

**Sex, Politics and Society. The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800** Jeffrey Weeks: Longmans 1982 306pp ISBN pb 0-582-48334-4 £5.95

Since the publication of Michel Foucault's *La Volonté de savoir* in 1976, his revision of the idea of Victorian sexual repressiveness has gained enough ground to be seen as a new orthodoxy in the study of sex and morals. This isn't just due to the persuasiveness of Foucault as an author: he could hardly be called a populariser in the usual sense, though I suppose that there is a certain approachability in his capacity to render history in broad sweeps. More important, though, is the fact that a political and intellectual context for the reception and dissemination of his ideas has been established in the feminist and gay movements. Of course, Foucault's work is itself partly the product of this new sexual politics, but nevertheless he is still a benchmark in it, a fixed point about which the waters of debate swirl. This relationship is expressed in Jeffrey Weeks' new book, which is a history of sexual regulation in Britain since about 1800: he writes, as he has before, from a place within the sexual politics movement, and his perspective is certainly Foucault-derived, i.e. non-functional, anti-essentialist, and concerned with a plurality of regulatory practices. As Weeks puts it, 'The directing principle of this work is that over the past few centuries sexuality has assumed major symbolic importance as a target of social intervention and organisation, to a degree that differentiates this period from those preceding it' (p.11). Or, as Foucault says, 'Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered' (Foucault ((1979)), p.24) – and, in administering it, one also had to name it and talk about it. Hence Foucault's revisionist description of the Victorian era as witnessing not a simple repression of sex, but an 'explosion of discourse' about this shameful secret.

This explosion of discourse was accompanied, as the subject of sexual behaviour was researched, by a proliferation of medicalized sexual categories, exemplified in the fervid and abundant taxonomies of sexual aberration invented by the pathologist Krafft-Ebing. That almost literally physical dissection of the ostensible biological unity of 'sex' has since been paralleled in the new sociology and history of sexuality by a dispersal of the fields of its investigation. The convenient unity of the individual body seems no longer convincing as a site for the questions and the scalpels. Instead, we are asked to examine and interpret every possible space in which the body and its sexual meanings might be deployed. For, once you accept the idea that 'Social roles are not vehicles for the expression of sexual impulse', then 'sexuality becomes a vehicle for expressing the needs of social roles' (Gagnon and Simon, 1973:45), quoted in Weeks, p.38). This reversal of a commonsensical relationship (the body and its activity as prior to the mental and social world it inhabits) is the new serpent: enticing, a necessary provocation to knowledge, but also very troublesome to handle.

Exiled among the rest of us in this new continent of knowledge, Jeffrey Weeks does an excellent job of educating our ruffled ignorance. He starts with a brief review of the principal existing approaches to the history of sex, distinguishing between 'naturalistic' and 'meta-theoretical' views, and then subdividing the latter into essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches. Actually, naturalism and essentialism are not dissimilar, since they both rely on seeing sexual behaviour as a thing-to-be-described in its various manifestations and variations. The key concept is, as Weeks describes it, that sex is seen primarily 'as a driving, instinctual force, whose characteristics are built into the biology of the human animal, which shapes human institutions and whose will must force its way out, either in the form of direct sexual expression or, if blocked, in the form of perversion or neuroses' (p.2). Against this, Weeks presents a review of the challenges to essentialism, mainly from the work of

Gagnon and Simon, Plummer, Lacan and Foucault. He singles out especially their rejection of the idea of sex 'as an autonomous realm', their 'recognition of the social and historical sources of sexual definitions', and their rejection of the idea that the history of sexuality is a history of repression and, sometimes, liberation (pp.3-5). But where these critiques of essentialism leave us is very unclear. The nearest we get to a working definition, or to an explanation of why sexuality has 'a major *symbolic* importance' (symbolic of what?), is in some remarks about Foucault:

For sex, argues Foucault, is the pivot of two axes along which the whole technology of life developed: it was the point of entry to the body, to the harnessing, identification and distribution of forces over the body; and it was the entry to control and regulation of population. 'Sex was a means of access to both the life of the body and the life of the species.' As a result, sex became a crucial target of power organised around the management of life rather than the sovereign threat of death. (p.8)

In fact I think this is an adequate account for Weeks's own purposes in his book, and it would have helped if he had accorded it – or some alternative or elaboration – more prominence. For otherwise, the processes of regulation, which (in Foucault's concept of power at any rate) sometimes seem to escape authorship, also threaten to be targeted at a vanishing subject. I want to come back to this after I've given some account of what the historical chapters of the book cover.

