Making Sexual History

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Making Sexual History
For my mother
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Jeffrey Weeks

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book attempts two closely related tasks. First of all, it argues that in order to understand the world of sexuality we need to grasp that it is not made behind our backs, by Nature, History or Society. We are the makers of sexual history, in our everyday lives, in our life experiments, in the tangle between desire, responsibility, contingency and opportunity. We may not make it in circumstances entirely of our own choosing, but we have more choice than we often believe or seize. Secondly, in various essays, written over a number of years, it records my own efforts both to understand and to help to remake the history of sexuality.

Though the essays were written for different occasions, and varying audiences, I would suggest that they reveal a consistency of outlook, though a constantly developing rethinking of issues, which gives the collection a coherence and value beyond the contingencies of the first appearance of the chapters. The organizing theme is the relationship between writing about, and acting on, the history and social organization of sexuality: the process of making sexual history in an ever more complex world.

Part I is concerned with writers on sexuality, from Havelock Ellis to influential contemporaries. The persistent theme is less the truth or scientific validity of the topics these writers discuss than the social and political context in which they wrote, and the significance of their writings for shaping the meanings given to sex and intimacy. In an important sense, as we move through these writers, we can witness a major shift from an expert discourse to an activist discourse: from science to grassroots sexology.

Part II is more concerned with the historical and sociological rethinking of what sexuality is (a ‘historic invention’), and the ways in which the
erotic is being reinvented by the new sexual movements and day-to-day experiments in living. The impact of AIDS is a prominent theme, but so is the incremental change which has transformed personal lives.

Part III looks in more detail at recent examples of the everyday remaking of the sexual world: in the development of sexual communities, through the community-based response to HIV and AIDS, and in the emergence of ‘families of choice’. The concluding chapter looks beyond the millennium, looming as I write, and argues that these grass-roots endeavours, everyday experiments in living, are both products and harbingers of profound changes in the opportunities open to us for living lives based on freedom, justice and choice rather than the harsh certainties of tradition. We live, I have argued elsewhere, in an age of uncertainty. That should not mean that we surrender to pessimism and despair. On the contrary, there are new opportunities to be grasped, new meanings to shape, better ways of making, and remaking, sexual history.

My debts to friends and colleagues over many years are too many to list here. The essays themselves testify to specific intellectual debts. I want to thank, however, all the editors and publishers who helped navigate the individual pieces to original publication, and who generously allowed me to republish here. I must thank Peter Aggleton, Chris McKevitt, Kay Parkinson and Austin Taylor-Laybourn, who were my research, and writing, colleagues on the ‘Voluntary Sector Responses to HIV and AIDS’ project, discussed in chapter 10. I owe Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan an immense debt for their friendship and collegiality in working on the ‘Families of Choice’ project, whose findings are outlined in Chapter 11. The British Economic and Social Research Council funded the research for both projects, and I am deeply grateful for their generosity and wisdom at a difficult time for funding sex-related research. My colleagues at South Bank University provided the usual academic distractions, but also a deep support, for which I am grateful. I owe especial thanks to Donna Thompson for her calm and deliberate administrative backing at all crucial times. Matthew Waite proved a loyal and thoughtful ally in helping me to make the final choice of these essays, and in helping me to make them suitable for publication here. I owe him many thanks.

Micky Burbidge, as always, has shown me the power, strength and durability of loyal friendship over many years, and I can only record my enduring gratitude. My partner, Mark McNestry, has lived with every moment of the construction of this book with patience, care, fortitude, and the ultimate compliment, trust. Its completion was momentarily delayed by the peculiar traumas and joys of a home move. I would not
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‘Community Responses to HIV and AIDS: The “De-Gaying” and Re-Gaying” of AIDS’, originally published in Jeffrey Weeks and Janet Holland (eds), *Sexual Cultures: Communities, Values and Intimacy*, Macmillan and St Martin’s Press 1996; republished with the permission of the publishers.
Introduction: Making Sexual History

