought together and violently parted, with unpredictable results on sexual mores – from enforced segregation of the sexes to child prostitution, from the disruption of traditional patterns of courtship and marriage, to the epidemic spread of HIV/AIDS. All the evidence suggests that contemporary global trends are speeding up these processes, creating dramatic new patterns of 'global sex'. Sexuality is not *determined* by the developing modes of production, but the rhythms of economic and social life, provide the basic preconditions and ultimate limits for the organization and 'political economy' of sexual life (Altman 2001).

### (3) Social regulation

If economic life establishes some of the fundamental rhythms, the actual forms of regulation of sexuality have a considerable autonomy. Formal methods of regulating sexual life vary from time to time depending on the significance of religion, the changing role of the state, the existence or not of a moral consensus which regulates marriage patterns, divorce rates and incidence of sexual unorthodoxy. One of the critical shifts of the last hundred years in most highly industrialized countries has been the move away from moral regulation by the churches to a more secular mode of organization through medicine, education,

psychology, social work and welfare practices. It is also important to recognize that the effects of these interventions are not necessarily pre-ordained. As often as not sexual life is altered by the unintended consequences of social action as much as through the intention of the authors. Laws banning obscene publications more often than not give rise to court cases that publicize them. Banning sexy films gives them a fame they might not otherwise deserve. Injunctions against artificial birth control methods can make people aware of their existence. It is surely no accident that Italy, the home of the Papacy, which strictly forbids abortion and birth control, has one of the lowest birth rates in Europe, whilst still remaining formally Catholic. Though religion can still be decisive, people are increasingly willing to decide for themselves how they want to behave. Morality is being privatized. Laws and prohibitions designed to control the behaviour of certain groups of people can actually give rise to an enhanced sense of identity and cohesion amongst them. This certainly seems to be the case with the refinement of the laws relating to male homosexuality since the late nineteenth century, which coincide with the strengthening of same-sex identities (Weeks 1977).

But it is not only formal methods which shape sexuality; there are many informal and customary patterns which are equally important. The traditional forms of regulation of adolescent courtship can be critical means of social control. It is very difficult to break with the consensus of one's village or one's peer group in school, and this is as much true today as it was in the pre-industrial societies. A language of sexual abuse ('slags', 'sluts', 'whores' in familiar Anglo-Saxon usage) works to keep girls in line, and to enforce conventional distinctions between girls who do and girls who don't. Such informal methods enforced by strictly adhered to rules often produce, by contemporary standards, various bizarre manifestations of sexual behaviour. One such example is provided by the traditional form of courtship in parts of England and Wales up to the nineteenth century known as 'bundling', which involved intimate but fully clothed rituals of sex play in bed. Closer to the present, we can find the equally exotic phenomenon of 'petting', which much preoccupied moralists and parents until the 1960s. Petting is dependent on the belief that while intercourse in public is tabooed, other forms of play, because they are not defined as *the* sex act, may be intimately engaged in. Kinsey noted in the early 1950s that:



Foreign travellers are sometimes amazed at the open display of such obviously erotic activity . . . There is an increasing amount of petting which is carried on in such public conveyances as buses, trams, and airplanes. The other passengers have learned to ignore such activities if they are pursued with some discretion. Orgasm is sometimes achieved in the petting which goes on in such public places.

(Kinsey *et al.* 1953: 259)

But petting itself becomes insignificant when the taboos against sexual intercourse before marriage are relaxed, as they have been in most Western societies since the 1960s. Implicit in such phenomena are intricate though only semiconscious rules which limit what can and cannot be done. Informal methods of regulation can have important social effects – in limiting, for example, illegitimate conceptions. They have often been enforced in the past by customary patterns of public shaming, rituals of humiliation and public mocking – examples include the ‘charivari’ and ‘rough music’ in Britain, which have widespread echoes across the globe – which serve to reinforce the norms of the community.

