JEFFREY WEEKS

What is Sexual History?
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What is Sexual History?

Jeffrey Weeks

polity
In loving memory of my parents

Raymond Hugh Weeks (1924–1976)

and

Eiddwen Weeks (1921–2014)
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My interest in the history of sexuality began as I was researching the history of political and social ideas in late nineteenth-century Britain. It was difficult to avoid the realization (though generations of historians had managed to do so) that the radical and socialist writers of the period I was reading about had also been intensely interested in sexuality, and were heavily influenced by the feminist ideas of the period, by the first stirrings of a new homosexual consciousness, and by the early days of sexology, the new science of desire. It’s not surprising, then, that throughout my writing career I have been intensely interested in how ideas of sexuality, and the very idea of sexuality itself, emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and began to shape social and political thinking.

This book in a sense continues that interest. It is in part about the idea of a sexual history, how it emerged, a little shyly, perhaps, in the nineteenth century, had a quiet, even covert existence for the first half of the twentieth century, and only began to stretch its limbs and transform itself from the 1960s and 1970s, in the wake of the cultural and social upheavals of the period. But sexual history is not just about ideas. It is a highly practical enterprise, involving a range of skills and practices, from archive searching to building new archives, from interpreting obscure texts to creating new
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knowledge, from trying to uncover traces of the past to writing histories of the present, from producing distinguished tomes to building a website and making documentary films. Sexual history today embraces both high theory and community histories, ivory-tower specialisms and democratic practices. It has become a major presence in the wider practice of history, and a historical presence in the practice of sexual politics.

Which means it is impossible to be fully comprehensive in a brief overview of sexual history in a short book. I have therefore focused on several key themes: the ‘invention’ of the subject and the development of a critical sexual history; the historicizing of homosexuality and sexual and gender dissidence; the relationship between gender and power, and their intersection with various dimensions of oppression and resistance; the mainstreaming of sexual history, and the emergence of ‘modern sexuality’; the globalization of sexual history; and the significance of community history. I hope that in exploring these themes the reader will gain insight into the wider adventures of doing sexual history.

Writing is by its nature a lonely business, but doing history is necessarily a collaborative one, because we build on the work of many others. I have expressed my debt to friends, colleagues and collaborators in my previous books and I won’t repeat all their names here. I will, though, repeat my warmest thanks to them for all they have contributed in different ways over many years. Some individuals, however, have given particular support in writing this book, through ideas, references, intellectual stimulation, invitations to give papers or write articles, critical appraisal, administrative support and emotional sustenance. It’s a pleasure to thank Peter Aggleton, Dennis Altman, Sue Bruley, Mariela Castro Espin, Matt Cook, Daniel Defert, Mary Evans, Robert French, Brian Heaphy, Clare Hemmings, Janet Holland, Jonathan Ned Katz, Brian Lewis, Karin Lutzen, Daniel Marshall, Rommel Mendes-Leite, Henrietta Moore, Ken Plummer, Paula Sequiera, Frederic Simon, Carol Smart, Marc Stein and Graham Willett. I must also thank the anonymous readers of the book for their positive and constructive comments. I have tried to accommodate their suggestions, but I alone, of course, remain responsible for the final product.
My partner, Mark McNestry, has as always given indispensable support. Without him, there would be no book.

My mother died when I was writing this book, thirty-eight years after my father. I miss them both, respect them deeply, and thank them for making everything possible. I dedicate this book to their memory with love.
An Introduction

What is a History of Sexuality a History of?

When I began writing about the history of sexuality in the 1970s it was like venturing into an unexplored territory. It was sparsely populated. There were few prominent features, and no reliable maps. Hardly anyone visited. Today sexual history is flourishing: the territory is well cultivated, the population is highly vocal, and there are plentiful guides, with highly developed global links. It has made great strides from the margins to the mainstream. In this book I hope to show how this happened, and what its implications are for thinking about, and living, that complex historical phenomenon we know as sexuality.

For most of the twentieth century histories of sexuality were relatively rare, and were overwhelmingly shaped by the self-declared ‘scientific’ paradigms established at the end of the nineteenth century following the emergence of sexology as the ‘science of sex’. Pioneering sexologists were conscious of the historical significance of what they were setting out to do – nothing less than to put the study of sexuality on a scientific basis by understanding the laws of sexuality and their impact on individual and social life (see chapter 2). The aim was to contribute to the achievement of sexual justice through the application of reason and scientific knowledge – ‘Through Science to Justice’, as Magnus Hirschfeld, the
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German pioneer of sexology, sexual reform and homosexual rights, proclaimed as his watchword. In this task pioneering sexologists advocated an increasing historical understanding of sexuality, and especially of the truth of the sexual categorizations and sexual and gender types their writings and clinical practice had ‘discovered’. In turn, their sexual science became the taken-for-granted framework for would-be historians in succeeding generations, until at least the 1970s.

