

The Role of Sexuality in Capitalist Patriarchy

(June 2003): I think I gave a version of this paper at the Gays and Socialism conference in April 1981 in Melbourne. Or did I? I have a vague recollection of having given something—a workshop, a discussion—at a conference on homosexuality, and of someone, a woman, coming up to me and talking about Foucault afterwards. But the only version of this paper I have is a set of unfinished written notes. Still, it does give some idea of the ideas that were around at the time. The argument I was trying to formulate was, if sexuality is socially constructed and society is male supremacist, what does that make sexuality? I included male homosexuality in the scope of this question at the time, but not lesbianism.

Start with 2 premises: (1) That sexuality is wholly socially (historically, ideologically) constituted; (2) That human¹ sexuality is constituted phallogcentrically.

(1) If we accept the first premise, then we can't talk about sexuality being repressed, etc. since there is nothing there to be repressed, etc. Sexuality is not a basic biological mandate, an instinctual urge which must be diverted from its original aim of satisfaction in sexual activity, into channels which serve the interests of 'civilisation' (or the ruling class). It is not a libidinal energy which must be redirected from useless polymorphous pleasure into useful productive and reproductive activity.

On the contrary, sexuality is, from the very beginning, a construction arising out of particular historical conditions. Indeed, according to Foucault, the function of sexuality as the focal point for the maintenance of relations of power is peculiar to the capitalist mode of production (not that Foucault uses that terminology). In feudal times (ditto), power was vested in the sovereign's right of life and death over his subjects—the sovereign had the right to cause the death of his subjects, either in a 'just war', or by execution of individual miscreants; and he had the power to allow them to live. In the last three centuries, the mechanisms of power have undergone a transformation which, in the widest sense, is a

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process of the management of life itself—and the mechanism of sexuality constitutes one of the most important techniques of population control, since it invests both the life of the individual and the life of the species: 'For the first time in history, without doubt, the biological is reflected in the political'.

This premise about the social construction of sexuality has serious implications for a theory of homosexual oppression. Previously, we had taken for granted that homosexuality was a kind of sexuality which had, by and large, escaped the sexual socialisation process, because that process was so obviously heterosexual. We had assumed that homosexuality was somehow more 'natural' than heterosexuality, since it was so obviously in opposition to the pressures to conform to the dominant heterosexual mode. We were prepared to admit that homosexuality, too, was a restriction of human sexual potential (which we saw as either 'bisexual' or 'polymorphous perverse'); but we were convinced that homosexuality was the first step on the revolutionary road to divesting ourselves of the restrictions placed on human sexual potential by the rigid requirements of the nuclear family.

As socialists, we saw that nuclear family as serving the interests of the ruling class in the reproduction of the labour force; and we saw the positive validation of our homosexuality as a serious threat to the hegemony of the family, and hence to those mechanisms of social control which were reproduced daily and generationally within its privatised space.

But if we accept that sexuality, in all its aspects and under all forms, is constituted as a domain of awareness and experience within particular historical conditions and, as Marxists, we accept that 'the ruling ideas in every epoch are the ideas of the ruling class', then homosexuality, too, partakes of those 'ruling ideas'.

Foucault demonstrates the way in which male homosexuality has been constituted as one form of sexuality since the end of the nineteenth century ...

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That sexuality is wholly socially (historically, ideologically) constituted: If this is so, then we can't talk about sexuality being repressed, because there is nothing there to repress. There is no sexual instinct(s) or drive(s), or biological urge which must be diverted from its original aim of satisfaction in sexual activity, and into channels which serve the interests of 'civilisation' (or the capitalist mode of production). Sexuality is not a libidinal energy which must be redirected from useless polymorphous (or perverse) pleasure into useful productive and reproductive activity. On the contrary, sexuality is, from the very beginning, (of each human life) a construction arising out of particular historical conditions.

The kind of argument which this premise is intended to refute is most cogently put by Freud because Freud's is a more sophisticated version of the idea of a biologically-based sexuality than that of the born-again fundamentalist Christians who believe that certain aspects of the kind of sexuality which has developed over the last three centuries is based in a God-given (and therefore universal and ineradicable and biologically given) human nature—and that it is heterosexual, monogamous and inherently linked to procreation. (Those aspects which are not God-given are, of course, the perverted uses of sexuality—homosexuality, promiscuity ...). Freud took pains to argue against the idea that there was a single sexual instinct which was 'naturally' heterosexual and was based on the desire (or necessity) for reproducing the species. According to Freud, there wasn't one sexual instinct but a number of sexual instincts, which only reached their usual normal heterosexual adult outcome because society prohibited their taking any other form. Some minority of individuals always managed to escape this prohibition in various ways, e.g. perverts and inverts, but that was only because, in their case, the normal development process had failed at various places along the way.

Nevertheless, Freud retained the idea of a physiological substratum of sexuality—he made numerous references to his hope that someday the findings of psychoanalysis would be firmly pinned down to a physiological basis. The physiological substratum of sexuality was initially (at birth) undifferentiated in its object—it wasn't either heterosexual or homosexual—in its locus—it wasn't focused on the genitals—and in its aim—it didn't demand satisfaction in orgasm. But those sexual instincts, whatever eventually happened to

them on the long forced march to adulthood, were based in a primal libidinal energy which was the biological inheritance of every individual human organism.

It was this libidinal energy which was both the raw material to be transformed, repressed, sublimated and diverted into socially acceptable channels, and also at the same time constantly at war with the civilising process of human society. It was a zero-sum game: the more civilisation gained, the less was left of the explicitly sexual. But the process of creating civilisation at the expense of sexuality was a necessary process for the human species—without it, the human race would be nothing but individual copulating couples or isolated incestuous families.

Note

1. (Added June 2003): By 'human' I meant both male and female, not 'as opposed to animal'. In fact, my notes don't get to this second premise.