Who makes sexual history? A generation ago the question would have been absurd. It was taken for granted that the truths of sex were timeless. Attitudes, legal forms, religious injunctions, moral codes, literary expressions, subcultural patterns might change, but the substratum of erotic energy and gendered (as it was not then called) relationships remained locked into biological necessity, beyond the realms of history or social science. There was a world of social life, susceptible to understanding through learning the laws of society or of historical necessity; and there was the domain of the essential, graspable only through uncovering the laws of nature. As a result, historians and sociologists (the two categories I could myself identify with) left the quest for sexual knowledge to others: psychologists, mythologists, anthropologists, sexologists could delve, but my own disciplines largely stood aloof. Ken Plummer as late as the 1970s (Plummer 1975) noted the lamentable absence of a sustained sociology of sexuality, and I began my own work on the modern history of sexuality in Britain, what became Sex, Politics and Society (Weeks 1981/1989), with a similar sense that this was terra incognita.

Today that has all changed, in large part at first as a result of the efforts of self-proclaimed sexual dissidents: the new feminist and lesbian and gay scholarship led the way in politically charged interventions, recovering a lost or ignored history or experience, and inventing or reinventing the idea of women’s history, lesbian and gay history and the like. More recently senior scholars from more traditional backgrounds have engaged seriously with the sexual (and of course many of the pioneering explorers are today themselves senior members of the academy). Now bookshops groan with shelves of books on the history, sociology,
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psychology, literature, philosophy, theory, theologies, practices and politics of sexuality. Publishers large and small have (more or less) profitable lists. Universities run courses. Many of us thrive on an extensive international conference circuit. There has been an unprecedented discursive revolution in writing about sexuality, gender and the body.

As I argue later in the book, writing about sexuality can be dangerous, but it is also constitutive: through the web of meaning we writers about the erotic weave in our intricate ways not only are beliefs and behaviours shaped, but the very definition of what sexuality is can be refined and then radically rethought. After Michel Foucault (1979) we have become accustomed to seeing ‘sexuality’ as an invented ensemble of related but disparate elements sometimes only contingently related to bodily needs or desires, and ‘performed’, as Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has suggested, in power-laden situations. After Plummer (1975, 1995) we have become aware of the impact of stigma in defining the boundaries of acceptability, and the impact of sexual ‘stories’ in both voicing and giving meaning to erotic activities. A vast literature on sexual identities, to which I myself have contributed (Weeks 1977/1990, 1985, 1991, 1995), has conclusively demonstrated the power of culture in giving definition to what or who we are, even as cultures of power are at last recognized as central to the construction, legitimization and delegitimization of patterns of sexual interaction. Now even the body and its pleasures, which Foucault saw as the last point of resistance to the controlling apparatus which delimited the erotic, are seen as part of a ‘reflexive project’ in which thoughts and meanings - even virtual reality - have as much weight as physiognomy and genetic imprinting (see Giddens 1991).

So we need to explore how sexual history is written because its contribution to how sexuality is lived is central. Hence my own preoccupation with theories of sexuality, and the construction, and contestation, of sexual knowledge, from Havelock Ellis to the present. Unless we can understand what they (we) were trying to do it becomes impossible, I believe, to understand fully the web in which we are entangled.

Yet most people live their sexual lives without a sense of history (or at least a detailed knowledge of the history of sexuality), and certainly without reading books on sexual history. Whatever the genuine theoretical breakthroughs of thinking of the erotic in terms of ‘performativity’, inventions, narratives or fictions (see Weeks 1995), we must always be aware that sexuality is lived as well as written about. The ultimate makers of sexual history do not dwell in the ivory towers of academe but on the ground, or perhaps, better, in the bedrooms or even at what AIDS researchers call the PSEs (public sex environments), negotiating their everyday lives as best they can in the circumstances in which they find themselves. The writers of sexual history must necessarily balance
their theories with an understanding of practices, weighing their discursive analysis against an analysis of how discourse is lived.

