John D. Wrathall, an independent scholar and historian of the YMCA, raises the question of evidence in the archives. Looking at the correspondence of a YMCA leader in the late nineteenth century, he emphasizes the importance—and the difficulty—of reading the silences and gaps in the documents of the past.

The Social Construction of Sexuality

JEFFREY WEEKS

The more expert we become in talking about sexuality, the greater the difficulties we seem to encounter in trying to understand it. Despite sustained attempts over many years to "demystify" sex, and several decades of much proclaimed—or condemned—"liberalism" and "permissiveness," the erotic still arouses acute moral anxiety and confusion. This is not because sex is intrinsically "naughty," as a sensitive commentator has rightly remarked, but "because it is a focus for powerful feelings." The strong emotions it undoubtedly arouses [give] to the world of sexuality a seismic sensitivity making it a transmission belt for a wide variety of needs and desires: for love and anger, tenderness and aggression, intimacy and adventure, romance and predatoriness, pleasure and pain, empathy and power. We experience sex very subjectively.

At the same time, the very mobility of sexuality, its chameleon-like ability to take many guises and forms, so that what for one might be a source of warmth and attraction, for another might be one of fear and hate, makes it a peculiarly sensitive conductor of cultural influences, and hence of social and political divisions. Not surprisingly, therefore, especially during the past century, sexuality has become the focus of fierce ethical and political divisions: between traditional moralists (of various religious hues, or of none) and liberals, between the high priests of sexual restraint and the advocates of sexual liberation, between the defenders of male privilege and those such as feminists who challenged it, and between the forces of moral regulation and a host of radical sexual oppositions, some of whom attack each other as much as they oppose sexual orthodoxy.

In the past such debates might have been regarded as marginal to the mainstream of political life, whatever their importance for those closely involved. Increasingly over the past decades, however, sexual issues have moved closer to the centre of political concerns. . . . [T]he increasing politicization of sex in the past century offers new possibilities and consequent challenges: not just of moral control, and its inevitable converse, sexual deviance, but of political analysis, opposition and of change. This makes it all the more necessary that we know what we are talking about when we speak of sexuality, that we clarify the meaning (or more accurately meanings) of this complex phenomenon. We need to know what it has been and is, before we can rationally decide what it should, or could, be.

This is an easy aim to proclaim. It is a notoriously more hazardous task to carry out. All of us have so much invested in our own concept of what is the true sex that we find it difficult enough to understand dispassionately the sexual needs and

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behaviour of our closest contemporaries, let alone the infinitely more ambiguous desires of our predecessors. The mists of time and the various disguises of prejudice conveniently obscure other ways of living a sexual life. This resilient will-not-to-know is backed up by an assumption which is deeply embedded in our culture: that our sexuality is the most spontaneously natural thing about us. It is the basis for some of our most passionate feelings and commitments. Through it, we experience ourselves as real people; it gives us our identities, our sense of self, as men and women, as heterosexual and homosexual, "normal" or "abnormal," "natural" or "unnatural." Sex has become, as the French philosopher Michel Foucault famously put it, "the truth of our being." But what is this "truth"? And on what basis can we call something "natural" or "unnatural"? Who has the right to lay down the laws of sex? Sex may be "spontaneous" and "natural." But it has not stopped an endless barrage of advice on how best to do it.

Let us start with the term "sex" and its common uses. Its very ambiguity signals the difficulty. We learn very early on from many sources that "natural" sex is what takes place with members of the "opposite sex." "Sex" between people of the "same sex" is therefore, by definition, "unnatural." So much is taken for granted. But the multiple meanings of the word "sex" in these last few sentences should alert us to the real complexity of the question. The term refers both to an act and to a category of person, to a practice and to a gender. Modern culture has assumed an intimate connection between the fact of being biologically male or female (that is, having appropriate sex organs and reproductive potentialities) and the correct form of erotic behaviour (usually genital intercourse between men and women). The earliest usage of the term "sex," in the sixteenth century, referred precisely to the division of humanity into the male section and the female section (that is, to differences of gender). The dominant meaning today, however, and one current since the early nineteenth century, refers to physical relations between the sexes, "to have sex." The extension of the meanings of these words indicates a shift in the way that "sexuality" (the abstract noun referring to the quality of being "sexual") is understood in our culture.