#### (4) Political interventions

These formal and informal methods of control exist within a changing political framework. The balance of political forces at any particular time can determine the degree of legislative control or moral intervention in sexual life. The general social climate provides the context in which some issues take on a greater significance than others. The existence of skilled ‘moral entrepreneurs’ able to articulate and call up inchoate currents of opinion can be decisive in enforcing existing legislation or in conjuring up new. The success of the New Right in America during the 1970s and 1980s in establishing an agenda for sexual conservatism by campaigning against sexual liberals and/or sexual deviants underlines the possibilities of political mobilization around sex. In particular, the anti-abortion position of many moral conservatives opened up a fundamental divide in American politics that became a central feature of the so-called ‘culture wars’. But examples abound across the world of the exploitation of sexual issues to advance or consolidate a political agenda – whether President Mugabe mixing anti-colonial and anti-gay messages to shore up his crumbling base in Zimbabwe, or fundamentalist regimes

asserting their purity by stoning adulterers and homosexuals (see essays in Weeks *et al.* 2003).

#### (5) Cultures of resistance

But the history of sexuality is not a simple history of control, it is also a history of opposition and resistance to moral codes. Forms of moral regulation give rise to transgressions, subversions and cultures of resistance. A prime example of these is provided by the female networks of knowledge about sexuality, especially birth control and abortion, which can be seen across history and cultures. As Angus McLaren has put it:

In studying abortion beliefs it is possible to glimpse aspects of a separate female sexual culture that supports the independence and autonomy of women from medical men, moralists and spouses.

(McLaren 1984: 147)

There is a long history of such alternative knowledge. A classic example is provided by the widespread use of the lead compound diachylon in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in the Midlands of England. Widely used as an antiseptic, it was accidentally discovered that this could be used to induce abortions and there is evidence of its subsequent spread as a prophylactic amongst working-class women up to the outbreak of the First World War (McLaren 1978: 390).

Other examples of cultural resistance come from the emergence of the subcultures and networks established by sexual minorities. There is a long history of subcultures of male homosexuality throughout the history of the West, manifest for instance in Italian towns of the late Middle Ages, and in England from the late seventeenth century. These have been critical for the emergence of modern homosexual identities, which have been largely formed in these wider social networks. More recently, over the last hundred years or so, there have been series of explicit oppositional political movements organized around sexuality and sexual issues. The classic example is that of feminism. But in addition recent historical work has demonstrated the longstanding existence of sex reform movements often closely linked to campaigns for homosexual rights: the modern gay and lesbian movements have antecedents going

back to the nineteenth century in countries like Germany and Britain (Weeks 1977).

What we so confidently know as 'sexuality' is, then, a product of many influences and social interventions. It does not exist outside history but is a historical product. This is what we mean by historical making, the cultural construction, and social organization of sexuality.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SEXUALITY

All societies have to make arrangements for the organization of erotic life. Not all, however, do it with the same obsessive concern as the West. Throughout the history of the West, since the time of the Ancient Greeks, what we call sexuality has been an object of moral concern, but the concept of sexual life has not been the same. For the Ancient Greeks concern with the pleasures of the body – *aphrodisia* – was only one, and not necessarily the most important of the preoccupations of life, to be set alongside dietary regulations and the organization of household relations. And the object of debate was quite different too. Freud, with his usual perceptiveness, was able to sum up one aspect of this difference:

The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own no doubt lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasise its object.

(Freud 1905: 149)

We are preoccupied *with whom* we have sex, the ancients with the question of excess or over-indulgence, activity and passivity. Plato would have banned pederasty from his city not because it was against nature, but because it was in excess of what nature demands. Sodomy was excessively licentious, and the moral question was not whether you had sex with a man if you were a man, but whether you were active or passive. Passive homosexual activities and the people who practised them were rejected not because they were homosexual but because they involved a man acting like a woman or child. This is a distinction we can see across many cultures, where homosexual activity amongst men was tolerated as long as it did not 'feminize' the man (Veyne 1985: 27; Halperin 1990, 2002). Northern European and American societies, on

the other hand, have since the nineteenth century at least been obsessively concerned whether a person is normal or abnormal, defined in terms of whether we are heterosexual or homosexual. They seek the truth of their natures in the organization of sexual desires. The differences between the two patterns represent a major shift in the organizing significance given to sexuality.

