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Histories of ‘Sex’, Histories of ‘Sexuality’

VICTORIA HARRIS

For Dagmar Herzog, writing the history of sexuality is an act of rebalancing. Sexuality becomes neither positive nor negative, but ambivalent. Herzog destabilises a dominant ‘narrative of gradual progress’, which misunderstands ‘how profoundly complicated the sexual politics of the twentieth century in Europe actually were’ (p. 2). Instead of a linear chronology, Herzog reveals a twentieth century of cyclical change – revolutionary liberalisations and conservative backlashes occur in quick succession, or even concomitantly. Repression appears even within developments considered liberalising by contemporaries.¹ The ambivalences within ‘progress’ and ‘change’ shape sexuality and its history. A third ambivalence is no less important – happiness. Despite being an act inextricably connected with pleasure, sex does not consistently give rise to happiness.

Indeed, what is most startling about Herzog’s account is just how depressing European society seems to have found the whole endeavour. Over the course of the last century, sex became ‘burdened’ with ever increasing significance (p. 2). It did not merely acquire this significance; it was punished by it. Europeans fretted about who was to have sex, when, and how. They exalted sex as the epitome of pleasure and labelled its achievement the central marker of normality. But only the right kind of sex; and only between people of the right sort, for the right reasons. Sex became increasingly central to individual identity, and a matter for public consumption, discussion and debate. Women gained greater control over their sexual agency and reproduction, but within a persistently patriarchal context. ‘There was lots of promiscuity’, one feminist noted, ‘but we were *all* unhappy’ (p. 163).

Sex was a burden indeed; nor was there enough pleasure to go around. Even emancipated men worried that as women’s sexuality blossomed, men’s would

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¹ For more on these issues of periodisation and chronology, and for a fuller discussion of challenges within the history of sexuality and its historiography, see Victoria Harris, ‘Sex on the Margins: New Directions in the Historiography of Sexuality and Gender,’ *Historical Journal*, 53, 4 (Dec. 2010), 1085–104.

necessarily 'wither' away (p. 165). By the end of the 1970s, Europeans were left asking what exactly sex was for. It became an 'isolated event turned inward' (p. 172). While AIDS returned sex to the public sphere, it left the bleakness of sex all the more striking (179). Although AIDS allowed for more expansive discussions of the sensual side of inclusively-defined 'safe' sex, it became difficult to shake off the notion that sex was, without careful forethought and without mediation by the condom, essentially dangerous. Europeans have even attempted to legislate the emotions behind sexual acts and identities, to criminalise and/or deviant-ise so-called depersonalised sex. Unless it fits within an increasingly narrow definition of 'romantic', sex is seen as part of an inescapably negative and oppressive power relationship, one compounded by both consumerism and technology.

Where does that leave European sex at the start of the twenty-first century? If, as a society, Europeans have made sexuality the marker of both individual freedom and collective oppression; if sex is essentially solitary and hierarchical, might not all European sex be depersonalised? Depersonalisation syndrome is defined as a psychological condition which is extremely likely to produce anxiety. Would that explain anxiety about sex? Given all these anxieties and ambivalences surrounding sexuality, what does it mean exactly to study it? For study it we have; one could argue that there is a direct correlation between the level of 'burden' sex represents and our desire to study it in ever greater detail.

Perhaps the study of sexuality is a way of testifying about progress and recounting the histories of marginalised peoples and sexualities, whose history over the twentieth century *is* largely one of improvement. Scholars who find persistent conservatism, even after accepted moments of improvement in sexual equality, may impose this negativity to counter this teleological liberationist history. Perhaps the study of sexuality is a way of seeking control and countering the bleakness or anxiety about depersonalised sexuality. Studying sexuality allows scholars to grant Europeans agency over their performances of sex and sexuality in the past. It allows scholars to discover who controls sex, and what it is exactly that 'they' are in control of. For perhaps sexuality is studied for the most basic, but most difficult, reason, of trying to understand exactly what *it* is. Much recent historiography on the history of sexuality seems to either be caught in or be engaging with these three problems of progress, agency, and definition.

