Sexual Matters: 
On Conceptualizing Sexuality 
In History 

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Sexuality—the subject matter seems so obvious that it hardly appears to need comment. An immense and ever-increasing number of "discourses" has been devoted to its exploration and control during the last few centuries, and their very production has, as Foucault points out,1 been a major characteristic of bourgeois society. Yet, ironically, as soon as we attempt to apply the concept to history, apparently insurmountable problems confront us.

To take a relatively simple example, relevant to one aspect of sexuality only, what are we to make of the ancient Greek historian Alexis' curious description of Polykrates, sixth-century B.C. ruler of Samos?2 In the course of his account of the luxurious habits of Polykrates, Alexis stresses his numerous imports of foreign goods, and adds: "Because of all this there is good reason to marvel at the fact that the tyrant is not mentioned as having sent for women or boys from anywhere, despite his passion for liaisons with males. . . ." Now, that Polykrates did not "send for women" would seem to us to be a direct corollary of "his passion for liaisons with males." But to Alexis—and we know that his attitude was shared by all of Greek antiquity3—sexual passion in any form implied sexual passion in all forms. Sexual categories which seem so obvious to us, those which divide humanity into "heterosexuals" and "homosexuals," seem
unknown to the ancient Greeks.

A problem thus emerges at the start: the categories which most historians normally use to analyze sexual matters do not seem adequate when we deal with Greek antiquity. We might, of course, simply dismiss the Greeks as "peculiar"—a procedure as common as it is unenlightening—but we would confront similar problems with respect to most other societies. Or, we might recognize the difference between Greek sexuality and our own, but not admit that it creates a problem in conceptualization. Freud, for example, writes:

The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own no doubt lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasize its object. The ancients glorified the instinct and were prepared on its account to honor even an inferior object; while we despise the instinctual activity in itself, and find excuses for it only in the merit of the object.  

Having made this perceptive comment, he lets the subject drop: so striking a contrast is, for him, a curiosity, rather than the starting point for serious critique of the very categories of sexuality.

Most investigators into sexuality in history have in fact treated their subject as so many variations on a single theme, whose contents were already broadly known. This is not only true of those who openly treat the history of sexuality as a species of entertainment, but even of those whose purpose is more serious and whose work is considered more significant from an historical point of view. One example, chosen from the much-admired The Other Victorians of Steven Marcus, is typical. Marcus describes a very Victorian flagellation scene which appears in the anonymous My Secret Life. After describing its contents, he states categorically:

But the representation in My Secret Life does something which the pornography cannot. It demonstrates how truly and literally childish such behavior is; it shows us, as nothing else that I know does, the pathos of perversity, how deeply sad, how cheerless a condemnation it really is. It is more than a condemnation; it is—or was—an imprisonment for life. For if it is bad enough that we are all imprisoned within our own sexuality, how much sadder must it be to be still further confined within this foreshortened, abridged and parodically grotesque version of it.

Marcus already knows the content and meaning of sexuality, Victorian or otherwise. It was not My Secret Life which gave him his knowledge, but rather his predetermined and prejudiced "knowledge"
which allowed him to use *My Secret Life* to create a catalogue of examples of a generalized and universal sexuality, a sexuality which was not the result but the organizing principle of his study. Given this pre-knowledge, sexuality in history could hardly become a problem—it was simply a given.

Not surprisingly, for Marcus as well as for many other "sex researchers"—from Freudians to positivists—the sexuality which is "given," which is sexuality *tout court*, is what they perceive to be the sexuality of their own century, culture, and class, whether it bears a fundamentally "popular" stamp or comes decked out in full scientific garb.

In any approach that takes as predetermined and universal the categories of sexuality, real history disappears. Sexual practice becomes a more or less sophisticated selection of curiosities, whose meaning and validity can be gauged by that truth—or rather truths, since there are many competitors—which we, in our enlightened age, have discovered. This procedure is reminiscent of the political economy of the period before, and all too often after, Marx, but it is not a purely bourgeois failing. Many of the chief sinners are Marxists.

A surprising lack of a properly historical approach to the subject of sexuality has allowed a fundamentally bourgeois view of sexuality and its subdivisions to deform twentieth-century Marxism. Marx and Engels themselves tended to neglect the subject and even Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* by no means succeeded in making it a concern central to historical materialism. The Marxism of the Second International, trapped to so great a degree within a narrow economism, mainly dismissed sexuality as merely superstructural. Most later Marxist thought and practice, with a few notable exceptions—Alexandra Kollontai, Wilhelm Reich, the Frankfurt School—has in one way or another accepted this judgement.