Despite these ambitions, early sexual historians remained marginal to the practice of history as a profession, rarely touching the mainstream let alone trespassing long in the wary groves of academe. When a new generation in the 1970s began challenging both the hegemony of sexology and the practice of history, in the name of alternative theories and knowledge, under the influence of new social movements and identities, they too at first experienced an academic coolness, especially in history departments. It is noticeable how many of the early writers on sexual history in the 1970s and 1980s were research students, junior faculty, independent scholars and activists in the women’s or gay movements, far from the ivory towers of academic prestige.

Much has changed. Many of the pioneers have become senior professors. The subject is taught at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in most universities in the global North and increasing numbers in the global South. Publishers’ lists groan with books on sexuality in general and histories of sexuality in particular. Mainstream and specialist journals pour out articles, in a scholarly production line. There are countless archives, physical and virtual; and websites, blogs, vlogs, listservs, online discussion groups and social network pages devoted to sexual history. There are national and international conferences, seminars, workshops and (often jet-setting) transnational communities of scholars. There is a creative grassroots history embodying the promise of pioneers in the 1970s to develop a new democratic history. Every year thousands of people in North America, Britain and Australasia attend events to celebrate LGBT History Month or equivalents. And there is a growing recognition of the global resonance of sexual history, with a new concern with transnational history and the construction of local, regional and national sexual histories in the global South (see chapter
Writing about sexuality has become a vital part of the historical endeavour, whilst also feeding into and being fertilized by a range of other disciplines, from sociology, social anthropology, literature, philosophy, politics, legal studies and cultural geography, to more recent hybrids such as cultural, postcolonial, gender, race/ethnic, LGBT and queer studies.

But in all this effort, amongst all the sound and fury, there is a nagging question: what is a history of sexuality actually a history of? Sexual history sometimes feels like a feverish activity without a clear or fixed referent. Sexual historians have been preoccupied with identities, and with non-identities, with homosexuality, queerness, paraphilias, perversion, transgression, subversion and resistance, as much as, sometimes more than, heterosexuality, respectability, the normative, the average, the ordinary. They engage with fertility, reproduction, birth control, abortion, but also with celibacy, masturbation, fantasy, erotica, pornography and purity. They cover transactional sex work as well as marriage (same-sex and other-sex), singleness as well as partnerships (couple and polyamorous), cohabitation and living apart, casual sex, abstinence and asexuality. Historians of sexuality explore the organization and cultures of families, traditional, extended, nuclear or chosen, as well as networks, friendships and subcultures, on the ground, in the mind or in cyberspace. They are concerned with the porous and ever-shifting boundaries of private and public life, secrets and lies and the closet, as well as public declarations and displays, and coming out. And they are concerned with sexual health and sexual ill-health: sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, ‘sexual addiction’ and the historic use of contraceptives or potency drugs.

The history of sexuality is inextricably intertwined with structures of power. You cannot really think sexuality without gender: masculinity, femininity, cisgender, transgender, intersex, hermaphrodite, bi-gender, all configuring sexual possibilities and meanings. Sexualities, and their histories, intersect with histories of race, class, age, religion, and with geographies, urban and rural spaces, and increasingly cyberspace.

The history of the sexual needs a grasp of the languages that give sense to, order and discipline inchoate passions, but also
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has to deal with the emotions and affect that people are particularly sensitive and prone to: love and desire, hope and pride, pain and terror, shame and insult, triumph and humiliation, trauma, panic, sexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, racial fear and horror of the Other, nationalism and fundamentalism. Emotions get locked into structures or assemblages which have their own histories, as fear of homosexuality is locked into heteronormative structures, or misogyny locked into gendered oppression. Historical sexualities are local, national, transnational, cosmopolitan, global. There are sexual cultures which have complex histories, histories of bodies and bodily reconstructions. There are histories of movements, campaigns – for and against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights, for and against reproductive rights, against sexual violence, the sex trade, to protect children, religious, socially conservative and fundamentalist groupings – and histories of NGOs, and governmental, cross-national and international organizations, all of which have their own trajectories, intricately intertwined with other sexual histories. There are patterns of domination, hierarchy, regulation, and multiple subjectivities and forms of agency – individual and collective. Which is why sexuality, and its history, are always necessarily political, even if the politics are often nicely obscured in the name of scholarly objectivity.

And a key to the new history from the 1970s: there are histories of ‘sexuality’ itself, not as the sum total of all of the above, but as a concept, a set of discourses, an embodiment of truths.

No single history, let alone one short book, can cover this vast and ever-growing continent of knowledge. I focus instead on the ways in which an emerging and developing sexual history has created the possibility of thinking of the erotic in new ways, putting sexual concepts, beliefs and practices into more carefully delineated historical contexts. My purpose is to demonstrate the significance of a critical sexual history which avoids the naturalism/essentialism/biological determinism which has bedevilled efforts to understand the sexual past and present, and opens the ways to an understanding of the history of sexuality as fundamentally social and human, that is fully historical. Through this we can, I suggest,
encourage a creative and meaningful dialogue between past and present.