The development of the dominant Western model is the product of a long and complicated history. But there seem to be several key moments in its evolution. One came with innovations of the first century AD in the classical world, before the generalized advent of a Christianized West. It was represented by a new austerity and by a growing disapproval of *mollities*, that is, sex indulged in purely for pleasure. The Church accepted and refined the view that husbands should not behave incontinently with wives in marriage. The purpose of sex was reproduction, so sex outside marriage was obviously for pleasure and hence a sin. As Flandrin has said, 'marriage was a kind of preventive medicine given by God to save man from immorality' (Flandrin 1985: 115). The sins of the flesh were a constant temptation from the divine path.

The second crucial moment came in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, after a series of intense critical and religious struggles, with the triumph of the Christian tradition of sex and marriage. This did not necessarily affect everyone's behaviour in society. What it did do was to establish a new norm which was enforced by both the religious and the secular arm. Marriage was a matter of family arrangement for the good of families. So for two people thrown together often as strangers, a tight set of rules had to be elaborated. As a result, 'the couple were not alone in their marriage bed: the shadow of the confessor loomed over their frolics' (Flandrin 1985: 115). Theologians and canonists discussed the sex lives of married couples to the last detail, not simply as an intellectual game but to provide detailed answers to practical moral questions.

The third crucial, and decisive, moment occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the increasing definition of sexual normality in terms of relations with the opposite sex, and the consequent categorization of other forms as deviant (Laqueur 1990). This last change is the one of which we are immediate heirs. It was represented by a shift from religious organization of moral life to increasingly secular regulation embodied in the emergence of new medical, psychological and

educational norms. Alongside this, new typologies of degeneracy and perversion emerged and there was a decisive growth of new sexual identities. Homosexuality moved from being a category of sin to become a psychosocial disposition. Sexology began to speculate about the laws of sex and 'sexuality' finally emerged as a separate continent of knowledge with its own distinct effects.

The emergence of the category of homosexuality and 'the homosexual' illustrates what was taking place. Homosexual activities are of course widespread in all cultures and there is a sustained history of homosexuality in the West. But the idea that there is such a thing as *the* homosexual person is a relatively new one. All the evidence suggests that before the eighteenth century homosexuality, interpreted in its broadest sense as involving erotic activities between people of the same gender, certainly existed, but 'homosexuals' in any meaningful modern sense, did not. Certain acts such as sodomy were severely condemned: in Britain they carried the death penalty, formally at least, until 1861, but there seems to have been little idea of a distinct type of homosexual personage. The 'sodomite' cannot be seen as equivalent to 'homosexual'. Sodomy was not a specifically homosexual crime; the law applied indifferently to relations between men and women, men and beasts, as well as men and men. And while by the eighteenth century the persistent sodomite was clearly perceived as a special type of person, he was still defined by the nature of his act rather than the character of his personality. From the early eighteenth century, however, historians have traced the evolution of new sexual types, third and even fourth sexes. From the mid-nineteenth century 'the homosexual' (the term 'homosexuality' was invented in the 1860s) was increasingly seen as belonging to a particular species of being, characterized by feelings, latency and a psychosexual condition. This view was elaborated by pioneering sexologists who produced ever more complex explanations and descriptions. Was homosexuality a product of corruption or degeneration, congenital or the result of childhood trauma? Was it a natural variation or a perverse deformation? Should it be tolerated or subjected to cure? Havelock Ellis distinguished the invert from the pervert, Freud the 'absolute invert', the 'amphigenic' and the 'contingent'. Rather later, Clifford Allen distinguished twelve types, ranging from the compulsive, the nervous, the neurotic and the psychotic to the psychopathic and the alcoholic. Kinsey invented a seven-point rating for the spectrum of heterosexual/

homosexual behaviour, which allowed his successors to distinguish a 'Kinsey one' from a 'five' or 'six' as if real life depended upon it [10].