In recent years questions concerning the nature of sexuality have been re-placed on the Marxist agenda by the force of events and movements. The women's movement, and, to an increasing degree, the gay movement, have made it clear that a politics without sexuality is doomed to failure or deformation; the strong offensive of the American right-wing which combines class and sexual politics can only re-enforce this view.⁴ The feminist insistence that "the personal is political," itself a product of ongoing struggle, represents an immense step forward in the understanding of social reality, one which must be absorbed as a living part of Marxist attitudes toward sexuality. The important comprehension that sexuality, class, and politics cannot easily be disengaged from one another must serve as the basis of a
materialist view of sexuality in historical perspective as well.

**SEXUALITY AS IDEOLOGY**

The contemporary view of sexuality which underlies most historical work in this field is the major stumbling block preventing further progress into the nature of sexuality in history. A brief account of it can be provided here, largely in the light of feminist work, which has begun to discredit so much of it. What follows is a composite picture, not meant to apply as a whole or in detail to specific movements and theories. But the general assumptions which inform this view appear at the center of the dominant ideologies of sexuality in twentieth-century capitalist societies, and it is against these assumptions that alternative theories and practices must be gauged and opposed.

In spite of the elaborate discourses and analyses devoted to it, and the continual stress on its centrality to human reality, this modern concept of sexuality remains difficult to define. Dictionaries and encyclopedias refer simply to the division of most species into males and females for purposes of reproduction; beyond that, specifically human sexuality is only described, never defined. What the ideologists of sexuality describe, in fact, are only the supposed spheres of its operation: gender; reproduction, the family, and socialization; love and intercourse. To be sure, each of these spheres is thought by them to have its own essence and forms ("the family," for example), but together they are taken to define the arena in which sexuality operates.

Within this arena, sexuality as a general, over-arching category is used to define and delimit a large part of the world in which we exist. The almost perfect congruence between those spheres of existence which are said to be sexual and what is viewed as the "private sphere" of life is striking. As Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, working partly within this view of sexuality, puts it, "The most significant and intriguing historical questions relate to the events, the causal patterns, the psychodynamics of private places: the household, the family, the bed, the nursery, and kinship systems." Indeed, a general definition of the most widely accepted notion of sexuality in the later twentieth century might easily be "that which pertains to the private, to the individual," as opposed to the allegedly "public" spheres of work, production, and politics.

This broad understanding of sexuality as "the private" involves other significant dualities, which, while not simple translations of the general division into private and public spheres, do present obvious analogies to it in the minds of those who accept it. Briefly, the sexual sphere is seen as the realm of psychology, while the public sphere is
seen as the realm of politics and economics; Marx and Freud are often
taken as symbolic of this division. The sexual sphere is considered the
realm of consumption, the public sphere that of production; the former is
sometimes viewed as the site of use value and the latter as that of ex-
change value. Sexuality is the realm of “nature,” of the individual, and
of biology; the public sphere is the realm of culture, society, and
history. Finally, sexuality tends to be identified most closely with the
female and the homosexual, while the public sphere is conceived of as
male and heterosexual.

The intertwined dualities are not absolute, for those who believe
in them are certain that although sexuality properly belongs to an
identifiable private sphere, it slips over, legitimately or, more usually,
illegitimately, into other spheres as well, spheres which otherwise
would be definitely desexualized. Sexuality appears at one and the
same time as narrow and limited and as universal and ubiquitous. Its
role is both overestimated as the very core of being and under-
estimated as a merely private reality.

Both views refer sexuality to the individual, whom it is used to
define. As Richard Sennett suggests,

Sexuality we imagine to define a large territory of who we are and
what we feel. . . . Whatever we experience must in some way touch
on our sexuality, but sexuality is. We uncover it, we discover it, we
come to terms with it, but we do not master it.6

Or, as Foucault rather more succinctly states, “In the space of a few
centuries, a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of what
we are to sex.” This is, after all, why we write about it, talk about it,
worry about it so continuously.

Under the impulse of these assumptions, individuals are en-
couraged to see themselves in terms of their sexuality. This is most
easily seen in such examples of “popular wisdom” as that one must
love people for their inner, that is, sexual, selves, and not for “mere in-
cidentals,” like class, work, and wealth, and in the apparently wide-
spread belief that the “real me” emerges only in private life, in the sup-
posedly sexual spheres of intercourse and family, that is, outside of
class, work, and public life. Sexuality is thereby detached from socio-
economic and class realities, which appear, in contrast, as external
and imposed.

The location of sexuality as the innermost reality of the in-
dividual defines it, in Sennett’s phrase, as an “expressive state,” rather
than an “expressive act.” For those who accept the foregoing
assumptions, it appears as a thing, a fixed essence, which we possess
as part of our very being; it simply is. And because sexuality is itself seen as a thing, it can be identified, for certain purposes at least, as inherent in particular objects, such as the sex organs, which are then seen as, in some sense, sexuality itself.

