

## **Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day**

**Review Number:** 1309

**Publish date:** Thursday, 30 August, 2012

**Author:** Stephen Brooke

**ISBN:** 9780199562541

**Date of Publication:** 2011

**Price:** £65.00

**Pages:** 304pp.

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press

**Publisher url:**

**Place of Publication:** Oxford

**Reviewer:** Charles Smith

In the past 40 years the history of sexuality has gone from being an insurgent force, questioning the very nature of what can be studied as history, to an established part of the field. This book underlines that point, for it is rare today to find such a *traditional* political history. In order to investigate the interactions between sexuality and socialism Stephen Brooke's new work concentrates on a central political institution, the Labour Party, its sub-committees and fringe organisations, accessed through their publications, archival paper work and media coverage – with a heavy sprinkling of *Hansard* on top. The book focuses on policy and legislative achievement with its linear narrative pivoting around the parliamentary reforms of 1967. However it is these factors and concerns which make *Sexual Politics* a much needed intervention in the history of politics and sexuality in the 20th century - a book which students and researchers of the subject will find essential and also, due to the clarity of the argument and lucidity of tone, enjoyable.

As Brooke points out, *Sexual Politics* is the first single study looking the interactions between party politics and sexuality over the entire 20th century. Brooke concentrates on the development of three areas of policy – birth control, abortion and gay rights – which all have a rich pre-existing historiography. However, by tying his work to the Labour Party and parliamentary reform, Brooke is able to consider the process by which radical ideas of sexuality both changed and were changed by mainstream politics. By considering a century-long period *Sexual Politics* also has to engage with the vexed question of chronology, not merely content with disrupting and complicating a popular narrative of a 1960s sexual revolution, as authors such as Matt Houlbrook and Frank Mort have done so successfully, but constructing a long account of change. In doing so Brooke has set himself the unenviable task of writing a history which tries to find continuities between figures as disparate as Tony Blair and Edward Carpenter.

Carpenter features heavily in the first chapter, which considers the connection between emerging socialist thought and sexual reform between the 1880s and the 1920s. According to Brooke two strands of socialist thought on sex emerged in this era. The first, exemplified through authors such as Carpenter, Karl Pearson and Olive Schreiner, was utopian and saw sex as 'a transformative force in the remaking of the world' (p.35). The second was more quotidian and concentrated on improving the day-to-day experiences of working-class women. By highlighting this second strand Brooke sets out one of his central interventions –

an emphasis on the enduring significance of class in the politics of sexuality. He shows how organisations such as the Fabian Women's Group (FWG) challenged the centrality of the male breadwinner to the nascent movement's analysis by arguing for action to improve the material conditions of working-class mothers. The supply of contraception was vital to this, leading to Stella Browne to declare that '[n]o economic changes would give equality or self determination to any women unable to chose or refuse motherhood' (p. 33).

In the subsequent chapters we see how this concentration on the working-class family and the working-class mother in particular translated into calls for a change in the inter-war Labour Party's policies on both birth control and abortion. It is here where another of the key themes of the book emerges, the tendency of Labour activists to campaign for sexual reform by expanding and redefining the existing ideas of society rather than aiming to completely overturn them. In the 1920s and 1930s, as unemployment was placing long-term pressure on the dominant ideology of the male breadwinner model, family groups such as the Workers Birth Control Group (WBCG) sought to highlight the burdens which child birth and child rearing placed on working-class women. They challenged the concentration of the labour movement on the body of the male worker by drawing equivalence between domestic, reproductive labour, and manual, industrial labour. They therefore argued for placing the material conditions of women at the centre of the Labour Party's policy programme, declaring, in Brooke's words, that 'Citizenship had to include workers of hand, mind and womb' (p. 55). The WBCG argued for women's rights and citizenship with the existing language of socialism, underpinned by the in some ways conservative concept of maternalism. Similar arguments came up in the case of abortion, the subject of chapter four. Using the debate around the 1938 Bourne case and subsequent Interdepartmental Committee on Abortion as his basis, Brooke shows how the Abortion Law Reform Association (a pressure group he argues was uniquely close to the Labour Party) and East Midlands Working Women's Association (EMWWA) presented the case for wider access to terminations. The mostly middle-class advocates of ALRA emphasised both the necessity of abortion for controlling family size in a depression, and the way in which working-class women were especially forced towards unsafe terminations. The EMWWA by contrast emphasised the way that the depression had changed the structure of working families, leading to far more women taking on a wage earning role. In Brooke's words '[t]hese working-class women stressed the complexity of the female body and their desire for agency to reconcile its various roles in a modern society and economy' (p. 111). Bodily autonomy, and therefore access to abortion, was seen as a vital part of this new vision of working-class femininity.

