

Zeitschrift: Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft
= revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera
d'etnologia

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

Band: 13 (2008)

Artikel: Theorising sexuality : gender power, feminism and sexual "liberation"

Autor: Mottier, Véronique

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007329>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 26.11.2024

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THEORISING SEXUALITY

GENDER POWER, FEMINISM AND SEXUAL «LIBERATION»

ABSTRACT

This article proposes to treat sexuality as a cultural object, analysing the sexual meanings produced by specific discourses on sexuality and gender power. More precisely, it focuses on the ways in which sexual liberation theorists have theorised sexuality as a site of liberation from capitalist power relations and it explores feminist critiques of sexual liberation discourse, drawing out the ways in which feminist debates around sexuality have recast sexuality as a crucial site of gender power.

VÉRONIQUE MOTTIER

This article will argue for the analysis of sexuality as a cultural object¹. Just as the differences between men and women cannot be reduced to biological factors alone, being better understood in terms of the concept of «gender» which takes into account the social meanings that different societies attach to masculinity and femininity, sexuality is not a «natural, biological, universal experience». The ways in which different cultures at different periods have made sense of erotic pleasures and dangers vary widely. Sexuality is shaped by social and political institutions and discourses and is embedded in gendered relations of power. Normative ideas about masculinity and femininity structure cultural understandings of sexuality, while gendered sexual meanings are, in turn, grounded in hierarchies based around ethnicity and race.

To take an example, recent cultural battles around immigration in Europe have centred on controversies around sexual ethics. Muslim immigrants in particular are, in a homogenising way, accused of rejecting both Western sexual liberation and women's liberation, and also of a lack of tolerance towards sexual diversity. This portrayal of cultural «outsiders» as more sexually repressed than the native population is an interesting reversal of earlier historical depictions of non-Western sexuality. Indeed, as Said (1978) has pointed out, ori-

ental cultures have traditionally been the repository of Western sexual fantasy. Exotic representations of «the Orient» which conjured up images of unlimited Eastern sensuality and guilt-free licentiousness have been a persistent theme amongst Western intellectuals including the eighteenth-century French political theorist Montesquieu in his *Persian Letters* (1721), the nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert, or the nineteenth-century British explorer Sir Richard Burton (translator of *Arabian Nights* and the *Kama Sutra*). In a similar vein, classic early Western ethnographies such as Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (1928) or Bronislaw Malinowski's *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929) have routinely portrayed non-white races as closer to nature and therefore much freer sexually, in contrast to the supposedly more civilised, and therefore sexually more restrained, West. Contemporary cultural stereotypes of black men as sexually potent and better-endowed than white men reflect the ongoing projection of Western sexual and racial fantasies and anxieties.

Such recent controversies around sexuality illustrate the intricate links between sexuality and the social relations of power related to gender which have, historically, shaped it. The connections between sexuality and

¹ Sections of this article are developed in more detail in Mottier (2008). Thanks are due to the Institute of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Lausanne and Jesus College, Cambridge for institutional support.

power are all the more important because our relation to ourselves as sexual beings constitutes such a central component of modern identity, as the social theorist Michel Foucault emphasises. Sexuality, as he famously put it, constitutes «an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population» (Foucault 1990: 103). A similar point is made by the British social theorist Anthony Giddens who argues: «Somehow [...] sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity, and social norms» (Giddens 1992: 15). The two authors disagree, however, on the political implications of the centrality of sexuality to modern self-identity. Whereas, for Foucault, sexuality is a prime target of modern relations of power and fundamental to processes of societal disciplinisation of «disorderly» populations, Giddens (1992) identifies the spread of the «pure» relationship over the past few decades as a positive phenomenon (by «pure» relationships he means to denote a type of relationship which, in a social context where women's economic dependency towards men has lessened and exit options such as divorce have become accessible on demand, exists for its own sake). Though more fragile than traditional marriage which was propped up more firmly by wider social institutions, the pure relationship involves transformations of intimacy which contribute towards a democratisation of the private as well as the public sphere. Concentrating on heterosexual relationships, Giddens (1992), similar to the German sociologists Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), sees women as the vanguard of more equal understandings of sexuality and intimacy. In this view, transformations of male sexuality are largely a result of women's struggles to change their lives. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995: 153) put it: «men's liberation is a passive affair» and men «seem to engage in self-liberation as spectators». In contrast, feminist theories of sexuality have frequently – though by no means uniformly – tended to emphasise the subordinate position of women in the realm of sexuality.