But modern sexual ideologues do not simply argue that sexuality is a single essence; they proclaim, rather, that it is a group of essences. For although they tell us that sexuality as a general category is universally shared by all of humanity, they insist that sub-categories appear within it. There are thus said to be sexual essences appropriate to “the male,” “the female,” “the child,” “the homosexual,” “the heterosexual” (and indeed to “the foot-fetishist,” “the child-molester,” and on and on). In this view, identifiable and analytically discrete groups emerge, each bearing an appropriate sexual essence, capable of being analyzed as a “case history,” and given a normative value. Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis of 1886 may still stand as the logical high-point of this type of analysis, but the underlying attitude seems to permeate most of contemporary thought on the subject.

In sum, the most commonly held twentieth-century assumptions about sexuality imply that it is a separate category of existence (like “the economy,” or “the state,” other supposedly independent spheres of reality), almost identical with the sphere of private life. Such a view necessitates the location of sexuality within the individual as a fixed essence, leading to a classic division of individual and society and to a variety of psychological determinisms, and, often enough, to a full-blown biological determinism as well. These in turn involve the enshrinement of contemporary sexual categories as universal, static, and permanent, suitable for the analysis of all human beings and all societies. Finally, the consequences of this view are to restrict class struggle to non-sexual realms, since that which is private, sexual, and static is not a proper arena for public social action and change.

BIOLGY AND SOCIETY

The inadequacies of this dominant ideology require us to look at sexuality from a very different perspective, a perspective which can serve both as an implicit critique of the contemporary view as well as the starting point for a specifically Marxist conceptualization.

If we compare human sexuality with that of other species, we are immediately struck by its richness, its vast scope, and the degree to which its potentialities can seemingly be built upon endlessly, implicating the entire human world. Animal sexuality, by contrast, appears limited, constricted, and pre-defined in a narrow physical sphere.

This is not to deny that human sexuality, like animal sexuality, is
deeply involved with physical reproduction and with intercourse and its pleasures. Biological sexuality is the necessary precondition for human sexuality. But biological sexuality is only a precondition, a set of potentialities, which is never unmediated by human reality, and which becomes transformed in qualitatively new ways in human society. The rich and ever-varying nature of such concepts and institutions as marriage, kinship, "love," "eroticism" in a variety of physical senses and as a component of fantasy and religious, social, and even economic reality, and the general human ability to extend the range of sexuality far beyond the physical body, all bear witness to this transformation.

Even this bare catalogue of examples demonstrates that sexuality is closely involved in social reality. Marshall Sahlins makes the point clearly, when he argues that sexual reproduction and intercourse must not be considered a priori as a biological fact, characterized as an urge of human nature independent of the relations between social persons... [and] acting upon society from without (or below). [Uniquely among human beings] the process of "conception" is always a double entendre, since no satisfaction can occur without the act and the partners as socially defined and contemplated, that is, according to a symbolic code of persons, practices and proprieties. ¹¹

Such an approach does not seek to eliminate biology from human life, but to absorb it into a unity with social reality. Biology as a set of potentialities and insuperable necessities provides the material of social interpretations and extensions; it does not cause human behavior, but conditions and limits it. Biology is not a narrow set of absolute imperatives. That it is malleable and broad is as obvious for animals, whose nature is altered with changing environment, as for human beings.¹³ The uniqueness of human beings lies in their ability to create the environment which alters their own—and indeed other animals'—biological nature.

Human biology and culture are both necessary for the creation of human society. It is as important to avoid a rigid separation of "Nature" and "Culture" as it is to avoid reducing one to the other, or simply uniting them as an undifferentiated reality. Human beings are doubly determined by a permanent (but not immutable) natural base and by a permanent social mediation and transformation of it. An attempt to eliminate the biological aspect is misleading because it denies that social behavior takes place within nature and by extension of natural processes. Marx's insistence that "men make their own history
but they do not make it just as they please" applies as well to biological as to inherited social realities. An attempt—as in such disparate movements as Reichian analysis or the currently fashionable "sociobiology"—to absorb culture into biology is equally misleading, because, as Sahlin's puts it,

Biology, while it is an absolutely necessary condition for culture, is equally and absolutely insufficient; it is completely unable to specify the cultural properties of human behavior or their variations from one human group to another.

It is clear that, within certain limits, human beings have no fixed, inherited nature. We become human only in human society. Lucien Malson may overstate his case when he writes, "The idea that man has no nature is now beyond dispute. He has or rather is a history," but he is correct to focus on history and change in the creation of human culture and personality. Social reality cannot simply be "peeled off" to reveal "natural man" lurking beneath.