In between these two accounts lies chapter three, which considers sexual politics through the lives and writings of two socialist women, Dora Russell and Naomi Mitchinson. This forms something of an anomaly in the book, looking at the interactions between the personal lives of specific activists and their emerging political philosophy rather than the development of the case for specific reforms. Brooke acknowledges this, pointing out that despite Russell's important role in the WBCG, her personal life story and writings did not have a large influence on either sexual reform or socialist politics. Indeed the political philosophy developed in this chapter is in stark contrast with the rest of the book. These authors' 'belief that sex offered an experience of personal transcendence that could permeate society' (p. 66) and particularly Russell's concentration on the importance of pleasure, shows a different focus to mainstream sexual politics which emphasised the material consequences and dangers of sex. The chapter recognises the difficulty with which people with radical sexual philosophies acted out such beliefs, describing Dora Russell's marriage to the philosopher Bertrand Russell and how eventually '[t]he power relations that Russell hoped would be assuaged through love eventually overwhelmed that love' (p. 90). The chapter is an intriguing addition, sensitively exploring the connection between the personal and the political in a general account which leans heavily on the institutional.

The middle section of the book deals with the legislative reforms of the Wilson governments: the Sexual Offences Act which decriminalised some homosexual offences, the Abortion Act which widened access to terminations, and the National Health Service (Family Planning) Act which allowed the NHS to supply contraception to women regardless of age or marital status. Rejecting a simplistic popular narrative of the 'permissive society' as an outburst of libertinism located solely in the late 1960s, Brooke shows the long term antecedents of the reforms and the decades-long shifts in the UK and Labour polity that led to them. By

the 1940s and 1950s arguments which had been marginal in the inter-war period became accepted parts of mainstream debate; the discussion of birth control in particular went from being an issue many within Labour Party were weary of discussing to a regular, accepted part of family life, as Brooke shows by looking at the evidence submitted to the Royal Commission on the Population. At the same time affluence and the increasing number of women (including married women) entering the work place changed how the working-class woman was viewed. The ability to control fertility was no longer seen as vital for ameliorating poverty but instead was to keep the working-class family within the sphere of modernisation. By protecting women's new found role outside of the home making, birth control became 'central to the protection of a new protagonist of post war society, the working women; in this way, reproductive control was moving from one understanding of class rooted in the family to another understanding of class rooted in the individual' (p. 143). Class, and indeed the heterosexual family, remained central to reproductive politics in the 1950s – but there were hints of the later move towards individualism.

Brooke argues for four specific shifts in polity which brought long standing issues of sexual reform to the fore in the 1960s, and led some at the top of the Labour Party to make them a priority for legislation. The first is the rise of labour revisionism, personified in Antony Crosland, which sought to reconsider Labour's class and ideological base in the light of the election defeats of the 1950s. This led figures such as future Health Secretary Kenneth Robinson to declare, echoing the WBCG, that family planning had to be a central part of any family welfare policy. Secondly the sociological 'rediscovery of poverty' brought attention to the fact that wide number of women and children had been missed out by the post-war boom. Thirdly, controversy around the arrests of several prominent men for homosexual offences and the subsequent Wolfenden report into homosexual offences and prostitution had revealed the limits of the post-war settlement when considering the issue of individual liberty. Fourthly, an increase in the explicitness of popular culture meant that such subjects were more widely and comfortably discussed. Whilst agreeing with the historical consensus that both the Abortion Act and the Sexual Offences Act were primarily utilitarian reforms, as notable for their limits as their achievements, Brooke argues for their chronological importance. 1967 represented a peak of sexual politics, where pressure groups such as the Homosexual Law Reform Society and ALRA were at the centre of the political process, and after their limited successes sexual politics would retreat to the periphery for a time. Also, because of their limited nature, the compromises achieved in 1967 would have an important role in determining patterns of sexual politics for years to come.

The continuing effect of the settlement of 1967 is one of the main insights of part three which considers the emergence of Women's and Gay Liberation. Brooke sees the absorption of the policy case for gay and women's rights, and many feminist and gay rights activists, in the mainstream of the Labour party as a product of the space created by the divisions in the Labour party of the 1970s and 1980s. Whilst agreeing with the historical consensus that these movements fundamentally challenged the assumptions of socialism, he emphasises the compromise and adaption required for their absorption into the mainstream. In chapter seven he describes how although free access to abortion was officially adopted as an aim by the party in the mid 1970s, actual parliamentary activity was based around defending the Abortion Act. Attacks from various MPs such as John Corrie in 1979 and David Alton in 1987–8 attempted to restrict the Abortion Act rather than repeal it, by chipping away at term limits and the circumstances in which an abortion could be allowed. This meant that the primary focus of parliamentary action was between the extremes of being completely anti-abortion and wanting to keep the act as it was, leaving little space for arguments about a genuine extension of women's rights.