One of the earliest battles for change in Herzog's chronology is the quest to 'eroticise' marriage (p. 18). While marriage is today a very different beast from what it was at the start of the twentieth century, analysing when and how change occurred is not easy. Marriage may now be more romantic and erotic; but this focus on modern romance might implicitly depersonalise the marriages of the past and hide commonalities across the period. The growing acceptability of gay marriage in the twenty-first century and conservative fears over the destruction of family values are not dissimilar to the realities surrounding pre-twentieth century 'female marriages' and straight 'common-law' marriages. Attempts to define moments of change and to periodise the history of this aspect of sexuality into modern and pre-modern types are not easy.

Nor is it easy to measure progress or to measure the quality of that progress. Efforts to improve marriage can also be seen as failed. In granting women the same licence as men, pre-marital and extra-marital relationships have become more accepted; many families are now composed of non-married partners and 'illegitimate' children. Improving marriage is thus killing marriage. Non-married heterosexual families are more similar to their homosexual equivalents in that both groups share the same levels of rights; but gay couples are campaigning, quite rightfully, to be admitted into the very institution that many straight couples are abandoning. Current feminist antagonism towards the 'depersonalisation' of sex through pornography, prostitution, strip clubs and, the newest phenomenon, cyber-sex (the epitome of sex without persons), could be seen as the darker side of a hard-fought campaign to centralise romance. So important to success is romance that those who 'fail' to find it 'normally' are compelled to seek it out in other ways. Alternatively, over-emphasised romance could be the inadvertent result of the sexual revolution, which focused on the human right to pleasure and happiness. Or it could be a response to the cold rationalism of 'liberal' interwar movements, which sought to control sexuality, love, and reproduction through both positive and negative eugenics. Here, the liberal democracies of Britain, the United States and Scandinavia were as guilty of denying freedom of choice to their citizens as those authoritarian regimes most often connected with sexual repression.

Herzog's attention to Scandinavia, and to the permissive side of authoritarian regimes, is refreshing. European histories often are actually histories of a few key Western European nations; work on the Third Reich often overemphasises the repressive tendencies of the Third Reich's politics. Important challenges to the sexual status quo arrived from all corners of Europe, and Nazism embraced sexuality, manipulating desire and pleasure to its advantage. In writing a history of liberalisation, in which sexual pleasure became a fundamental human right and a moral good, campaigners contrasted their hopes for the future with the horrific authoritarian past, in doing so implying that current regimes were still secretly authoritarian. Historians, in adopting this line of thought, have lost sight of far more provocative, and troubling, developments. Herzog's work returns this to us. Her destabilisation of a pre- and post-Fascist periodisation and of the assumption that governmental type married neatly with attitudes towards sexuality are both fascinating and unsettling.

But her analysis also raises the question of whether the Third Reich still attracts too much attention – the regime becomes a mechanism for highlighting the contradictory permissiveness and repression within all European nations, as well as changes and continuities during this period. Herzog is surely right to suggest that 'no regime before or since' Nazism 'did so much to intervene violently in the bodies and intimate relationships of its citizens' (p. 66). Nazism did bring with it a 'grotesque extremity'. But does it necessarily follow that Nazism had the *biggest* impact on sexuality in the twentieth century? On *all* aspects of sexuality? What of the fact that, as Herzog herself notes, for the majority of its citizens Nazism encouraged sexuality, which probably meant that for a sizeable number of that 'normal' majority group, things proceeded much as they had done previously? Furthermore, do we not continue

the problem of downplaying liberal democracies' unpleasant history of intervention into the sexual lives of its citizens – including forced sterilisation, for example – by beginning a chapter on state intervention with such a statement about Nazism, which renders its treatment of sexuality incomparable with other European nations?

