



# sexualizing

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**KEY  
POINTS**

- Human sexual behaviour is a complex and nuanced field. The social patterning of it over time has shown great variety, rather than following one particular 'natural' paradigm.
- Sociology examines how modern society benefits from particular forms of sexual patterning and privileges them over others.
- The dominant heteronormative model privileges the monogamous heterosexual couple as the family unit and as a key social element in providing capitalism with a stable unit capable of producing more workers and consumers.
- Societies based on the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) tend to show a much more restrictive attitude to sexuality than others.
- The sociology of sexuality has tended to focus on those groups that fall outside the norms and seeks to explain why modern societies regulate sexuality in particular ways.
- The study of homosexuality in particular has provided fertile ground for examining sexuality in a sociological manner as a whole.
- Sexuality has become one of the key flashpoints in contemporary society as some groups seek to claim full moral and legal equality that others do not wish them to have.
- The original push for gay liberation grew out of the same historical and social impetus that drove the civil rights and feminist movements in the developed world.
- Today many now base the call for equality of homosexuals around a neo-liberal version of the self that locates the person first and foremost as a tax-paying consumer rather than as a member of a socially oppressed minority.

- Some academic theorists have worked to place sexuality as a social marker equivalent to the more traditional sociological categories of class, race, gender and age.
- They have developed the idea of ‘queer’, encompassing all non-heteronormative forms of sexuality, as a new way of seeing human sexuality.

## Introduction

Sex is for many one of the greater pleasures of being alive. Sex with a loved partner is valued and extolled in most societies today – and has been through time and history – as one of the great and fulfilling experiences of human existence (see Chapter 12, ‘Feeling: Emotions’). The sexual act between a man and a woman has, until the advent of new technologies, been absolutely necessary to ensure the continuation of the species. Sexual desire and love is a strong motivator for individual action and how this motivation is expressed and patterned is reflected in social organization. The collective history of humanity is layered with stories based around happy – or more often unhappy – tales of how these forces can come into play and the consequences they carry in their wake. The story of Helen of Troy has been famous in Western culture for millennia (Homer, 1960), as has the love of Leyla and Mejnun in Turkic culture (Fuzuli, 1970) or Zhang Junrui and Cui Yingying in classical Chinese culture (Xu, 1992). The example of the lovers Harmodius and Aristogeiton in classical Athens, who were revered for overthrowing the Peisistratid tyranny in 514 bce, shows us these stories were not only based around the love of men for women (Crompton, 2003, pp. 25–8).

What is central to these stories is how they reflect the societal mores of their time. They tell us about the sexual patterns and behaviours that were accepted, praised, idealized, tolerated, winked at, condemned or rejected. A close examination of them reveals a wealth of variety and numerous points of convergence and divergence between cultures and societies.

How human sexuality is expressed and patterned has been the subject of regulation in societies over centuries. This regulation has typically been based in religious understandings of the world and society and the proper and divinely sanctioned roles of men and women (see Chapter 13,

'Believing: Religion,' and Chapter 9, 'Gendering'). However, it should be borne in mind that what is officially sanctioned by approved societal teachings and what is practised by the population at large have often been at variance. We can see here evidence of a private culture versus a public one. Although we are all aware of the rules that exist, we recognize that there are times when we and those around us do not follow them. If sexual behaviour in societies followed all the societal rules laid out for it, then how much less complex, yet also how much poorer, our societies, cultures and individual lives would be.

In this quest to regulate and control and also to celebrate what is acceptable sexual behaviour – and to limit and punish what is not – we gain an insight into understandings of religion, science and health, of property rights, of gender relations, of age and class, and of how the entire world of the social is conceived. Sexuality is a fundamental force in how our societies are structured and in how we live in them. For example, Jenkins mentions the fact that in many societies in Papua New Guinea adultery is considered a more serious crime than murder (Jenkins, 1997, p. 372). Any glance through the news media will also show us how often sexual acts that fall outside socially accepted norms are the cause for extreme reaction in modernized societies as well.