The social processes through which this has taken place are complex. But the implications are clear, for they are ones we still live with. In the first place, there is an assumption of a sharp distinction between "the sexes," a dichotomy of interests, even an antagonism ("the battle of the sexes") which can only he precariously bridged. Men are men and women women—and rarely the twain shall meet. But secondly, there is a belief that "sex" is an overpowering natural force, a "biological imperative" mysteriously located in the genitals (especially the wayward male organs) that sweeps all before it (at least if you are male) like hamlets before an avalanche and that somehow bridges this divide, like a rainbow over a chasm. Thirdly, this gives rise to a pyramidical model of sex, to a sexual hierarchy stretching downwards from the apparently Nature-endowed correctness of heterosexual genital intercourse to the bizarre manifestations of "the perverse" hopefully safely buried at the base but unfortunately always erupting in dubious places.

This view of the world of sex is deeply embedded in our culture, part of the air we breathe. It provides an ideological justification for uncontrollable male lust, and even, therefore, for the fact of rape, for the downgrading of female sexual autonomy, and for the way we treat those sexual minorities who are different from ourselves, as well as for the more acceptable verities of love, relationships and security. Since the

late nineteenth century, moreover, this approach has had the ostensibly scientific endorsement of the broad tradition known as sexology, the "science of desire." Sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, August Forel, Magnus Hirschfeld, Sigmund Freud and many others, sought to discover the true meaning of sex by exploring its various guises: the experience of infantile sexuality, relations between the sexes, the influence of the "germ plasm," the hormones and chromosomes, the nature of the "sexual instinct," and the causes of sexual perversions. They often disagreed with one another; they frequently contradicted themselves. In the end, even the most dedicated had to admit to a certain defeat. . . .

Sexology has had important positive effects in extending our knowledge of sexual behaviours and I have no desire to denigrate its real achievements. Without it we would be enslaved to an even greater extent than we are to myths and nostrums. On the other hand, in its search for the "true" meaning of sex, in its intense interrogation of sexual difference, and in its obsessive categorization of sexual perversities it has contributed to the codification of a "sexual tradition," a more or less coherent body of assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, rules, methods of investigation and forms of moral regulation, which still shape the way we live our sexualities. Is sex threatening and dangerous? If we want to believe that then we can find justification not only in a particular Christian tradition but in the writings also of the founding father of sexology, Krafft-Ebing, and in many of his scientific successors. Is sex, on the other hand, a source of potential freedom, whose liberatory power is only blocked by the regressive force of a corrupt civilization . . . ? If so, then justification can be found in works of polemicists and "scientists" from the nineteenth century to the present, embracing not only socialist pioneers such as Charles Fourier and Edward Carpenter, Freudo-Marxists like Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, but also more ostensibly sober-suited "social bookkeepers" like Alfred Kinsey. Whatever our moral and political values, it has been difficult to escape the naturalistic fallacy that the key to our sex lies somewhere in the recesses of "Nature," and that sexual science provides the best means of access to it. . . .

Against the certainties of this tradition I . . . offer an alternative way of understanding sexuality. This involves seeing it not as a primordially "natural" phenomenon but rather as a product of social and historical forces. "Sexuality," I shall argue, is a "fictional unity," that once did not exist, and at some time in the future may not exist again. It is an invention of the human mind. As Carole S. Vance has suggested, "the most important organ in humans is located between the ears."

This does not mean we can simply ignore the massive edifice of sexuality which envelops us. . . . Of course sexuality exists as a palpable social presence, shaping our personal and public lives. But I am suggesting that what we define as "sexuality" is an historical construction, which brings together a host of different biological and mental possibilities—gender identity, bodily differences, reproductive capacities, needs, desires and fantasies—which need not be linked together, and in other cultures have not been. All the constituent elements of sexuality have their source either in the body or the mind, and I am not attempting to deny the limits posed by biology or mental processes. But the capacities of the body and the psyche are given meaning only in social relations. . . .

. . . [T]he meanings we give to "sexuality" are socially organized, sustained by a variety of languages, which seek to tell us what sex is, what it ought to be—and

what it could be. Existing languages of sex, embedded in moral treatises, laws, educational practices, psychological theories, medical definitions, social rituals, pornographic or romantic fictions, popular music, and commonsense assumptions (most of which disagree) set the horizon of the possible. They all present themselves up as true representations of our intimate needs and desires. The difficulty lies in their contradictory appeals, in the babel of voices they bring forth. In order to make sense of them, and perhaps to go beyond the current limits on the possible, we need to learn to translate these languages—and to develop new ones. This has been one of the tasks of those who have sought, in recent years, to "deconstruct" the apparent unity of this world of sexuality. Together they have provided the elements of a non-essentialist concept of "sexuality."