Against this backdrop, this article proposes to examine two theorisations of power in the realm of sexuality which have each been highly influential over the past few decades but which have developed contrasting ways of conceptualising the links between power and sexuality. These are the sexual liberation discourse and feminist analyses of sexuality.

SEXUAL LIBERATION «AGAINST» POWER

Sexual liberation theorists such as the Freudian Marxists Marcuse, Reich or Fromm argued in the 1960s that sex is a natural, positive force which is repressed by bourgeois capitalist society. They called for sexual «liberation» which, they claimed, would transform the entire social and political order. Perhaps the most influential of the three, Reich argued that full «orgastic potency», which he equated with «genital gratification» and conceptualised as a biological capacity, had been destroyed by modern society. In his view, the majority of individuals suffer from sexual repression. This cultural repression of «natural» sexual energy was, he claimed, the origin of all neurosis. As he put it in 1948: «My contention is that every individual who has managed to preserve a bit of naturalness knows that there is only one thing wrong with neurotic patients: the lack of full and repeated sexual satisfaction» (Reich 1948: 37). Reich thus developed analyses of the ways in which modern society turns individuals into neurotics, putting the responsibility for this «mass neurosis» at first on capitalism and later on authoritarian society and its repressive social institutions more generally. The institution of the «authoritarian compulsive family» as incarnated in the nuclear family came in for particular criticism since it reproduced in Reich's eyes the authoritarian structures of the state at the micro-level and propped up the social, economic and sexual oppression of women through patriarchy. Denouncing the compulsive monogamy that created so much spousal unhappiness and the economic dependency of women and children within the family, Reich also saw the family as a central agent in the social repression of natural childhood and adolescent sexual exploration. Reich consequently called for a «sexual revolution» which would liberate the natural force of sexuality from its repression by capitalist society and bourgeois culture – something that would not be possible, he believed, without overthrowing the social and political order as well. As he wrote in the preface to the second edition of his 1930 work *The Sexual Revolution*: «Authoritarian social order and social sexual suppression go hand in hand, and revolutionary «morality» and gratification of the sexual needs go together» (Reich 1969: xxix).

The call for sexual liberation from capitalist and patriarchal repression by the Freudian Left was to have a deep influence on the leftist and feminist movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Sexual liberationists' hopes that the sexual revolution would not only liberate sexuality but also subvert wider repressive structures of

power have, however, faded since and feminist critiques of the differential effects of the sexual revolution on women and men have led to a profound rethinking of the links between sexuality and gender power.

GENDERING SEXUALITY

Sexuality has constituted a central concern in feminist struggles. Whereas the first women's movement that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century prioritised the fight for civil and political equality for women, sexuality nevertheless constituted an important arena for the critique of gender relations. Drawing on biological justifications of the double moral standard which saw men as naturally promiscuous and women as passive and chaste, feminists built upon such views of gender to argue that women's morals were consequently by nature superior to those of men. Occupying the moral high ground, they developed a critique of male sexuality which pointed at the natural lustful drives of men and male sexual freedom as the origin of the sexual oppression of women (see Bland 1995; Weeks 1989). Reflecting wider social concerns of the time concerned with the expansion of prostitution in the nineteenth century across Europe and the US, and the attendant increase in venereal disease, political activism centred especially on these areas. The «real» reason why men did not wish to give women the vote, some feminists argued, was to protect male sexual exploitation of women (Garton 2004; Levine 2003).

