

The Modern History of Sexuality

Review Number: 526

Publish date: Thursday, 1 June, 2006

Editor: Matt Houlbrook

Harry Cocks

ISBN: 1403912904

Date of Publication: 2005

Price: £19.95

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication: Basingstoke

Reviewer: Lesley Hall

That the history of sexuality has come of age is clear. The most recent *Journal of the History of Sexuality* is a self-reflexive special issue on 'Theory, Methods, Praxis'. The extent to which history of sexuality has come in from the margins and is no longer lurking in the back streets has recently been manifested by the award of the *History Today*/Longmans Book of the Year prize to Matt Houlbrook's *Queer London. The Modern History of Sexuality* provides us with an overview of the current state of the art. The editors and the contributors are among some of the most sparkling figures in the younger generation of scholars toiling in this area.

In 1978 R. P. Neumann, in a prescient review essay just predating the appearance of a number of influential works emerging from gay and women's history and the impact of Foucault, deplored the anecdotal and simplistically theorised works then appearing. 'If the history of sexuality is to avoid being completely trivialized', he argued, 'sexual attitudes and behavior must be examined within the larger framework of social and economic history' and exhorted sex historians to 'examine their mindless materialist and progressive assumptions about human sexuality'. (1) The sophistication and complexity of the discussions in *The Modern History of Sexuality* demonstrate just how far the field has come in nearly 30 years. These densely packed chapters discuss various fields in which history of sexuality is embroiled, the development of theories and arguments, and the questions that are being raised. Thus it is not 'a history of sexuality' as such, but a meta-level contribution providing a guide to how historians have thought, and are now thinking, about sexuality in history, focusing largely on the modern period. It provides a useful introduction to the area, if somewhat uneven due to the different approaches taken in the various chapters: but this validly represents the protean nature of the subject.

The editors provide a valuable overview in their introduction, pointing out that the history of sexuality is not just about detailing the organisation and experience of sexual behaviour in the past but can be deployed as 'a prism through which to explore wider social and cultural issues', as a 'protean discipline that allows us to enter a world of meaning, to understand the most fundamental assumptions about everyday life that shape the social, cultural and political life of modern Western societies'. This is a sound guide to the development of the discipline and the ways in which it works, although some points might bear nuancing.

Hera Cook's chapter provides a valuable introduction to the theme of demography, which deals with the most common form of sexual interaction in all societies up to the present: reproductive intercourse between

individuals of differing sexes. As she points out, 'Heterosexuality was, and is, the dominant sexual culture' and needs to be historicised just as homosexuality has been. This is one of the few points at which something of a gap in the volume is foregrounded: as she states, there is, 'an implicit assumption ... that we already know what heterosexuality is, what it consists of, and what the practice involves' (pp. 22–23). I should like to have seen more attention given overall in this volume to the fact that in spite of the richness of the historiography of sexuality, there are rather large blank spaces on the map where 'heterosexuality' and in particular 'the “normal” male' reside. Cook makes the important point that reproduction is not 'a perennial, unchanging experience', and that changing birth rates over time and space, in combination with other forms of evidence, can be a way into understanding sexual cultures. In particular she argues that statistics provide an important check on anecdotal evidence relating to specific, not necessarily typical, individuals. However, to what extent were 'sharply-rising rates of syphilis recorded from the mid-nineteenth century' (p. 32) an artefact of improved clinical understandings (and awareness) of the disease and thus better diagnosis, in particular of the late (tertiary) manifestations, rather than an increase in actual cases?

Chris Waters looks at 'Sexology' – the attempt to bring science and rationality to bear upon the vexed questions of sexual behaviour and attitudes. This endeavour was already in progress well before it was named: as he points out, the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the modern usage to William Walling's book of that title, published in 1902, a date when 'sexology was already on its way to becoming an established science' (p. 42). I might perhaps contend with Waters's suggestion that early sexology was most interested in 'the psychology of the perversions'. As I have argued, sexology emerged against a backdrop of feminist protest against existing male-dominated sexual institutions of society, both prostitution and marriage, and many of the early sexologists were embedded in milieux in which debates on these issues, critiquing established assumptions about sexuality and gender, were flourishing. (2) It was not coincidence, or a mere gesture to interwar modernity, that the platform of the World League for Sexual Reform during the 1920s included sex education, birth control and abortion, rational divorce legislation and sexual equality, as well as reform of the laws on homosexuality: these were longstanding concerns of sexologists. (3)