This labelling and pigeonholing energy and zeal has led a number of historians to argue that the emergence of distinct categories of sexual beings over the past century is the consequence of a sustained effort at social control. Writers on the history of lesbianism have suggested that the development of a sexualized lesbian identity at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century was an imposition by sexologists designed precisely to split women from women, breaking the ties of emotionality and affection which bind all women together against men (Faderman 1981). There is clearly an element of truth in this. Nevertheless I think it much more credible to see the emergence of distinct identities during this period as the product of struggle against prevailing norms, which had necessarily different effects for men and women. Sexologists did not so much invent the homosexual or the lesbian as attempt to put into their own characteristic pathologizing language changes that were taking place before their eyes. Pioneering sexologists like Krafft-Ebing were confronted by people appearing in the courts or coming to them for help, largely as a result of a new politically motivated zeal to control more tightly aberrant manifestations of sexual desire. The definition of homosexuality as a distinct form of sexual desire was one attempt to come to terms with this new reality. Krafft-Ebing found himself in an unlikely alliance with articulate defenders of their own sexualities, to explain and even justify it. This in turn produced an inevitable response in the urge to self-definition, and the articulation of new sexual identities (Oosterhuis 2000).

Sexual activity was increasingly coming to define a particular type of person. In return people were beginning to define themselves as different, and their difference was constituted around their sexuality. One Thomas Newton was arrested in London in 1726, entrapped by a police informant in a homosexual act. Confronted by the police he said: 'I did it because I thought I knew him, and I think there is no crime in making what use I please of my own body' (Bray 1982: 114). Here we can see, embryonically, the urge to self-definition that was to flourish in the proliferation of homosexual identities in the twentieth century. In turn, the growth of the category of the homosexual at the end of the nineteenth century presaged a profusion of new sexual types and identities in the twentieth century: the transvestite, the transsexual, the bisexual, the

paedophile, the sado-masochist and so on. Increasingly in the twentieth century people defined themselves by defining their sex. The question we have to ask is why sexuality has become so central to our definition of self and of normality.

Sexuality, it can be argued, is shaped at the juncture of two major axes of concern: with our subjectivity – who and what we are; and with society – with the future growth, well-being, health and prosperity of the population as a whole. The two are intimately connected because at the heart of both is the body and its potentialities. 'As the human body becomes autonomous and self-conscious', Lowe has written, that is, as it becomes the object of a fully secular attention:

as emotion recoiled from the world and became more cooped up, sexuality in bourgeois society emerged as an explicit phenomenon.  
(Lowe 1982: 100)

And as society has become more and more concerned with the lives of its members, for the sake of moral uniformity, economic well-being, national security or hygiene and health, so it has become more and more preoccupied with the sex lives of its individuals, giving rise to intricate methods of administration and management, to a flowering of moral anxieties, medical, hygienic, legal and welfarist interventions, or scientific delving, all designed to understand the self by understanding sex.

Sexuality as a result has become an increasingly important social and political as well as moral issue. If we look at all the major crises in Britain since the beginning of the nineteenth century (and this can be echoed in all the major industrializing and urbanizing societies, other things being equal) we see that in one way or another a preoccupation with sex has been integral to them. In the crisis of the French revolutionary wars in the early nineteenth century one of the central preoccupations of ideologists was with the moral decline which it was believed had set off the train of events leading to the collapse of the French monarchy. In the 1830s and 1840s, with the first crisis of the new industrial society, there was an obsessive concern with the sexuality of women and the threat to children who worked in the factories and mines. By the mid-nineteenth century, attempts to re-order society focused on the question of moral hygiene and health. From the 1860s to the 1890s prostitution, the moral standards of society and moral reform