**Transformations**

My own practice as a professional social scientist, grounded in a historical training and performing as a sociologist, dabbling in a host of other intellectual activities, but specializing in the sexual, has been tempered by my own practice as a sexual being and my wider socio-cultural belongings and political engagements and alignments. This nexus has demanded simultaneously a commitment to traditional canons of scholarly achievement and to the perceived truths of my experience. I have sought, in my own way, to be both a truth-teller and a yeah-sayer, to analyse and to tell my personal stories and preoccupations. My local, particular experience has not been purely individual, however, because I profoundly believe that personal life and macro-historical trends are inextricably combined. In the contingencies of everyday life we can see the impact of world-historical events; and through our understanding of the long-term shifts in social and economic transformation we may grasp the limits and possibilities of change in the sphere of the intimate. The changes in our own private lives are part of wider, collective transformations. The challenge lies in teasing out the hidden connections, making sense of what often seems incomprehensible, or merely idiosyncratic.

Of course, such thoughts were only latent in my mind when I began what has become, despite my original best intentions, a career in sexual studies, an intellectual sex-worker if you like. At the beginning of the 1970s I was completing a postgraduate study in political theory, an exploration of early twentieth-century socialist pluralist writings (the work of the British Guild Socialists largely), to which I gave the title ‘The Search for Community’. The title seemed apt for that particular piece of research, but in a peculiar way it became a leitmotif in my subsequent intellectual career - and personal life. For it was another definition of community that grabbed me as I finished the study - the new idea of a gay community, condition for and product of the eruption of lesbian and gay activism after 1970. Working at the London School of Economics from October 1970, in my first academic research job, I soon got drawn into the London Gay Liberation Front, which had its first meetings there. It is not too extreme or exaggerated a description when I say that everything changed for me from then on: my personal life and commitments, my political engagement and eventually my intellectual trajectory and research agenda. It was, in Anthony Giddens’s (1991) graphic phrase, a ‘fateful moment’ which forced a reordering of my
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personal narrative and the way I saw the world. I came out with a bump, and eventually harnessed my innate romanticism and latent utopianism to a new sense of what was possible. I assumed a new personal identity, found a new sense of belonging, and became committed to a new political project. And I began research on sexuality and sexual history.

Of course, though it seemed like - indeed was - a deeply personal experience, it was also a profound collective experience. Through a new social involvement, I began remaking my sense of self, but the new identity I embraced was the product of a transformation of historical possibility that we are still working through, though in quite different ways from those we anticipated in the early 1970s. With decent hindsight it is now possible to see that what I, and many others, lived through was the first burst of what has now become a firestorm of change that is literally changing the world.

My experiences then opened an ongoing conversation between academic knowledge, political and ethical commitments and personal life which has continued to this day. The essays in this book, written at various periods in response to research interests and ongoing changes, are a reflection of this continuing dialogue. Let me now, therefore, try to outline the main concerns of my own historical and sociological practice, the making of sexual history.

As I suggested earlier, we need to address two fundamental questions: how we conceptualize, and know, the sexual; and how we live it - ‘make it’ in every sense. This has shaped three preoccupations which have dominated my work, and provide the framework of this book: with the construction and reconstruction of sexual knowledge; with rethinking the history of sexuality; and with the everyday making of sexual history. In the rest of this chapter I shall attempt to explore each of these themes with reference to my own work, and in particular the essays in this book.

