

REVIEWS

Stephen Garton*, *Histories of Sexuality*, London: Equinox Publishing, 2004. xiv + 311 pp.

As a medical practitioner, I wondered how much misery, injustice and strife, provoked by society's attitudes to sexual behaviour, could have been curtailed over the years by even modest acquaintance with the insights offered in Stephen Garton's *Histories of Sexuality*. Imprisoned in the concepts of the times, and limited by the words that frame those views, there has often been such certainty about the rights and wrongs and 'normality' of roles and behaviours. Garton expands our outlook: from the classical world to our own 'sexual revolution', he sets out dominant notions about sexual activities and explores the different points of view that these have engendered.

The book ends with the question: '... are we poised at a moment when fixed sexual orientations will begin to fade as primary modes of modern identity, to be replaced by transgressive plurality and ambiguity?' If the answer is 'yes' it may be as much in response to emerging biological insights as to anything transgressing social strictures. Genetics and molecular biology are beginning to suggest a wondrous complexity and fragility of sex determination. Where, once, male sex was thought simply to be a function of the Y chromosome, it is becoming evident that genes from multiple chromosomes are needed for the development of testes and male internal and external genitalia. These genes interact with and modify each other and, as Vernon Rosario has written, 'at every step of their action there are critical points where the effects of environment can act to modulate or thwart their usual functions'. It is almost astonishing that transsexuality is not a commonplace. But if sex determination is complex, then gender—the sex of the brain, our sexual identities—

product of genetic, hormonal, and environmental interactions, will surely prove much more intricate in origin and, necessarily, diverse in phenotype. But even when we have a better grip on the biology of sex and gender, their expression will always be transacted within society. The law, morality, and perhaps especially custom—all the usual players—will doubtless continue to exert their pressure to shape attitudes to sexuality, and so it remains important to understand how and where notions about sexuality have formed.

The book's title, and its cover image by Paul Cava, with its fusion of ambiguous bodies, tell us something of Garton's open approach. Foucault and others used the definitive term 'History' for writings on the subject. 'Histories' signals the point Garton will make repeatedly throughout the book: that 'history is never simply about uncovering the past. It requires judgements about the appropriate contexts in which to make sense of the evidence'; and therein lies the diversity of the telling. Garton's aim is 'not so much to tell the history of sexuality, but rather to examine the ways in which it has been told'.

For the non-historian and perhaps even for historians unfamiliar with this field, it is helpful that the book opens with an overview of key themes and contributors to writing sexual history. It is evident early that the topic, almost as central to man's existence as respiration, ingestion and excretion, provokes rather more interest. It also fuels a range of potent views as readily employed as 'weapons in a variety of reform struggles' as in the cause of open historical enquiry. We learn that for much of the last two decades, the main historical debate has centred on two main lines of argument: the 'essentialist' and the 'social constructionist'.

It was something of a surprise to learn that my simple notion of sexuality—as a biologically determined spectrum of desire orientations engaging with a spectrum of tolerance or repression in the society of the time—is by no means the prevalent view. But it does fall broadly within one of the main camps: the 'essentialist' view that saw sexuality as 'relatively constant but affected by cycles of repression and tolerance'. And some still hold to that

view. However, as others struggled with questions such as 'What is sexuality?', 'What is the relationship between sexual acts and sexual identity?', 'How do sexual regimes regulate conduct?', they found that the historical evidence seemed better to fit a different conceptual framework. The 'social constructionists' argued that major sexual identities, such as homosexuality and heterosexuality, are of relatively recent origin. Garton notes that adherents to this viewpoint 'were a very diverse group' but broadly they saw concepts of sexuality and the diverse ways sexual practices have been understood as a discontinuous process, influenced by specific social and political structures of power and inequality. And so the debate of the 1980s and 1990s explored and developed the areas around and between these major poles.

Garton seems to me to offer, in the key opening chapter, a model of how to write about the writing of this history. He first draws the clear lines of major conceptual differences and then sets against these all the fine but important gradations of difference and opposition, avoiding both oversimplification and the temptation to befog with detail.

