The Psychology of Sexual Diversity

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Sexual Diversity: A Sociological Perspective

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For the past century, much of the research and thinking about sexual diversity has been within the psychological, biological and medical sciences; all the contributors to this volume work within these fields, and the value of such work has been clearly demonstrated in their reviews. As the sole sociological contributor, my task of redressing the balance requires a reviewing of issues rather than a summary of findings. There is now a substantial corpus of social and political writing which is perhaps alien to the clinical mode of thought, and I intend merely to signpost some central debates rather than to perform the impossible task of detailing this literature. My central themes, now almost taken for granted by sociologists, will be dual. First, human sexuality is overwhelmingly a matter of symbolism: other animals just do not inhabit the erotic worlds that humans make for themselves. Human sexuality is thought about, fantasized about, talked about, written about and scripted into action. It is enmeshed in the dialogues of theology, philosophy, medicine, literature, law, morality, psychiatry and the sciences. However biological and 'animal-like' its foundations may be, human sexuality is assembled and comes to life through these languages. Thus I will suggest the need to examine the assumptions we make about sexuality - especially its being a natural essence geared to normal procreation; the need to examine how specific historical cultures come to construct their notions of the normal and the pathological; and the need to examine how the sexual diversities are fashioned out of such notions.

My second theme will be to suggest, and here I am on more treacherous ground, that 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. No culture could function with a sexual free-for-all, but the pattern of these constraints is exceedingly variable across time and space. Thus, I will suggest the need to examine the very different ways
in which political definitions separate male and female diversities; the ways in which sexual taboos can symbolize the boundaries of a particular culture; the critical function that medicine has played politically in our culture in recent times; and the modes in which the sexually diverse organize to ‘fight back’ and modify these political constructions. I shall conclude by briefly highlighting an emerging political debate – between the politics of desire and the politics of sexism – which could well work to reconstruct diversity as we move into the twenty-first century.

It has long been recognized that although the human mammal may have a great deal in common with other mammals a most important difference lies in the extent to which humans display wider variations both within and across cultures. In the field of sexuality this is no exception: anthropologists and historians have substantially documented the degree of cross-cultural variety (e.g. Ford and Beach 1952; Marshall and Suggs 1971; Bloch 1965; Bullough 1976), while clinicians and social researchers have indicated the degree of diversity within a culture (Krafft-Ebing 1886; Kinsey et al. 1948, 1953). That human eroticism and gender experience have displayed substantial diversity across time and space is now something of a commonplace – though it remains a curiosity as to why such a commonplace is frequently ignored.

In this chapter I shall review the broad social processes through which such diversities are handled in a society. Two main sets are involved: those which enable the society to mark boundaries of the acceptable and the unacceptable, and those which enable the members of a society to handle their own diverse sexualities. I call the first the *regulative* processes and the latter the *reactive* processes; both work together in constructing specific patterns of sexualities. My discussion is only a provisional one, and in the main I focus upon the construction of diverse sexualities in western societies in recent times. Much of what I say may actually only be applicable to a limited range of diversities but it is my hope that ultimately an extension of such reasoning may lead to a much wider and deeper analysis.

I shall also attempt to place research into sexual diversity within a wider framework by signposting some of the assumptions that usually underpin such work. This is absolutely necessary since, I suggest, all discussions of sexuality come from a point of view, whether acknowledged or not. Too frequently such preconceptions are nothing more than the commonsense wisdoms embedded in the wider culture of the researcher. Thus this chapter will start with an analysis of some such assumptions and indicate potential sources of inevitable bias.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HUMAN SEXUAL DIVERSITY

All discussions about human sexuality must proceed from a bedrock of assumptions, whether articulated or not. Gone are the days when social scientists could research as if they were simply neutral, objective, value-free students with neither meta assumptions informing their studies nor social consequences arising from them. Even the so-called sexual gurus of the modern day – Freud, Kinsey, Masters and Johnson – have been shown to be entangled with hidden assumptions and ideological bias (cf. Robinson 1976); while the sudden and dramatic reversal of the American Psychiatric Association’s classification of homosexuality as a non-sickness in 1973 suggests that psychiatry is at least as much politics as science (cf. Bayer 1981; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). Indeed, the title of this very book suggests assumptions: two decades ago it would have used more negative words like perversion, disorder or deviation: the notion of diversity attempts to capture a more benign and tolerant mood which has recently emerged in pockets of western culture. Without elaborating my case, it must be acknowledged that all writing on sexuality contains assumptions, including this chapter and all the others in this book, and since, as Kenneth Burke once remarked, ‘every way of seeing is a way of not seeing’, to analyse those assumptions can help generate alternative ways of thinking.

