

INVENTED MORALITIES

SEXUAL VALUES IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY



JEFFREY WEEKS

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*Sexual Values in an Age of
Uncertainty*



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For Mark McNestry
with love and gratitude
and
In loving memory of Angus Suttie
(1946–1993)

Even the death of friends will inspire us as much as their lives . . . Their memories will be encrusted over with sublime and pleasing thoughts, as monuments of other men are overgrown with moss; for our friends have no place in the graveyard.

Henry David Thoreau

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Preface and Acknowledgements



When I began working on this book, far too long ago now, my friends were sceptical. The question of values, they tended to mutter, was the prerogative of the Moral Right, a code for the attempted reestablishment of what goes by the label of 'traditional' ways of life: a reaffirmation of 'family values', hostility towards the advances made by women during the past generation, fear and loathing of homosexuality, and a deep anxiety caused by the growing diversity both of public life and our private arrangements.

Today, as I at last complete the book, values have shot to the top of the political agenda on both left and right. As traditional ways of life fragment under the revolutionary changes of our times, as social identities are reshaped and remade, as well-established political alignments collapse and new alliances are painfully constructed, as the public sphere is redefined, and the boundaries between public and private shift, as epidemic disease returns to haunt the imagination of the postmodern world, and as the flame of love flickers in the cold draught of various forms of hate, debates over values encapsulate our uncertainties about how we should live.

My concern in this book is with value debates as they inform

the debates about sexuality, and with debates about sexuality as they help us to understand the significance of questions of value. For sexuality is at the heart of contemporary anguish about values: to that extent my sceptical friends were right. Where they were wrong was in thinking that the value-laden discourse of the morally conservative did not deserve a considered response from liberals and radicals, because such ideas were self-evidently ill-intentioned. I believe, on the contrary, that the failure of progressive thought to counter effectively the values of the right has left a vacuum which stymies effective defence of what I believe in, the values of sexual diversity and freedom of choice.

As this suggests, I do not attempt in this book an 'objective' exploration of either the question of value in general, or of sexual values in particular. Value debates are about taking sides, about placing yourself in a tradition or traditions of arguments extending through time which necessarily conflict at many points with other traditions, other values. We can rightly require that the debates are conducted dialogically and democratically – that seems to me an absolute prerequisite of argument in a pluralist world. But I do not expect, or even hope, that the positions I have adopted will evoke universal agreement.

On the contrary, I hope my arguments will arouse debate and controversy, even among my friends, for that is the only way we can advance towards the radical humanism that this book attempts to advocate, a humanism which values individual freedom and celebrates the rich diversity of human goals, and therefore must expect disagreement as the price we pay for autonomy and choice.

How to live with diversity is the main theme of the book. The reader will not, therefore, find prescriptions here about how to live; it is precisely that form of the value debate which I am hoping to combat. I do attempt, however, to offer a framework for thinking about the issues that need to be confronted in asking that question, how shall I live? My argument, in brief, is that many forms of life can be 'moral' or ethically valid, especially with regard to the erotic. It is not so much what you do, but how you do it that should matter: less a morality of acts, more an ethics of relationships. Concepts such as care, responsibility, respect and

love have become the currency of recent debates around personal behaviour. I argue that these are important virtues, but they cannot, and should not, be identified with any particular form of domestic arrangement or sexual activity. They embody values that inform a variety of lifestyles and 'experiments in living'. Their meaning needs to be struggled for, not assumed.

For whatever the fantasies of particular traditions, the legitimacy of any set of values cannot in the end depend on the claim that Truth, Revelation, Science or History are on their side. Values are human inventions, products of complex histories and the intermingling of many individual and collective aspirations and anxieties. Values depend on us, what we want or desire. At the moment there appears to be a high degree of uncertainty about values, leading among many to a search for new absolutes. I, however, see uncertainty as a challenge: to find ways of living, and loving, together, in a world without intrinsic meaning or foundational givens, which are securely rooted in our common humanity and our care and responsibility for others. This book is a contribution to that aim.

The book has taken considerably longer to complete than I originally intended, and in that time I have incurred many material, intellectual and emotional debts. I have to thank the University of Manchester for electing me to a Simon Senior Fellowship during 1989–90, which gave me the space to begin work on the book. I am grateful to the University of Michigan where I was welcomed as a visiting fellow at its Institute for the Humanities in 1991, a visit that provided a stimulus for writing first drafts of some of these chapters. The Humanities Research Group at the University of Windsor, Ontario, similarly provided intellectual encouragement and the spur to writing during my visit in early 1993.

