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# Making Sexual History

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The age of the historian as public moralist is not quite past. To be sure, most of us today are content to write for each other on matters of no particular current concern and harbour little ambition to reach a lay audience, let alone convert it. Yet political movements still need usable pasts to instruct and inspire them, and those historians who prove willing to satisfy this demand have acquired an influence outside the profession far beyond that of their peers. The New Right needed its Correlli Barnetts, second wave feminism its Sheila Rowbothams, colonial nationalism its Eric Williams', and the gay community, Jeffrey Weeks. Weeks came of age during the brief flowering of the Gay Liberation Front in early 1970s London, its exhilaratingly 'new sense of what was possible' furnishing him with 'a new personal identity... a new sense of belonging, and... a new political project' to which he has devoted himself for the rest of his life. Before gay liberation he, in common with countless others, had sought to construct a homosexual identity out of fragments: a bit of James Baldwin here, a bit of sexology there, overlaid onto personal experiences and social prejudices in his quest for some sense of who he was and how he was to act. After it, thanks in large part to writers like him, gays had to hand a common history, a collective memory, the rudiments of a shared identity.

The essays contained in *Making Sexual History* illustrate how Weeks has helped to refashion gay identity in Britain over the past quarter of a century. It begins with a series of studies of key theorists of sexuality, from Havelock Ellis to Michel Foucault, identifying what he claims to be a shift from 'scientific' to 'grassroots' sexology. Whereas experts sought to define 'homosexuality' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he argues, the late twentieth century saw homosexuals intent upon defining themselves. The second and third sections, respectively devoted to history and sociology, pursue this theme of sexual agency in describing how 'the erotic is being reinvented by the new sexual movements and day-to-day experiments in living'.

But being a latter-day public moralist is no easy task in our era of specialists and professionals. One key issue is how to reconcile activism to academic research: how, in Weeks' words, his mission to 'remake the history of sexuality' squares with his ambition to 'understand' it. This appears to have been an easier task in the late sixties and seventies, when gay and feminist historians alike felt it sufficient to restore the past to its rightful owners, to identify historical oppression, resurrect forgotten heroes and, perhaps most important of

all, to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of their present condition. If existing models of homosexuality, masculinity and femininity had been imposed upon women and gays in the past, it was at once possible and desirable that they should reinvent them in the present. Weeks' sympathy for such an approach can be seen in the critiques of Havelock Ellis, Mary McIntosh and Dennis Altman contained in this volume. McIntosh and Altman exploded the 'liberal' sexological consensus which Ellis epitomised, namely that 'inversion' could be categorised as a distinct condition resulting from some biological or psychological abnormality. Weeks' work has likewise sought to blur the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality, claiming with Michel Foucault that the modern 'homosexual' was a late nineteenth century creation.

Today, however, such a political stance is open to challenge from a number of angles. To begin with, the history of sexuality shows signs of outgrowing its politicised origins. While Weeks is surely right to argue that its early innovators were 'self-proclaimed sexual dissidents' driven by 'as much "political" and "purely academic"' concerns, this is no longer the case. The more respectable the discipline has become, the less overtly political are its exponents, with the worthy Oxbridge monographs produced by the likes of Michael Mason and Simon Szreter wearing the colours of no identifiable cause. The biases of straight male authors are doubtless harder to detect, but these appear dispassionate works on subjects of negligible political import. Their archival burrowing and exhaustive number-crunching also contradict Weeks' claim that 'traditional historical methods have proved inadequate to the understanding of sexuality'. Though unusual in its interdisciplinary methodology and the universal interest of its subject-matter, the history of sexuality appears to be becoming just one more sub-discipline replete its own e-mailing lists [2] catering for arcane debates.

Quite where Weeks himself fits into a less politicised historiography of sexuality is unclear. For all his commitment, he has never been a tub-thumper. His key contributions to the history of sexuality, *Coming Out* (1977) and *Sex, Politics and Society* (1981), possessed little of the didacticism of some contemporaneous studies: hence their enduring influence. Yet for the past two decades, as this essay collection makes plain, he has largely deserted history in favour of sociological studies of a more discursive, less empirical sort. It would be interesting to know why: one reason, I would guess, is that contemporary commentary is a better vehicle for the activist-academic than historical research. The past can be mined for components of an identity, but mostly it yields detritus and junk, so much useless knowledge more distracting than inspiring for the activist of today. How, after all, can one justify studying Georgian molly-houses when one's friends are dying of AIDS?