The women's movements which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, generally referred to as «second-wave feminism», put the politicisation of sexuality at the heart of their agenda but did so in an entirely different social context. Second-wave women's movements emerged in societies whose traditional gender relations had been fundamentally transformed by the massive post-war entry of women into the workforce. Against the backdrop of the greater economic independence which resulted both from women's entry into paid work and from the emerging state provision of welfare which offered alternative support mechanisms, wider (and partly linked) detraditionalisation processes occurred which transformed the institutions of marriage, the family and gender. Overall, women's control over their own life options increased significantly, especially for middle-class women, though rising divorce rates also produced a feminisation of poverty primarily amongst single mothers in those countries where welfare state support was weakest.

Meanwhile, a further major set of social changes took place in the area of reproductive control. In particular, the invention of the modern contraceptive pill made reliable birth control available to the wider public for the first time in human history. Followed by the subsequent elaboration of new reproductive technologies such as IVF (in vitro fertilisation), which mean that conception cannot just be prevented but also artificially produced, these changes mean that Freud's famous claim that «anatomy is destiny» is no longer true. The uncoupling of intercourse and reproduction involved a radical transformation of the conditions of female sexuality with, in turn, profound consequences for male sexuality. How far access to contraception encouraged the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s has been hotly contested but it was certainly an important structural precondition. The rise of sexual permissiveness and the emergence of new meanings around love, sex and relationships which spread from the pioneering countries of the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark across the Western world transformed the landscape of sexuality. The counter-cultural social movements which emerged in the 1960s, most prominently the American Civil Rights and anti-war movements with their slogan «make love not war» as well as the anti-authoritarian student movements in countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, were heavily influenced by sexual liberation theorists such as Reich, Fromm and Marcuse. They promoted the liberation of «natural» sexual desire from bourgeois repression as part of a wider project of political subversion of capitalist, authoritarian society.

Symbolised by the «summer of love» of 1967, the increase in sexual permissiveness has conventionally been interpreted by sociologists such as Giddens to be «gender-neutral» and to have led to greater female sexual autonomy. Many feminists initially embraced the sexual revolution with great enthusiasm, seeing sexual liberation as crucial for women's liberation generally. From the end of the 1960s, consciousness-raising groups sprang up in many countries encouraging women to explore their bodies and capacities for sexual pleasure. An example of this phenomenon is provided by the «bodysex» workshops which the sex educator Betty Dodson organised from 1973 in the US. Having presented female masturbation as a means of reversing the repression of female sexuality in her book *Liberating Masturbation* (1974), Dodson's workshops guided a circle of naked participants in collective «orgasm rituals» with the help of vibrators. Dodson further celebrated «swinging» (partner exchange) and campaigned against monogamous posses-

siveness, jealousy and sexual guilt, ideas that were promoted with considerable enthusiasm by many other sexual revolutionaries at the time.

However, the cultural transformations involved in the sexual revolution largely seemed to reproduce the unequal relations of power between men and women while celebrating a normative promiscuity which actually, feminist critics argued, benefited men more than women. Works such as Sheila Jeffreys's *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (1990) argued that, in retrospect, the revolution was less an increase in sexual freedom for women than the fulfilment of male fantasies about female availability. The rhetoric of sexual liberation legitimised male control of women's sexuality and made it impossible to «say no» to sexual advances, they claimed. As Beatrix Campbell (1980: 1ff.) put it: «the permissive era had some pay-off for women in so far as it opened up political-sexual-space. It permitted sex for women too. What it did not do was defend women against the differential effects of permissiveness on men and women... It was about the affirmation of young men's sexuality and promiscuity; [...] The very affirmation of sexuality was a celebration of *masculine sexuality*.»

Nor was the sexual revolution quite what Marxist liberation theorists had pictured. Far from the subversion of capitalism by the free reign of the pleasure principle, which Marcuse and Reich had expected, the lifting of obscenity and other morality laws that resulted from the relaxation of moral controls over sexuality opened the floodgates to the commodification of sex on a previously unprecedented scale. The national and international sex industry dramatically expanded and became major players in the capitalist global economy. Whereas Alex Comfort's bestseller *The Joy of Sex* had predicted in 1972 that sexual freedom would render prostitution unnecessary, since women would now be willing to meet all male sexual needs for free, commercial sex in reality greatly expanded – as did pornography. Both prostitution and pornography consequently rapidly reappeared on the agenda of the women's movement while, more generally, sexuality became one of the central issues of second-wave feminism. The sexual oppression of women came to be seen as a central – by some theorists, as *the* most central – area of male power over women. The new women's movement thus adopted the slogan «the personal is political», expressing the idea that many of women's «personal» life experiences are in fact rooted in the subordinated position that women as a group have within the gendered power structure. Consciousness-raising groups which aimed to increase awareness of the structural basis of individual women's experiences were