Through reinforcing a pre- vs during- vs post-Nazi sexuality, a rigid periodisation of the twentieth century persists; this makes it more difficult to see continuities. Some sexual policies changed very little as a direct result of the Nazi takeover – those which pertained to prostitutes, for example. Others fluctuated wildly, both inside and outside Germany, with the UK, for example, tightening laws against homosexuality and contraception during the inter-war period. Where there were distinctive changes, it is difficult to label them specifically 'Nazi' changes. So to talk about a 'postfascist' history of sexuality runs the risk of ironing out the very ambiguities which Herzog has so artfully displayed. It also aids the post-war democracies' desire to disguise their continued negative and repressive approaches to sexuality by defining themselves as 'beyond' or 'other' to Fascism. Moreover, Fascism still persisted in some areas of Europe – Spain and Portugal, for example; so too did another form of authoritarianism in Eastern Europe. While we can speak of a post-Fascist north-western Europe, we cannot truly speak of a change in 1945 that affected all Europe. So strongly emphasising this periodisation does not square easily with Herzog's desire to expand the history of sexuality into eastern Europe. Because of the framework established by this temporal division, discussions of post-war Europe look primarily at the West until the fall of communism.

Issues of control or agency also come to the fore in discussions of the Third Reich. Focusing on governmental control of sexuality risks minimising other groups' and individuals' control or agency over their own and others' sexual history. While totalitarian regimes, by their very nature, tried to exert control over sexual theories and practices, humans sought to evade these controls and rival groups sought to maintain alternative moralities. Even sexual revolutionaries, it was complained, constrained individual freedom by establishing new norms of sexuality, although they may have been very permissive ones. If enough attention is not granted to the ways in which liberal regimes also intervened in the sexual lives and choices of their citizens, even less is given to the interventions by other, non-political, groups and the ways in which informal or alternative legislation and norms developed, changed and/or persisted. Herzog deftly handles religion and religious authority structures, exploring the contradictions and ambiguities in the outlook of organisations and belief structures that are most often connected exclusively with conservatism. Although the Catholic Church opposed condoms precisely because it thought that sex should be 'filled with risk', largely Catholic countries, including Spain, Italy and Belgium (as well as Poland) did not criminalise sodomy, in part because of the influence of the Napoleonic Code (pp. 20, 36). Conversely, Protestant or mixed confessional countries, including Denmark, Sweden, Britain and Germany had tight restrictions on homosexuality which persisted very late. Although, as Herzog discusses, the Church has often been criticised for narrowing morality to questions of sexuality, it is

apparent that its views on sexuality, like those of the Third Reich, are far more fluid and contradictory than often admitted. It would be interesting to explore further for what reasons Catholicism was more permissive and how that affected the agency and control believers felt they had over their sexuality.

Class also shaped attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behaviours. While class issues frequently arise in Herzog's book, they are not a primary focus. Indeed, scholars of sexuality often seem to eschew class in their analyses. But whatever agency, or lack thereof, historical actors felt they had was shaped and constrained by their socio-economic position. Prostitution is an extreme example; sexual acts occurred only or primarily because of the economic needs of prostitutes, male or female, and regardless of which class of clientele sought their services. The prostitutes' sexual agency and need to engage in 'depersonalised' sexual acts stemmed precisely from their precarious economic position. The responses of fellow citizens also differed by class. In their attempts to 'free' prostitutes from their misery, middle- and upper-class abolitionists often misunderstood the reasons behind the decision to enter prostitution and sought to take away a form of livelihood without solving the root problem. Working-class Europeans tolerated prostitution to a remarkable extent, perhaps because of the blurry line between extra-marital sex and prostitution, as well as a greater acceptance of illegitimacy. Some socialists took dramatic and hyperbolic stances against prostitution, in part to demonstrate respectability; conversely, communist parties sometimes sought out deviants such as prostitutes, who they viewed as particularly ripe for organisation against their socio-economic repression. The idea of change in marriage rituals and relationships was also undoubtedly shaped by the class position of those seeking to enter or to avoid the institution, as well as those for whom it was simply not relevant. Permitted sexualities and their physical display are yet another example – while upper-class men could sometimes get away with being feminised dandies, working-class men usually had to perform more traditional sexuality. Between the wars upper-class women found it far more acceptable to dress as men and be outwardly lesbian than their lower-class peers.