What interests us as sociologists is how these patterns of human sexual behaviour have been shaped and reformed by the modern world, the world shaped by the Industrial Revolution and its great motor, the capitalist economy. Sociology's arena is the modern world and a core part of sociology is the way that modernity has shaped and shifted social patterns as a result of the changes brought about by the economic, political, social and technological advances of the last 200 years. Social patterns and, with them, the accepted sexual patterns of Western society have been dramatically reshaped and reformulated in this period – the intense urban environments that have become one of the most obvious identifying forces of the modern developed world. Industrialization demanded a new concentration of urban population and concomitant shifts in labour relations and this had a marked effect on all our social relations including our sexual life (see Chapter 2, 'Modernizing').

Sexuality has become a central area of social theory and debate over the last century. The term 'sexuality' itself is scarcely more than a century

old. Although a wide variety of sexual practices have been recognized in all human societies across time, the study of sexuality as an academic area is very much a product of the modern Western world (Herdt, 1984, 1997; Foucault, 1990; Hinsch, 1990; Weeks, 1991; Treat, 1999; Crompton, 2003). A cursory study of the literature available on the topic today shows how vast the field has become in a short time. What was once an area surrounded by taboos and not fit for speech or print has become a major site of production in both academic and general contexts. To understand the context and appreciate the vast changes that have occurred in modernized societies, we need to consider the historical background and place of sexuality in the pre-modern world.

In Western societies, strongly influenced by Christian teaching and thought for the last two millennia, the social aspect of the sexual has been, until very recently, dictated largely by the thoughts and teachings of the Church, whether explicitly stated or not. The Christian Church, strongly shaped by the writings of the Apostle Paul, and later St Augustine of Hippo, has had a largely negative attitude to the body and to sexuality throughout its history. The body is the site of sin and corruption, and it is the soul and the afterlife that matters. The female body is especially dangerous because it was Eve who lured Adam into temptation and is responsible for humanity's fall from grace into the state of sin. This religious centring of the sexual act as the definitive rupturing event for humanity from the divine continues to echo down the years in the social attitudes expressed in these cultures. It is woman who is made to bear the blame – characterized at once as lascivious, lustful, potent, devious, dangerous and destructive yet at the same time weak, passive, ignorant and dependent upon the man, from whose rib she was made. The body, and especially the female body, led humanity away from the divine and redemption from this earthly life that ends in death. Thus in Western culture we can see sex and death as almost inextricably intertwined (Bauman, 1992).

The sexual act could only be justified if it was in the context of procreation within the bounds of marriage. This is still the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, hence its ban on contraception, including condom use to prevent the transmission of the HIV virus. All other sexual acts are sinful. This includes a husband and wife having sex as a means of celebrating their love for each other without the desire for children to

come from this act at the time. In these terms, all sex outside marriage is of course sinful, as is masturbation, and especially homosexuality. The origins of this way of thinking can be found in St Thomas Aquinas' theology, with his attempts to make theology 'rational' by the lights of his era. He argued that the only natural and therefore legitimate and sinless form of sexual expression was for procreation; thus, all sexual acts that did not have procreation as their intention were sinful. This idea has had immense impact over the years in forming official and popular discourses on sexual behaviour and society.

As the realm of authority moved away from the Church – as Western societies modernized and secularized and the state emerged as the unifying force with the power to punish – so the categories of sexual acts were reclassified. What had been the province of religion and priests – sin, with the prospect of eternal damnation – moved instead into the realm of doctors, illness, medicine and law, and lawyers and questions of sanity and perversion (Freud, 1962; Foucault, 1990). Human sexual behaviour became subject to the great cataloguing, rationalizing project of modernity, with attempts to fit all sorts of aspects of human life and its varieties into neat organizational categories. Instead of appealing to theological categories of sin, with the threat of damnation, we can see evidence of Weber's 'iron cage' of rationality enclosing humanity. Sexual acts and the persons performing them could be classified and categorized into 'value free' varieties and schemes. Again with reference to the supposedly immutable biological rules of males and females being needed to mate, anything outside this pattern was viewed as abnormal. What is remarkable is how, as Western Europe modernized, the sexual acts that were condemned stayed the same, but the means used to justify their social exclusion and opprobrium were moved from the religious to the scientific. Heterosexual marriage was still enshrined as the ideal state. Sex outside marriage was officially frowned on, though in popular discourse winked at as fun and to be expected. Masturbation was now a sign of moral degeneracy and a site of moral panic (Friedman, 2001, pp. 86–102), and homosexuality, instead of sodomy, demanded incarceration in prison and, in some more enlightened societies, treatment to 'cure' it.

