
Pleasure and Duty

J E F F R E Y W E E K S

Three obvious, superficially simple but actually intensely complex questions embodied in the title immediately confront the reader of Dagmar Herzog's important new book. First, what do we mean by the 'sexuality' that constitutes the subject matter? Second, what is demarcated by the Europe that provides the geo-political boundaries of this study? Third, does the 'twentieth century' provide a useful temporal unity for the narrative and analysis that is at the heart of the book? Such questions are not mere scholarly nit-picking or academic point scoring, but a tribute to the problematising of the body in space and time that has been a hallmark of the deconstructive and reconstructive energy of recent scholarship on the sexual, and that is now making a welcome entry into mainstream history.

Take the question of periodisation. Nothing much changed in 1900. Prostitution had been seen as a major social problem – 'the social evil' in British terminology – since the mid-nineteenth century. The voluntary limitation of family size was already entrenched in sections of the populations of various European countries from the latter part of the century (much earlier in France). Birth control methods and abortion remained controversial and highly contested in many countries, but policy varied enormously, with France banning contraceptive devices in 1920, just as other countries began to embrace them more overtly. Homosexuality began to be defined as the distinctive feature of a particular type of person from the 1860s, and self-defined inverts, intermediates and third sexers were already in dialogue with would-be scientists of desire during the 1880s and 1890s. But the legal structures that bounded and helped shape the social climate towards same-sex relations varied widely, and were not to change substantially until the second half of the twentieth century. The emerging science of sex, sexology, which is an important feature of the first chapter of the book, was making its mark in scientific circles well before the turn of the century, and its real impact came later. The founding father of sexology, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, first published *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886, and it went through

Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research, London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London SE1 0AA; weeksj@lsbu.ac.uk

Contemporary European History, 22, 2 (2013), pp. 277–282 © Cambridge University Press 2013
doi:10.1017/S096077731300009X

various editions before the turn of the century. When Freud came to write his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905 he was basing his work, as he makes clear, on a host of already existing studies. On the other hand, eugenics, the self-proclaimed science of reproduction, which plays an important role in this book, was indeed a product of the early twentieth century, but was rooted in the Darwinian revolution of the second half of the nineteenth century, and a growing belief that not only did 'Science' speak the truth of our bodies, but that it might also be able to change them.

If finding a starting point is difficult, choosing an end point is yet more problematic. From the 1980s, commentators and critics began to compare the *fin de siècle* of the nineteenth century, as a period of feared 'sexual anarchy', with the *fin de millennium* of the twentieth, defined above all by the 'sense of an ending' encouraged by the AIDS pandemic and a general air of moral uncertainty.¹ In the event, little happened at the turn of the century to justify such anxieties, and HIV/AIDS, while still having devastating effects on individual lives, was well on the way to becoming a chronic manageable disease, at least in the affluent west, thanks to new combination therapies. Any time frame is of course arbitrary. The 'twentieth century' as a time frame for studying sexuality seems especially problematic. Herzog herself seems to agree implicitly, and gives the emotional and intellectual focus of the book to a slightly different time scale, closer to Eric Hobsbawm's short twentieth century, 1914 to 1991.² To this reader at least, the heart of the book, for reasons I will come back to, are the three chapters covering the period 1914–80, with the most powerful of all on 'State Interventions 1914–1945', the period closest to Herzog's own research interests. Here is the heart of darkness of the last century's sexual regime, and in many ways the book can be seen as a painful journey to and through the horrors of that experience.

The temporal question is enmeshed in the geo-political. What is the Europe that forms the framework for this book? If we seek a common 'civilisation' that defines Europe, perhaps we could agree with the wit that it would be very nice if there were such a thing. In an earlier synthesis on European sexuality, Anna Clark suggests that Western civilisation has been imagined 'as the triumph of rational values over barbarism and ignorance' but argues that historians now find the picture much more muddled.³ Today, the history of this civilisation is seen as dominated by conquest and imperialism.

Certainly, Dagmar Herzog is reluctant to portray European sexuality as a history of inevitable progress, and powerfully tells of the appalling impact on individual sexual lives of Europe's civil wars and colonial expansions – and subsequent retreats – in the twentieth century. However we define its geographical and cultural boundaries, Europe has never constituted a sexual whole, not even today as European institutions,

¹ For example, Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Sexuality at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), and my comments in Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 233–45.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

³ Anna Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 2.