were at the heart of public debate, many seeing in moral decay a sign of impending imperial decline. In the early decades of the twentieth century these concerns were re-ordered in a new concern with the quality of the British population. The vogue for eugenics, the planned breeding of the best in society, though never dominant, had a significant influence in shaping both welfare policies and the attempt to re-order national priorities in the face of international competition. Inevitably it fed into a burgeoning racism during the first half of the twentieth century. During the inter-war years and into the 1940s, the decline of the birthrate engendered fevered debates about the merits of birth control, selective encouragement of family planning policies, and the country falling into the hands of the once subject races. By the 1950s, in the period of the Cold War, there was a new searching out of sexual degenerates, especially homosexuals, because they were apparently curiously susceptible to treachery. This was to become a major aspect of the McCarthyite witch hunt in the USA which had echoes in Britain and elsewhere. By the 1980s in the wake of several decades of so-called permissiveness, minority forms of sexuality, especially homosexuality, were being blamed for the decline of the family, and for the return of epidemics (in the form of AIDS), and a new moral conservatism gave new energy to a revival of right-wing political forces. Yet by the turn of the new Millennium, whilst moral fundamentalism still flourished across the globe, it had become clear that rapid social and cultural change were relentlessly undermining traditional patterns, giving rise to a heightened sexual individualism, and new claims for 'sexual citizenship'. In many Western countries, particularly, sexuality had reached the heart of the political agenda.

A series of concerns are crystallized in all these crises and critical moments: with the norms of family life, the relations between men and women, the nature of female sexuality, the question of sexual variation, the relations between adults and children, and so on. These are critical issues in any society. The debates about them in much of the West over the last few decades have been heated precisely because debates about sexuality are debates about the nature of society: as sex goes, so goes society; as society goes, so goes sexuality.

## SEXUALITY AND POWER

This is another way of saying that issues of sexuality are increasingly important in the whole working of power in contemporary society. I mentioned earlier that one of the effects of a historical approach to sexuality was to see power over sexuality as productive rather than negative or repressive. The metaphor of repression comes from hydraulics: it offers the image of a gushing energy that must be held in check. The historical approach to sexuality would stress rather the impact of various social practices and discourses that construct sexual regulations, give meaning to bodily activities, shape definitions and limit and control human behaviour.

The rejection of a repression model (what Foucault called the 'repressive hypothesis') does not of course mean that all regimes of sexual regulation are of equal force or effectiveness. Some are clearly more harsh, authoritarian and oppressive than others. One of the important results of the new historical investigation of sexuality has been a reassessment of the whole Victorian period. Classically this has been seen as a period of unique moral hypocrisy and sexual denial. It is now increasingly apparent that this is highly misleading. Far from witnessing an avoidance of sex, the nineteenth century was not far from being obsessed with sexual issues. Rather than being the subject that was hidden away, it was a topic that was increasingly discussed in relation to diverse aspects of social life. This does not mean, however, that the Victorian period can now be seen as peculiarly liberal. In England the death penalty for sodomy was still on the statute book until 1861. Restrictions on female sexual autonomy were severe and the distinction between respectable women and the unregenerates (the virgin and the whore, the madonna and the magdalen) reached their apogee during this period. Although the present may not have produced a perfect resolution of all conflict, for many of us it is infinitely preferable to what existed little more than a hundred years ago.

The usefulness of abandoning the repressive model, in its crude form, however, is that it does direct us towards an attempt to understand the actual mechanisms of power at work in any particular period. Power no longer appears a single entity which is held or controlled by a particular group, gender, state or ruling class. It is, in Schur's phrase, 'more like a process than an object' (Schur 1980: 7), a malleable and mobile force

which takes many different forms and is exercised through a variety of different social practices and relationships. If this approach to power is adopted then we need to abandon any theoretical approach which sees sexuality moulded by a dominant, determining will – whether it be of 'society', as functionalist sociology tended to suggest, or 'capitalism', as Marxists might argue, or 'patriarchy' or 'men', as some feminists would propose. Power does not operate through single mechanisms of control. It operates through complex and overlapping – and often contradictory – mechanisms, which produce domination *and* oppositions, subordination *and* resistances.