From ‘nature’ to the ‘symbol’

In recent history, thinking about human sexual diversity has been largely the province of medical and psychological science; it is, perhaps, of note that collections of the sort comprised in this volume are often composed primarily by those interested in medicine, psychology and zoology – anthropologists, historians, sociologists and the broader humanities are often conspicuously absent. We cannot think about sexuality, it seems, without evoking the imagery of natural bodies, powerful drives, dysfunctioning organs and clinical nomenclature. The field of enquiry has been thoroughly medicalized and individualized (cf. Foucault 1979; Szasz 1981). Such biological and medical imagery, however, can harness the mind away from the central feature of distinctively human life: that it is symbolic and utterly dependent upon historically specific cultures for its existence. Kenneth Burke has meditated on this problem at length and it will help to cite him here:

[We are] The ‘symbol-using animal’, yes, obviously. But can we bring ourselves to
realise just what that formula implies, just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by ‘reality’ has been built up through us by nothing but our symbol system? Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something down to earth as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our ‘reality’ for today (beyond the paper thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know through maps, magazines, newspapers and the like about the present? In school, as they go from class, students turn from one idiom to another. The various courses in the curriculum are in effect but so many different terminologies. And however important to us is the tiniest sliver of reality each of us has experienced first hand, the whole overall ‘picture’ is but a construct of our symbol systems. To meditate on the fact until one sees its full implications is much like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss. And doubtless that’s one reason why, though man is typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naive verbal realism that refuses to realise the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his notions of reality. (Burke 1966, p. 5).

This refusal to acknowledge ‘symbolicity’, as Burke calls it, seems particularly strong in the domain of the sexual. Try and imagine what human sexuality would be like if it did not exist in and through symbols. How could it be recognized? How could we do it? How could we feel it? How could we talk about it? Imagine, if you dare, a world where men have uncoordinated erections and women have uninterrupted lubrications; where sexuality existed devoid of rule or fantasy; of a constant inability to make sense of our feelings, our partners, our orgasms. Clearly none of these can announce themselves to us without symbols. It is a very basic precondition of human sexuality, and indeed it is because the world of symbolism is inherently ambiguous that the problem of diverse sexual meaning announces itself in all societies. We are the talking, thinking, symbolic sex; as Lawrence Stone remarks, ‘Despite appearances, human sex takes place mostly in the head’ (Stone 1977, p. 483). Symbols are the ghost in the machine, and to talk about human sexuality in terms derived from biology, medicine or nature is to talk about the less distinctive features of sexuality. Sexuality, for humans, is absolutely unnatural. For we are really quite removed from other species. They have little history (except their evolutionary programmes) to pass on from generation to generation; they have little language (except their elementary sign systems) to communicate with; and they have little concern with moral or political issues. This is not to deny that sexuality amongst humans has a clear biological substrata, but it is to recognize that our essential human nature, although biologically based, is one that is grounded upon diverse, historically changing cultures, and, concomitantly, symbolism and language (cf. Leach 1982; Midgley 1979). Such a feature is indeed acknowledged by many prominent biologists. C. S. Beach, for example, comments: ‘It is my present feeling that human sexuality is about as closely related to the mating behaviours of other species as human language is related to animal communication, a relationship that is distant indeed’ (Beach 1974: p. 334). Understanding sexual diversity is dependent upon understanding the cultures that render us such a differentiated species, and most significantly the different patterns of symbolism and communication which enable such diversities to be fostered and transmitted.4

From ‘essentialism’ to ‘phenomenalism’

The existence of both symbolism and diversity in all known cultures generates a second cluster of problem assumptions. Can we assume the diversities to display ultimately (after a great deal of scientific discovery) some clear, universal form? Or should we assume that specific forms of sexuality emerge under specific economic, religious, kinship and cultural conditions? Can we assume that the diversities exhibit definite and uniform constellations of experience? Or should we assume that people’s lives are much less fixed, with a toing and froing of their sexualities across their life cycles?

The former view is essentialist. Thus, looking at history, prostitution can become the ‘oldest profession’, rape may be seen as the means by ‘which all men keep all women in a state of fear’ (Brownmiller 1975, p. 5), pornography becomes (universally) the ‘depiction of whores’ (Dworkin 1981), whilst homosexuality may be found just as readily in ancient Greece as in a modern sauna bath in New York. A common essence is found which transcends time and place. This view would also tend to see ‘the family’ as a given (cf. Thompson 1979), and, most supremely, sexuality is taken to be a universal constant – usually a powerful biological drive requiring control and directly linked to procreation and gender (cf. Gagnon and Simon 1973). This view, however, is open to the immediate accusation that it simply takes the assumptions of today and uses them to ‘read’ other cultures. It fails to recognize that the meaning given the experiences in different cultures may be so at variance that it does not help to see them unproblematically in the same terms.

Is the experience of two men in a New York Leather Bar beating each other comparable to the fantasies of de Sade? Is the paternalistic tutelage of boy and adult in ancient Greece the same as the ‘child molester’ locked up in our modern prisons? Is the wearing of female costume by males in a modern Beaumont Society meeting in a provincial English town comparable to that of the Berdache? Of course there are similarities and tentative universals: but the actual meaning of the experience is organized so differently in each case that it is dangerous to render them too similar.5

As one clear instance, consider the young men of a small New Guinean community, fictitiously named the Sambia, who spend nearly ten years of their lives exclusively engaged in sexual relations with other men. This is not just a freak happening of a few; it is prescribed for all. More than this, intercourse
with women is forbidden – indeed, the men are kept firmly away from women. In our culture it would be hard not to think of this as homosexuality – and indeed the anthropologist who studied this group does refer to it in such a fashion throughout his book (Herdt 1981). But as the author makes very clear, the rituals and meanings surrounding the experience are wildly at variance with those we associate with homosexuality in our culture.