The chapter is otherwise an extremely usefully overview of the rise and development of sexology and of the ways in which historians have looked at it. Waters makes the often overlooked point that the roots of the history of sexuality itself lie in sexology and sexual reform. This sometimes took the form of 'manufactur[ing] a usable past' (p. 51), as in the invocation of Ancient Greece for models of non-pathological homosexuality, but also included Iwan Bloch's belief that 'historical knowledge offered an important key to understanding contemporary problems of sexuality', and his argument that sexual practices and attitudes were shaped by unique national cultural factors. Waters also demonstrates that the sexologists' writing of themselves into the history of the discipline constructed a narrative of progress into emancipation and enlightenment that endured until the 1970s. Post-Foucault, Walters claims, 'there was a tendency to veer to the other extreme, to view sexologists as insidious agents of social control', similarly overlooking sexology's 'origins as a complex product of social interaction' (pp. 54–55). More recent studies have looked at this complex process of the production of sexual knowledge, and the ways in which it was disseminated, transformed and used by a variety of constituencies.

Matt Cook examines the role of law and legal systems both in 'delineating deviancy' and in creating an archival record which can provide insight into 'voices, subcultures and behaviours which would otherwise be lost' (p. 64). He emphasises that law was far from a static monolithic system; instead it was constantly changing over time and reft with internal contradictions at any given moment, not to mention the significant national differences in judicial institutions and procedures. Legislation can reflect highly specific cultural anxieties and outbreaks of moral panic, while not necessarily embodying a general consensus. He mentions the opportunity that the courtroom provided for articulating 'overt dissent from domineering codes and values', such as Wilde's famous 'love that dare not speak its name' peroration (p. 79), but it is odd that he does not consider the role of deliberate test cases such as those of Bradlaugh and Besant, Bourne (which via case-law opened up a space for doctors legally to perform abortions), and Chesser in providing a way to testify to oppositional views on existing laws. But as a whole this chapter does a fine job of demonstrating the complexity of the nature of legal regulation and the need for contextualisation when using the materials

it generated.

George Robb provides an overview of marriage and reproduction that possibly focuses a little too narrowly on Anglo-American debates and concerns. His account of feminist critiques of marriage and their intersections with anxiety over breeding the healthy race, the arguments advanced for free love, and moves to revitalise marriage following two world wars is excellent as far as it goes. Nonetheless, it would have been useful to look at the somewhat different slants on marriage, women's role within it, and reproduction emerging in continental Europe, especially given his emphasis on eugenics and pronatalist agendas, and the status of women. A brief mention of the shift from the sexual radicalism of the early days of the Soviet regime in Russia to Stalinist pronatalism and a sentence alluding to the excesses of the Nazis' eugenic programme in Germany do not really provide a nuanced analysis of the different ways in which these concerns played out in different national contexts, such as Scandinavia, France, with its constant panic over depopulation, Italy, and Spain, where a deeply conservative traditional Catholic morality was contested by anarchists advocating both free love and eugenics.

The important questions of race and empire are tackled by Ross Forman. He analyses the debated issue of 'empire as space of sexual liberation', complicating assertions such as those made by Hyam in *Empire and Sexuality* (1990). The question of sources is discussed, and the bias that can be introduced by the sites at which and the reasons for which records were produced, but Forman fruitfully suggests the variety of resources that can be investigated as well as the various methodological strategies that can be deployed to identify 'important details about sexual and racial histories' in apparently neutral and unpromising official documentation. An important point is made about the process of circulation between empire and metropole, and the constant renegotiation of boundaries.

There is an excellent account of the contingent and contextual significance of 'miscegenation' in diverse historical and geographical contexts. The overview of the relationship between scientific racism and questions of sexuality is very useful, though possibly the picture was perhaps not entirely one of evolution from primitive to civilised. Was there not, particularly with the late nineteenth century rise of degeneration theory and eugenic anxieties, a positioning of certain 'races' as effete and decadent (and given to elaborate and sophisticate 'perversions') rather than savage and primitive? This would place 'Western civilisation' at a precarious midway balance point needing constant readjustment.

The city and urban spaces have become, Matt Houlbrook suggests, 'an increasingly hot academic issue'. This is a sophisticated thematic essay, as one would expect from the author of *Queer London*. Houlbrook asks why a generation of historians have been 'so obsessed with the city'; how urban culture has shaped and been shaped by experiences and understanding of sexual behaviour; and what is problematic in the ways historians have addressed these themes. Partly this is an artefact of the richness of the urban archival record, but that itself arose from anxieties engendering practices of surveillance over the populations of cities. This is a well-analysed and thought provoking chapter, but again, exposes a gap in the existing historiography: what were the patterns of heterosexual interaction (other than prostitution) in the city, what opportunities were enabled for new kinds of courtship and relationships? There is an intriguing meditation about cyberspace and whether this fills the role cities formerly did as sites of identity creation, pleasure, and danger: however, it would be interesting to examine earlier 'virtual' methods by which individuals combated isolation and anomie (those frequent by-products of urban life) through personal advertisements, correspondence clubs and the creation of circles via shared common interests without, necessarily, prior physical encounters.