During most of the time I worked on the book I was gainfully employed in the Faculty of Economics and Social Science at the University of the West of England, Bristol. I am very grateful to the Dean, Peter Glasner, for his constant support, and to his colleagues for their stimulating company, and occasional distraction. I must particularly thank Jem Thomas, Simon Thompson and Ian Welsh for their comments and intellectual encourage-

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This book is partly about friendship, and my friends have been all I could have asked for. I want particularly to thank Lisa Adkins, Bob Cant, Emmanuel Cooper, Barry Davis, Liz Fidlon, Sue Golding, Jill Grinstead, Janet Holland, Ken Plummer, Kevin Porter, Alex Potts, Martha Vicinus and Simon Watney for their sustenance, material and intellectual, at various times. David Clark and Chetan Bhatt read parts or all of the book in draft, and I am grateful for their illuminating comments and support. I am also grateful to Chetan Bhatt for the many conversations I have had with him over the years which have never failed to stimulate me, and which have informed some of the arguments here (though he is not to blame for any recalcitrant conclusions I may have reached!).

Some of the arguments set out in the book have been rehearsed in my classes, in numerous seminar and conference papers, and in several articles, though in substantially different, earlier forms: *The Sphere of the Intimate*, Manchester Sociology Occasional Papers 29, University of Manchester 1991; 'Invented Moralities', *History Workshop Journal* 32, Autumn 1991; 'Values in an Age of Uncertainty', in Stanton 1992; 'Living with Uncertainty' and 'Necessary Fictions' in Jacqueline Murray (ed.) *Constructing Sexualities*, Windsor, Humanities Research Group, University of Windsor, Ontario; and 'Rethinking Private Life' in Clark 1994. I am grateful to all who invited me to give papers, to students and seminar and conference participants who engaged with my views, and to the various editors concerned for their comments and support at the time. I have seized the licence of the author to modify or revise my earlier views where appropriate.

For permission to publish from copyright material, I am grateful to the following: to Bloodaxe Books for the quotation from Jackie Kay's poem 'Close Shave', in *The Adoption Papers*, Bloodaxe Books 1991; to Faber and Faber Ltd, and Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc. for the quotation from Thom Gunn's poem 'In Time of Plague', in *The Man with Night Sweats*.

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I met my partner Mark McNestry as I began work on this book. He has lived with its various vicissitudes, been patient with my anxieties, sustained me through doubt, and given me all the love and support I could have wished for. The dedication is a small token of my deepest thanks.

My friend Angus Suttie died before I could complete the book. His bravery in the face of mortal illness, and the courage with which he faced his premature death, gave me unforgettable insights into the importance of living life well. Those final months with Angus also taught me something new about friendship, love and intimacy, and the value of the human bond. I have tried to convey some of what I learnt through this book.

INTRODUCTION

Values, whose Values?



... a tour of perplexities, not a guide for the perplexed.

Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*

All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this sense of pathos and change, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities.

M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*

A CHANGING SEXUAL LANDSCAPE

There's an oil painting in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, by the Chilean-born artist, Matta (Sebastian Antonio Matta Echaurren). As you first look at it, the overwhelming impression is of darkness and formlessness, a dark night of the soul. Gradually you notice that the black wash is less uniform than it first appears. It has been partially rubbed away to reveal gradations in the blackness, and this in turn highlights the apparently randomly distributed, indefinable and mysterious shapes which seem to float or explode in the shade, entwined in spirals and webs of white lines.

Matta's painting is entitled *The Vertigo of Eros*, and the canvas is ineffably but unmistakably sexual. As you continue to stare at it, what you see is less the initial cosmic darkness and more the imagery of fire, roots and sexual organs floating dreamlike and

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evocatively in the void, until the imagery becomes the totality of what you see: an almost mystical world of sexual flux. Matta is quoted as saying that the title of his work derived from a reading of Freud: the life force, Eros, is constantly challenged by the death drive, Thanatos, which produces in most people a state of vertigo that must be constantly combated in order to achieve a sense of equilibrium and stability (Franc 1992, p. 128). Sexuality, it seems, is a field of infinite possibilities, shadowed by dissolution and death.

We can read too much into a single painting, or the life of a single artist, but there is something emblematic about Matta's painting, and career, which speaks to my concerns, and to the purposes of this book. Matta originally studied architecture in the Paris office of the arch-priest of modernism, Le Corbusier, famous, even infamous today, as the progenitor of machines for living stretching heavenwards into the pure air. The artist later, however, gravitated towards the Surrealists, whose group he joined finally in 1937. *The Vertigo of Eros* was painted after his absorption of surrealism, in 1944. A journey beginning in the idealistic yet disciplinary purity of modernist hubris, gave rise to a striking and disturbing but also highly charged landscape of chaos and disorder, and sexual excitement. Order and entropy, threat and opportunity, fear and attraction: these seem to me to sum up the confused trajectory of sexuality amidst what Nietzsche called the 'tropical tempo' of modernity.