In our culture (until recently) male–male fellatio was taboo – amongst the Sambia it was prescribed. In our culture it was linked to effeminacy and weakness – amongst the Sambia it was a sign of masculinity and strength. In our culture to engage in such acts for six or seven years exclusively, having no contact with women, would be seen as indicative of a fixed type of person (a homosexual man) who would have to be castigated, imprisoned or ‘treated’ – amongst the Sambia, it was a long experience in adolescence that prepared one for later-life heterosexual intercourse and marriage. In Sambia, male–male fellatio was one of a number of rituals in which older men and boys prepared younger boys for adulthood and masculinity – central to this was the idea that sperm from another man had to be built up in the younger man in order to meet women and procreate later in life. Fellatio was the cornerstone of masculinity; nothing could be further from the thoughts of all these young men that such activities were clinical disorders or evidence of homosexual types. To understand this experience it has to be placed in the wider context of Sambia interpretations of gender and Sambia explanations of procreation. If same-sex fellatio has a hormonal base then can it be the case that such hormones are activated for all males between the ages of seven and eighteen in Sambia culture? If same-sex fellatio is the result of behavioural conditioning, then something drastic must happen to transfer all these fellators to heterosexuality around the age of 18? If homosexuality is pathologic, then some cultures must have wholly pathological age-bands! Of course there are reasonable responses to such challenges, but the point I hope is made: it is not the case that other cultures make sense of diverse sexualities in the same way as we do and there are dangers to be found in interpreting the past through the lenses of the present, or other life experiences through our own.

Similar concerns emerge in comparing same-sex experiences amongst women (though there is the additional problem that until recently women have been so hidden from history that adequate data on which to build are hard to find). If an examination was made of same-sex experiences between women in the eighteenth century, women in the early twentieth century and women in the late 1970s (in England and America) there are clear signs of a radically different form of experience. Thus Lillian Faderman has documented the ubiquity and strength of ‘romantic friendships’ between women in the eighteenth century – a world accepted but ignored by men, a wholly different and powerful sphere of intimacy. Only if the women started to cross-dress and ‘act like men’ was it taken as a threat to the male world and hence reacted to with vengeance. Normally it was just an assumed troubled part of the life of women (Faderman 1981). Not so, of course, by the twentieth century, when comparable relationships had become shrouded in a deep medical stigma – derived from a male model of pathology through which it was interpreted in roughly the same way as male homosexuality. The lesbian became a new clinical type: the romantic relationships of a century earlier were banished and transformed totally in their significance and meaning. With the wake of the women’s movement in the 1970s yet another shift in the meaning of lesbianism occurred: it was invested with a political meaning and became a central plank in feminist claims. The ‘woman-identified-woman’ was invented (Wolf 1979, p. 63). Again, it is a quite different phenomenon from the romance of the eighteenth century and the sickness of the early twentieth. It would hence be very dangerous and indeed foolish to read ‘lesbianism’ as if it was a clinical entity that transcended time and space; paradoxically this was but one mode of grasping such experiences and, as is now well understood, a highly damaging and destructive mode.

Such ideas led social scientists during the 1970s to develop a more relativistic and Constructionist view of sexuality. Padgug summarizes the general approach well:

Sexual reality is variable, and it is so in several senses. It changes within individuals, within genders, and within societies just as it differs from gender to gender, class to class and from society to society. Even the very meaning and content of sexual arousal varies according to these categories. Above all, there is continuous development and transformation of its realities. . . . There do exist certain sexual forms which, at least at a high level of generality, are common to all human societies: live [sic], intercourse, kinship, can be understood universally on a very general level. But that . . . Greece, Medieval Europe and modern capitalist societies share general sexual forms, do[es] not make the contents and meaning of these forms identical or undifferentiated. They must be carefully distinguished and separately understood, since their inner structures and social meanings and articulations are very different. . . . The forms, contents and context of sexuality always differ. There is no abstract or universal category of ‘the erotic’ or ‘the sexual’ applicable without change to all societies. (Padgug 1979, pp. 10–11; my italics)

Although their problems differ, this new ‘constructionist’ understanding has united a number of differing theoretical postures towards the study of sexuality: symbolic interactionists (Gagnon and Simon 1973; Plummer 1975) find many similarities with discourse theorists (Foucault, 1979), while feminist theorists join hands with Marxists (Barrett 1980; Weeks 1982; Coward 1983).
From procreation to pluralism

Behind much writing on human sexuality the assumptions of both ‘nature’ and essentialism converge in a unitary view of the nature of sexuality: sex is for the reproduction of species. From this it follows inter alia that the ideal form of sexuality must be heterosexual coitus in which the male must be sufficiently aroused to penetrate and the woman must be capable of at least bearing the child (usually raising it too). Key images hence follow from this unitary conception of sexuality — images of heterosexuality, coital sex, male arousal, female nurturance, motherhood, procreation — and these certainly seem to have informed most of western thinking, no less in the past than in the present. I am not talking here simply of the more formal definitions of the perversions, most of which certainly make such criteria of normality very explicit; but rather of the more pervasive ideas which lie unstated throughout much other writing on sexuality, even much that aims to transcend such limitations (cf. Rich 1981).