consequently seen as an important basis for collective political action. Within the context of this politicisation of the «private», sexuality was intensely discussed and problematised. It was central to an important part of feminist theory and activism from the 1970s, including issues such as the right to sexual pleasure, the right to say «no», political lesbianism and debates around contraception, abortion, rape, sexual abuse, pornography, prostitution and sexual harassment – most of these issues which mainstream politics had conventionally defined as part of the «private» sphere of the family and the individual citizen. Feminist activism undertook to introduce the politics of sex into the political arena – and generally succeeded (see also Carver & Mottier 1998).

The feminist problematisation of sexuality did not, however, constitute a unified whole. Since Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), multiple and diverging voices have participated and contributed to the debates on sexuality. Disagreements on the role of sexuality in relations of power between men and women led to both political and theoretical differences in analysis. Influential socialist feminists such as Zillah Eisenstein, Michèle Barrett, Juliet Mitchell and the French 1970s «Psych et Po» (psychoanalysis and politics) group turned towards Marxism, Freudianism or a mix of the two to explore sexual repression and its links to capitalism. Others rejected psychoanalysis altogether for its perceived fundamental misogyny, while the Marxist assumption that the exploitation of women would come to an end with the withering away of the State was dismissed on the grounds that «we cannot wait that long», as Germaine Greer succinctly put it in the *Female Eunuch* (1971).

Some feminists campaigned for the reform of the institution of heterosexuality, which was criticised for privileging male sexual needs – take, for example, Shere Hite's (1976: 420) claim that «lack of sexual satisfaction is another sign of the oppression of women» – and called for «improved» sex with men (see also Mottier 1995). Other feminists advanced «political lesbianism» as an alternative. Following the American feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson's statement made in the early 1970s that feminism is the theory, lesbianism the practice, authors such as Sheila Jeffreys, member of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, argued that women should exit relationships with men altogether, for as long as current power relations between men and women remained unequal. Doing so, they believed, would foster relations of solidarity between women, though it would not require them to actually have sex with other women. Declaring lesbianism to be a matter of «political choice», political lesbians promoted a political understanding of

sexuality. Sexual identity was not just defined by cultural, social and historical context, they argued – it was a matter of voluntary political decision. The Leeds group and others went on to argue that «it is specifically through sexuality that the fundamental oppression, that of men over women, is maintained» (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1981: 5). Political lesbianism was thus, in their view, a crucial political strategy in the fight against patriarchy.

MASCULINITY AND GENDER VIOLENCE

Controversies around political lesbianism followed by disagreements on feminist positions towards pornography and prostitution triggered major and bitter divisions amongst feminists which became particularly intense during the 1980s. American organisations such as Women Against Violence Against Women, the UK Campaign Against Pornography and New Zealand's Women Against Pornography defined prostitution and pornography as central to the oppression of women generally, in stark contrast to its portrayal within the sexual revolution as part of the wider march towards greater sexual liberation. Feminists such as Susan Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon and Susan Griffin conceptualised pornography and prostitution as forms of violence against women and sexual violence as a key feature of male domination in general. Controversially, they grounded their critique of female sexual exploitation in a broader analysis of male sexuality which identified violence as the underlying foundation of all male sexuality. As Brownmiller formulated it in her influential analysis of rape *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975: 15): «From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.» Brownmiller labelled rape a «political crime against women», a weapon of patriarchy just as Kate Millett (1970) had also argued. Shere Hite (1981: 742) agreed, stating in her report on male sexuality: «Right now, forcible physical rape stands as an overwhelming metaphor for what has been the rape – physical, emotional and spiritual – of an entire gender by our culture.»