Reconstructing sexual knowledge

Sexuality emerged as a subject for serious study at the end of the nineteenth century, signalled most clearly by the development of a separate discipline devoted to it: sexology, the would-be science of desire (Weeks 1985). Havelock Ellis (see chapter 1) was one of its pioneers in the English-speaking world, and I became interested in him originally for two reasons. First, he was in his earlier life part of that circle of British socialists and radicals that in the 1880s began to try to link up the woman question and the problem of sexuality with wider questions of social and cultural transformation (a group I had first encountered when I began my postgraduate research in socialist theory). He was a particip-
ant in the Fellowship of the New Life out of which came both the Fabian Society and the first Labour prime minister, but which was originally concerned with ‘the subordination of material things to spiritual’ and ‘the cultivation of a perfect character in each and all’. He was a close friend of the South African feminist Olive Schreiner, and became a hero to many other feminist leaders. He was a friend of the socialist propagandist and pioneering advocate of homosexual love, Edward Carpenter. Heterosexual himself, though with a minor sexual ‘perversion’ of his own, urolagnia (pleasure in urination), he married a lesbian, and with John Addington Symonds he wrote the first ‘scientific’ book on homosexuality, *Sexual Inversion*. There was interest enough here!

But I came to realize that Ellis represented more than simply a complex and fascinating life. He seemed to me to embody the influence of sexology on progressive thinking in the twentieth century. His theories on homosexuality, as an inborn inversion of the sexual instinct, his way of writing about the subject, with abundance of cross-cultural, even cross-species, examples, his cautious advocacy of decriminalization and of social toleration, seemed to epitomize the liberal approach that was dominant when I was first coming to terms with my own sexuality. His views on women, equal but different, sexual but needing to be ‘kissed into love’ by the more aggressive male, had also, in the post-war world, become hegemonic. I was fascinated, therefore, by this paradox: how a man who had come out of a radical milieu, not, other things being equal, all that different from the one I was involved in, could become the icon of a liberal sexual ideology that by the 1970s I was committed to opposing because of its drastic limitations. How could a perceived radical of the 1890s seem not only *passé* but positively reactionary by the 1970s?

From this sense of dislocation came an insight which structured much of my later work: that sexology not only attempted to understand the sexual world, but actually helped to shape it. This was clearly the case, it seemed to me, with regard to homosexuality. In defining the homosexual as a distinct type of person, Ellis was one of those who helped the twentieth century to believe that homosexuals were different from heterosexuals, that they were separate types of sexual being. I argued, then, that work such as Ellis’s was a major element in the constitution of a separate homosexual category, which in turn has fundamentally shaped the identities of self-defined homosexual people, women and men, throughout the twentieth century. Subsequently, a number of feminist writers have gone further, in excoriating Ellis as the definer of female sexual subordination (Jeffreys 1985). Such was the power of the word.

Of course, the reality was rather more complex than this simple summary. Ellis did not invent a separate homosexual experience. He learnt of
it from colleagues like Symonds and Carpenter, from case studies solicited by or anonymously sent to him, from friends - and from his wife. What he did was to give theoretical weight to the idea, in Foucault’s (1979) phrase, that the homosexual belonged to a species. He gave expert credence to the dichotomization of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Many self-identified homosexuals welcomed this (see Weeks and Porter 1998), and it has indeed become the fundamental framework for twentieth-century sexual categorizations, identities and politics. The obsessive contemporary researchers after the gay gene or gay brain can be seen as Ellis’s and his confrères’ spiritual heirs. So why did I - do I - find it problematic?

The first difficulty was that Ellis presents as true something that he was in part - with a number of others - inventing: the idea that sexuality can be understood in terms of neat categories and typologies. The research I was already undertaking for what became my book Coming Out (1977/1990) was making me aware that the late nineteenth century was doing something more than simply applying reason to understanding sexuality, and especially homosexuality. It was attempting to impose a particular meaning on it. Yet it was clear in Ellis’s own work, and has become even clearer in the work of sexual theorists and investigators throughout the twentieth century, that the erotic always overflows the neat divisions that science simultaneously imposes. From Freud to Kinsey we can see the tensions between behaviour and identity, private desire and public morality, dreams and reality, sexuality as presented and sexuality as lived (Weeks 1985). Secondly, however important the sexological effort was in feeding into liberalizing efforts in the twentieth century (and despite his limitations I remain convinced that Ellis and his like were on the whole forces for good), we now needed to go beyond that in order to realize the hopes awakened by the new radical sexual politics of the early 1970s.

