

alty and golf. In 1922 she was made a Dame of the British Empire.

She fell in love with a number of women, most notably with Virginia Woolf, whom Ethel Smyth met when she was seventy-one. "I don't think I have ever cared for anyone more profoundly," she noted in her diary. "For eighteen months I have thought of little else." By this time she was suffering from deafness, and had to stop composing. She shifted her energy to her autobiographical volumes, which became renowned for their frankness and excellent prose style. Always forthright, she declared in 1935: "I am the most interesting person I know, and I don't care if anyone else thinks so." Her own summation of the three reasons for her remaining undefeated was: "An iron constitution, a fair share of fighting spirit, and, most important of all, a small but independent income."

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Christopher St. John, *Ethyl Smyth: A Biography*, London: Longmans, 1959.

Evelyn Gettone

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION APPROACH

In the 1980s a seemingly new approach to the study of homosexual behavior arose, which its advocates termed social construction. Denying the existence of any "transhistorical" definition of same-sex behavior, the social constructionist scholars hold that sexual behavior is, in all significant aspects, a product of cultural conditioning, rather than of biological and constitutional factors. Thus same-sex behavior would have an entirely different meaning, say, in ancient Egypt or Tang China from what it would have in nineteenth-century Europe. In the view of some proponents of this approach, the "modern homosexual" is sui generis, having come into existence in Europe and North America only about 1880; hence it is vain to conduct comparative research on earlier eras or non-Western societies.

The social constructionists contrast their own approach with that of the "essentialists" (a term of their own devising), who ostensibly believe in an eternal and unchanging homosexuality. Yet most critics of social construction are not essentialists, and to label them as such amounts to a caricature that has proved tactically useful for polemical purposes but has advanced understanding very little. One should also bear in mind that the discussion is not current in the gay/lesbian community as a whole, but is confined to scholars.

Strengths and Weaknesses. What is valuable about the social construction approach is the fact that it alerts researchers to the dangers of anachronism. It makes no sense, for example, to refer to such ancient Greek figures as Socrates and Alexander the Great as gay without noting that their erotic life was conducted in a framework in which pederasty, the love of an adult man for an adolescent boy, was the rule, and not the androphilia—male adult-adult relationship—that is dominant today.

Granting this point, social construction errs too far on the side of difference in denying any commonality whatever among same-sex love in ancient Greece, in the Middle Ages, and in contemporary Western society. This denial of commonality and continuity would deprive scholars of the fruits of cross-cultural study of same-sex behavior. Another consequence of social construction orthodoxy is to exclude biological factors from any role in the shaping of sexual desire. Some extreme adherents claim that the body itself is a mere social construct—implying a rejection of material reality itself.

Sources. It has been suggested that the conflict between social construction and its opponents is another version of the old debate about nature versus nurture, between those who believe that human conduct is largely conditioned by biological forces and those who attribute the

leading role to culture (the environmentalists). One's first response is to say that human behavior is the result of a confluence of the two forces, but this compromise is usually rejected by those in the environmentalist camp. In similar fashion, the social constructionists hold that culture is supreme, and are little prepared to concede biological constants. The social construction debate has also been compared to the medieval philosophical dispute between the realists and the nominalists, those who believed that the world contained real essences as against those who believed that we know only names for primal qualities. The parallel is inexact, however, since few social constructionists would be willing to adopt the nominalist views they are said to hold. Indeed, thoroughgoing nominalism would make the social constructionist claims meaningless, since there would be no stable social categories to contrast with the purportedly labile ones of sexual orientation.

The actual roots of social construction as a theory are twofold. First is the heritage of German historicism, which (emerging in the late eighteenth century), saw successive historical epochs as each having a distinct character, radically different from those that precede and follow. This trend, which posits a series of historical eras almost hermetically sealed from one another, accounts for the social constructionist belief that there is a "modern homosexual," a type that has existed only since ca. 1880. This eighteenth-century source shows that the social construction approach is not as new as its proponents suggest.

The second source is the tendency of modern **sociology** and **anthropology** to attribute human behavior solely to cultural determinants. In some social constructionists this tendency is tinged with late **Marxism**—which may itself be regarded as a sociological doctrine. These two main sources were given focus by the writings of the French social thinker and historian Michel Foucault, who though

not self-identified as a social constructionist seminally influenced such proponents of social construction as Kenneth Plummer and Jeffrey Weeks. These and other adherents picked up Foucault's ideas of historical discontinuity, of "ruptures" radically segmenting periods of historical development.