The above assumptions of a unitary procreative model run very deep and have helped therefore to define the entire field of sexual diversity. The image of male activity and female receptivity helps us to understand why nearly all discussion of perverse sexuality are essentially discussions of male sexuality. Currently all the major sex offences (with the exception of prostitution) are aimed at male desire, while discussions of perversion invariably focus on men, since women’s involvement seems to occur much less frequently. Where are all the women who cross-dress, who crave men’s suede shoes, who steal underwear from clothes-lines, who seek out the young child or who find sexual excitement in obscene telephone calls? Where, indeed, is the pornography for women? Of course there are exceptions, but generally the problem of perversion (diversity) has been established as a problem of men.

That sexual deviance is viewed this way is (in part at least) a consequence of the way we structure our expectations. Since it is men who need to be aroused in order to impregnate, it is when this desire is aroused by some non-procreative source that we have a problem. Since it is women who merely acquiesce in the sexual act, their sexuality can be for the most part ignored. They figure only in the background — servicing men (in prostitution, strip-tease, pornography, etc. — where the women’s needs sexually are rarely the focus of attention), provoking men (as in many accounts of rape) and frequently, through denial, having their sexuality unconstrued — much lesbianism, historically, as we have seen from Faderman (1981) seems to have been ignored; and I have argued elsewhere that were a man to have a relationship comparable to a woman’s sensuous relationship with a child it would lead the man directly into prison — the man is sexual whilst the woman is not (cf. Plummer 1981b, pp. 227–8). Until the advent of the recent women’s movement, the issue of female sexuality has been a puzzle to male social scientists and they have usually elected to ignore it. Arguably, then, the field of sexual deviation has been built out of the issue of male desire. Deviant women are likely to be those who break the ‘virginity requirement’ before marriage and the ‘motherhood requirement’ after it (cf. Edwards 1980).

However necessary procreation may be for the survival of the species, it is increasingly recognized that human sexuality has more goals than this. And once this is accepted, the core assumptions of so many investigations begin to crumble. Singer calls this the pluralistic view of sex:

By pluralism I mean the refusal to assume in advance that nature prescribes a unitary model for male and female response, that there is only one norm which could indicate how all men or women must behave in order to function properly, that there is a unique mode of consummation that satisfies male or female sexuality, that there is a universal condition which constitutes or structures sexual response in all people on all occasions, or that there is a single instinct or biological system basic to human sexuality. (Singer 1973, pp. 15–16)

Pluralism culturally is a growing feature of industrialized societies, and arguably sexuality is just one more instance of this awareness of pluralism. All manner of sexual activities may be engaged in for all manner of reasons; men and women can elect to follow their own patterns of sexuality (though, of course, within a broad culturally agreed framework: a sexual free-for-all is as unacceptable as any kind of free-for-all in a social order). Following on from this, there are some who see the sexual fringe (Rubin 1981) and most particularly same-sexers (homosexuals) as providing the experimental lead in diverse sexualities — working out patterns and establishing the trends that the rest of society may, at a later date, more cautiously follow (cf. Lee 1978; Altman 1982). Be this as it may, the important point for my discussion is the need to recognize just how deep the assumption of procreation (with all its accompanying unified imagery) has been in the study of sexual diversity. To move towards a pluralistic model is to unhinge the majority of work in this area during the past century. If, for example, pluralism was accepted, the debate would turn to such questions as: how flexible can sexuality be? Can men and women experience these forms in the same way? How can procreation be satisfactorily integrated with the other goals of human sexuality? Are there some goals of sexuality which should be recognized as socially and politically unacceptable (e.g. those in the services of power?) and others which should be fostered (e.g. those in the service of mutual play (affection? recreation?). A very different kind of analysis would proceed from this.
From perversity to diversity

Questions such as the above are couched in terms of human variety and to ask them requires breaking away from assumptions of a unitary or unilinear sexuality – notably ones geared to procreation. Much discussion of sexuality for the past century or so has been either with an explicit condemnation of diversity (through law and morality) or with an implicit attack (through the conversion of diversity into sickness and clinical problems by medicine and psychiatry). It has been impossible to think about patterns of non-procreative sexuality without evoking some sense of stigma: devaluation, dishonour, degradation. To read the purportedly objective studies of clinical science over the past century is, in effect, to read a catalogue of abuse – whether writting or unwitting. Minor sexual whims are placed side by side with monstrous murders; specific sexual experiences are seen to carry with them the seeds of the most general diseases and atrocities; causes are never found in the ordinary and mundane but are sought in the ‘bad seed’ and the ‘bad home’ – contaminating all who surround the experience; the small delight is turned into the worst excess.

Of course there are many exceptions as always; but the general trends are unmistakable. From Krafft-Ebing’s blood-drinking, shit-eating, corpse-mutilating band of degenerates at the end of the nineteenth century to the modern unstable homosexuals, inadequate fetishists, dangerous child molesters and depraved prostitutes, the underlying imagery of stigma has not been far away. Accounts have become more benevolent, tolerant, humane: but the backdrop of stigma still looms large. It seems hard to write or look from a point of view which acknowledges that diversity of cultural experience is a central characteristic of human beings, and senses the extraordinarily limited images we have established of moral sexuality (the coital ‘fuck’). It seems hard to grasp that the stigma which is assumed in so much writing may actually be the problem to be analyzed.