The enjoyable clarity of Garton's writing is especially welcome in the section on Foucault's contribution, which is subtle but central to the development of the 'social constructionist' ideas. Foucault's contention that 'sexuality only emerged as a concept in the late-nineteenth century' is a notion that gives pause, at least at first reading. Yet Foucault's supporting arguments, as expounded by Garton, are persuasive: the development of medical, criminological, psychiatric and other such 'discourses' in the nineteenth century provided frameworks in which people came both to recognize themselves and to be described. Control mechanisms passed from the predominantly legal or juridical to more complex 'disciplinary' effects operating in the new power webs between individuals. As sexologists defined normality they delineated the 'deviant' and, in so doing, constructed a discourse of sexuality such that, as Robert Padgug wrote, 'before sexuality there were sexual acts not sexual identities'.

Having established the platform of historical approaches to

sexuality, Garton then takes us back to the origins of the western tradition. Was same sex activity among men in the classical era evidence of a long tradition of homosexuality? Not necessarily: the issue of that time was not sexual orientation but whether the role was active or passive. Masculine identity, tied up with rights of citizenship and authority, all required dominance in the sexual exchange whether the object be man, woman, child, slave or prisoner. Clearly this tells us nothing about the prevalence of homosexual orientation as we know it today but it makes the point quite powerfully that an activity-associated identity is mutable. The concern for society at the time and for long after became not sexual orientation but transgression of the gender role.

The other powerful, limiting notion that came from the classical era was that women were undeveloped men: they shared the one body type but the woman was defective. Later, even as anatomists explored cadavers of men and women, they continued to see the organs in culturally specific ways, the uterus and ovaries as undeveloped male genitalia: another potent example of conceptual limitation of a field of view.

Garton tracks the idea of sexual desire as one of many barriers to self-mastery in the late classical period through its centralisation by the Church as the prime object for renunciation in the search for a higher existence. But even as he follows main trends and broad developments, he makes clear that at many points historians have identified contrary movements and traditions. The picture must never be oversimplified. Even in Renaissance Florence, after a millennium of Christian influence, there were pederastic practices in the active/passive tradition of Roman times. The eighteenth century, with its revolutions, Enlightenment, industrial changes, urbanisation and scientific developments brought further complex and critical changes. Around this time an appreciation of the biological differentiation between the sexes allowed a new notion of embodiment of gender. Heterosexual intercourse then came to be seen as the coupling of different kinds of bodies rather than an act between active/passive or developed/undeveloped

participants. What extraordinary changes those insights must have initiated.

As we look back at the now curious ideas and concepts that exerted such power over the societies and individuals of our western culture, we wonder how many current notions will be similarly overturned. We also wonder what the 'histories of sexuality' from African, oriental and indigenous cultures would tell us. How do those people view sex and gender; what conceptual revolutions have occurred in their societies and what does that tell us about the way mankind processes the idea of sexuality?

In the Victorian era, the richness of historical documentation allows easy dismantling of any simple stock views on repression and prudery. It was a time of diverse sexual ideas and customs. It was also 'an era of medicalization of sex and the body', and the development of scientific, medical, psychiatric, criminal, custodial discourses brought new ways of identifying individuals and groups. Foucault believed that Victorianism, rather than repressing sexuality, brought it centre stage and actually created the concept of sexuality. In Garton's analysis of orientalism and empire, and the emergence of feminism and suffrage, we learn of the political ramifications of sexuality-based points of view. The emergence of 'the new woman', for example, demanded sexual freedom for women, acceptance of the notion that like men, nice women could experience and satisfy a healthy libido. But the fight for female suffrage at one point used the argument that men could not adequately represent women in parliament precisely because women were 'different'.

As sexology developed, attempts were made to define the 'abnormal', and as those edges blurred, to define the 'normal' through the major population surveys of the twentieth century. And on to the so-called 'sexual revolution' of the last forty years, so markedly influenced by the horror of HIV. For me, this curtain fall over freedom of sexual activity at the end of the twentieth century raised questions about the extent to which microbiological imperatives may have influenced sexual behaviours and attitudes in different societies and different times. If relevant data were

recoverable, perhaps there is yet another telling of the story of sexuality.

But there are already pleasures enough in Garton's *Histories*. The book grew from a course on the history of sexuality which he began to teach in the early 1990s. Clearly the book will be a boon to current and future students of this topic. But it deserves a much wider readership. Such a lucid crystallisation of the major arguments and counter-arguments at each of the main points along the path of this story, all thoroughly annotated and backed with an extensive bibliography, is a great resource for lay readers or professionals concerned with medicine, law, sociology, criminology, religious studies—indeed for anyone with a serious interest in an enduringly interesting subject: 'how seemingly timeless and natural behaviours shape and are in turn shaped by history'.

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