This is true of sexuality in all its forms, from what seem to be the most purely "natural" acts of intercourse or gender differentiation and hierarchy to the most elaborated forms of fantasy or kinship relations. Contrary to a common belief that sexuality is simply "natural" behavior, "nothing is more essentially transmitted by a social process of learning than sexual behavior," as Mary Douglas notes.

Even an act which is apparently so purely physical, individual, and biological as masturbation illustrates this point. Doubtless we stroke our genitals because the act is pleasurable and the pleasure is physiologically rooted, but from that to masturbation, with its large element of fantasy, is a social leap, mediated by a vast set of definitions, meanings, connotations, learned behavior, shared and learned fantasies.

Sexual reality is variable, and it is so in several senses. It changes within individuals, within genders, and within societies, just as it differs from gender to gender, from class to class, and from society to society. Even the very meaning and content of sexual arousal varies according to these categories. Above all, there is continuous development and transformation of its realities. What Marx suggests for hunger is equally true of the social forms of sexuality: "Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth."

There do exist certain sexual forms which, at least at a high level
of generality, are common to all human societies: live, intercourse, kinship, can be understood universally on a very general level. But that both "saint and sinner" have erotic impulses, as George Bataille rightly claims, 22 or that Greece, Medieval Europe, and modern capitalist societies share general sexual forms, do not make the contents and meaning of these impulses and forms identical or undifferentiated. They must be carefully distinguished and separately understood, since their inner structures and social meanings and articulations are very different. The content and meaning of the eroticism of Christian mysticism is by no means reducible to that of Henry Miller, nor is the asceticism of the monk identical to that of the Irish peasants who delay their marriages to a relatively late age. 23

The forms, content, and context of sexuality always differ. There is no abstract and universal category of "the erotic" or "the sexual" applicable without change to all societies. Any view which suggests otherwise is hopelessly mired in one or another form of biologism, and biologism is easily put forth as the basis of normative attitudes toward sexuality, which, if deviated from, may be seen as rendering the deviant behavior "unhealthy" and "abnormal." Such views are as unenlightening when dealing with Christian celibacy as when discussing Greek homosexual behavior.

SEXUALITY AS PRAXIS (I)

When we look more directly at the social world itself, it becomes apparent that the general distinguishing mark of human sexuality, as of all social reality, is the unique role played in its construction by language, consciousness, symbolism, and labor, which, taken together—as they must be—are praxis, the production and reproduction of material life. Through praxis human beings produce an ever-changing human world within nature and give order and meaning to it, just as they come to know and give meaning to, and, to a degree, change, the realities of their own bodies, their physiology. 24 The content of sexuality is ultimately provided by human social relations, human productive activities, and human consciousness. The history of sexuality is therefore the history of a subject whose meaning and contents are in a continual process of change. It is the history of social relations.

For sexuality, although part of material reality, is not itself an object or thing. It is rather a group of social relations, of human interactions. Marx writes in the Grundrisse that "Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand." 25 This seems to put the em-
phasis precisely where it should be: individuals do exist as the constituent elements of society, but society is not the simple multiplication of isolated individuals. It is constituted only by the relationships between those individuals. On the other hand, society does not stand outside of and beyond the individuals who exist within it, but is the expression of their complex activity. The emphasis is on activity and relationships, which individuals ultimately create and through which, in turn, they are themselves created and modified. Particular individuals are both subjects and objects within the process, although in class societies the subjective aspect tends to be lost to sight and the processes tend to become reified as objective conditions working from outside.

Sexuality is relational. It consists of activity and interactions—active social relations—and not simply “acts,” as if sexuality were the enumeration and typology of an individual’s orgasms (as it sometimes appears to be conceived of in, for example, the work of Kinsey and others), a position which puts the emphasis back within the individual alone. “It” does not do anything, combine with anything, appear anywhere; only people, acting within specific relationships create what we call sexuality. This is a significant aspect of what Marx means when he claims, in the famous Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach, that “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.” Social relations, like the biological inheritance, at once create, condition, and limit the possibilities of individual activity and personality.

Praxis is fully meaningful only at the level of socio-historical reality. The particular interrelations and activities which exist at any moment in a specific society create sexual and other categories which, ultimately, determine the broad range of modes of behavior available to individuals who are born within that society. In turn, the social categories and interrelations are themselves altered over time by the activities and changing relationships of individuals. Sexual categories do not make manifest essences implicit within individuals, but are the expression of the active relationships of the members of entire groups and collectivities.

We can understand this most clearly by examining particular categories. We speak, for example, of homosexuals and heterosexuals as distinct categories of people, each with its sexual essence and personal behavioral characteristics. That these are not “natural” categories is evident. Freud, especially in the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, and other psychologists have demonstrated that the boundaries between the two groups in our own society are fluid and difficult to define. And, as a result of everyday experience as well
as the material collected in surveys like the Kinsey reports, we know that the categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality are by no means coextensive with the activities and personalities of heterosexuals and homosexuals. Individuals belonging to either group are capable of performing and, on more or less numerous occasions, do perform acts, and have behavioral characteristics and display social relationships thought specific to the other group.