Mary McIntosh’s essay on ‘The Homosexual Role’ provided an intellectual spur to my understanding of what was wrong with the liberal sexological tradition (see chapter 2). That tradition assumed that homosexuality was a condition which some people had and others did not. In a groundbreaking think piece published as early as 1968, McIntosh wondered why we did not ask a more difficult question: what were the historical circumstances that led us to believe that this was the case? As she was able to show, the assumption of a distinct condition obscured the gap between behaviour and category that Alfred Kinsey and comparative anthropology (and indeed sexologists like Ellis himself) abundantly demonstrated. It ignored the existence of varying transhistorical patterns for organizing same-sex activities. And most daringly of all, McIntosh was able to show that the concept of a separate historical existence for the people we call homosexuals was of comparatively recent origin, probably dating back no earlier than the late seventeenth century. This
article opened up an agenda - almost ten years, be it noted, before Michel Foucault published a similar argument - which historians and social scientists, and indeed ‘queer theorists’, are still pursuing. It posed fundamental questions which still tease us: what are the sources of the heterosexual/homosexual binarism, and what are the effects of that dichotomy on structuring individual lives, and sexual history?

Following through the logic of the argument, I suggested that the recent history of homosexuality could best be interpreted as a complex process of definition and self-definition. On the one hand we could trace the social, cultural and political forces that shaped the creation of homosexuality as a minority, and generally socially execrated, experience: religion, the law, state activities, family ideologies, class consolidation, popular prejudice, the institutions of medicine, psychiatry, even sexology. On the other hand there were forces of resistance: individual struggles, subcultural developments, nascent organizations for homosexual rights.

In the heady days of the early 1970s it was these proto-gay ‘movements of affirmation’ that especially intrigued me, because they seemed the first tinklings of what became the chorus of self-assertion in the new international lesbian and gay movement. If as Dennis Altman asserted in his pioneering work of gay liberation theory, Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation, its aim was to welcome the end of the homosexual, and of course of the heterosexual - or to put it less polemically, to make the distinction socially meaningless - the road to it was through an affirmation of identity, a strengthening of community, and the political activity of lesbians and gays themselves (see chapter 3). The paradox that you can only get rid of oppressive dichotomies by affirming the subordinate form in order to challenge the hegemonic term is one that continues to haunt the radical agenda, and has led directly to an identity politics that is generally wedded to what differentiates us rather than what we have in common.

But a transgressive tradition has survived, most obviously alive in recent years in queer theory and politics. We can see the early expression of that not just in Altman’s work but in a book from quite a different tradition, Guy Hocquenghem’s essay on Homosexual Desire(see chapter 4). This was first published in France in 1972, almost contemporaneously with Altman’s book, and I subsequently introduced it to an English audience in 1978. Its real significance, however, is that he sharply posed the issue in a way which has continued to be important: ‘The problem is not so much homosexual desire as the fear of homosexuality.’ Though expressed in the terms of post-1968 French intellectual delirium, the question he asks is actually similar to both Mcintosh’s and Altman’s: why out of the flux of desires, which is neither homosexual nor heterosexual, do we insist on sharp categorizations? His answer, in terms of Oedipalization, anti-homosexual paranoia, the sublimated anus and all, might not excite everyone’s
enthusiasm, but it is clearly congruent with more recent concerns with the roots and forms of homophobia, the embedded nature of the heterosexual imperative, and sexual transgressiveness as a form of resistance. Despite its limitations, which are explored in my essay, it is perhaps not surprising that his book has recently been welcomed as a proto-queer intervention (see Marshall 1996; and Moon 1993).