A merit of the book is that it's very well organized. Chapter titles and sub-headings are clearly chosen and set out, organizing very diverse material without over-compartmentalizing it. The range of the discussion can be gauged from Weeks's list of the forces or factors at play in the shaping of sexuality historically, socially and relationally. These are: kinship and family systems; economic and social changes; changing forms of social regulation; the 'political moment'; and cultures of resistance. The first three are self-explanatory; the 'political moment' designates any period 'when moral attitudes are transformed into formal political action', while cultures of resistance are the various formal and informal modes of 'avoidance of, or resistance to, the moral code' (p.15). The book surveys these fields in their relation to the deployment and meaning of sexuality, not the other way round. It is this change of perspective which distinguishes this account from the essentialist studies criticized by Weeks. The most notable consequence of his approach is that the book does not present a unilinear narrative, in which the law constrains or renders freedom, social morality journeys towards tolerance, and medical science delivers ever more perfect truths. Instead, the identification and regulation of the sexual, and the generation of counter-movements, is depicted as a process which is not uniform, has no pre-given goal, and does not travel in one progressive direction only. The five contexts or factors mentioned above circulate in a complex process of independent change and mutable interactions, providing new and sometimes unpredictable combinations which cannot be subsumed into a progressivist framework.

The most prominent and persistent themes of discussion are family relations (internally, and in interaction with the state), population questions and eugenics, the theorization and investigation of sexual behaviours, and moralities and their modes of enforcement. Some of the best chapters are about the moments of apparent convergence between these aspects: Victorian moral regulation in the context of growing uncertainties about the relation of public and private (chapter 5), population debates of liberal reformism and the 'permissive moment' in the 1960s (chapter 13). Much of the historical material is available in other books and essays (clearly signposted in the footnotes), but I can think of no other work which combines this sweep of information with such a sustained demonstration of the 'anti-essentialist'

case. As a whole the book makes a successful exposition of that case, literally making sense of the variegated material it presents. And it's also historically comprehensive, even if (in common with much writing about the 'modern' world) it consigns the pre-1800 world to a nebulous Other which can't quite sustain the comparative weight it is supposed to bear.

At this point, a reviewer has to decide which conjunction to use to make the connexion to her or his wider comments. 'But' – the author has omitted or ignored some vital matter; or 'and' – here are some further ideas stimulated by the book. I'm torn between the two here, because I *did* find the book provocative of thoughts which don't necessarily belong in it; but on the other hand I do feel short-changed on the question of defining 'sexuality', which I mentioned earlier. So what follows are some observations of a kind that I think should have found more of a place in the book, even if not in precisely this form.

The main point is that I find the book pervaded by notions of the relationship between the private and the public which in the end needed a more deliberate discussion. This is not to say that they aren't discussed at all: in fact it is because the chapter on the public and the private in the Victorian period has such good insights that I miss a return to the issues it raises in the final chapters. Chapter 5 presents the contemporary debate about the regulation of vice and the problem of the double standard in Victorian England as a debate about the relationship of public and private. Putting it rather crudely here, the social purity movement of the late 19th century was grappling with the tensions in the contrasting convergences of man/public/vice, and woman/private/virtue. As Weeks demonstrates successfully, this was a classic moment of convergence of far wider and more diverse social strains onto a symbolic enemy – the prostitute, disrupter of those convenient equations – and a symbolic goal: 'individual conduct . . . as the key to public health' (p.81). All this is well argued by him, so I don't want to pursue it as such. My point is that I think the reverberations of this debate are still with us, still defining and constraining the terms of current struggles which have been directly precipitated by the feminist and gay movements, and which have injected new life into wider socialist debate.

This is because sexuality, in the comprehensive designation implied here, stands at the intersection between the public and the private, as Foucault's comment suggests. In the forms in which we understand and have formed the concept now, it exists as a symbolic account of the self; as a means of imagination and desire; as a relational expression; and as a means of procreation. It is a condensation, then, of meanings which, being often incompatible, can only take on a symbolic unity.

These are possible directions in the present, but I want to end by looking back at the original public:private dichotomy. Weeks writes about England and Wales (*sic* – there is not as much about Scotland as its somewhat different legal history might justify), but he doesn't really attempt any systematic account of what is peculiar to the English experience he describes. It's true that his purpose was not a comparative one (and that would be a huge project anyway); yet I think there *are* peculiarities about the English experience which can be identified and contributed towards the explanation of it. At play in the late 19th century public:private context of sexual regulation was a peculiarly English form of liberalism, mixing notions of property, individualism and privacy. This was neither the enlightenment rationalism of revolutionary France, which produced in the Napoleonic legal code a model of distance from theological moralisms which JS Mill would have admired. Nor was it the social interventionism of unified Germany (whether of the kaisers or the republic), which pushed the state towards a more direct regulation of the fields discussed by Weeks. Civil rights in England have always been a residual category, but this was balanced to an extent by the restraint in direct state intervention. Weeks notes this

reluctance of the state to engage in direct regulation of sexuality, and he is also very lucid in his discussion of the legal and moral debate initiated by the Wolfenden and the liberal reformism of the late 1950s and 1960s. But this wider context is missing, even though it provides a way of linking the hesitancy of the state, the righteousness of the 'new moralists' and the dissenting challenge of the new cultures of resistance. The call for a *right* to abortion is thus also a challenge to the whole shifty and devious history of English state policy, reforming us for our own good, shrinking back from the brink of positively recognizing rights, positively restricting the state's own freedom of action against its own citizens. This is as much the nanny state as the patriarchal or the paternalist. No wonder – to strike a rather rhetorical note – it found the concept of the sexual so hard to cope with, while also ensuring by its dispersed practices that the wretched secret would be everywhere.

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### References

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