From this perspective, pornography came to be seen as another manifestation of male violence against women, both during the production process of pornographic material and in its consequences – teaching men to eroticise the sexual subordination and abuse of women. Andrea Dworkin famously extended the analysis to intercourse itself, arguing that the sexual domination which she saw as central to pornography constitutes a basic feature of the ways in

which men and women experience intercourse in patriarchal society. As she put it: «In the fuck, the man expresses the geography of his dominance: her sex, her insides are part of his domain as a male. He can possess her as an individual – be her lord and master – and thus be expressing a private right of ownership (the private right issuing from his gender); or he can possess her by fucking her impersonally and thus be expressing a collective right of ownership without masquerade or manners» (Dworkin 1987: 66). Dworkin's views echoed statements made eight years earlier by the Leeds Feminist Revolutionary Group which had argued in its 1981 manifesto: «Only in the system of oppression that is male supremacy does the oppressor actually invade and colonise the interior of the body of the oppressed [...] Penetration is an act of great symbolic significance by which the oppressor enters the body of the oppressed» (1981: 5-6).

Male sexuality was thus theorised as intrinsically violent. Whereas Dworkin located this violence within the historic context of current gender relations, Catherine MacKinnon criticised cultural theories of sexuality for obscuring the universal forms of the oppression of women through sexual abuse, rape, prostitution, and pornography. Not all feminists agreed, however. Critics such as Ellen Willis, Gayle Rubin, Susie Bright, Lynne Segal, Carol Queen and Carol Vance, followed a decade later in France by Ovidie and her *Porno Manifesto* (2004), began to define themselves as «sex-positive» feminists in contrast to the perceived negative stance towards sex which pervaded the anti-pornography and prostitution crusades. These critics attacked the anti-pornography stance on the grounds that its analysis of porn which assumes that there is no difference between violent, misogynistic porn and porn produced for lesbians by lesbians, for example, was over-simplistic. They rejected the «depressing» views of sex which reduce female sexual pleasure in intercourse to the result of male brainwashing and denounced the dangers of the legal strategies pursued by anti-porn activists to freedom of speech in general, as well as the «disturbing» political alliances with the religious right (who meanwhile continued to combat women's and gay rights) which the anti-porn crusaders had made. In the US, organisations such as FACT, Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce, were founded in the early 1980s to fight the attempts to legislate against pornographic materials led by Dworkin and MacKinnon. The transnational feminist Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, based in Thailand, on the other hand, combated the position which called for the abolition of all prostitution promoted by the US-based Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW). The Alliance called for the decriminalisation of voluntary prostitution, re-conceptualised as a form of «work» that women can choose

to engage in, while battling against any type of forced prostitution and trafficking in women. Meanwhile, women working in the porn industry and prostitutes, who had recently started to found their own interest groups and trade unions, often vigorously objected against feminist labelling of their activities as inherently degrading for women (though the prominent porn star Linda Boreman who had appeared in the notorious porn movie *Deep Throat* as «Linda Lovelace» joined forces with MacKinnon and Dworkin). Adopting the «sex work» label, organisations of sex workers argued that the political priority should be to try to legalise and improve working conditions in the sex industry rather than to try to eradicate commercial sex altogether. Sex-positive feminism further spawned a series of thriving businesses specialising in the sale of women-friendly sex toys and publications, particularly in the US, such as *Good Vibrations*, *Babeland*, the *Down There Press* and the lesbian magazine *On Our Backs*.