The categories in fact take what are no more than a group of more or less closely related acts ("homosexual"/"heterosexual" behavior) and convert them into case studies of people ("homosexuals"/"heterosexuals"). This conversion of acts into roles/personalities, and ultimately into entire subcultures, cannot be said to have been accomplished before at least the seventeenth century, and, as a firm belief and more or less close approximation of reality, the late nineteenth century.** What we call "homosexuality" (in the sense of the distinguishing traits of "homosexuals"), for example, was not considered a unified set of acts, much less a set of qualities defining particular persons, in pre-capitalist societies. Jeffrey Weeks, in discussing the act of Henry VIII of 1533 which first brought sodomy within the perview of statute law, argues that

the central point was that the law was directed against a series of sexual acts, not a particular type of person. There was no concept of the homosexual in law, and homosexuality was regarded not as a particular attribute of a certain type of person but as a potential in all sinful creatures.**

The Greeks of the classical period would have agreed with the general principle, if not with the moral attitude. Homosexuality and heterosexuality for them were indeed groups of not necessarily very closely related acts, each of which could be performed by any person, depending upon his or her gender, status, or class.** "Homosexuals" and "heterosexuals" in the modern sense did not exist in their world, and to speak, as is common, of the Greeks, as "bisexual" is illegitimate as well, since that merely adds a new, intermediate category, whereas it was precisely the categories themselves which had no meaning in antiquity.

Heterosexuals and homosexuals are involved in social "roles" and attitudes which pertain to a particular society, modern capitalism. These roles do have something in common with very different roles known in other societies—modern homosexuality and ancient pederasty, for example, share at least one feature: that the participants were of the same sex and that sexual intercourse is often in-
volved—but the significant features are those that are not shared, including the entire range of symbolic, social, economic, and political meanings and functions each group of roles possesses.

"Homosexual" and "heterosexual" behavior may be universal; homosexual and heterosexual identity and consciousness are modern realities. These identities are not inherent in the individual. In order to be gay, for example, more than individual inclinations (however we might conceive of those) or homosexual activity is required; entire ranges of social attitudes and the construction of particular cultures, subcultures, and social relations are first necessary. To "commit" a homosexual act is one thing; to be a homosexual is something entirely different.

By the same token, of course, these are changeable and changing roles. The emergence of a gay movement (like that of the women's movement) has meant major alterations in homosexual and heterosexual realities and self-perceptions. Indeed it is abundantly clear that there has always existed in the modern world a dialectical interplay between those social categories and activities which ascribe to certain people a homosexual identity and the activities of those who are so categorized. The result is the complex constitution of "the homosexual" as a social being within bourgeois society. The same is, of course, true of "the heterosexual," although the processes and details vary.31

The example of homosexuality/heterosexuality is particularly striking, since it involves a categorization which appears limited to modern societies. But even categories with an apparently more general application demonstrate the same social construction.

For example, as feminists have made abundantly clear, while every society does divide its members into "men" and "women," what is meant by these divisions and the roles played by those defined by these terms varies significantly from society to society and even within each society by class, estate, or social position. The same is true of kinship relations. All societies have some conception of kinship, and use it for a variety of purposes, but the conceptions differ widely and the institutions based on them are not necessarily directly comparable. Above all, the modern nuclear family, with its particular social and economic roles, does not appear to exist in other societies, which have no institution truly analogous to our own, either in conception, membership, or in articulation with other institutions and activities. Even within any single society, family/kinship patterns, perceptions, and activity vary considerably by class and gender.32

The point is clear: the members of each society create all of the sexual categories and roles within which they act and define themselves. The categories and the significance of the activity involved will
vary as widely as do the societies within whose general social relations they occur, and categories appropriate to each society must be discovered by historians.

Not only must the categories of any single society or period not be hypostasized as universal, but even the categories which are appropriate to each society must be treated with care. Ultimately, they are only parameters within which sexual activity occurs or, indeed, against which it may be brought to bear. They tend to be normative—and ideological—in nature, that is, they are presented as the categories within which members of particular societies ought to act. The realities of any society only approximate the normative categories, as our homosexual/heterosexual example most clearly showed. It is both as norms, which determine the status of all sexual activity, and as approximations to actual social reality that they must be defined and explored.

SEXUALITY AS PRAXIS (II)

Within this broad approach, the relationship between sexual activity and its categories and those that are non-sexual, especially those that are economic in nature, becomes of great importance.