There are many structures of domination and subordination in the world of sexuality but three major axes seem peculiarly important today: those of class, of gender, and of race.

## (1) Class

Class differences in sexual regulation are not unique to the modern world. In the slave-owning society of pre-Christian Rome, moral standards varied with social status. 'To be *impudicus* (that is passive) is disgraceful for a free man', wrote the elder Seneca, 'but it is the slave's absolute obligation towards his master, and the freed man owes a moral duty of compliance' (Veyne 1985: 31). What was true in the ancient world has become more sharply apparent in the modern. It has in fact been argued (by Foucault) that the very idea of 'sexuality' is an essentially bourgeois one, which developed as an aspect of the self-definition of a class, both against the decadent aristocracy and the rampant 'immorality' of the lower orders in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was a colonizing system of beliefs which sought to remould the polity in its own image. The respectable standards of family and domestic life, with the increased demarcations between male and female roles, a growing ideological distinction between private and public life, and a marked concern with moral and hygienic policing of non-marital, non-heterosexual sexuality, was increasingly the norm by which all behaviour was judged. This does not, of course, mean that all or even most behaviour conformed to the norm. There is plentiful evidence that the behaviour of the working classes remained extremely resilient to middle-class manners, producing its own complex rules and rituals. Nevertheless, the sexual patterns that exist in the twenty-first century

are a product of a social struggle in which class was a vital element. This resulted, not surprisingly, in distinct class patterns of sexual life. Kinsey's American sample of 18,000 in the 1940s suggested that whether it be on masturbation, homosexuality, the incidence of oral sex, petting, concourse with prostitutes, pre-marital or extra-marital sex, or 'total sexual outlet', there were significantly different class patterns amongst men. For women, on the other hand, class differences played a relatively minor part: their age and gender ideologies were much more critical factors in shaping behaviour. Later surveys, while taking note of the gradual erosion of class boundaries, have confirmed the continuing existence of class sexualities. It is hardly surprising, then, that the literature abounds with images of relations between men and women (and indeed between men and men, and women and women) where class, power and sexual desire are intricately interwoven.

## (2) Gender

Class, as we have seen, is not an undifferentiated category. Classes consist of men and women, and class and status differences may not have the same significance for women as for men. Gender is a crucial divide.

A number of feminist writers have seen the elaboration of sexual difference as crucial to the oppression of women, with sexuality not merely reflecting but being fundamental to the construction and maintenance of the power relations between women and men [11]. There clearly is a close relationship between the organization of gender and sexuality. Sexuality is constituted in a highly gendered world. At the same time, we cannot simply derive sexual subjectivities from gender. That would give it an *a priori* significance that would deny the intricacies in the social organization of sexuality. Nevertheless, the patterns of female sexuality are inescapably a product of the historically rooted power of men to define and categorize what is necessary and desirable. 'To be a woman', Rosalind Coward has said:

is to be constantly addressed, to be constantly scrutinised . . . Female desire is crucial to our whole social structure. Small wonder it is so closely obscured, so endlessly pursued, so frequently recast and reformulated.

(Coward 1984: 13)

And it is, of course, still pursued, recast and reformulated by men. As Richard Dyer has put it, male sexuality is a bit like air: 'you breathe it in all the time, but you aren't aware of it much' (Dyer 1985: 28). We look at the world through our concepts of male sexuality so that even when we are not looking at male sexuality as such we are looking at the world within its framework of reference.