Thus were terms such as 'sadist', 'masochist' and 'transvestite' born, and the terms 'homosexual' and later still 'heterosexual'. What had once been

categories of behaviour defined as sinful or not and endangering the soul now become part of individual identities that could be defined instead as natural or perverted, legal or illegal (MacCulloch, 2003, p. 622). If they were perverted or unnatural then it was only right to look for a cure for them and to seek a way to impose ‘normalcy’ on the deviant. The origin for such deviancy was sought in either physical or psychological illness, and correspondingly cures were also claimed. Most influential in the late Victorian era was Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s classical work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Krafft-Ebing, 1935). Monogamous heterosexuality was seen as the norm and variations from this were seen as deviant and in need of correction. Where the ‘patient’ (for they were suffering a sickness) could not be cured then incarceration was seen as normal. In this era women were treated for ‘hysteria’ – the condition of a wandering womb – and men were treated for ‘spermatorrhea’ and masturbation amongst other problems (Friedman, 2001). Such medical-sexual conditions have now disappeared and tell us more about the attitudes of the society that invented them than they do about the human body, desires and sexual behaviour.

While the early editions of Krafft-Ebing’s work saw deviations from the heterosexual norm as curable medical abnormalities of some sort, later editions shifted to the idea that they were innate and incurable. Throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries academic discussion around sexuality tended to focus on homosexuality as an obvious example of deviation from the norms of heterosexual behaviour. This discourse, typically framed by discussions of what it was to be a ‘normal’ male or female, made assumptions about masculinity and femininity that reflected standard social mores of the time. These social mores were still based in pre-modern understandings of human life.

Following on from Krafft-Ebing’s work, the British sexologist Havelock Ellis (1859–1939) took a view of sexual behaviour that we would see as more recognizable today. It understood sexuality as a normal part of being human and not reducible to the simplistic categories of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’. Ellis is notable as one of the first academics to consider seriously the notion that what others viewed as sexual deviations from an essential fixed biological norm were in fact social constructions. One of the ongoing points of debate in the field of sexuality has been just what deserves to be counted as ‘normal’ sexual behaviour and what should be

excluded. The categories for establishing the grounds for this have been and continue to be contested. However, in seeking to establish taxonomies and classifications of sexual behaviour, these early sexologists at least opened the door for discussion on what had been in most societies a social taboo.

Possibly the most influential sexologist was Alfred Kinsey. He and his interviewers carried out thousands of two-hour interviews with men and women to try to gain an understanding into just what made up their sexual lives (Kinsey et al., 1948; Kinsey and Institute for Sex Research, 1965). People were asked deep questions about their sexual experiences, fantasies and desires, and the results provided some startling and important information about the sexual life of typical American men and women. His findings showed far greater variety from the accepted social norm of sexual behaviour was common, and this in turn raised questions about the validity of attempting to impose these social norms on people, and to punish those who broke them. He is perhaps most famous for his 'seven-point' scale, which rates just how attracted people are to either men or women, with someone who is a '0' rating as exclusively heterosexual, a '3' as someone who is equally homosexual and heterosexual and a '6' as someone who is exclusively homosexual (Kinsey et al., 1948, pp. 638–41). Treating sex in this explicitly scientific and positivistic manner had enormous social repercussions. If, as his results showed, many people had sexual lives that did not conform to heteronormative monogamy, then it could be argued that this social model (and the laws supporting it) was in fact deeply flawed. His research was often cited by many seeking more liberal laws around sexuality, and condemned by those who wished to preserve the status quo. Although his work has been criticized by many for both its methodology and its underlying assumptions (Irvine, 2002), its influence has been enormous.