From Ellis to McIntosh, Altman, Hocquenghem and the like we can trace, I would argue, a profound shift in the locus of sexual knowledge construction: from the scientific expert to the politicized grass roots. The fact that Ellis had radical roots and his own liberalizing agenda, and the new theorists were academics or intellectuals, does not obviate my main point: that whereas the pioneering sexologists were speaking for a scientific understanding of the erotic, the new sexual intellectuals were speaking from experience, from a sense of community involvement, and for a political-cultural project. In the new writing on sexuality from the early 1970s we can see the beginnings of what Steven Epstein (1996), with particular reference to HIV/AIDS, describes as ‘credibility struggles’ to determine who can legitimately speak the truth about sexuality. The generation since has seen a number of symbolic struggles over this, from the early zaps by gay liberationists of psychological conferences and dubious publications, through the battles to remove the definition of homosexuality as a disease from diagnostic manuals, to the heavy involvement of activists in defining the nature of HIV/AIDS and the burgeoning literature on sexual diversity - from s/m to transgender - written by practitioners and fellow travellers. Of course, there have always been popularizing writers on sexuality, and the scientific exploration of sexuality continues. Both have an important part to play in our growing understanding of the domain of sexuality. The argument I want to make is a different one. The significant shift is that those who were talked about in the pioneering works of the sexologists are now speaking openly for themselves, in a variety of voices, and are changing the nature of the debate. The history of sexuality can never be the same again.

Rethinking the history of sexuality

So far I have given little credit to the work of Michel Foucault, often seen as the source of the revolution in sexual thinking I have tried to describe. This is not because I undervalue him - on the contrary, Foucault has profoundly influenced me (see chapter 5). But chronologically and theoretically, the intellectual revolution was already well under way by the time he published his introductory essay on the history of sexuality (Foucault 1979). What his History of Sexuality did was to offer a
wider theoretical context for understanding the development of modern sexual discourses, and to relate it to broader considerations of power as a way of constituting a history of the present: a map of the sexual battle-field. Of course, in many ways Foucault fundamentally challenged the easy ideology of early sexual radicalism, and especially the assumption that sexuality in and of itself could provide a challenge to the complex configurations of power. His critique of the psychoanalytic institution - invoking a ‘confession’ in order for individuals to become free within a framework that was wholly complicit with a long, and repressive, cultural tradition - offered a vital justification for deconstructing the disparate forms of power. Similarly, it was salutary to have spelled out for us that by working within the confines of historically constituted categories of sexuality we were in danger of remaining trapped within them. Most important, however, was his injunction to see sexuality as itself an historically specific discursive formation, with effects in the real world, and therefore pointing the way for a historical project that explored the various forces that shaped and regulated sexual life.

This is what I sought to do in my book *Sex, Politics and Society* (Weeks 1981/1989), conceived before I encountered Foucault, but completed in full knowledge of Foucault’s enterprise. The essay ‘Sexuality and History Revisited’ (chapter 6) is an attempt at a critical review of a post-Foucauldian understanding of sexual history. I suggest that what the new sexual history has achieved is three things:

1. There has been a recognition that sex can no longer be seen as locked into the natural. It is a legitimate subject of historical investigation. Seeing sexuality as a ‘social construction’ or ‘historical invention’ forces us to think beyond the boundaries of existing categories and to explore their historical production.

2. Deconstruction of sexuality prepares us for reconstruction: for understanding the historical present so that we can potentially intervene in it to change it.

3. In demonstrating the moral and sexual diversity of the past we may learn to come to terms with the diversity of the present.

This last injunction is all the more important when we consider the role of the unexpected. The new sexual history has taught us to try to understand the variety of social forces which shape sexuality. The sudden emergence of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s forced all of us to re-evaluate the taken for granted: about sexual behaviour, the importance of relationships, the way we treat the vulnerable and sick, the role of expertise, the potentiality for other voices to intervene, and so on. But it also tested the validity of the theoretical protocols developed over the previous decade, and by and large did not find them wanting. In the vast increase in sex research unexpectedly occasioned by the AIDS crisis, it is striking that many of the most
controversial insights of the sexual writers of the 1970s - about the
difference between behaviour and identity, for instance, and the possibility
of collective changes of behaviour, as in the adoption of safer sex in the gay
male community - were confirmed. The new sexual history offered a guide
to further research and practice - as we had hoped when we first tried to
formulate it. In ‘AIDS and the Regulation of Sexuality’ (chapter 7), which
attempts to place our responses to HIV and AIDS in a complex history
which frames our beliefs and behaviours, I try to put this hard-earned
understanding into analytical operation.