The ramifications of these class-based prescriptions for how to act sexuality and perform sex are particularly interesting to explore in communist societies, in which all political and social decisions were subsumed to the primacy of class, but within an ideology which sought to create a classless society. Perhaps it is the difficulty of unravelling class-based distinctions in sexuality in societies which simultaneously exalted and denied class difference that has resulted in Eastern Europe getting remarkably little scholarly attention. But a number of interesting issues bubble beneath the surface of Herzog's discussion. One is the relationship communist regimes had with the body. The body and sexuality were seen as taboo topics in most Eastern European nations because of the abhorrence of individual autonomy in favour of collective consciousness. Single motherhood, however, was relatively acceptable; so too was abortion. Countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia decriminalised homosexuality relatively early. In these cases, did the lack of concern for individual agency work in favour of practices that those in the West would have seen as startlingly progressive? It would be fascinating to be shown parallel histories of these distinct

experiences of 'postfascist' sexuality, in order to compare more fully the nuances of Western and Eastern histories. This might enable a better understanding of Eastern homosexual identities, for example. Coming-out was a Western phenomenon, which gained prominence in the East after the fall of communism. Was coming out in the East important but not possible because of governmental or social stigma? If so, how did this square with those same countries' lack of interest in criminalising homosexuality? Alternatively, was the individual identity of a homosexual simply less important within that culture? Did the embrace of Western practices by the East (or their imposition) result in 'progress' for those in the former East? Or was this another way that capitalism extended its reach eastwards? Regardless of which explanation might best fit, the questions of agency and control over sexual identity and experience that arise are fascinating to contemplate. Is the individual eastern European gay man now more in control of his sexuality? Or is his sexuality now simply controlled by another normative structure – i.e. that of Western capitalist individual rights?

This complicated interplay between control and identity has much to tell us about the labels that are chosen by and imposed upon historical actors to describe their sexuality and sexual behaviour. What does it mean to 'have' a sexuality? And how do those sexualities change over time? French activist André Baudry described himself as homophile, rather than homosexual, to put the emphasis on his emotions and attractions, rather than the activities in which he was involved. At around the same time Germaine Greer suggested that women could have as much sex as they wanted, but that, nevertheless, they were still castrated, cut off from their sexuality and from themselves. Both comments suggest that sexuality could be fluid and also that a certain vulnerability came with an identity or understanding of one's sexuality. The Church focused on this idea of vulnerability in its concerns that young people who were only just developing a sexuality could be led astray by homosexuality or other perversions. The very groups which should have been able to rely on the idea of inherent, stable sexuality derived from God were most afraid of the possibility that it was not nearly so inherent. This notion of vulnerable adolescent sexuality seems to have become more pronounced at the same moment teenagers were 'invented' as a distinct demographic group. Is that significant? Lesbophobia, too, only emerged with the decision to publicly recognise lesbianism. Without the label of lesbian and without the realisation that women even without men could choose to engage in sex, there was nothing to be afraid of, despite the documented history of female–female relationships in the near and ancient past. With the emergence of AIDS it became increasingly clear that gay and straight individuals participated in similar sexual practices; the simplistic distinction between homo- and heterosexual, itself a relatively recent development, suddenly did not seem up to the challenge of describing the lives of those who preferred partners of the same or opposite sex (p. 182).

Sexual self identity and the labelling of others' sexuality were highly fluid. Distinctions between aspects of sexual behaviour and understanding also complicate matters – including the desire to separate sex from reproduction. While this makes abortion and contraception logical issues to discuss within a history of sexuality, it also makes them difficult concepts to define as being part of sexuality. For abortion was the

consequence of a sexual act, itself the consequence of a sexual identity (or label). But aborter is not necessarily a sexual identity, or sexuality. The same is true for prostitute; this man or woman may have defined their sexuality in many ways. However, it seems unlikely that they would have included 'prostitute' in that definition, although others may have thought only of prostitute when thinking of this individual's sexuality. Or not – many countries defined male prostitutes as criminal only as a potential consequence of their homosexuality well into the twentieth century. The crime was first homosexuality and then homosexual intercourse for money. Only the female was defined primarily and exclusively as a prostitute. How do we untangle all this? Given that sexuality can be defined as human sexual identity, biological sex, gender identity or sexual orientation – none of which are the same thing – how do we write the 'history' of sexuality, in Europe or anywhere else, which fully encompasses all these definitions but without collapsing into behaviours that are not sexualities but pertain to sex? One suggestion would be to write instead histories of 'sex'. In many ways this is what Dagmar Herzog has done – and done fantastically well.