Too many Marxists have tried to solve this problem by placing it within a simplified version of the "base/superstructure" model of society, in which the base is considered simply as "the economy," narrowly defined, while sexuality is relegated to the superstructure; that is, sexuality is seen as a "reflex" of an economic base. Aside from the problems inherent in the base/superstructure model itself, this approach not only reproduces the classic bourgeois division of society into private and public spheres, enshrining capitalist ideology as universal reality, but loses the basic insights inherent in viewing sexuality as social relations and activity.

Recently, many theorists, mainly working within a feminist perspective, began to develop a more sophisticated point of view, aiming, as Gayle Rubin put it in an important article, "to introduce a distinction between 'economic' system and 'sexual' system, and to indicate that sexual systems have a certain autonomy and cannot always be explained in terms of economic forces." This view, which represented a great advance, nonetheless still partially accepted the contemporary distinction between a sphere of work and a sphere of sexuality.

The latest developments of socialist-feminist theory and practice have brought us still further, by demonstrating clearly that both sexuality in all its aspects and work/production are equally involved in the production and reproduction of all aspects of social reality, and

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cannot easily be separated out from one another. Above all, elements of class and sexuality do not contradict one another or exist on different planes, but produce and reproduce each other's realities in complex ways, and both often take the form of activity carried out by the same persons working within the same institutions.

This means, among other things, that what we consider "sexuality" was, in the pre-bourgeois world, a group of acts and institutions not necessarily linked to one another, or, if they were linked, combined in ways very different from our own. Intercourse, kinship, and the family, and gender, did not form anything like a "field" of sexuality. Rather, each group of sexual acts was connected directly or indirectly—that is, formed a part of—-institutions and thought patterns which we tend to view as political, economic, or social in nature, and the connections cut across our idea of sexuality as a thing, detachable from other things, and as a separate sphere of private existence.

The Greeks, for example, would not have known how, and would not have sought, to detach "sexuality" from the household (oikos), with its economic, political, and religious functions; from the state (especially as the reproduction of citizenship); from religion (as fertility cults or ancestor worship, for example); or from class and estate (as the determiner of the propriety of sexual acts, and the like). Nor would they have been able to distinguish a private realm of sexuality" and "the economy" became separable from other spheres of the Greek oikos or household unit was as much or more a public institution as a private one. This is even more true of so-called primitive societies, where sexuality (mediated through kinship, the dominant form of social relations) seems to permeate all aspects of life uniformly.

It was only with the development of capitalist societies that "sexuality" and "the economy" became separable from other spheres of society and could be counterposed to one another as realities of different sorts. To be sure, the reality of that separation is, in the fullest sense of the word, ideological; that is, the spheres do have a certain reality as autonomous areas of activity and consciousness, but the links between them are innumerable, and both remain significant in the production and reproduction of social reality in the fullest sense. The actual connections between sexuality and the economy must be studied in greater detail, as must the specific relations between class, gender, family, and intercourse,

if the Marxist and sexual liberation movements are to work in a cooperative and fruitful, rather than antagonistic and harmful, manner.

A second major problem-area stands in the way of a fuller understanding of sexuality as praxis. The approach to sexuality we
have outlined does overcome the apparently insurmountable opposition between society and the individual which marks the ideological views with which we began our discussion. But it overcomes it at a general level, leaving many specific problems unsolved. The most important of these is the large and thorny problem of the determination of the specific ways in which specific individuals react to existing sexual categories and act within or against them. To deal with this vast subject fully, Marxists need to develop a psychology—or a set of psychologies—compatible with their social and economic analyses.40

Much the most common approach among western Marxists in the last fifty years towards creating a Marxist psychology has been an attempt, in one manner or another, to combine Marx and Freud. Whether in the sophisticated and dialectical versions of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse, or Wilhelm Reich, or in what Richard Lichtman has called "the popular view that Freud analyzed the individual while Marx uncovered the structure of social reality,"41 these attempts arose out of the felt need for a more fully developed Marxist psychology in light of the failure of socialist revolutions in the west.

None of these attempts has, ultimately, been a success, and their failure seems to lie in real contradictions between Marxist and Freudian theory. Both present theories of the relationship between individual and society, theories which contradict each other at fundamental levels.