The battles between «sex-positive» and anti-prostitution/pornography feminists, described as the feminist «sex wars» by Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter (1995), led to deep and permanent splits within feminism from the 1980s onwards. One of the reasons for this was that the conflicts did not only concern differences about political strategies regarding commercial sex but also involved fundamentally different ways of thinking about sexuality and its links to relations of power between the genders. The women's movement came to be criticized by lesbians for privileging heterosexual concerns, by working-class women for reflecting middle-class interests and by women of colour for being implicitly white. Against this backdrop, poststructuralist, postcolonial and postmodern theories of gender emerged (from the 1980s) which rejected what they perceived of as simplistic binary oppositions between men-the-oppressors and women-the-passive-victims which, though politically mobilising, were conceptually unhelpful. For example, as the African-American feminist bell hooks (1982) pointed out, sexual violence such as «rape» has historically played a particularly important role for black women as a central element of the system of slavery and continues to impact on contemporary sexualised portrayals of black women – glossing over such differences in the name of universal male oppression is neither useful nor accurate. The homogenising category of «black feminist» has though, in turn, also been criticized for masking cultural and class differences. For example, the African-American feminist novelist Alice Walker was actively involved in the international campaign against clitoridectomy which is currently practiced primarily in several countries on the African continent and some parts of the Middle East as well as amongst some immigrant communities

in Western countries. Feminist activists, including prominent US feminists Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan, joined third-world feminists such as the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi to call for the redefinition of the practice as «female genital mutilation» and therefore as a form of violence against women (Steinem 1983). As a result of international campaigns, the practice was declared a violation of human rights by Amnesty International and the United Nations and was declared illegal in many Western as well as non-Western legislations in the mid-1990s. Whereas Alice Walker's earlier work had criticized white feminists for routinely excluding black women by speaking out on their behalf, her anti-female genital mutilation novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), dedicated to «the blameless vulva», and the documentary film *Warrior Marks* (Walker & Parmar 1993), which she co-produced, on the same topic have been accused of cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism because they claim to speak on behalf of African women on the grounds of Walker's own ancestry, while actually imposing an ethnocentric American vision of African cultural practices. More generally, Western feminists have been criticised for focusing on third-world cultural practices, while largely ignoring the fact that surgical interventions on women's genitals such as «laser vaginal rejuvenation» and «designer laser vaginoplasty» are currently amongst the fastest growing areas of cosmetic surgery in many Western countries.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In contrast to sexual liberationist discourse on the links between sexuality and power, feminist discourse – though by no means homogenous, as we have seen – argues that sexuality cannot be simply pitted «against» power. Feminist analyses of sexuality have constructed the institution of heterosexuality and intimate relationships as particularly important sites of the oppression of women by men and therefore as loci of political struggle. While this has led at least some radical feminists to argue for the boycott of heterosexuality, the privileged focus on gender power within intimate relationships has also resulted in a comparative theoretical neglect of the role of state regulation on the family and sexuality. Paradoxically however, it is also in the context of the politics of sexuality that feminist activism has most frequently and successfully interpellated the state, albeit in contradictory ways. Whereas feminists have called for state legislation in areas such as rape, sexual harassment and pornography, pushing these issues from the private into the public sphere, they have at the same time argued against state intervention in matters such as abortion, on the grounds

of a woman's «private» right to decide. Feminist politics of sexuality have also, as we have seen, been the source of great conflict amongst feminists. Calls for more differentiated analyses of male and female sexuality have pointed out the importance of other types of identity, especially those of class and race, to the understanding of the ways in which power relations shape sexual experiences (see for example Amos & Parmar 1984; Connell 1995; Mottier 2008).

Certainly, relations of power between men and women have shifted dramatically over the past few decades as have normative models of femininity and masculinity. More generally, sexuality has figured prominently in Western political agendas since the late 1980s, covering national as well as international issues. Controversies around teenage pregnancy rates, the prevention of sexually transmitted disease, the regulation of prostitution, the sexual exploitation of children, internet porn, gays and lesbians in the military, gay «marriage» and adoption, hate crimes, new reproductive technologies and the «private» morality of politicians are topics of intense public debate and older issues such as access to abortion are currently being subjected to renewed examination. Issues such as Aids, sex tourism, the international trafficking of women and internet networks

of paedophiles illustrate the global nature of the politics of sexuality as well as the resurgence of moral purity discourses and their political influence.