## Gender and sexuality: who do we desire and why?

In Plato's *The Symposium* Aristophanes tries to explain human sexual desire by way of a myth. In his telling, there were originally three types of human. There were males, females and hermaphrodites (those made up of an equal measure of male and female). Each human was round like a ball,

with four arms and four legs, and two faces on one head, four ears and two sets of genitals. The gods feared them and so Zeus split each one down the middle, not killing them but leaving instead humans, as we know them today. Zeus' actions left each half desperately yearning for the other. Thus those that had been exclusively male desired men, those who had been female desired other females, and those who had been hermaphrodite desired the opposite sex (Plato, 1935, pp. 189–91). While this myth may strike us as an odd way of conceptualizing things, it demonstrates some attempt to understand just how and why some humans desire certain other types of humans. Generally speaking, our sexuality is driven by a desire for another person of a particular type based on our attraction to them. The gender of the other that we desire is commonly used to identify our sexuality. This other person – this object to our subject – that we desire continues to define the understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation in most areas of discourse.

If a woman desires a man, or a man a woman, we use the word 'heterosexual' as a descriptor; if a man desires other men, or a woman other women, then we employ the term 'homosexual', and if they claim to desire both, we label them 'bisexual'. While this scheme has an attractive simplicity and neatness to it, it fails to capture the complexity of actual human behaviour. Although some theorists query the validity of these terms, they continue to hold popular sway and are resorted to even by those who critique them and wish to do away with them. They are powerful and widely understood descriptors of basic human sexual behaviour. They exist as social categories and are applied by individuals and groups to describe themselves, their identities and behaviours. They are not unproblematic terms, but they do relate to just who we perceive as a desirable and attractive sexual object, and their currency is still very strong. These terms themselves are in fact of very recent origin, with the term 'homosexual' pre-dating 'heterosexual'. The first recorded use of it was in German in 1868 by Karol Maria Kertbeny (1824–82), who invented and employed it as a more dignified and scientific term than existing terms such as 'sodomite'. He is also credited with inventing the term 'heterosexual' 11 years later (Norton, 1997, p. 67).

Gender as a concept intersects with sexuality in a fundamental manner. Typically, sexual attraction and desire is seen as based on gender. The heteronormative world in which we live sees the attraction and sexual

expression between a man and a woman as the normal mode of sexual behaviour. In this model there are only two genders – male and female (see Chapter 9, ‘Gendering’). This simple binary model of humanity appears to be a common understanding in human cultures across time, as we can witness from the Book of Genesis (1: 27): ‘male and female he created them’. While this may seem blindingly obvious to many, in fact a number of cultures have recognized more than one possible gender. For example many pre-Conquest Native American cultures had room for third and fourth gendered people – men who did not fit the traditional role of the male but occupied an accepted space and role that we would construe as feminine, and likewise some also allowed a role for those we would perceive to be biologically female but who lived and identified themselves in a way that we would label masculine. Many Polynesian societies continue to give room to men and women who do not fit imposed Western colonial and Christian notions of gender.

Hocaoglu (2002, pp. 147–9) gives examples in contemporary Turkish society of men who see the men they sleep with as gay because they allow themselves to be penetrated, but do not in any way regard themselves as being gay or less than real men so long as they are performing the penetrative act. Here we can see an interesting and not uncommon intersection of ideas of gender roles (real men do not get penetrated, but retain their masculine status as long as they penetrate) and ideas about what constitutes sexual identity. In my own experience, living in Turkey for eight years, I found this to be a typical understanding of many men. These ideas about the ‘active’ man not losing any status by performing these roles while the ‘passive’ one does are also well documented by writers on Latin American sexuality (Murray, 1995; Girman, 2004). What is striking in these examples is how the masculine ‘active’ partner’s status is not socially diminished, while the man who takes the ‘passive’ role loses.

This wider shift can be seen as signalling the impact of modernity itself on social organization. When measured in human terms, it may have seemed a slow progression taking more than a hundred years, but in historical terms these changes are quite sudden and mark a point of disruption in the previously slower pace of social change. Accepted social norms and institutions reformed into new modes of social organization and life, including dramatic changes in marriage, especially in the role

and legal status of women. (See Chapter 9, ‘Gendering’, and Chapter 18, ‘Relating: Family’.)