The AIDS crisis also, however, cast a sharp new light on what I have
called the ‘Unfinished Revolution’ in sexual attitudes (chapter 8). It
revealed the difficulty our cultures have in coming to terms with sexual
diversity. We acknowledge it, but find it difficult to live with it and accept
it fully. In the 1980s, moreover, in the shadow of AIDS it was not sexual
radicalism but the moral conservatism of the New Right that appeared to
be seizing the initiative. Sexual radicalism seemed doomed to be locked
either into the ‘sex wars’, a vituperative assertion of incompatible claims
to right and justice amongst competing groups of self-declared radicals; or
overwhelmed in the culture wars; or seeking salvation in returning to the
fruitless search for origins and a natural justification of sexual difference
and diversity in the genes or the brain. I became convinced that none of
these offered viable ways forward. On the contrary, what we had to do
was to articulate more clearly our values. If we believed that homosexu-
ality offered a valid way of life, and a legitimate life choice, then why
couldn’t we just say that, instead of proving the unprovable: that gays
constituted a natural born minority? If AIDS demonstrated the perme-
ability of our identities, was it valid to stay trapped within them? If social
constructionism demonstrated the power of definition, in what ways
should we redefine the sexual? This is what I tried to address in my book
Invented Moralities (1995), and ‘An Unfinished Revolution’ offers a back-
ground to this argument.

Making history

In fact, all around us we can see the rich development of everyday sexual
values which belies the prophets of doom:

1 In the ideal of the sexual community embodied in the lesbian and gay
community, we can see the growth of social capital, which made possible
the response to the HIV/AIDS crisis (chapter 9).

2 In the community-based response to HIV/AIDS itself we can see the
significance of grass-roots knowledge and creativity in making possible a
massive response, originally in the face of indifference or deliberate neglect, and then as a model of care and innovation in the complex response to the epidemic (chapter 10).

3 In the development of non-heterosexual created families, or ‘families of choice’, we observe networks of mutual care and support where key values of mutual respect, responsibility, care and love can be worked through in genuine ‘experiments in living’ based on new forms of intimacy, equality, mutual negotiation and choice (chapter 11).

Which brings us squarely to the present, and likely futures. In the 1980s, as writers began to perceive the fin de millennium looming under the shadow of AIDS and sexual reaction, a rash of gloomy prognostications began to appear about our sexual futures. In the countdown to the millennium a rise in apocalyptic thinking may indeed be inevitable, and we have not been short of prophets of that. A sense of an ending seemed to loom over many analyses, a sense of living at the edge of the world, enticed and repelled by panic culture and the pleasures and pains of catastrophe. Yet as the millennium strikes my sense is of a new mood. Yes, the culture wars continue, sex panics still rise and fall, fundamentalism grows. There are many areas of profound cultural uncertainty, and new dilemmas emerge and confuse: genetic engineering, embryological research, virtual sex, the boundaries between children and adults, the permeability but resilience of gender and sexual categories, sex tourism and exploitation - the list is potentially endless. But many of the old issues are already fading; what seemed impossible thirty years ago - like same-sex marriages - is now on the agenda everywhere in the west, in varying degrees. Even the threat of epidemic begins to fade as new therapies lengthen lives, and make it possible to see HIV/AIDS as a chronic but manageable disease. The sexual world changes. New issues arise. But what is surely new is the sense we have today that it does not do so behind our backs. We can intervene in the world of the erotic as we can in other social phenomena. The sexual is not an all-powering force beyond human control. Made in a complex history, it can be changed in and through history. Sexual history is not made somewhere out there, in Nature. It is made by us here, in our everyday lives. We all make sexual history.