The idea of 'sexual flux' is a characteristically postmodern trope, but it is integral to the whole modern discourse of sexuality, what I have called elsewhere the 'sexual tradition' (Weeks 1985). We can see this if we cast our minds towards the major codifications of sexuality during the twentieth century, the sexological texts which have helped shape the ways in which we think the erotic (see Bullough 1994). The rise of a science of desire, from the late nineteenth century, was in large part a response to a perception of the duality of the sexual: simultaneously, but contradictorily, a boundless sea of highly differentiated and excessive desires, and a massive continent of sexual and gender patterning and symmetry. Sexologists attempted to recognize the first by cataloguing and categorizing the varieties of sexual experi-

ence, while at the same time affirming the second, the majestic norms of heterosexual life which marginalized, devalued and often execrated the deviant, the perverse. Part of the enduring, if ambivalent, attraction of the greatest of these pioneers, Freud, is that he both recognized the contingency and flux of sexuality ('polymorphous perversity'), and of gender and object choice ('bisexuality'), and immediately sought to harness them to the complex cultural necessities of 'normality' (Coward 1983). But in this he was only a more subtle and profound representative of a major intellectual endeavour, which in turn responded to, and shaped, an opening up of sexual possibilities and a crisis of sexual certainty which continues to this day.

The impact of sexology is not my concern here (see Bullough 1994); rather I want to underline what the codifications embodied in sexology tell us about sexual change, or rather the way sexual change is perceived. In retrospect, the sexual tradition, as a set of concepts and intellectual interventions, laws and social practices, marital and family organization, and diverse patterns of life, can be seen as a sustained effort to channel and discipline the imagined powers of sexuality. Great efforts have been made by the architects and mechanics of the sexual tradition to order and regulate the swampy sexual landscape. It has been well tilled and carefully cultivated by expert hands. Barriers have been put up against the chaos, disorder and disease of the city. Brave and well-intentioned settlements have been constructed to embody a new pattern of sexual and family life. Dams have been built here, rivers canalized there, to reshape 'the forces of nature'. But in vain. What we call 'nature' cannot be so easily appeased. Now the dams are full to overflowing; the rivers are bursting their banks (I make no apology for the male sexual imagery, which seems to me to be central to the sexual imaginary I am describing). Parts of the flood plain have already been overwhelmed. The landscape is being transformed, as familiar buildings go under, or the waters lap their historic foundations. New features appear: an island where once there was a crossroads, a shelter near where children once played. A flood threatens all we can see. There is a certain mood of tired fractiousness in the air, even a hint of civil war, in some areas. An anxiety about

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contagion is abroad. Where once there seemed order, there is now a pervasive fear, not so much of disorder as of formlessness: an amorphous vista of murky and uncertain waters and a re-shaped landscape which we must learn to navigate without reliable maps. This is the metaphorical landscape on which the struggle over values is being fought.

We live in a world of uncertainty, where good guides and firm guarantees that we can reach any particular destination are in short supply, and where the goals themselves are cloudy and indeterminate. Nowhere is this uncertainty more acute than in the domain of sexuality, which has been the subject in the recent past of apparently endless panics, controversies, anguished moralizings, and the rebirth of the value issue. It seems a long time since a British Prime Minister (Harold Macmillan, in the early 1960s) could say with insouciance that morals and values were best left to the bishops. Today, the question of values has reached the centre of the political and cultural agenda, with sexuality as the magnetic core. Illegitimacy and the future of the family; surrogate parenthood and embryological research; teenage pregnancy and the 'age of consent'; divorce and the fate of marriage; violence and explicit sexual imagery; sex education and child sex abuse; sexual diversity and sexual identity; the changing claims of women and the 'crisis of masculinity'; the balance between individual freedom and collective obligations; disease and sexual health; these and other topics have become the focus of public agonizing and personal anguish, the major theme of social policy debates, and the lodestars of drifting politicians in search of a coherent but eternally elusive 'big idea'.

It is not that sexuality has ever been absent from social, cultural and political debate. On the contrary, it is perfectly accurate to say that anxiety about the sexual has, like mysterious creatures scuttling under the floorboards, implicitly shaped many of our public debates for a long time, from the fear of national or imperial decline at the end of the nineteenth century to the structuring of welfare provision from the 1940s to the present (see Mort 1987; Weeks 1981/1989). What is new, however, is the way in which worries about changing sexual behaviour and gender and sexual identities have become the explicit focus for

debates about the current shape and desirable future of society. And if, as I believe, we can no longer rely on pre-existing narratives to shape our hopes for the future, if above or beneath the social and the historical there is nothing, then what we believe to be desirable counts. 'An existence without a script written in advance', suggests Zygmunt Bauman (1992b, p. 94), 'is a *contingent* existence'. The debate around sexual values is a response to a growing sense of our contingency, where nothing but uncertainty and death is certain.