## Essentialism and constructionism

Academic and popular discourse on sexuality has tended to alternate between the positions that can be identified as *essentialist* and, in opposition to this, as *social constructionist*. While it may be argued that taking a position at either pole of this continuum is unproductive and unsupported by evidence, these extremities are where much of the debate has coalesced and been fought. Essentialist and constructivist interpretations are applied not only to sexuality, but also to debates on gender, ethnicity and even emotions (see Chapter 8, ‘Racializing’; Chapter 9, ‘Gendering’; and Chapter 12, ‘Feeling’). In its crudest, most ‘commonsense’ form, the essentialist argument claims that humans are all possessed of a ‘hard-wired’ form of sexuality, and that this is most often heterosexual. An essentialist viewpoint can also be used to explain the existence of homosexuality and bisexuality as a pre-set genetic disposition. The social constructionist views sexuality as much more fluid and malleable in make-up – a result of how certain societies privilege and shape the sex drives of its members – and seeks to explain it as something we ‘learn’.

Essentialist thinking in its most basic form holds to the notion that sexuality is a fixed biological part of human nature, hence it is seen as consisting of, or as part of, one’s essence. The essentialist view works on the basis that we are born with some fixed and unalterable basic sexual orientation. We are, in this view, born attracted either to our own gender or to the opposite one, with a small group of people attracted equally to both genders. In this view there are only three possible sexual orientations – heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual. There might be some variations of this desire and its manifestations but desire itself is seen as a biological and innate quality within each human being. Heterosexuals, homosexuals and bisexuals are human kinds in the way that redheads or people born with blue eyes are. This is a commonly held view and is often seen as simply common sense. Much of the work that has been done to support this view searches for the genetic basis of sexual attraction and operates

on the assumption that a force as important as the reproduction of the species must have some sort of innate genetic basis. Typical of this sort of work is the biological work often dubbed the search for the ‘gay gene’ (Hamer, 1994).

The social constructionist position understands sexual orientation and gender as social artefacts that arise from specific sets of social and historical forces at play within a society. Perhaps most famously, in terms of gender, the French philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir (1952) claimed: ‘One is not born a woman, one becomes one.’

These two opposing poles signal a very important and as yet ongoing debate about more than just human sexuality or gender. This debate points to a much deeper question about basic ontological positions: how much of our life is under our own control, and how much is created by our cultures, societies and perceptions of reality, and how much lies beyond our control? This is important as it highlights the role of human agency – how much lies in our hands and how much is determined by the evolutionary history of our species? Arguments about the morality or otherwise of, for example, homosexuality, fall away if it is held to be a natural and unchangeable aspect of a person’s life. If instead, sexuality is seen as something one has control over and is a ‘choice’ then the argument can be made that it does not have to be chosen and that there are certain moral choices involved in making one choice over another. Thus, the state should have an active role to play in legislating for good choices.

The role of evolutionary psychology, or socio-biology, in this debate is also of note. Why, given the basic evolutionary idea of the best genes being passed on to ensure the survival of a species, would evolution favour the emergence of exclusive homosexuality in individuals? On the other hand, if it is not an innate and natural trait, why do so many men and women insist that they were born this way, that it is a deep and real part of their selves and that they have known they were ‘different’ from a very early age?

The study of sexuality as a subject in itself signals a marked change in thought and life. While talk on the subject of sex has never been in short supply in society, its official rise as a subject worthy of academic discussion and investigation tells us something has changed. Along with this development of the subject as a field of academic inquiry we can



match a rise in the open discussion of sexual matters in Western literature. Works at the start of the twentieth century by writers such as James Joyce or D. H. Lawrence that seem to us today to be tame or even boring were in their time treated as scandalous and outrageous in their frank treatment and discussion of the subject. Thus we can see a wider cultural shift taking place in the public discourse on human sexual behaviour in general.

There remain questions still inadequately answered by both camps. If constructionists are correct and sexuality is a socially constructed pattern of human sexuality, why do so many people swear that they cannot change their sexuality? Why have so many gay men been put through various programmes that have claimed to alter or ‘cure’ their gayness and come out the other end still physically attracted to other men? Why do so many gay men and lesbians swear that this is the way they were born and have always been? Can they all be wrong and the social theorists correct? And if the essentialists are correct, what evolutionary advantage is there in gayness? Why would there be some gene or set of genes that is inherited for gayness when gayness presupposes that most gay men and women will not reproduce? What evolutionary advantage can there be for homosexuality? And if it is an essential and inherited human trait like left-handedness, then why is there such turmoil around the concept in so many cultures?