From social anthropology, sociology and post-Kinsey sex research there has come a growing awareness of the vast range of sexualities that exist in other cultures and within our own culture. Other cultures, Ruth Benedict noted, act as laboratories "in which we may study the diversity of human institutions." . . .

The legacy of Freud and his theory of the dynamic unconscious is another major source of the new sexual theory. From the tradition of psychoanalysis that he initiated has emerged a recognition that what goes on in the unconscious mind often contradicts the apparent certainties of conscious life. The life of the mind—of fantasies above all—reveals a diversity of desires to which the human being is heir. It unsettles the apparent solidities of gender, of sexual need, of identity. . . .

Alongside these developments, the "new social history" of recent years, with its emphasis on the history of populations and of "mentalities," the experiences and beliefs of the downtrodden and oppressed as much as the powerful, has posed new questions about what we mean by "the present" as well as about the "history of the past." *The History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault has had a spectacular influence on modern thinking about sex because it grew out of, as well as contributed to, this fertile development of our historical understanding. Foucault, like Freud two generations earlier, stands at a crossroads of sexual thought, important as much for the questions he raises as for the answers he provides.

Finally, and most powerfully of all, the emergence of new social movements concerned with sex—modern feminism, the gay and lesbian and other radical sexual movements—ha[s] challenged many of the certainties of the "sexual tradition," and ha[s] offered new insights into the intricate forms of power and domination that shape our sexual lives. The politics of homosexuality have placed on the agenda questions about sexual preference, identity, and choice. The women's movement has forced a recognition of the multiple forms of female sexual subordination, from endemic male violence and misogyny to sexual harassment and a pervasive language of sexual denigration and abuse. It has demanded a recognition of women's rights over their own bodies by re-posing questions about consent and reproductive rights, desire and pleasure. Again there are as many questions posed as answers given. Differences have emerged between men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, black and white. No acceptable codes of appropriate behaviour have been elaborated despite all the heated debates. But something much more valuable has happened. We are being forced to rethink what we understand by sexuality because of a growing awareness of the tangled web of influences and forces—economics, race, gender, morals—that shape our emotions, needs, desires and relationships. . . .

In practice, most writers on our sexual past assume that sex is an irresistible natural energy barely held in check by a thin crust of civilization. . . .

These approaches assume that sex offers a basic "biological mandate" which presses against and must be restrained by the cultural matrix. This is what I mean by an essentialist approach to sexuality. It takes many forms. Liberatory theorists such as Reich and Marcuse tend to see sex as a beneficent force which is repressed by a corrupt civilization. Contemporary sociobiologists on the other hand see all social forms as in some unspecified way emanations of basic genetic material. Yet they all see a world of nature which provides the raw material we must use for the understanding of the social. Against all these arguments I want to stress that sexuality is shaped by social forces. And far from being the most natural element in social life, the most resistant to cultural [molding], it is perhaps one of the most susceptible to organization. Indeed I would go so far as to say that sexuality only exists through its social forms and social organization. Moreover, the forces that shape and mould the erotic possibilities of the body vary from society to society. "Sexual socialization," Ellen Ross and Rayn[a] Rapp have written, "is no less specific to each culture than is socialization to ritual, dress or cuisine." This puts the emphasis firmly where it should belong, on society and social relations rather than on nature.

I do not wish to deny the importance of biology. The physiology and morphology of the body provide the preconditions for human sexuality. Biology conditions and limits what is possible. But it does not cause the patterns of sexual life. We cannot reduce human behaviour to the mysterious workings of the DNA or what two contemporary writers have recently called "the dance of the chromosomes." I prefer to see in biology a set of potentialities which are transformed and given meaning only in social relationships. Human consciousness and human history are very complex phenomena.