This framework is of course the result of more than the contingencies of biology, or the inevitability of sexual difference. It is constituted by a historically specific organization of sexuality and gender. This has been variously theorized as 'compulsory heterosexuality', institutionalized heterosexuality, the 'heterosexual matrix', 'heteronormativity' – the labels reflect different theoretical positions and political positions, but they all point to a key understanding. Sexuality is in complex, but inextricable, ways locked into the structuring of gender, and both are locked together by the heterosexual assumption. The binary divides between masculinity and femininity, and between heterosexuality and homosexuality (with the first term in each couplet as the dominant one) still positions sexual subjects, and organizes sexual desire, in contemporary societies, in ways which subordinate women and marginalize the transgressor.

It would be wrong, however, to see this structuring as either monolithic or unchallenged. The law, medicine, even popular opinion is highly contradictory and changes over time. Before the eighteenth century female sexuality was regarded as voracious and all-consuming. In the nineteenth century there was a sustained effort to inform the population that female sexuality amongst respectable women just did not exist. In the later twentieth century there was a general incitement to female sexuality as an aid to all forms of consumerism. The sexuality of women has at various times been seen as dangerous, as a source of disease, as the means of transmitting national values in the age of eugenics, as the guardian of moral purity in debates over sex education, and as the main focus of attention in the debates over permissiveness and sexual liberation in the 1960s. Female sexuality has been limited by economic and social dependence, by the power of men to define sexuality, by the limitations of marriage, by the burdens of reproduction and by the endemic fact of male violence against women. At the same time, these contradictory definitions have as often provided the opportunity for women to define their own needs and desires. Since the late nineteenth century the acceptable spaces for self-definition have expanded rapidly

to include not only pleasure in marriage but also relatively respectable forms of unmarried and non-procreative heterosexual activity. As Vance observes, gross and public departures from "'good" woman status' – such as lesbianism, promiscuity or non-traditional heterosexuality – still invite, and are used to justify, violation and violence (Vance 1984: 4). The patterns of male privilege have not been broken. At the same time, the real changes of the past century and the long-term impact of feminism testify that these patterns are neither inevitable nor immutable. There is plentiful evidence of 'crisis tendencies' in hegemonic masculinity, and of major, if uneven, transformations in the position of women. Each is reflected in the shifting conceptualizations of male and female sexuality.

### (3) Race

Categorizations by class or gender intersect with those of ethnicity and race. Historians of sex have not actually ignored race in the past, but they have fitted it into their pre-existing framework. So the evolutionary model of sexuality put forward by the theorists of the late nineteenth century inevitably presented the non-white person – 'the savage' – as lower down the evolutionary scale than the white, as closer to nature. This view survived even in the culturally relativist and apparently liberal writings of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead. One of the attractions of her portrayal of Samoan life was precisely the idea that Samoans were in some indefinable sense freer of constraints and closer to nature than contemporary Americans. A most abiding myth is that of the insatiability of the sexual needs of non-European peoples and the threat they consequently pose for the purity of the white race. A fear of black male priapism, and the converse exploitation of black women to service their white masters, was integral to slave society in the American South in the nineteenth century and continued to shape black-white relationships well into the twentieth century. In apartheid South Africa the prohibitions of the Mixed Marriages Act and section 16 of the Immorality Act designed to prevent miscegenation were among the first pieces of apartheid legislation to be introduced after the National Party came to power on a policy of racial segregation in 1948. As the regime attempted to deal with the crisis of apartheid in the 1980s by reshaping its forms, one of the first pillars of apartheid it attempted

to remove were precisely these Acts. As a result the regime came under heavy criticism from extreme right-wing groups which argued that the whole edifice of apartheid would be undermined if the laws were repealed. That of course proved to be the case. On a global scale, the belief in the superiority of European norms was perhaps most clearly revealed in the obsessive Western concern with the population explosion of the Third World, which led to various efforts on the part of development agencies as well as local authorities to impose Western patterns of artificial birth control, sometimes with disastrous results as the delicate ecology of social life was unbalanced. It should serve to remind us that modern attitudes to birth control are rooted both in women's desire to limit their own fertility and also in a eugenic and 'family planning' policy whose aim was the survival and fitness of the European races. Elements of this eugenicist past long remained in everyday practices. In Israel, Jewish families received higher child allowances than Arab ones, while in Britain the dangerous contraceptive injection, Depo Provera, was given virtually exclusively to black and very poor women. One study in the 1980s found more birth control leaflets in family planning clinics in Asian languages than in English.