## Queer theory

Queer theory lies in what is often termed ‘the postmodern turn’ (Jagose, 1996; Sanderon, 2001). Broadly speaking, post-modernism challenges the modernist assumptions of rationality, and over-arching narratives that can be used to explain any phenomenon. This challenge has been both popular and controversial in the academic world. Where modernity and structuralism offer certainty and claim an objective field of knowledge, post-modernity and post-structuralism see the world and our knowledge of it in a much more relativistic fashion, one that is dependent more on the observer’s own social and cultural understandings than on any notion of objective truth.

Queer theorists all place the origins of their work in the thought of the French philosopher Michel Foucault and especially his *History of Sexuality*

(Foucault, 1980). Broadly speaking, the stance taken by queer theory is a constructionist one: that sexuality, gender and identity are constructs of society. This stance rejects the essentialist idea of an innate identity, regarding things such as gender and sexuality as social constructions that vary over time, cultures and societies rather than having any innate presence as part of a ‘natural’ human condition (Butler, 1990; Halperin, 1990; Stein and Plummer, 1994). Foucault’s biographer, Didier Eribon, points out that much of what Foucault says in the *History of Sexuality* was in fact hypothetical and abandoned by Foucault himself soon after (Eribon, 2004, pp. xiii–xiv), a point rarely noted by the queer theorists themselves.

Kirsch claims that the term ‘queer theory’ was first used by Theresa de Lauretis at a conference in 1989 (Kirsch, 2000, p. 33). The socio-political background needs noting here. It was at this time that AIDS was wreaking its havoc and seemed unstoppable. The existing gay political world, based on the ideas of gay liberation and its descendants, was seen (rightly or wrongly) as ineffective in dealing with the crisis, distant from its radical roots and largely white, male, middle-class and assimilationist. This provided fertile ground for the more radical approach that queer promised. Kirsch, citing Edgar and Sedgwick, describes queer theory:



What demarcates Queer theory from its postmodernist and poststructuralist foundations is its referral to a range of work ‘that seeks to place the question of sexuality as the centre of concern, and as the key category through which other social, political and cultural phenomena are to be understood’. (Kirsch, 2000, p. 33)

These writers here are calling it the *key* category above or at least equal to issues of race, class and gender. Queer theorists in their most radical form seek to reshape accepted sociological and political norms in identity politics and to at least ‘trouble’, and at best rid, them of heterosexist assumptions. They differ from the ideas that inhere in the Gay Liberation movement that grew out of the 1960s civil rights movement, which focused on reinforcing and strengthening group identities derived from class, ethnicity or gender.

These movements, such as Black Power and Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation, sought to claim legitimate social and cultural space and power by affirming their difference as real and identifiable groups within

society that deserved equal rights and opportunities. Queer theorists do not see this reinforcing of identity through difference as liberating because it is still, in their view, based in heterosexist assumptions that cannot be anything but oppressive to the very group trying to emancipate themselves. Taking their lead from Foucauldian theory, which sees identity formation as being at least in part regulatory and disciplinary in nature, queer theorists such as Seidman (1997) see the self as limited and constrained by the application of identity labels such as gay or straight that restrict the possible spectrum of imagining the self. Dillon, citing the work of Stein and Plummer (Stein and Plummer, 1994) encapsulates the project of queer theorists:

Queer theorists call for a radical ‘queering’ of all aspects of sociology and not just the study of sexuality. Emphasizing the contextual intersectionality of biographical, sexual, gender, racial, and class identities, they call for new analytical approaches that inject sexuality into ‘mainstream’ sociological analyses of, for example, stratification, education, and gerontology, asking what happens when a (nonheterosexist) sexual lens is used in our apprehension of the social world. (Dillon, 2005, p. 225)