Even if we accept a place for politics in academic research, this leaves unresolved which political line to follow. Weeks is more than aware that gay intellectuals accord to no single party whip. A major dividing line among them is the nature-nurture debate, as the social constructionist orthodoxy of the 1970s and early 1980s has come under challenge from geneticists seeking to identify a 'gay gene'. There is also the question of the relationship between lesbians and gay men. Are the two homosexualities equivalent, with each being persecuted due to its threat to male heterosexuality, or are they qualitatively different on the grounds that lesbianism faces a double dose of discrimination? Weeks is a reluctant participant in each of these disputes. On the origins of homosexuality, he remains a convinced environmentalist, claiming that his own work has 'conclusively demonstrated the power of culture in giving definition to what or who we are'. This sounds reasonable enough, but his hostility to biological explanations of sexual behaviour leads him to simplify his opponents' views. The counterargument is not that 'sexuality is simply the domain of nature', but that nature predisposes humans to sexual behaviours which, due to social pressures and personal psychology, they may act upon or otherwise. It is not 'unprovable' that a minority of individuals have an in-built predisposition to homosexual behaviour, merely as yet unproven, while to raise the nightmare scenario that such a discovery might lead to 'genetic engineering' eradicating homosexuality is not reason in itself to abandon serious scientific research. It is the duty of scientists to explore and report: that of wider society to decide what to do with their findings.

Evidently perturbed by the possibility that the geneticists are on to something, Weeks' position shifts on occasion from denying the existence of inherent sexual inclinations to denying their importance. Thus the

quest for an aetiology of homosexuality is in his view the modern-day equivalent of 'count[ing] angels on the point of a needle', while the question of whether homosexuals are born or made is 'irrelevant' to the more significant issue of studying sexuality's 'social organisation'. Yet the problem cannot be so easily side-stepped, for Weeks' own work is too dependent on a constructionist methodology to remain intact once it is removed. This much can be seen in his critique of Ellis, in which he argues that the 'conceptual inadequacies' of his essentialist outlook left him 'trapped within the conservatism that his biological theories dictated.' Since Ellis' categories were so many stereotypes, it was inevitable that they proved insufficient either fully to explain sexuality or to contain it within its prescriptive typology. From Weeks' constructionist perspective, the ostensible radicalism of Ellis is exposed as 'reactionary' due to its biological underpinnings and, in an interesting twist on the hydraulic model of drives and discharges, the amorphous, polymorphous nature of sexuality 'always overflows the neat divisions that science simultaneously imposes.' Yet, insofar as constructionism is thrown into doubt, such arguments lose some of their validity.

Weeks' attitude to the relationship between homosexual men and women also appears to have changed little since the early days of gay liberation and its fond hopes for a feminist-gay alliance. The Ellis piece finds him adopting a moderate feminist line according to which women and 'inverts' were joint victims of Ellis' stunted radicalism, while his solitary attempt at sociological fieldwork, a survey of the 'democratic, egalitarian' relationships being pioneered by homosexuals, makes no clear distinction between lesbian and gay couples. Yet constructing a common front against male heterosexuality is not as unproblematic as it might first appear. In the case of Ellis, there remains a fundamental incompatibility between his demonisation at the hands of such radical feminist historians as Sheila Jeffreys and Margaret Jackson, here cited uncritically, and Weeks' own (revised) view that Ellis and like-minded sexologists were 'on the whole forces for good' due to their 'liberalising' intent. And, in his analysis of contemporary lesbian and gay relationships, Weeks could be accused of minimising the differences between gay and lesbian lifestyles while maximising the difference between them and heterosexuals. Lesbians' generally greater preference for monogamy must surely produce markedly different relationship patterns to those of gay men, yet here such contrasts are dismissed as 'stereotypes'. Moreover, in the absence of any control group, it is difficult to establish whether or not non-heterosexual relationships are more 'pure', in Anthony Giddens' phrase, than their heterosexual equivalents.

The manner in which *Making Sexual History* addresses such profound issues as the relationship between scholarship and politics, biology and society, lesbians and gays and homosexuality and heterosexuality testifies both to the scope of Weeks' interests and the value of his work. That the questions it raises appear more compelling than the answers it delivers show that there is still a place for public moralists. It was ever their role to make sense of complex issues using the cool certainties of political convictions - and that of critics to object to the generalisations and inconsistencies that this involves. *Making Sexual History* challenges us to think hard about where our sexuality comes from, how it shapes our lives and how we might in turn seek to shape it to the benefit of ourselves and society as a whole.

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