COPING WITH DIVERSITY IN MODERN SOCIETY: REGULATION AND CONSTRUCTION

There is no society where sexual experiences proceed untrammeled by social regulations – complete sexual freedom exists exclusively in the libertarian’s dream and the moral reformer’s nightmare. Of course, societies will differ in both the degree and the substance of such controls (cf. Brown 1952; Christensen 1966), but regulation of some form there always seems to be.

At the most general level, there are two main types of explanation of this regulation – those which focus on the regulations of desire, and those which focus upon the production of symbolic order. Each has many contradictory and competing adherents.

The regulation of diversity

Within this explanation, the problem is one ultimately of bodily control: of our bodily lust, instincts or desires being curtailed. People are assumed to be guided by a powerful set of urges pressing for constant satisfaction – though very often this is restricted to men alone, women’s desires are seen as minimal. In most versions of this theory, this satisfaction can never be permitted because it is destructive of social life or personal character. In a few versions, its satisfaction is encouraged as a liberatory force. It is to be found no less in the writings of Christians than in those of Freudians, Marxists or feminists: despite enormous differences, a unity of belief in the powerful body binds them together.

Fornication and lust must be regulated, according to the writings of Christians, through virginity, denial – or, if one must, through careful control in marriage (‘It is better to marry than to burn’). For Freud, the regulations of polymorphic perverse libido were a necessary concomitant of the advance of civilization – it was the very energy which needed to be rechannelled into cultural creations (Freud 1975). For Reich, capitalist organization held this desire in check, harnessing the needs of the system for work – a theory later amplified by Marcuse and Brown (cf. Robinson 1969). For some feminists, men established their supremacy over women by gaining control over their desires, which in earlier periods were much stronger than men’s: becoming male sexual property is the cornerstone of many theories of patriarchy (cf. Sherfey 1972). First virginity and then motherhood are the only appropriate routes for the woman (cf. Edwards 1981).

Clearly, there are many divergent accounts of regulation subsumed here, but a broadly similar principle is at work. Lyman has expressed this unanimity:

Lustful cravings are likely to arise anywhere, anytime, and toward any object – human, animal, or ideal. . . . lust, whether enabled by love or not, can assume the totality of interests, activities, energies of those overwhelmed by it. Once this has occurred, the contributions to society or to that part of it which the parties are attached, are diminished by the loss of the lustful parties’ services. In the most general sense the various methods of social control employed to curb or channel lust are directed towards securing society against the losses entailed by lustful withdrawal. (Lyman 1979, p. 77)

Within this argument, then, the sex drive is held constant and various patterns of regulation – religion, the state, the family, capitalism etc. – are grafted on to it, thereby transforming the patterns of sexual diversity. But there is another set of arguments which suggest that far from controlling sex, regulations may actually
serve to construct it. Since this argument is much less well known and much less
popular than the ‘regulation of desire’ view, I will elaborate it in more detail.

The construction of diversity

Once human sexuality ceases to be viewed as a powerful, natural drive
universally pressing for release, then the argument about sexual repression is
considerably weakened: if there is no drive, then there is nothing to be
repressed. Such an argument thus comes to suggest that far from culture acting
on a ‘drive’ and regulating it, culture actually constructs and assembles the
‘drive’ and all that comes with it. Human sexuality is not in conflict with society
but is shaped by those very social definitions. There is a continuity between
culture and personal experience. John Gagnon has put this position clearly:

the kind of sexuality that members of a culture believe helps to create the kind of
sexuality they get. If they believe that sex is an anarchic and powerful drive and
that view to young people, then they will get at least some who will behave as
if they were possessed by an anarchic powerful drive. If they offer sex as a calming
and therapeutic truth . . . then the good learners will indeed find that sex is a
calming and therapeutic experience. All of social life is part of a self-fulfilling
prophecy – if we teach people to believe something and tell them that it is right,
then they will tend to act in that direction. However, our control of learning is
never complete; people behave reflexively and often choose not to do what we
want them to. (Gagnon 1977, p. 34)

This broad cultural view renders the analysis of symbols especially important in
looking at sexual diversity.

Symbols, despite their inherent ambiguity, always work to impose form upon
formlessness. Both in the wider culture and in the personal mind, symbols
suggest a sense of order upon what would otherwise be inchoate disorder –
unmanageable, unstable, unpredictable. This sense of order means constructing
a symbolic system of classification – the naming of parts and the labelling of
the acceptable and the unacceptable. Such a process of symbolic constructions
and hence selections seems necessary for human life. And this seems so as both
the personal and public levels.

On the personal level the need for a certain amount of cognitive restriction
keeps at bay the buzzing, booming confusion of the chaotic universe. However
radical or free-thinking individuals seem to be, their views must always occur
within deeply restricted sets of assumptions – what the phenomenologists call
the ‘world taken for granted’ and more colloquially the ‘OK World’ (cf. Berger
1973). Roth has put the point nicely: ‘People will not accept uncertainty. They
will make an effort to structure it no matter how poor the materials they have to
work with and no matter how much the experts try to discourage them’ (Roth
1963, p. 93). To attempt to get through a day without a deep sense of order
guiding one’s novelty of thought is to invite oneself to get no further than
opening one’s eyes in the morning. The existential world of human possibility
would simply be paralysed. It behaves a few – like de Sade or Nietzsche
perhaps – to attempt such transcendence, but it is no basis for most people in
most cultures to get through their day.