This theoretical stance has many roots: in the sociology and anthropology of sex, in the revolution in psychoanalysis and in the new social history. But despite these disparate starting points, it coheres around a number of common assumptions. First, there is a general rejection of sex as an autonomous realm, a natural domain with specific effects, a rebellious energy that the social controls. We can no longer set "sex" against "society" as if they were separate domains. Secondly, there is a widespread recognition of the social variability of sexual forms, beliefs, ideologies and behaviour. Sexuality has a history, or more realistically, many histories, each of which needs to be understood both in its uniqueness and as part of an intricate pattern. Thirdly, we must abandon the idea that we can fruitfully understand the history of sexuality in terms of a dichotomy of pressure and release, repression and liberation. Sexuality is not a head of steam that must be capped lest it destroy us; nor is it a life force we must release to save our civilization. Instead we must learn to see that sexuality is something which society produces in complex ways. It is a result of diverse social practices that give meaning to human activities, of social definitions and self-definitions, of struggles between those who have power to define and regulate, and those who resist. Sexuality is not given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency. . . .

Five broad areas stand out as being particularly crucial in the social organization of sexuality: kinship and family systems, economic and social organization, social regulation, political interventions, and the development of "cultures of resistance."

(1) Kinship and family systems

These *appear* as the most basic and unchanging forms of all—preeminently the "natural" focus of sexual socialization and experience. The taboo on incest, that is the prohibition of sexual involvement within certain degrees of relationship, seems to be a universal law, marking the passage, it has been often argued, from a state of nature to human society: it is constitutive of culture. (It is also the basis for our most enduring myth—that of Oedipus.) Yet the forms of the taboo vary enormously. In the Christian traditions of the Middle Ages, marriage to the seventh degree of relationship was prohibited. Today, marriage to first cousins is allowed. In the Egypt of the Pharoahs, sibling marriages were permitted, and in some cases so were father–daughter marriages, in the interests of preserving the purity of the royal line. The existence of the incest taboo illustrates the need of all societies to regulate sex—but not how it is done. Even "blood relationships" have to be interpreted through the grid of culture.

The truth is that kin ties are not *natural* links of blood but are social relations between groups, often based on residential affinities and hostile to genetic affinities. . . . Who we decide are kin and what we describe as "the family" are clearly dependent on a range of historical factors. There are many different family forms especially within highly industrialized, Western societies—between different classes, and different geographic, religious, racial and ethnic groups. Family patterns are shaped and re-shaped by economic factors, by rules of inheritance, by state interventions to regulate marriage and divorce or to support the family by social welfare or taxation policies. All these affect the likely patterns of sexual life: by encouraging or discouraging the rate of marriage, age of marriage, incidence of reproduction, attitudes to non-procreative or non-heterosexual sex, the relative power of men over women, and so on. These factors are important in themselves. They are doubly important because the family is the arena in which most of us in Western culture gain some sense of our individual sexual needs and identities, and if we follow psychoanalysis, it is the arena where our desires are organized from a very early stage indeed. So to understand sexuality we have to understand much more than sex: we have to understand the relationships in which most of it takes place.

(2) Economic and social organization

As I have suggested, families themselves are not autonomous, natural entities. They themselves are shaped by wider social relations. Domestic patterns can be changed by economic forces, by the class divisions to which economic change gives rise, by the degree of urbanization and of rapid industrial and social change. In the past, and probably also in the present, labour migrations have affected patterns of courtship and have helped dictate the incidence of illegitimacy rates. . . . Work conditions can shape sexual lives. A good example of this is provided by the evidence for the 1920s and 1930s that women who worked in factories tended to be much more familiar with methods of artificial birth control, and thus to limit their family size to a greater degree than women who worked solely in the home or in domestic service.

The relations between men and women are constantly affected by changes in economic conditions. The growing involvement of married women in the paid workforce in the 1950s and 1960s inevitably affected the patterns of domestic life.

It also fuelled a consumer boom which provided one of the preconditions for a proliferation of new markets for sexual commodities in the past generation. Sexuality is not *determined* by the mode of production, but the rhythms of economic life provide the basic preconditions and ultimate limits for the organization of sexual life.

(3) Social regulation

If economic life establishes some of the fundamental rhythms, the actual forms of regulation of sexuality have a considerable autonomy. Formal methods of regulating sexual life vary from time to time depending on the significance of religion, the changing role of the state, the existence or not of a moral consensus which regulate marriage patterns, divorce rates and incidence of sexual unorthodoxy. One of the critical shifts of the last hundred years has been the move away from moral regulation by the churches to a more secular mode of organization through medicine, education, psychology, social work and welfare practices. It is also important to recognize that the effects of these interventions are not necessarily pre-ordained. As often as not sexual life is altered by the unintended consequences of social action as much as the intention of the authors. Laws banning obscene publications more often than not give rise to court cases that publicize them. . . . [L]aws designed to control the behaviour of certain groups of people can actually give rise to an enhanced sense of identity and cohesion amongst them. This certainly seems to be the case with the refinement of the laws relating to male homosexuality in the late nineteenth century.