Freud does accept the importance of social relations for individual psychology. For him, sexuality has its roots in physiology, especially in the anatomical differences between the sexes, but these distinctions are not in themselves constitutive of our sexuality. Sexuality is indeed a process of development in which the unconscious takes account of biology as well as of society (mediated through the family) to produce an individual's sexuality.42

The problems begin here. Society, for Freud, is the medium in which the individual psyche grows and operates, but it is also in fundamental ways antipathetical to the individual, forcing him or her to repress instinctual desires. Freud's theory preserves the bourgeois division between society and the individual, and ultimately gives primacy to inborn drives within an essentially ahistorical individual over social reality. In a revealing passage, Freud argues:

Human civilization rests upon two pillars, of which one is the control of natural forces and the other the restriction of our instincts. The ruler's throne rests upon fettered slaves. Among the instinctual components which are thus brought into service, the sexual instincts, in the narrow sense of the word, are conspicuous for their
strength and savagery. Woe if they should be set loose! The throne would be overturned and the ruler trampled under foot.43

In spite of the fact that Freud does not view instincts as purely biological in nature,44 he certainly sees sexuality as an internal, biologically-based force, a thing inherent in the individual. This is a view which makes it difficult to use Freud alongside of Marx in the elucidation of the nature of sexuality. This is not to say that we need necessarily discard all of Freud. The general theory of the unconscious remains a powerful one. Zillah Eisenstein pointed in a useful direction when she wrote, "Whether there can be a meaningful synthesis of Marx and Freud depends on whether it is possible to understand how the unconscious is reproduced and maintained by the relations of the society."45 But it is uncertain whether the Freudian theory of the unconscious can be stripped of so much of its specific content and remain useful for Marxist purposes. The work of Lacan, which attempts to "de-biologize" the Freudian unconscious by focusing on the role of language, and that of Deleuze and Guattari, in their Anti-Oedipus, which attempts to provide it with a more fully socio-historical content, are significant beginnings in this process.46

At the present time, however, Marxism still awaits a psychology fully adequate to its needs, although some recent developments are promising, such as the publication in English of the important non-Freudian work of the early Soviet psychologist L.S. Vygotsky.47 But if psychology is to play a significant role in Marxist thought, as a science whose object is one of the dialectical poles of the individual/society unity, then it must have a finer grasp of the nature of that object. At this point, we can only agree with Lucien Seve that the object of psychology has not yet been adequately explored.48

THE ISSUE

The historical study of sexuality has an important role to play in contemporary struggles. Through a better understanding of how capitalist societies developed, and are continuing to develop, the modern ideology of sexuality—including the struggles which have occurred around it, both between and within classes—we will better understand the specific role it plays in legitimating contemporary society and in defusing class struggle, as well as its contradictory potentialities for undermining the capitalist system. We can also begin to develop specific socialist strategies for political activity which combines economic and sexual struggle in fruitful ways. And, finally, we will be in a better position to examine the possible outlines of sexuality in a socialist society, with the useful comprehension that the sexuality

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of the future cannot be a simple unveiling of something which capitalism "repressed" or distorted, but must be an essentially new creation within the total configuration of the developing social relations of a future society.

The entire field of sexuality and its political and historical content and significance is clearly undergoing a process of major revision within the Marxist tradition. New approaches to methodology and conceptualization of use to historians are beginning to remake our understanding of this significant area of social experience. But more questions have been raised than have been answered. Marxist approaches to sexuality in history remain in a state of flux, in spite of, or rather because of, the important new work being done in this area.

The current exploratory state of the field has dictated the nature of this issue of the Radical History Review. For other thematic issues, which dealt with areas in which much good work had been done over a long period of time, and in which the basic theoretical perspectives have been worked out, it was possible to present a selection of important synthetic articles which summarized the field and called attention to its progress and its remaining problem-areas; such, for example, was our Winter 1978-1979 issue (no. 19) on "Marxism and History: the British Contribution." For sexuality in history, where the field is still in process of construction, another approach is necessary.

We therefore begin this issue in an unusual way. The section entitled "Sex in History: Critique of Recent Work" presents a series of review essays dealing with current works which we felt were of significance for the development of the entire field and which raise a large number of problems in conceptualization, problems which our reviewers have attempted to come to grips with. E.P. Thompson and Ellen Ross deal with varying approaches to family history and examine the very status of the concept of "the family" as a tool for historical analysis. Joseph Interrante and Carol Lasser investigate the nature of capitalist patriarchy and its historical and contemporary developments, and attempt to create a new theoretical framework within which it can be better understood. Blanche Cook and Burt Hansen look at the manner in which homosexuality has been viewed in recent years, discuss the historical construction of that category, and describe the various ways in which lesbians and gay males have responded to it. Harry Liebersohn approaches the problem of the use of sexual ideology in the service of class politics in Fascist Germany, demonstrating the inadequacies of of current approaches which themselves substitute amorphous and ideological categories for serious historical analysis.

Naturally, as historians, we realize that new modes of concep-
ualization must be accompanied by serious research into archival and other sources of historical material concerning sexuality. In our "Texts" section we print two pieces which address themselves directly to the sources. Nancy Sahli surveys the archival material available to the historians of the nineteenth and twentieth century United States. Martin Duberman edits and (with the assistance of two anthropologists, Fred Eggan and Richard Clemmer) comments on an important set of early twentieth-century documents dealing with Hopi Indian culture, an imperialist assault on it, and Hopi resistance in the domain of sexuality. This provides a significant example of the kind of illuminating source material which continues to lie untapped in archives around the world.