like the European Union, the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights, and various NGOs, as well as individuals in their thousands, even millions, strive to promote common values and ways of life. Franz Eder and colleagues have shown the amazing longevity and resilience of fundamental religious divides in shaping Europe's sexual cultures.⁴ Differences between largely north-western Protestant or southern Catholic, eastern Orthodox or Balkan Islamic patterns in relation to individualism, family, gendered relations, homosexuality, patterns of shame and guilt have persisted through profound political and religious struggles, and even the imposition of Communism with its models of the new socialist man or woman on large chunks of these territories. And yet even within these broadly demarcated areas different sexual cultures thrive. In my own work, in relation to my own life, I have attempted to show the persistence of differences between the gender and sexual culture of the south Wales mining valleys where I grew up and the wider sexual culture of Great Britain.⁵ European sexualities are like a rich carpet with intricate patterns and many colours. France and Italy, both largely Catholic countries, have distinctive sexual histories. Even two close Scandinavian, and Protestant, neighbours, Denmark and Sweden, have frequently diverged in their sexual journeys. These differences are extremely long lasting. In recent moves in Europe towards endorsing same-sex marriage or similar arrangements for recognised civil partnerships, it is noticeable how national cultures continue to shape the actual form of the new arrangements despite a common will to recognise new relational rights of same-sex couples.⁶ Just as one may doubt the existence, yet, of a common European civilisation, so it is difficult to define a common European sexual culture. Both are projects still in the making.

The other question I posed at the beginning was in relation to the meaning of sexuality. The day has long gone when historians, if they attempted to touch the subject at all, could take for granted they knew straightforwardly what it actually was. When President Clinton denied that he had had sex with 'that woman', Monica Lewinsky, he was not so much lying as offering the last gasp expression of the Euro-American assumption that true 'sex' was solely defined by heterosexual coition, ultimately delimited by its reproductive potential; everything else was perversion, corruption, seduction, sickness, foreplay or whatever – definitions varied – but something clearly short of the real thing. An important theme of Herzog's book is the rise and rise of the view that sexuality could be defined by the idea of pleasure rather than duty. In one sense this was not new. As Anna Clark notes, two competing concepts of sexual desire run through European history in its widest sense: desire as dangerous, threatening and polluting, and desire as creative, transcendent and transformative. Punishment or enjoyment were the twin poles of this dialectic,

⁴ Franz X. Eder, Lesley Hall and Gert Hekma, eds, introduction in *Sexual Cultures in Europe: National Histories* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 6–10.

⁵ Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), 23–33.

⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, 'A Very British Compromise? Civil Partnerships, Liberalism by Stealth and the Fallacies of Neoliberalism', in Jackie Jones, Anna Gear, Rachel Anne Fenton and Kim Stevenson, eds, *Gender, Sexualities and the Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 271–82.

and perhaps the battle has never really been won (hence one of the temptations of sado-masochism?). But what is striking is the degree to which pleasure rather than reproduction becomes the common ground for thinking of sexuality, long before effective contraception made it a reality for women in the second half of the century. Even the most conservative moralists came to fit pleasure into their ideals of married monogamy. Pleasure, as Herzog powerfully shows, was harnessed by Nazis and Fascists to their vicious reactionary modernism. Pleasure also began to escape the confines of heteronormativity, and in doing so began to transform the meanings of the sexual. By the early twenty-first century, the form of sexuality that was most obviously solely about pleasure, masturbation, was no longer the solitary vice that had obsessed post-Enlightenment Europe and had become almost the emblematic definition of the erotic through the multiple incitements of the cyber world. You didn't have to dress up for it, as the wit Quentin Crisp pointed out.

In the *Three Essays*, building on the pioneers of sexology, Freud in effect incorporated the perversions within the normal range of sexuality in the sense that every blob of humanity was heir to them. He also problematised the naturalism and inevitability of heterosexual object choice. To attain a precarious 'normality', as defined by the demands of civilisation, was a lifetime's struggle, and many failed. Few immediately recognised the significance of these insights, and some attempted to turn psychoanalysis into the policeman of normality even in the later part of the century. Even Freud himself hesitated to accept the full logic of his position, especially in relation to homosexuality. Michel Foucault, the arch-deconstructor of sexual essentialism, saw psychoanalysis as part of the problem, not the solution.⁷ Yet from the vantage point of the present it is surely right to see that Freud and the early sexologists, wittingly or not, let the genie out of the bottle. Sexuality effectively ceased to be a fixed rock battered by the waves. It was more like a broad archipelago, constantly changing its shape and ever expanding as new islands emerged out of the depths, and new fauna and flora flourished on them.

And central to this shifting ecology was the new sexual subject, defining him- or herself by the nature of his or her sexuality or sex-related characteristics – the homosexual, bisexual, transvestite or transsexual, sado-masochist, or whatever. Sex, as Foucault suggested, had become the truth of our beings, and sexed beings were marching out of the pages of Krafft-Ebing onto the stage of history. Contemporary radical critics of 'sexual liberation', taking the hint from Foucault, have seen the emphasis on affirming sexual identity as little more than a ruse of power, fully complicit with neoliberal imperatives, where self-governance is the mask of new forms of discipline and governmentality. Others might more historically recognise the significance of new forms of sexual agency that have emerged since the 1960s. But all can agree that this revolution was long, uneven and never uncontested. The Nazis put many homosexuals into the camps. The post-war liberated world continued to persecute sexual deviants, and it was to be the 1960s and 1970s before newly defined

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1979).

sexual minorities began to openly claim rights and citizenship. By then Oscar Wilde's love that dare not speak its name had become extremely voluble and articulate. But the road was long, rocky and hard.