One part of this deeply assumed world will be our thoughts on sexuality:
zombie-like most of the time, we will experience our classifications of
sexuality only dimly, confronting ambiguities with fear and rage and
attempting either to explain them to ourselves or else expelling them into the
world of dirt and disorder, disease and decay, degeneracy and the devil. Such
process of reinterpretation and expulsion will usually serve to strengthen our
sense of security and order, our conviction that the way we believe is right. It is,
of course, the process widely recognized as ‘scapegoating’ (cf. Becker 1973).

But it is not just on this psychological level that such processes of symbolic
ordering work: societies are commonly analysed by anthropologists as
elaborate classification systems containing their own internal logics and
interconnections centring particularly around issues of purity and taboo.
Cultures are made sense of through symbols, but such symbolic order always
implies disorder: ambiguities will emerge, phenomena will not fit, new ‘stuff’
will emerge which threatens the purity of the existing symbolism. Disorder is
symbiotic with order: indeed not only must the two coexist, the one (disorder)
may actually serve to strengthen the other (order) by creating the need for
tighter classifications, stronger boundaries, ritualistic denunciations. Far
from disrupting social order, the anomalies – if handled correctly – can serve
to enhance it. These are general points given articulation by Durkheim (1964)
and amplified very effectively in the more recent work of Mary Douglas
(1970), Kai T. Erickson (1966) and Robert Scott (1972). Classification of
genres and sexualities will be part of any cultural classification system – at
least for as long as such things are considered important enough to
differentiate. (Arguably, some cultures make very weak distinctions in such
matters, and some recent arguments have suggested that such distinctions
could be abolished altogether (cf. Kessler and McKenna 1978).)

Such an analysis can be made much more concrete. Christie Davies (1982)
has examined the origins of taboos against homosexuality, bestiality and
transvestism – or phenomena resembling these – in such groups as the Old
Testament Jews, the Parsees, the ancient Greek states, the early and medieval
Christians and the modern British armed forces. From comparative materials,
he argues that it is when the identity of a group is most at stake that it ‘uses’
sexual taboos to mark its cohesive boundaries. In talking of the Jews, for
example, he suggests that ‘The forces of the taboos lies less in their content
than in their structure, in the way they insist on the separation of categories so
that the keeping apart of like and unlike is an everyday reminder of God’s setting apart the Jews, the chosen people, from the heathen, the lesser breeds without the law’ (Davies 1982, p. 1034). But is not just the Jews and religion: he sees military cohesiveness as another domain where social boundaries need tightening. In sum, he concludes:

A detailed examination of the history of a number of Western societies and institutions shows that the origins and maintenance of these taboos stem from the fact that these forms of behaviour have been perceived by religious and military leaders as a threat to crucial social boundaries. They have sought to punish the homosexual, the transvestite and to a lesser extent other sexual deviants both as a means of reinforcing the distinctive identity of a group by emphasising its boundaries and as the means of maintaining the boundaries between the different layers of a religious or military hierarchy. (Davies 1982, p. 1033)

I think this account of sexual taboos works well at the abstract and formal level: it is hard to imagine a society without layers of symbols, systems of classifications and thereby anomalies that do not fit. But the theory commits the very sin that I have described earlier: it is too general and lacks a specific historical analysis. Christie, for example, talks about homosexuality in all the cultures as if it were the same thing; such theories hold too much constant.

It is part of Foucault’s recent and much discussed contribution to challenge this notion of continuity. Regulative theories (like Freud’s) see a sexual essence (transhistorical and transcultural) that has to be acted upon; symbolic-order theorists stress the continuity across cultures of symbolic thresholds. Although Foucault is quite close to this latter position and places a great deal of importance upon symbolic controls, his prime aim is to break beyond the conventional modes of thinking which can only see continuity and unfolding rationality. For him, there is a significant rupture in the world with the onset of industrialization and capitalism; our modes of apprehending and grasping the universe significantly shifted. History cannot be written in a continuous line. Thus his most relevant study here — The History of Sexuality — is neither a history nor about sexuality as conventionally conceived. Instead, it is about the explosion of ‘knowledge’ and ideas which came to constitute our thinking about sexuality from (roughly) the eighteenth century onwards. Part of a much wider programme in which Foucault attempts to trace the genealogy and archaeology of contemporary thought (about crime, about medicine, about madness), the burden of his argument seeks to show how such discourses are the modes through which we enact our life and through which power is ubiquitously engendered. Discourses about sexuality, Foucault argues, have proliferated since the eighteenth century and transformed the constitution of our sexualities. He conjectures an earlier period where sexuality seems relatively insignificant but routinely and enjoyably experienced, and contrasts that with the explosion of talk about sex: from the earliest confessinals, through the medical treatises and onwards to modern-day psychiatry and sexology. It has been a period which far from repressing sexualities has actually given it a shape, a coherence and — most vitally — an importance which it does not necessarily have in all societies. We have learnt to think differently about sexuality and in the same process we have come to organize our power relationships differently; they are everywhere enacted within a framework of sexuality. Bodily control has come through symbolic orderings.