Narratives

Analysis of the past is mediated through our current preconceptions and perceptions, but the past also continues to live in the present. The present in all its complexity and confusions is deeply historical. We live and breathe a living history in our everyday lives, shadowed and shaded by meanings, categories, laws, structures, institutions, beliefs, prejudices, discriminations, phobias, oppressions, struggles, embodiments and memories that are part of the deep consciousness and unconscious of our cultures. We may accept these historic burdens, resist them, reject them, ignore them or try to transform them, but it is difficult to forget them entirely. We make our own histories, but rarely in circumstances of our own choosing. People may have freedom of will, but they are never entirely free agents.

Sexuality is particularly freighted by a living past because it is so intimately connected with our sense of who we are, where we came from and where we are positioned, by identities, gender and social recognition, as well as our deepest feelings and current ways of being in the world. It is also profoundly contested. Sexuality and intimacy are the focus for critical value debates: about conflicts between the traditional and the new, faith and the secular, the majority and minorities; about relations between men and women, men and men, women and women, the family and personal desires, adults and children, the old, the able and less or differently abled; on the meanings and implications of sexual, gender and ethnic/racial diversity; around reproductive rights and new reproductive technologies, representation and new digital forms of communication and connectivity, and so on. These value debates translate into political conflict, and to an unprecedented degree sexual issues have moved to the centre of the political stage in an increasingly globalized and networked world. So those who are engaged in attempting to understand change in historical and intimate life as people live it today are inevitably doing more than simply record the
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truth of the past. By their interventions they are inevitably asserting a particular set of value-laden narratives about the present too.

Narratives provide examples of the ways in which ‘reality’ is constituted and structured through sets of beliefs, assumptions and the appropriate selection of evidence. They are powerful because they carry the unconscious assumption that what is being elaborated for the reader is a ‘true history’. But the very act of selection can obscure a complex and more contested history. Strong narratives of sexual change have been particularly powerful in shaping recent scholarship, and understanding their often hidden assumptions can help us see what is missing.²

The progressive story is rooted in the optimism of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century pioneering sexologists and sex reformers, that sexual change would come as a result of good will and rational thought. A more muted and cautious story of sexual modernization arose in the 1950s and 1960s, which strongly influenced the liberalizing currents that battled for sexual reform in many parts of the West. By the late 1960s a stronger liberationist story emerged, which directly linked sexual freedom with social revolution. The spirit of this liberationist politics was quite different from the cautious liberalism that proclaimed sexual modernity, but there were important links. They both shared a theoretical assumption that sexuality was a powerful force for good that the social repressed. The major problem with the narrative is the assumption of inevitability and determination that lies behind it. There is, of course, a lot to be said for a story of progressive advance, at least if you live in large parts of the prosperous West, for there has been dramatic and on the whole beneficial change in everyday life for millions of people. But to say that does not mean that change is either automatic or inevitable, or that it is neutral, It can lead to intensified regulation as well as greater freedoms. And in many parts of the world radical changes in intimate life have barely begun, or have been subjected to severe repression.

The mirror image of the progressive narrative is the declinist story. Its characteristic note is a lament for the awful state of the present – the broken families, the high rate of divorce, the sexualization of young people, the incidence of mindless
sexual promiscuity, the commercialization of love, the pornography of society, the over-visibility of homosexuality, the explicitness of sex education and the media, the weakening of values, the collapse of social capital, the rise of sexual diseases, dramatized by the AIDS epidemic – and a comparison of that with some golden age of faith, stability and family values. If the progressive mind-set assumes that the erotic in itself is a positive force for good, if only liberated from ignorance, prejudice or capitalist exploitation, the declinist or socially conservative view (a social conservatism that goes far beyond and transcends traditional party-political commitments) assumes that it is not so much bad as potentially dangerous, unless framed in traditional frameworks of family and (heterosexual) marriage.

A third great narrative tends to present a history where, despite deceptive shifts, nothing has really fundamentally changed at all. This is a story of continuity in terms of the underlying structures of power, despite apparently striking epiphenomenal changes. There is a powerful account which uses the work of Michel Foucault to suggest the all-embracing nature of power in modern societies, and has invested in concepts of governmentality to theorize the resilience of contemporary societies against meaningful change. Similarly, theorists of formalization and informalization have emphasized the ‘controlled decontrolling’ of emotions that has become dominant in Western societies since the 1950s.

There is a radical feminist version of this continuist story, which acknowledges some changes, but stresses the continuities, especially in terms of the relations of power between men and women. We will see its impact in the development of feminist sexual history (chapter 4). A ‘queer’ subset of the story does recognize that there have been great changes in attitudes towards homosexuality and sexual diversity, but wonders how much has fundamentally changed in a heteronormative culture. Isn’t a gay identity little more than a pseudo-ethnic identity that is easily accommodated by late capitalist societies? Isn’t same-sex marriage simply an assimilation into heterosexual values (see chapter 3)?

The queer critique of the present often overlaps with a neo-Marxist, anti-capitalist, anti-globalization subset of this story, which focuses on the impact of neoliberal restructuring