In the section entitled "Studies in the History of Sexuality" we present four articles which use some of the new theoretical perspectives in the field of sexuality to guide their empirical research. Ann Snitow studies mass market romances aimed at millions of American women, and explores the ways in which their semi-pornographic content provides ideological support for traditional women's roles while attempting to reduce some of the tensions which stem from those very roles. Jeffrey Weeks, continuing the research he began in his book Coming Out (reviewed in this issue by Burt Hansen), explores the ways in which the category of modern homosexuality came into being in late nineteenth and twentieth century England as a process of interaction between the wider society and homosexuals themselves. Louis Kern examines in detail the contradictions between a deliberately chosen sexual communism and a received patriarchal tradition within the nineteenth century utopian Oneida community. Donna Haraway demonstrates how much of biological research, especially "sociobiology," has in fact functioned as a kind of science of capitalist reproduction; she points to the close relationship between scientific theory in this field and political and economic reality, and draws out the implications for the scientific construction of sexual concepts, including that most important of concepts, "Nature" itself.

In this issue's section on teaching, "The Struggle in the Class," Liz Phillips discusses a new series of volumes which present some of the first syntheses of new work in the field of sexuality aimed at a high school audience.

The issue also includes, within our regular departments, historical work devoted to subjects not directly related to sexuality. Sandi Cooper, in a review of Wank's Doves and Spionats, discusses public intervention in the process of foreign policy making in Europe and the United States from the late nineteenth century to the Vietnam War. And, picking up the theme of the Vietnam War, Joshua Brown
provides a critique of its recent treatment in Hollywood-style movies, focusing on *The Deer Hunter* and its version of the war and working-class life in America.

**Notes**

This essay represents a condensed and reworked version of the introduction to a much longer work on the nature of sexuality in history. The author would like to thank Betsy Blackmar, Edwin Burrows, Victoria de Grazia, Elizabeth Fee, Joseph Interrante, Michael Merrill, David Varas, and Michael Wallace for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts. He dedicates the essay to David Varas, without whose help and encouragement it would have been impossible to write it.

3. Cf. for other examples, Lucian, “The Ship” (Loeb Classical Library edition of Lucian, vol. VI, 481), or the “Love Stories,” attributed to Plutarch (Moralia 771E-778E), which provide pairs of similar love tales, each consisting of one involving heterosexual love and one involving homosexual love.
14. These points are strongly insisted upon by Timpanaro (*On Materialism*). See also Raymond Williams, “Problems of Materialism,” *New Left Review* no. 109 (1978) 3-18.
23. Cf. the important analysis of this and similar points in Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (New York, 1956), 159 ff.
26. Cf. the work of the so-called “symbolic interactionists,” best exemplified by Kenneth Plummer, *Sexual Stigma* (London, 1975). Their work, although not Marxist and too focused on individuals per se, does represent a major step forward in our understanding of sexuality as interpersonal.
the pioneer work in this field, suggests the seventeenth century for the emergence of the first homosexual subculture. Randolph Trumbach, "London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behavior and Western Culture in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Social History* 11 (1977/78) 1-33, argues for the eighteenth century. Jeffrey Weeks, in two important works, "Sins and Disease," *History Workshop* 1 (1976) 211-219, and *Coming Out* (London, 1977), argues, correctly, I believe, that the full emergence of homosexual role and subculture occurs only in the second half of the nineteenth century. Cf. the articles by Weeks and Hansen in this issue of the *Radical History Review*. All of these works deal with England, but there is little reason to suspect that the general phenomenon, at least, varies very considerably in other bourgeois countries.


30. The best work available on Greek homosexual behavior is K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (London, 1978), which contains further bibliography.


33. This appears to be true even of such relatively unorthodox thinkers as Louis Althusser (*Lenin and Philosophy* [New York, 1971], 127-186); E. Balibar (*Reading Capital* [New York, 1970], pt. III); P. Hindess and B. Hirst (Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production [London, 1975], esp. ch. 1); and Claude Meillassoux, *Femmes Greniers et Capitaux* [Paris, 1975], pt. I).


39. For works which begin this process, cf. those cited in notes 35 and 36 above, plus the articles collected in Z. Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy*.


37.78. form a good introduction to the study of the relationship between Marx and Freud, arguing for their incompatibility.

42. An important recent attempt to demonstrate the social underpinnings of Freud's thought is Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York, 1974). Eli Zaretsky, "Male Supremacy and the Unconscious," *Socialist Review* no. 21/22 (1975) 7-55, demonstrates several defects in Freud's understanding of socio-historical reality, but suggests that they are remediable.