Dagmar Herzog, as we have seen, rejects a straightforwardly progressivist argument. However, and quite rightly, she also implicitly rejects its mirror image, the declinist account which would see a collapse of morality, the family and who knows what else in the face of consumerism, relativism, secularisation and so on, which has been immensely tempting to moral conservatives of right and left. She tells a story of real advances to sexual justice, toleration and human rights in Europe over the span of a century. But it was not inevitable, there were appalling setbacks, and the real advances of recent years were the result of struggles, which are by no means over.

How can we explain this complex history? For Foucault, in what is ultimately a profoundly pessimistic narrative, the apparatus of sexuality is constructed as a deployment of power-knowledge, whose ultimate function is regulation and control. Nowhere is that control stronger than when we imagine ourselves to be liberated. For another tradition, that of Norbert Elias and his followers, shifting patterns of sexual organisation have to be understood in relation to long-term processes towards more orderly and rule-driven ways of life – formalisation. In the twentieth century this has taken the form of periods of a 'controlled decontrolling' of sexual life, part of a new phase of informalisation, followed by periods of reaction.⁸ The increasing sexual openness of the 1920s was followed by the deepening conservatism of the 1930s, continuing into the 1940s and 1950s in western Europe, and longer in the communist east. It was to be the 1960s before a stronger phase of informalisation developed which generated a backlash in the 1970s and 1980s before resuming its advance in the 1990s and beyond.

Such explanations are predicated on long-term shifts in social and psychological structures and forms of power. Herzog is not preoccupied with grand theory, however. For her, the main determinants of sexual organisation appear to be largely political. The chapters are organised around essentially political themes – 'Reconceiving sexuality 1900–1914', 'State intervention 1914–1945', 'Cold War cultures 1945–1965', and so on. These provide the framework for detailed analysis, but also have the effect of placing the emphasis less on long-term trends, whether inexorable or not, and more on the contingencies of political forces. And for the key period in Herzog's narrative, the inter-war years, the dominant theme is the 'unprecedented efforts on the part of national and local governments to intervene in their citizens' private lives' (p. 45). This was true of democratic as much as authoritarian countries, as sexuality increasingly became a matter of central political importance. But it is in the Fascist countries and the Soviet Union that sexuality became most explicitly a focus for the new technologies of power.

Here Herzog tells a story that is original and powerful, and shapes the book. She refutes the conventional view that the Nazi regime could be defined simply as the

⁸ Cas Wouters, *Informalization: Manners and Emotions since 1890* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007); Jeffrey Weeks, *The Languages of Sexuality* (Abingdon and New York, 2011), 'Informalization', 94–6.

imposition of the values of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*, and shows how Fascism embraced sexual pleasure in its distorted version of sexual modernity to bind people ever more closely to their destiny. Pleasure can never in and of itself put itself in opposition to power; it can be a tool in its very operation. The opposite side of this, however, was manifest in the camps where, as Herzog puts it, 'Killing was not enough; the death of the soul was aimed at – and in the assault on their sexuality, the victims were targeted in their innermost selfhood' (p. 85). The shifts in policy in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, as the liberal reforms on homosexuality and abortion of the early revolution were abandoned, spoke to the same violent rejection of the humanistic tradition. Ironically, the initial triumph of violently anti-democratic forces revealed a truth that it would take the democratic parts of Europe several more generations to recognise: that our sexuality, in all its diversity, lies at the core of our humanity, and that to attack it or deny it is to make a fundamental attack on our very existence as human beings.

This, it seems to me, is the real significance of the liberalisation of European sexual values since the 1960s, in what I have described elsewhere as the 'great transition'.⁹ The great change lies not so much in more sex, or even more pleasure in sex, nor in more equitable legal systems, the emancipation of women, the greater acceptance of same-sex love and a growing toleration of difference, important as these are. Such changes have been a long time a-growing, and in parts of the former communist world are still resisted, especially in relation to homosexuality. European sexuality in the sense of a set of common values based on respect for sexual differences and for human dignity is still in the making. But surely what is the most significant feature of all these changes is that sexuality is no longer seen as a fate but as something we can create for ourselves. At the beginning of the twentieth century sexuality was still the domain of the truth makers, whether in churches, traditional institutions, medicine, science or the state. A hundred years later, in a very different Europe, we are more ready to embrace a multiplicity of truths, and to recognise that our destinies – especially our sexual destinies – lie in our own hands. This is the real story that Dagmar Herzog tells us in her indispensable history of European sexuality.

⁹ Weeks, *The World*, Chapters 3 and 4.