Behind all such examples is a long history of the encounters between the imperial heartlands and the colonized peoples in which the latter's erotic patterns were constituted as 'other', and inferior. The process has been encoded in a series of practices, from immigration laws to birth control propaganda, from medical attitudes to the pathologizing in psychology and sociology of different patterns of family life [12]. As Stoler argues, via the colonial encounters, an 'implicit racial grammar underwrote the sexual regimes of bourgeois culture' (Stoler 1995: 9). Western notions of racial purity and sexual virtue – that is, norms of white sexuality – were in large part constituted by rejection of the colonized 'other'.

The boundaries of race, gender and class inevitably overlap. Ethnic minorities who are most subject to racist practices tend to be working class or poor, socially excluded in a variety of ways, while the definition of membership within the ethnic group can often depend on performing gender and sexual attributes successfully. Power operates subtly through a complex series of interlocking practices. As a result political challenges to oppressive forms are complex and sometimes contradictory. Sexual politics therefore can never be a single form of activity. They are

enmeshed in the whole network of social contradictions and antagonisms that make up the modern world. There is, however, an important point that we can draw from this discussion. Instead of seeing sexuality as a unified whole, we have to recognize that there are various forms of sexuality: there are in fact many sexualities. There are class sexualities, and gender-specific sexualities, there are racialized sexualities and there are sexualities of struggle and choice. The 'invention of sexuality' was not a single event, now lost in a distant past. It is a continuing process in which we are simultaneously acted upon and actors, objects of change, and its subjects.



## NOTES

### 1 THE LANGUAGES OF SEX

- [1] The terms are discussed in Williams (1983: 283–6).
- [2] For a variety of sociological and historical perspectives, see Weeks *et al.* (2003). On globalization see Altman (2001).

### 2 THE INVENTION OF SEXUALITY

- [1] See Bullough (1976); the particular essay, 'Sex in history: a virgin field', was first published in 1972.
- [2] See Dawkins (1978). I discuss sociobiology in Chapter 3.
- [3] Padgug (1979). For contributions to the debate on sex in history, including Padgug's essay, as well as a contribution from myself, see Phillips and Reay (2002).
- [4] Mead (1977; first published 1928). For a highly critical dissection of this work, see Freeman (1983).
- [5] The phrase is used by Malinowski in 'Culture as a determinant of behavior' (reprinted in Malinowski 1963: 167).
- [6] See Cartledge and Ryan (1983: 1). For an overview of the essentialist–constructionist controversy, see Stein (1992).
- [7] Altman (1982). For a discussion of the impact of AIDS, see Chapter 5.
- [8] See Ford and Beach (1965; first published 1952) and Kinsey *et al.*, (1953). Compare comments in Argyle and Henderson (1985: 159).
- [9] For fuller details, see the discussion in Weeks (1989: ch. 4).
- [10] See the discussion in Weeks (1985: 89–91 and ch. 8).
- [11] See Coveney *et al.* (1984); and discussion in Jackson 2000.
- [12] See the summary of evidence in Amos and Parmar (1984), Anthias and Yuval Davis (1983; 1993: 100–1).

### 3 THE MEANINGS OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

- [1] See the discussion in Weeks (1985: 80–5).
- [2] See Masters and Johnson (1966). On classical views of a single sex, see Laqueur (1990).
- [3] Wilson (1978: 3); Thornhill and Palmer (2000). For a critique of these arguments, see Rose and Rose (2001), and Segal (1999: 78–115).
- [4] Cherfas and Gribbin (1984: 178). But see Jones (2002).