Foucault’s discussion is far removed from the orthodoxies which discuss sexual repression and regulation, and as such it is not always easy to follow. Certain parts are, however, clearer than others: he describes, for instance, four great mechanisms that have constructed sexualities in the recent epoch which have become ‘especially dense transfer point(s) 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 1979, p. 103). These mechanisms entailed the hysteresis of women’s bodies (with the creation of the hysterical woman), the pedagogization of children’s sex (with the creation of the hysterical woman), the pedagogization of children’s sex (with the creation of the Masturbating Child), the socialization of procreative behaviour (with the creation of the Malthusian couple) and the psychiatricization of perverse pleasure (with the creation of a gallery of modern perverts — from the homosexual to the sadomasochist). For Foucault, then, the modern categories surrounding diverse sexualities (produced largely by medical men) are not to be seen simply as the revelations of science. They are, in fact, new ways of constructing sexualities: and through them, new ways of reaching into the body politic. It is not diverse sexuality that is being controlled and regulated; rather diverse sexualities are being constructed, shaped, given a new form — and through this, our relationships are imbued with a dynamic of power.

The making of the modern perverts

Although roots can be traced back to at least the seventeenth century (cf. Diethelm 1750; McIntosh 1968; Bray 1982), it was distinctively during the nineteenth century that our contemporary modes of apprehending sexual diversity were consolidated. Partially this meant the increasing use of the law to construct sexuality, but more crucially it meant the rise of the medically defined expert. Human sexualities were progressively taken over from the domain of the explicit moralist to the domain of the presumably objective and scientific medical men. It was ‘female sexuality’ and ‘masturbatory insanity’ that symbolized this medicalization of sex, and judged by today’s standards the pejorative moralism and control disguised as benevolence is all too apparent.
Thus for women ‘the act of sexual intercourse’ was seen to become ‘an absolute and positive source of disease’ (cf. Edwards 1984, p. 82), while masturbation — for men and women — became a common cause of insanity. Esquirol in France, Acton in England and Rush in America converged on the centrality of the masturbatory hypothesis: at times it seemed as if masturbation was the greatest (evil) medical complaint in the world. As one commentator could write: ‘neither plague, nor war, nor smallpox, nor a crowd of similar evils, have resulted more disastrously for humanity than the habit of masturbation: it is the destroying element of civilized society’ (From the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal, quoted in Szasz 1981, p. 18). Along with such round condemnation emerged a whole cluster of implements and strategies for the containment of masturbation — well documented in Alex Comfort’s The Anxiety Makers (Comfort 1968). Today this fear has been partially dissipated and the old medical treatises are a matter of amusement; but the basic structure of the argument still imbues the masturbatory experience with guilt and secrecy for many (Marcus and Francis 1975; Sarnoff and Sarnoff 1979).

It was particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century that the diverse sexualities became classified into a huge taxonomy of perversion: causes were sought, characteristics charted and treatments designated. Generic terms — such as nymphomania — were invented, and then subclassified — the nymphomaniac could be andromaniac, citoromaniac or hypatomaniac (Cf. Acton 1857; Marcus 1981, p. 31). Elaborate classifications grew up designating the perversion of object choice and the perversions of aim; and case-study after case-study was introduced first to the medical profession and later to the general public through elaborate volumes such as Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis (1886). The ‘homosexual’ was literally born in 1860, when Benkert coined the term; the ‘exhibitionist’ was literally born in 1877, when Lasegue coined the term; and the fetishist came into being around 1887, when Binet coined the term. One by one, and in step with the more general developments in criminological science (cf. Mannheim 1966; Matza 1964), a rogues gallery of sexuality came into being. And it is this gallery which remained at the centre of contemporary modes of thinking about sexual diversity. It is true that over the past two decades there has been some shifting in these cultural constructions — most notably the women’s movement has brought some change to the conceptions of female diversities (cf. Ehrenreich and English 1979; Banks 1901), and the gay movement managed to bring the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from the psychiatric nomenclature (cf. Bauer, 1981) — but the gallery of specific types (the homosexual, the paedophile, the transvestite) remain at the core of thinking about diversity. The point is that such categories construct diversities at least as much as reflecting them. A close look behind any one of these categories reveals enormous diversities of experience that are held together by a slender categorical device. Paedophilia, for instance, is an experience with so many levels and forms that the term obscures much more than it helps (cf. Rossman 1979; Plummer 1983b).

The classification and medicalization of diverse sexualities, however, needs to be seen against a much wider background. It is not just that medicine has constructed the perverse: it has also constructed the ‘normal’. Masturbation, hysterical women, fetishists or homosexuals all stand in contrast to the assumed baseline that human sexuality has one natural goal — procreation. All sexualities should ultimately be harnessed to procreation and from this much of social life may be explained: the deep assumption of heterosexuality, since only heterosexuals can reproduce (cf. Plummer 1981; Rich 1981); the deep assumption about the nature of men and women, since men impregnate and are thereby assertive and active, while, women ‘merely’ conceive and then are charged with the responsibilities of raising the child; and the deep assumption about the nuclear family, since this alone will provide the ideal stability for the procreative goal. It is this procreative assumption that becomes the key definer of contemporary sexuality. Even though, at the behavioural level, remarkably little sexuality is actually geared to a simple goal like procreation — sexuality is behaviourally pluralistic (cf. Singer 1973) — symbolically it is seen within this framework.