How successful this radical approach to sociological thought has been remains to be seen. While extremely popular throughout much of the 1990s on university campuses, the radical theoretical notions attached to queer theory seem to have gained little traction. Their strength lies, in this writer’s opinion, in challenging preconceived notions of gender and sexual identity. Their weakness, however, seems to lie in putting too much weight onto the area of sexuality alone. It is hard to see how this one aspect of human life can be made to carry such ideological weight successfully. Many people outside the heterosexist norms of contemporary society do not define themselves purely on the basis of their sexuality. For some it is central, for others a concern, for yet others merely a peripheral concern, and for some it is of no issue whatsoever. Hurley makes the point that gay men are certainly ‘doing gay’ in a very different way today than before – different from before the time of Gay Liberation and its subsequent development of identity politics, different from the time of AIDS’s initial dreadful impact (Hurley, 2003), and this also seems to apply to others who fall outside the heterosexist norms that are still predominant.

Perhaps the necessary accommodation with simply living along with the generally more benign (though certainly not perfect) social environment for gay men and lesbians that has resulted in the developed world over the last 40 years has made many of the concerns of queer theorists seem trivial outside the academy. Indeed, Stein and Plummer locate the origins of queer theory ‘in the most elite American universities in the late 1980s’ (Sanderon, 2001, p. 55).

Perhaps expecting such a disparate group of people, united only through some sense of being ‘different’ in terms of their sexual practices and desires, was building upon foundations too weak to sustain much. ‘Queer’ currently seems to simply occupy a space as an umbrella term to mean those who fall outside the heterosexist norm – an easier way of being inclusive without having to run through the familiar list of ‘Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender’ (GLBT). This seems a long way removed from the original radical plans for the notion, but perhaps is where it will remain.

## Conclusion

Louis Crompton points out that there seems to be a broad and obvious distinction between those societies that have their origins in the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the rest when it comes to matters of sexuality and homosexuality in particular (Friedman, 2001; Crompton, 2003). All societies seek to impose some sort of regulation upon sexual behaviour, whether it is in the form of an age of consent or legislating which people of which gender may legally have sex with others. However, the three Abrahamic religions show a particularly strong aversion to any form of sexuality outside married heterosexuality.

The reduction of sexuality to simply the mechanical actions of sex and its pleasures does us a disservice as humans – we are emotional beings as well and now, more than ever, perhaps, we desire from our sexuality not just a sense of identity but also that the object of our desire, our loved one and our partner, occupy some space that transcends the everyday for us. Bauman points out the way we now live in an age where we place a gigantic expectation on our partner in love: we expect our relationship with them, our ‘universe of two’, to use his words, to provide us with a vicarious

immortality (Bauman, 1992, p. 28). Bauman points out the contradictory role our society in this period has given itself, placing such a high value on the functional importance of love while its carrying capacity appears to have been reduced so drastically. Love, and the technical display of sexual prowess, have come to take on a new social meaning in his analysis, similar to that of the record-breaking sportspeople: it is a way to escape the limitations of the body, to deny the inherent finitude and mortality of our selves (Bauman, 1992, p. 30). Sexuality and its expression and regulation can be viewed as a lens through which society seeks to understand and hold at bay mortality. If we view it in this light it is no wonder that it is such a contested area of our social world.

Different societies have shown different levels of tolerance and intolerance to different forms of sexual expression over time. We can see that most strikingly in recent times in the legalization of 'gay marriage' by the Spanish government. As the world has modernized and as the concept of moral and political rights has widened in its scope as a direct result of this modernizing force, so old certainties have been challenged. The debate is by no means settled as yet, and debates around sexuality – what is and is not appropriate, moral, socially acceptable or otherwise – continue to arouse great passion. In many ways the semiotic/symbolic space occupied by sexuality within a culture seems to point to something deeper, some greater fundamental sense of anxiety about itself. Eribon (2004) points to how the dominant paradigm of heteronormative societies maintain their position by the use of the insult. Perhaps the current debates signal a slow lessening of the power of the force of this insult in modern and post-modern societies, perhaps not.

To examine sexuality is to examine both one of the central delights of human existence and one of its central points of tension and control. Sexuality, like much else that modernization has touched, has changed and exerts a level of change on its surrounding society. Society still sees a need to control and regulate sexual expression, as a way of controlling and regulating itself.

## Suggestions for further reading

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