Coda

These essays were written over a period of twenty years or so. They reveal (I trust) a continuous development in my own thinking about the nature of sexuality. It would be surprising, therefore, if they did not show both overlaps and contradictions. I have not sought to eliminate these,
not least because their presence should uncover the hazards of attempting to write sexual history, and the changing circumstances in which we both write about and live sexuality. I have attempted to eliminate errors where they have stared me in the face, and have added additional observations, especially concerning subsequent interpretations, where I thought it appropriate and necessary. I have not ordered the chapters in the chronological order in which they were written, but tried to group them in what seemed to me a logical, analytical order to offer a kind of intellectual autobiography. The result, I hope, is a dialogue between my present and past selves, in a fashion which makes sense of what I have been trying to say over an extended period of work.

My own rereading of this work, however, suggests as much consistency as inconsistency in my arguments over a hectic twenty years. My interpretations of events may have subtly altered over time, but my broad preoccupations have been constant. Theoretically, I have been continuously concerned with the struggle to understand the ways in which what we call the sexual has been shaped in a complex history. I have never subscribed to the view that sexuality is simply the domain of nature, because the evidence is overwhelming that the sexual world is in constant flux. The physical acts may seem broadly the same across all cultures, all historic periods, but their meanings change all the time. A simple comparison of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveals this: my preoccupation with the history of homosexuality over the past century is more than simply a personal obsession. I believe it to be deeply revealing about the ways in which sexuality as a whole is shaped and reshaped. It is a marker for wider sexual change. Similarly, my analysis and reanalysis of the question of sexual identity which recurs throughout the essays may have roots in personal change, but it has been a focus of my writing because it is self-evident to me that identities are more than reflections of a deep natural instinct. They are the sites for the historical positioning of who and what we are, and want to become. They are made in history.

This is turn poses questions about how we conceive the relationship between past and present. I have avoided, I believe consistently, an unthinking progressivism, a sexual whiggism. I do not think the present is an automatic outcome of the past, that everything is for the best in all possible worlds. The real gains in openness about the erotic, in increasing toleration of diversity, in widening spaces for life experiments, have to be measured against the suffering that all too many people have been burdened by because of their personal struggles, the resilience of ignorance, prejudice and discrimination, the reality of epidemic, moral fundamentalism, and the timidity of politicians. The changes that have taken place have had to be fought for in ever-changing circumstances. In trying
to understand this tangled skein we cannot rely on easy distinctions between the traditional and the modern, the modern and the postmodern. These terms are themselves contested, underlining the complexity of sexual history. To take one example, the rise of sexual fundamentalisms wedded to the renewal of traditional values is itself a product of late modernity, using advanced means of information technology to promote the values of an imagined past (Bhatt 1997). One of the themes that goes through the essays in this book is precisely that of the changing meaning of modernity. Havelock Ellis saw himself as the very essence of the modern. By the early 1970s he seemed part of the problem. Today, perhaps, it is easier to see that ‘modernity’ (to say nothing of ‘postmodernity’) is an ambiguous concept whose meaning depends on your value stance.

Politically, like everyone else’s, my positions have shifted over time. I have no doubt shed some of my youthful utopianism. Time tempers euphoria. Experience hardens caution. Circumstances force new, hopefully more realistic, commitments. Yet my basic values, refined by lived experience, rendered more sophisticated, one hopes, through the intellectual trajectory, have remained steady. I believe in the necessity to question constantly the taken for granted, especially explanations which rely on unthinking genuflections to Nature, to broaden our understanding of the intricacies of the erotic, to respect diversity, and to explore the possibilities of different ways of being. The aim is not to develop a new set of truths about sexual history, but rather to challenge the assumption that there can be a final truth about sexuality.

So these essays are not definitive; they do not foreclose debate. On the contrary, I offer them here to open up debate, to continue the endless conversation about the meaning and place of sexuality in our history and culture.

References


PART I

Contested Knowledge: Writers on Sexuality