Two Key Questions. A major objection to the social constructionist position is that homosexual behavior existed in Western society during the hundreds of years in which its existence was formally denied by the dominant culture; the authorities imposed obligatory heterosexuality upon the entire population and subjected anyone known for "sodomitical" behavior to economic boycott and social ostracism, if not to criminal prosecution. A curious outcome of these centuries of oppression is that when the first writings on homosexuality reached the general public at the end of the nineteenth century, some individuals revealed to psychiatrists that, although they had responded solely to members of their own sex since adolescence, until then they imagined themselves unique in the whole world. They had "constructed" their own sexual consciousness without any social input—a feat that should be impossible according to social constructionist postulates.

Another fact that contradicts the social constructionists is the abundant evidence for gay **subcultures** in Europe and the United States for at least a hundred years before the modern, political phase of homosexuality began—a subculture whose participants, however, merely thought of themselves as members of an erotic freemasonry from whose forbidden pleasures the vulgar mass was excluded. (While the evidence becomes sparser as one goes back in time, in some sense these subcultures can be traced back to the twelfth century in the **Middle Ages**.)

The "modern homosexual" is a *political* concept; the phenomenon began when individuals oriented toward their

own sex, in the wake of trials such as those of Oscar Wilde and Prince Philipp zu Eulenburg, came to regard themselves as part of an oppressed minority cherishing a grievance against late Victorian society and its norms of sexual morality, and demanding their own "place in the sun." This trend was for a long time characteristic of northern Europe (where generally homosexual conduct was criminalized) and was foreign to the dwellers of Mediterranean lands. Since the 1960s, the "gay" identity has had an undeniable component of political activism; it was the badge of the individual who proclaimed his sexual nature openly and campaigned for the liberation of himself and others like him from the unjust prohibitions and discriminations of "straight" society. One can readily grant that in ancient Greece and Rome no one was "gay" in this sense. Such a political stance arose only in dialectical opposition to the Judeo-Christian attitude toward homosexual behavior and those who engaged in it. Even today many of those who participate in homosexual activity far from the mass meetings and rallies of the "gay ghettos" are heedless of this political aspect of homosexuality, which they perceive as irrelevant to their desires for erotic gratification.

Conclusions. As has been noted, social construction theory has made a contribution in warning against anachronism, the tendency to project back into the past one's own familiar experiences and life ways. Yet the idea that cultural climates shift, changing the expression of sexuality with them, is scarcely a new discovery. What is disappointing about social construction is that it offers no explanation of the "grounding" of such change. What mechanisms—economic, political, intellectual—cause a society to move from one dominant cultural climate to another? Moreover, social construction has gone too far in seeking to discourage transhistorical and cross-cultural investigations of homosexual desire. Implied roadblocks of this kind must not stymie the investiga-

tor, for comparative studies across time and across social systems are a vital prerequisite to the emergence of a satisfactory concept of human homosexual behavior in all its fullness and complexity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. John Boswell, "Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," *Salmagundi*, 58-59 (1982-83), 89-113; Wayne R. Dynes, "Wrestling with the Social Boia Constructor," *Out in Academia*, 2:1-2 (1988), 18-29; Robert Padgug, "Sexual Matters: On Conceptualizing Sexuality in History," *Radical History Review*, 20 (1979), 3-23; Kenneth Plummer, ed., *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*, Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1981; Will Roscoe, "Making History: The Challenge of Gay and Lesbian Studies," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 15:3/4 (1988), 1-40.

Wayne R. Dynes

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

This term has acquired various meanings in the course of the past century and a half. Late nineteenth-century Europe saw the formation of Marxian working-class parties that called themselves Social Democrats. These gained in numbers and influence, but were beset by the unresolved problem of whether to limit themselves to parliamentary maneuvering, or else to resort to such extra-parliamentary means as general strikes and working-class violence to achieve power.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 triggered a major crisis within the left, in which the parliamentary and reformist elements sided with Social Democracy, while those committed to violent revolution joined Communist Parties organized on the Leninist model. This splitting of the left provoked internecine struggles that weakened it in the face of the emerging fascist and National Socialist movements in the years of the Great Depression. Social Democracy tended to become the party of the petty bourgeoisie and the intellectuals, while the working class proper rallied to its Communist rivals.