

SEX, POLITICS AND SOCIETY: THE REGULATIONS OF SEXUALITY SINCE 1880

Jeffrey Weeks

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Jeffrey Weeks, in attempting to chart changes in sexual behaviour and the habits, customs, laws and taboos surrounding it, has taken on a major task. His subtitle, 'the regulation of sexuality', signals that any discussion is bound to try to define not only what sexuality 'is' — a difficult and in a sense, Weeks argues, an inappropriate goal — but also to give an account of how society structures sexuality and sexual behaviour.

Jeffrey Weeks opens with a theoretical chapter, in which he sets out the premises on which his historical approach is based. The writing of a history of sexuality, he argues, is difficult because (Weeks, 1981:1):

'The usual assumption is that sex is a definable and universal experience, like the desire for food . . . I want to suggest that it is the centrality given to this concept of sexuality that constitutes a problem for historians, for it ignores the great variety .of patterns that history reveals, and the very different meanings given to what we blithely label as "sexual activity".'

He is concerned to move away from such a notion of sex as a universal and trans-historical experience essentially impervious to social and cultural change. He is also concerned to reject the idea that there can be any 'totalising' theory that would relate sexual behaviour in an uncomplicated way to an economic infrastructure. To that extent this work represents a (latent) critique of the Marxism of the early 1970s. At that time both Gay Liberation and the women's movement in Britain sought for explanations of sexual regulation and the oppression of gays and women in terms of the dominance of

capitalism, and sought to relate forms of sexual subordination unproblematically to it. This volume stresses rather the diversity and complexity of both sexual behaviour and its regulation; and Jeffrey Weeks perceives the latter as the coincidence of diverse influences and pressures interacting in a variety of ways that can never be reduced either to class or gender.

In pursuing this approach Jeffrey Weeks has been much influenced by Michel Foucault — and has also contributed to a popularisation of the French theorist's thought. He mounts a brief and lucid critique of Foucault's latent functionalism (Weeks, 1981:9):

'On the most general level Foucault's society of normalisation is in danger of being as rigidly functional, tending towards a necessary social equilibrium, as Talcott Parsons "... social control seems to be absolute".'

Yet ultimately his attempt is to use a Foucauldian approach in a more historicised way, which recognises that the discourses shaping sexuality 'have their conditions of existence and their effects in concrete, historical, social, economic and ideological situations.' And, for him, Foucault's greatest importance is in raising the 'fundamental question' of how (Weeks, 1981:6)

'in our society sex is seen not just as a means of biological reproduction or a source of harmless pleasure, but, on the contrary, has come to be seen as the central part of our being, the privileged site in which the truth of ourselves is to be found.'

Having set out his theoretical perspective, Jeffrey Weeks presents a detailed account of the major aspects of sexuality and sexual behaviour and discourse in Britain since the Industrial Revolution. Chapter after chapter is densely packed not only with information but also with clear, concise summaries of ideological, scientific and other debates (for example eugenicism; the Freud/Jones Horney dispute; the disagreements between

Freud and Havelock Ellis); there are brief outlines of the careers of prominent sex reformers and pioneers, and summaries of theoretical positions. So, while clearly written, it is not a quick read, but it is both scholarly and lucid. Indeed, so full of information is it that it must be indispensable to any student of the period and of sexual custom and practice in general.

Is it a political book? As a feminist and a Marxist, such a question must be the ultimate touchstone to this reviewer at least. *Sex, Politics and Society* represents a particular theoretical approach with covert political implications. Weeks's emphasis on the complexity and pluralism of ideologies and social practices is a reaction against 'monolithic' Marxism. This sometimes appeared to deny the authenticity of subjectivity by tending to describe for example oppressed groups who did not recognise their oppression (such as working class Tories, or women who 'want' men to be dominant) as victims of 'false consciousness'. This has come to be seen as elitist and patronising and recent work in many areas has tended rather to emphasize the contradictory aspects of 'reactionary' ideologies and ideological practices. Such an approach is more democratic than that of the vanguard militant who in one grandiose movement claimed to tear the scales from the eyes of the oppressed and exploited victim.

Now, though, the pendulum has swung so far that we are in danger of returning to an atomisation of experience in which no one explanation has any theoretical supremacy, and thus in danger of falling back into a sociological pluralism which ultimately involves the denial of real conflicts and struggles in society, and the real coercion involved in the domination that exists. In this scheme of things, morality has no anchor in material life, but becomes simply a form of idealism, an expression of goodwill, and logically at least, it would become diffi-

cult for women to raise any sort of *absolute* objection to any form of male behaviour — we would once more become reliant on liberal definitions of what constitutes morality.

After finishing this book I was left wondering how different as supposedly 'left' social history this is from traditional social history with its feelings of 'one damn thing after another' and ultimately little sense of causal primacy simply because there are so many intersecting explanations. The end of the book celebrates the breakdown of sexual categories (at least for gay men) during the 1970s, and an optimistic looking forward to a time when sex-gender categories are not so defining as they have been. Yet to a woman, when women are still so deeply defined — psychologically, economically, legally, emotionally — by virtue of their sex, this must seem like a movement away from the political meaning of sexual definitions in our society — and also a move away from any attempt at political initiatives or solutions to the problems the regulation of sexuality has hitherto raised.

Sex, Politics and Society is fascinating in its detail and subtle in its approach. We still need a book that would explain why sex and gender are of central political importance to all socialists.

Elizabeth Wilson