Against the backdrop of the politics of sexuality, as well as wider social and technological developments, sexuality has undergone profound changes over the past few decades. In the process, understandings of sexuality have opened up to a plurality of meanings. Whereas liberation theorists saw sexual pleasure as crucial for the fulfilment of full human potential and happiness, competing understandings have portrayed sexuality as the site of risk, death, moral decay, commercial exploitation, male violence, political self-affirmation and the destabilisation of identities. Such competing constructions of meaning illustrate both the intricate links between sexuality and power and the impossibility of simply opposing sexuality with power. As the sociologist Ken Plummer puts it: «However neutral and objective talk about sexual diversity appears to be, it is also talk about power. Every culture has to establish – through both formal and informal political processes – the range and scope of the diversities that will be outlawed or banned» (1984: 219). It follows that no culture can have «full» sexual freedom, since sexuality can never be «free» from power.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AMOS Valerie, PARMAR Pratibha
1984. «Challenging Imperial Feminism». *Feminist Review* 17: 3-19.
- BECK Ulrich, BECK-GERNSHEIM Elizabeth
1995. *The Normal Chaos of Love*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- BLAND Lucy
1995. *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914*. London: Penguin.
- BROWNMILLER Susan
1975. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- CARVER Terrell, MOTTIER Véronique (Eds.)
1998. *Politics of Sexuality. Identity, Gender, Citizenship*. London: Routledge.
- CAMPBELL Beatrix
1980. «A Feminist Sexual Politics: Now You See It Now You Don't». *Feminist Review* 5: 1-18.
- COMFORT Alex
1972. *The Joy of Sex*. New York: Crown.
- CONNELL R.W.
1995. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity.
- DODSON Betty
1974. *Liberating Masturbation. A Meditation on Self-Loving*. Bodysex designs.
- DWORKIN Andrea
1997 (1987). *Intercourse*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- DUGGAN Lisa, HUNTER Nan D.
1995. *Sex Wars. Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- FOUCAULT Michel
1990 (1976). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- GARTON Stephen
2004. *Histories of Sexuality. Antiquity to Sexual Revolution*. London: Equinox.
- GIDDENS Anthony
1992. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- GREER Germaine
1971. *Female Eunuch*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- HITE Shere
1976. *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality*. New York: Dell.
1981. *The Hite Report on Male Sexuality*. New York: Ballantine
- HOOKS bell
1982. *Ain't I a Woman*. London: Pluto Press.
- JEFFREYS Sheila
1990. *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution*. London: The Women's Press.
- LEEDS REVOLUTIONARY FEMINIST GROUP
1981. *Love Thy Enemy? The Debate between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism*. London: Onlywomenpress.
- LEVINE Philippa
2003. *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire*. New York: Routledge.
- MALINOWSKI Bronislaw
1987 (1929). *The Sexual Life of Savages*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- MEAD Margaret
2001 (1928). *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization*. New York: Perennial.
- MILLETT Kate
1970. *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago.
- MOTTIER Véronique
1995. «The Politics of Sex: Truth Games and the Hite Reports». *Economy and Society* 24(4): 520-39.
2008. *Sexuality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (VSI Series).
- OVIDIE
2004. *Porno Manifesto*. Paris: La Musardine.

- PLUMMER Ken
1984. «Sexual Diversity: A Sociological Perspective», in Kevin HOWELLS (Ed.), *Sexual Diversity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- REICH Wilhelm
1960 (1948). «The Orgasm Theory», in: *Selected Writings: An Introduction to Orgonomy*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
1969 (1930). *The Sexual Revolution: Towards a Self-Governing Character Structure*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- SAID Edward W.
1978. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- STEINEM Gloria, MORGAN Robin
1983. «The International Crime of Genital Mutilation», in: Gloria STEINEM (Ed.), *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- WALKER Alice
1992. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- WALKER Alice, PARBAR Pratibha
1993. *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*. San Diego: Harvest.
- WEEKS Jeffrey
1989. *Sex, Politics and Society: the Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*. Harlow: Longman (2nd ed.).

AUTHOR

Véronique Mottier is Professor in Sociology at the University of Lausanne and Director of Studies in Social and Political Sciences at Jesus College, Cambridge.

Institut d'anthropologie et de sociologie
Université de Lausanne
Anthropole
1015 Lausanne

Veronique.Mottier@unil.ch