THINKING THE EROTIC

If sexuality is, as I believe, about choice rather than destiny, then the issue of what we choose and how and why we do so becomes central to the debate. In the current ethical fog, choice has become a lodestar, but there are as many choices as there are human subjects. My own choices demand a few comments before I launch into the argument proper. So a touch of intellectual autobiography might be useful here, to outline why I have become centrally concerned with questions of values.

My own research and writing about sexuality have been shaped by a rejection of what have come to be known as essentialist arguments, and an attempt to elaborate what has generally, though inadequately, been called 'social constructionism', and which I prefer to call a historical approach to the erotic (see Weeks 1991). The basic assumption has been that it is deeply problematic to think of sexuality as a purely natural phenomenon, outside the boundaries of society and culture. We have all too readily believed that sexuality is the most natural thing about us, that our drives are fixed and inherent, that our identities are dictated by that nature and those drives, and that a history of sexuality must therefore be no more than an account of reactions to those basic biological givens.

Over the past twenty years most of the assumptions behind those positions have been profoundly challenged, building on a century of challenges to essentialist modes of thought (Weeks 1985). Through anthropology and social analysis we have

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strengthened our awareness of the relativity of sexual norms. From Freud we can derive (though sadly most interpreters have not) insights into the tentative and always provisional nature of gender and sexual identities. From the new social history we have become aware of the multiple narratives of sexual life. After feminism, lesbian and gay politics and the theoretical challenges of Michel Foucault (1979) we are increasingly sensitive to the subtle forms of power that invest the body, and make us simultaneously subjected to and subjects of sex. All these influences in turn feed into the deconstructionist project and the postmodernist critiques which question the fixities and certainties of post-Enlightenment humanism, rationalism and progressivism (Lyotard 1984). With the philosophers of deconstruction we have become alive to the contingency of human arrangements, the finity and delicacy of our placing in a world without intrinsic meaning but clamorous with multiple and conflicting meanings (Rorty 1989). With the theorists of postmodernity we have become more aware of the pain and challenge of moral choice (Squires 1993; Bauman 1993).

As a result we increasingly recognize that sexuality can be understood only in its specific historical and cultural context. There cannot be an all-embracing history of sexuality. There can only be local histories, contextual meanings, specific analyses. Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick has usefully suggested that rather than speak any longer about essentialism versus constructionism, which has led to a tired and repetitive (and perhaps incomprehensible) internal debate among students of sexuality, we should think in terms of universalistic and particularist positions (Sedgwick 1990). Universalistic arguments assume a common experience throughout time and history. Particularist arguments on the contrary want to understand the specifics of any sexual phenomenon: the histories and narratives which organize it, the power structures which shape it, the struggles which attempt to define it (see Plummer 1995). That is fundamentally my position.

Much recent writing on sexuality has been concerned with three interlocked issues. First, there has been a new sensitivity to the sexual identities that we take for granted as given and fixed,

but which any careful historical reading show to be culturally specific. Lesbian and gay identities are the classic examples of this: these are widely seen now as products of a specific, if complex history (see Stein 1990; Vance 1989). This in turn has produced a sharper, though still grossly inadequate, interest in the historical evolution of the dominant form of sexual organization, heterosexuality (Sedgwick 1990; Katz 1995). Second, there has been a concern to examine the social regulation of sexuality: the forms of control, the patterns of domination, subordination and resistance which shape the sexual (Foucault 1979). Finally, scholars have explored the sexual discourses which organize meanings, and especially the discourse of sexology which has been crucial, if not alone, in proclaiming the 'truth' of sex (see Weeks 1985).

The core of the historical argument has been that we can understand sexuality only through understanding the cultural meanings and the power relations which construct it (see Foucault 1979 as the *locus classicus*). This does not mean that biology is irrelevant, nor that the body has no role (Giddens 1992). Nor does it mean that individuals are blank pieces of paper on which society writes its preferred meanings. Take, for example, homosexuality, the subject of many of my previous writings. To say that lesbian and gay identities have a history, have not always existed and may not always exist, does not mean that they are not important. Nor should it necessarily be taken to imply that homosexual proclivities are not deeply rooted. That question is in any case irrelevant to the argument. The real problem does not lie in whether homosexuality is inborn or learnt. It lies instead in the question: what are the meanings that this particular culture gives to homosexual behaviour, however it may be caused, and what are the effects of those meanings on the ways in which individuals organize their sexual lives. That is a historical question. It is also a question which is highly political: it forces us to analyse the power relations which determine why this set of meanings, rather than that, are hegemonic; and poses the further question of how those meanings can be changed.

Many contemporary writers on sexuality have been concerned, therefore, with tracing the genealogy of our present sexual arrangements and identities, seeking the elements of confusion