Harry Cocks posits the continuing relevance of considering religion and spirituality as important elements in sexual attitudes and behaviour. While I have argued that it is possible that Foucault's concept of the centrality of the confessional is too universalising a model, eroding significant differences of national culture and sectarian affiliation, (4) it is undoubtedly the case that spiritual beliefs continued to play a significant role for much longer than simplistic stories of modernity and secularisation might suggest. Cocks' discussion of issues of 'spiritual friendship' and the possibilities of queer readings of these in their own terms is a very

useful way out of sterile 'were they/weren't they' debates, though, following Maynard, (5) possibly another element might be invoked: the privileging of the state of desire over that of consummation. Cocks's claim that religion 'had fallen into decay' as a 'location for sexual expression' by the 1920s is contestable: figures such as Maude Royden and A. Herbert Gray were adumbrating a new theology of marriage, and sexual relationships within it, strongly inflected by feminism and the works of sexologists such as Havelock Ellis. The Marriage Guidance Council evolved during the late 1930s out of the efforts of organisations and individuals with strong religious affiliations. The role of fears (realistic or not) of negative reactions by organised religion or particular sectarian groups towards questions such as birth control provision and reform of divorce laws might also have featured in this chapter.

Sarah Leonard's chapter on 'Pornography and obscenity' deals with issues of boundaries, borders, definition and genre categorisation, which constitute one of the linking themes of the volume. This is an extremely valuable overview of the ways in which historians can use the 'undergrowth of literature' to illuminate a range of issues, in particular the light it sheds on ideas of 'the body politic'. I would, however, like to query the association, also mentioned by Matt Cook, that mid-nineteenth-century concerns around obscenity laws were the outcome of anxieties specifically directed to a metropolitan book trade and 'rooted in the industrial urban landscapes'. London may have been a major source of supply, but officials of the Society for the Suppression of Vice reported a flourishing traffic in obscene materials at provincial and rural markets and fairs throughout the UK. The role of efficient and inexpensive to the end-user postal services was surely also a major issue in the wider dissemination of 'obscene' materials' (as were developments in printing technology and greater ease of transportation), and the fears around this.

In the chapter on prostitution Elizabeth Clement also foregrounds the issue of boundaries, borders, definitions and categorisation, and how significant these have been – and continue to be – around what prostitution is and what is a prostitute. Even under law definitions have often been extremely ambiguous. When statistical claims were made these were often counters in contests between moral reformers (setting the figures high) and policing authorities (fixing the figures low as a testimony to their maintenance of good public order). She points out that the customer in mercenary or barter sexual transactions has often been subsumed to a transhistorical model of heterosexual male desire, with an unexamined assumption that 'men have innate sexual desires that they will go to great lengths to satisfy'. Given that, as she so cogently remarks, 'the question is never why some women went into prostitution, but why so many (with very similar motivating factors) did not', perhaps the question of imperative male sexual desire and men's determination to gratify it also needs unpacking, nuancing and problematising. Clement also addresses the broader question of 'sex-work', the purveying of sexualised forms of entertainment not involving actual intercourse, though it is possible that one might be able to trace areas of 'parasexuality' further back than the 1920s.

She is insightful on the difficulties of striking a balance between narratives granting sex-workers full agency and those which treat them as helpless victims of oppression. While her point about the long historical continuities in the sex-trade is well made, is it not possible to discern certain changes to do with 'modernity', such as the almost factory-like time-management practices of some nineteenth century brothels, increasing market diversification and elaboration, and the importance of improved transportation in the form of railways and steamships?

Children and young people have been, and still are, at the centre of debates and moral panics to do with sexual issues, and 'concepts of childhood and youth have been crucial to the construction of modern sexualities'. As Louise Jackson argues in her chapter on 'Childhood and youth', 'Histories of youth and sexuality have overwhelmingly examined processes of categorization and regulation by adults'. The very definitions of the definitions of 'child' and 'young person' are fluid and heavily contextual. Accounts of childhood sexual experiences are usually reconstructed through an adult perspective, thus it is difficult to get at a less mediated understanding of sex in childhood. Jackson examines the construction of the highly gendered and class-inflected notions of 'childhood innocence' and the various cultural myths resting on them. However, although 'white slavery' narratives and later representations of the paedophile depend on locating abuse outside the home, the fact that an Incest Act was passed in the UK in 1908 does suggest that at one

level abuse within the family was recognised even if it did not form part of pervasive cultural myths. It might have been useful to include in this chapter some discussion of the contested history of sex education, advocated on the grounds that 'ignorance is not innocence' and children should be provided with adequate knowledge to understand and withstand sexual dangers, opposing claims that disseminating such knowledge to children itself constitutes a violation of innocence.