But it is not only formal methods which shape sexuality; there are many informal and customary patterns which are equally important. The traditional forms of regulation of adolescen[t] courtship can be [a] critical means of social control. It is very difficult to break with the consensus of one's village or one's peer group in school, and this is as much true today as it was in the pre-industrial societies. A language of sexual abuse ("slags" and "sluts") works to keep girls in line, and to enforce conventional distinctions between girls who do and girls who don't. Such informal methods enforced hy strictly adhered to rules often produce, by contemporary standards, various bizarre manifestations of sexual behaviour. One such example is provided by the traditional form of courtship . . . up to the nineteenth century known as "bundling," which involved intimate but fully clothed rituals of sex play in bed. Closer to the present, we can find the equally exotic phenomenon of petting, which is dependent on the belief that while intercourse in public is tabooed, other forms of play, because they are not defined as *the* sex act, may be intimately engaged in. . . . Implicit in such phenomena are intricate though only semiconscious rules which limit what can and cannot be done. Informal methods of regulation like these can have important social effects—in limiting, for example, illegitimate conceptions. They have often been enforced in the past by customary patterns of public shaming, rituals of humiliation and public mocking . . . which serve to reinforce the norms of the community.

(4) Political interventions

These formal and informal methods of control exist within a changing political framework. The balance of political forces at any particular time can determine the degree of legislative control or moral intervention in sexual life. The general social climate provides the context in which some issues take on a greater significance than others. The existence of skilled "moral entrepreneurs" able to articulate and call up inchoate currents of opinion can be decisive in enforcing existing legislation or in conjuring up new. The recent success of the New Right in America in establishing an agenda for sexual conservatism by mobilizing against sexual liberals and/or sexual deviants underlines the possibilities of political mobilization around sex.

(5) Cultures of resistance

But the history of sexuality is not a simple history of control, it is also a history of opposition and resistance to moral codes. Forms of moral regulation give rise to cultures of resistance. A prime example of these is provided by the female networks of knowledge about methods of birth control[,] especially abortion. . . .

Other examples of cultural resistance come from the emergence of the subcultures and networks established by sexual minorities. There is a long history of subcultures of male homosexuality throughout the history of the West, manifest for instance in Italian towns of the late Middle Ages, and in England from the late seventeenth century. These have been critical for the emergence of modern homosexual identities which have been largely formed in these wider social networks. More recently, over the last hundred years or so, there have been series of explicit oppositional political movements organized around sexuality and sexual issues. The classic example is that of feminism. But in addition recent historical work has demonstrated the longstanding existence of sex reform movements often closely linked to campaigns for homosexual rights: the modern gay and lesbian movements have antecedents going back to the nineteenth century in countries like Germany and Britain.

What we so confidently know as "sexuality" is, then, a product of many influences and social interventions. It does not exist outside history but is a historical product. This is what we mean by the "social construction" of sexuality.

So what does a non-essentialist theory of sexuality mean for the politics of sexuality and for sexual ethics? These . . . topics . . . pose perhaps the most difficult challenges of all. The "sexual tradition" assumed that your sex was your fate or destiny: what you desired was what you were. Sexuality pinned you down like a butterfly to the table. If you break with this tradition, if you reject the idea that sexuality embodies its own values and goals, then you are faced with complex problems of alignment and choice. Confronted by such uncertainties, it is all too easy to retreat into moral or political absolutes, to reassert again, against all the odds, against all the evidence, that there is a true sexuality that we must find at all costs. The aim of this essay is to challenge such absolutes without falling into the trap of saying no values are possible, "anything goes." "Sexuality" is a deeply problematic concept, and there are no easy answers to the challenges it poses. But if we begin to ask the correct questions then we might find the way through the maze. We shall not find at the end of the journey a prescription for correct behaviour. But we might find a framework which allows us to come to terms with diversity—and to re-find, in sexuality, new opportunities for creative relationships, agency and choice.