Chapter eight seeks to explore how gay rights came into the mainstream of the Labour Party. Working within the Labour Party both required an engagement with the reformism, which was something the most radical, and most frequently celebrated, parts of the Gay Liberation movement had rejected, instead wanting to change the whole nature of society. It was the direct challenge of the Thatcher Government's Section 28 which convinced both the gay movement to engage with the parliamentary centre and the Labour Party to launch its first full-throated defence of gay rights. In order to work within the Labour Party the gay rights movement had to abandon its more millenarian ideas about the destruction of sexual categories and the abolition of the nuclear family. Instead it embraced identity as a basis for political action, arguing not for a

revolutionary change in society but for gay rights to be seen as a natural part of a modern civilised society. Gay rights, like pro-choice politics, therefore gained a place at the centre of the Labour party through a rhetoric of individual rights, rather than more utopian social change.

Readers of books with subtitles including the phrase 'to the present day' will be used to approaching final chapters with a degree of caution. Brooke's account of the Blair years, both in opposition and in government, describes both how gay rights became a central part of his administration and how Parliament fell into the, by now usual, defensive pattern on the issue of abortion. The chapter demonstrates how sexually autonomous individual became the basis of New Labour sexual reforms. Such an individual was now seen, in contrast to the socialist utopians of the 1880s, as someone who could be absorbed into existing societal (and economic) structures. The family was not destroyed, as revolutionary gay activists had proposed in the 1970s, but its definition was expanded to include gay people. Therefore the adoption of a gay rights agenda was fully compatible with the Labour Party's move to the centre and adoption of a more individualistic stance. Brooke argues his case well but it slightly undermined by the unfortunate decision to make this final narrative chapter the book's conclusion. This at first glance gives the book a teleological feel, making the nature of the Blair reforms seem like the inevitable outcome of debates which preceded them rather than the historically specific and contingent actions they were. Brooke carefully argues against this in the final page of the chapter which attempts a synoptic consideration of the changing nature of sexual politics during his century-long time period. In it he argues that the most 'powerful and far reaching change came from the shifting understanding of traditional ideas' (p. 268); sexual reform was secured through adapting to changing definitions of family and gender in society rather than aiming to revolutionise society entirely.

The book is entirely convincing on the centrality of socialist thought to sexual politics, showing clearly how calls for sex reform have evolved in line with socialism and the Labour Party. However it might have been improved by a more focused concentration on those socialist voices who sought to stop sex being part of socialist programmes. Sex reform has a unique place within Labour Party programmes due to the use of the unofficial constitutional tool of the 'conscience' vote on all abortion and many gay rights votes. Abortion access may have been Labour policy since 1976, and membership of the Labour Party is still a more reliable indicator that an MP will vote pro-choice than any other factor (including gender [\(1\)](#)), but, unlike other parts of the programme, issues of sexuality are almost unique in having a procedure to allow individual MPs, from back bench to cabinet, to vote against the line of either leadership or the party. Sex reform, unlike say Europe, nuclear defence or nationalism, has never been seen as worth splitting the party over, or converted into a shibboleth of membership. Brooke gives us a clear image of the socialist politics of sexual reform, but the socialist of politics of sexual conservatism remain under explored.

The decision to limit the work to its three chosen areas also elides certain wider issues. Brooke specifically declares he is leaving aside venereal disease, sex education and divorce 'in part because some of these issues were not covered in detail or consistency by the Left' (p. 3). Which provokes the obvious question: why? Given the importance of family structure to Brooke's argument, the silence on the issue of divorce is particularly perplexing. One possible explanation is that such issues did not have either the clear material need seen in the case of birth control, or the clear and vocal constituency which emerged in the case of gay rights; but a more detailed analysis of these silences would be useful. Furthermore, the topics on which Brooke concentrates are those where some form of 'liberal' policy consensus has emerged, on which most, with the caveats above, of the Labour Party (and indeed, historians of sexuality) would agree; he doesn't consider more consistently divisive issues such as the regulation of pornography and prostitution. In the case of pornography, even if we ignore the extra-parliamentary left, Labour figures have hardly been silent on the issue – from Roy Jenkins' backing of the Obscene Publications Act and the Callaghan government's commissioning of the Williams report, through Claire Short's campaign on page three, to New Labour's legislation on 'extreme pornography'. Why this activity never cohered into any consistent socialist, or Labour, line on so fraught an issue is worthy of historical exploration.

Brooke makes an enlightening case about areas of consensus, where reforms were fought for loudly and

achieved; however the book raises the questions of the silences, the disagreements and the failures which were equally important characteristics of the relationship between the Labour Party and sexual reform. These are not, as the cliché goes, mere quibbles, but examples of the fruitful lines of enquiry that Brooke's approach can inspire; he has written a book which should provoke debate and focus minds for years to come.

## Notes

1. Phillip Cowley and Mark Stewart, 'Party rules, ok: voting in the House of Commons on the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63, 1 (2010), 173–81.[Back to \(1\)](#)

### Other reviews:

Times Literary Supplement

<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1063730.ece> [2]

---

**Source URL:**<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1309>

### Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/30650> [2] <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1063730.ece>