The whole volume is, as already mentioned, acutely aware of issues around definitions and categories and the problems these raise. Alison Oram's concluding chapter discusses the questions raised by cross-dressing and transgender. This reveals the complexities that arise when discussing this topic in historical perspective. Cross-dressing took a variety of forms and could be undertaken for a range of personal and social reasons. Cases of cross-dressing individuals have been analysed from various angles, both by contemporaries and by historians. They provide a rich resource for examining specific historical concepts about gender, sexuality and transgression. Oram distinguishes between the choice to live as the opposite gender and the more self-conscious masquerade of drag, and emphasises the 'very diverse sets of meanings' that can be ascribed to cross-dressing at any given historical moment, and indeed to the significance of transgender following mid-twentieth century developments in gender reassignment through hormones and surgery. One area not explored in this otherwise excellent chapter is that of cross-dressing as erotic fetish and the phenomenon of the 'straight' male transvestite: but this would perhaps take us into rather different areas.

There are a few minor but irritating errors throughout the volume. Havelock Ellis was *not* Australian (p. 4), and *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* was published in the USA. It was not the protagonist of Radclyffe Hall's famous lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) who 'escape[d] to the Canadian forests' (p. 113), but her partner, whom the heroine gives up so that she can marry and lead a 'normal' life. Even today, one would surely not describe London as 'nearby' Southampton or Plymouth (p. 219); in the nineteenth century the journey would have been considerably longer. And not an error, but a possibly unsustainable assumption: would Frank Podmore necessarily have been aware that telegraph boys from the Post Office in St Martin's Lane where he worked were having sex with men for money at the Cleveland Street brothel (p. 174)? How much contact would he have had with them, and even if he did, how widely was this known about before the scandal broke (during an investigation into suspected petty theft)?

There are also some strange contradictions between different chapters. Can Mabel Loomis Todd's diary still be deployed as 'abundant evidence ... of the sex lives of some women' during the Victorian era (p. 161)? Copious documentation by one woman, or even a handful of women, of individual enjoyment of sexual life does not constitute abundant evidence that this was necessarily widespread: as Hera Cook points out in her chapter, working on a level of population rather than anecdote strongly tends to suggest the opposite. The location of 'sexologists' efforts' as characteristic of the interwar era and a product of the Great War is extremely strange (p. 184), as the sexological enterprise had been going, as we know from Waters's chapter, for nearly 50 years by then.

I might possibly take issue with the notion that some of the phenomena described were the products of 'modernity': categorisation, for example, is surely a longstanding trait of humanity. While the categories themselves may have changed, the desire to categorise and classify is hardly a post-Enlightenment phenomenon. However, overall the volume makes a strong case for problematising boundaries and categorisation and draws attention to the continuous process of redrawing these, blurring them and constantly negotiating them. It also emphasises that sexuality is not a transhistorically enduring phenomenon: not just definitions but acts and identities are profoundly mediated by the contexts in which they occur.

As an overview this volume works well, although it would have been nice to have had some attention given to the blanker spaces on the map and how these might be more adequately filled in. There is a helpful select bibliography organised chapter by chapter, and the notes to each provide additional guidance for further explorations.

Notes

1. R. P. Neuman, 'Review Essay: Recent Work in the History of Sexuality', *Journal of Social History*, 11.3 (1978), pp. 419–425. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Lesley A. Hall, 'Hauling down the double standard: feminism, social purity, and sexual science in late nineteenth-century Britain', *Gender and History*, 16.1 (2004), pp. 36–56. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ralf Dose, 'The World League for Sexual Reform: some possible approaches', in ed. Franz Eder, Lesley Hall and Gert Hekma, *Sexual Cultures in Europe: National Histories* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 242–259. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: the Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1680–1950* (New Haven, Conn., 1995), p. 180. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. John Maynard, *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion* (Cambridge, 1993). [Back to \(5\)](#)

The editors thank Lesley Hall for a generous review and applaud her command of detail. As she rightly notes, this collection of essays is intended to prompt historians to question and debate the theoretical, methodological and historiographical frameworks within which they approach sex and sexuality. It is good to see from Dr Hall's review that it has already succeeded in this aim.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/526#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/2931> [2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>