This image of ‘procreation’ not only serves to construct images of the ‘perverse’, it also serves to construct different sorts of perversities for men and women. The symbolism of procreation serves to play down the female’s interest in sexuality (she does not have to experience orgasm in order to procreate) while playing up her interest in nurturing the child. Conversely, the symbolism serves to highlight the need for male orgasm through intercourse while minimizing his involvement with the nurturing of the child. And contained within such imagery is the notion of perversity for men and women. Thus a perverse woman is one who is either too sexual (nymphomaniac) or neglectful of motherhood. A perverse man is one whose sexual drives are not harnessed to reproductive intercourse. It is not the case that men are more perverse than women, as is so frequently suggested in clinical textbooks or criminal statistics. Rather, the perversities of men and women are assembled in different ways according to the image of their role in procreation.

COPING WITH DIVERSITY IN MODERN SOCIETY: REACTION AND CONSTRUCTION

To ban sexualities is not to eliminate them; rather, it is to give them a distinctive form. People who experience diversities are not simply the recipients of given
biological or psychological needs; instead, they have to construct their sexuality as a response to the cultural definitions that surround them. In this section I propose to examine briefly three sets of responses to these cultural definitions: the personal, the collective and the political. In each case, these responses can be seen as ways of handling a culturally induced set of problems; of access, guilt, secrecy and identity.

The problems of sexual stigma

A first key problem which confronts the sexually different is the feeling of guilt and the consequential desire for legitimacy. To apprehend that your diversity is taboo is to exist either in public shame or in private guilt. This problem manifests itself in different ways, but it is initially omnipresent. A person who seeks to cross-dress may be ‘disgusted with himself’; a man who seeks sex with children may see this as a sign of ‘weakness’ or a sign of ‘immaturity’; the person who wants to be urinated on may see this as a ‘wicked thought’; the woman who wants to whip a man may fear she is a ‘pervert’; the person who plans to sell their sexual wares may fear they are a ‘whore’. Over and over again – in the stories of many diverse people – the tale of oddity, abnormality and wicknowledgedness is stressed. Yet such worries are not intrinsic to the experiences: all, at some time or place, could be acceptable. It is rather the stigma which generates them. Many may live with such guilt all their lives, but others may quickly overcome it. Crucial in this must be the gaining of legitimation which can transform the sense of wrong into a positive experience.

A second problem centres around secrecy: stigma creates silence, ban breeds solitariness. If ‘it’ is spoken about, it will be in hushed tones, inadequate language, ridicule or horror. The struggle here is on to find the right words to use and the right person to approach. Homosexuals, for example, are brought up in families where the deep presumption is that the child will be heterosexual and marry, attend schools where sex education is strictly heterosexual and absorb a message from the mass media that excludes or ridiculesthe sexually different. The same holds, even more strongly, for the paedophile, the transvestite, the fetishist: who can imagine the child that asks its parents where to go for eroticized spankings or leather fetishism? Many will harbour this ‘secret’ till the day they die; others might broach the subject with a few, while some others may come to realize that there are whole worlds where such things are spoken about.

A third problem is that of access and availability. Once an experience becomes the subject of ban, it is clearly rendered unavailable to all except the active seeker – it cannot be a simple matter of ‘drift’ as marital sexuality will routinely be. The ‘getting of sex’ may be a more general problem, but for the diversities it is initially a seemingly insurmountable one. How can a woman find another woman? How can you find someone to beat? How can you find a well-worn black stiletto heel shoe to fondle? How can an elderly man find a young girl as an emotional and sexual companion? How can you find the surgical tools to turn yourself from a man into a woman? In all cases, the struggle is on to make available what culture has rendered unavailable. Many will not believe the effort is worth the making and indeed may take their worry quietly to their grave. Others may briefly experiment, find the price too high and give up. Still others may find ways of flirting with the experience throughout their lives – never quite making it central, and never quite giving it up. Still others will pursue the problem until their need is regularly and routinely available to them.

A fourth, and final, problem centres upon identity. In our culture (and many would argue in all), distinctions based on gender go to the very heart of our identity, and gender is presumed to be closely correlated with sexual experience. The idea that what one experiences sexually may be disentangled from one’s biological sex and social definitions of gender is not usually part of conventional wisdoms. A ‘principle of consistency’ seems to be at work (Ponse 1978; Barrett 1980; Plummer 1981a). Hence, once any anomaly in gender or sexual experience is sensed, questions will be posed about identity. The struggle is on to find out who one really is. Given the centrality of these experiences in building identities, it is very easy for them to be transformed into a being; for potential to become personhood, for doing to become an essence, for an encounter to become an orientation. Whatever one’s diversity – to worship feet, to adore encasement – it starts to be connected to one’s identity and thereby is given a centrality and importance. What could just be a ‘hobby’ may ultimately come to be the core of one’s being.

Personal reactions to stigma

It is these four problems – all fundamentally social in origin – that serve as the materials out of which modern ‘perverts’ are made. How a person copes with these problems helps to form the character of the sexual variations: at the very least they are likely to generate substantial worry for the person pondering them. Thus a self-amplifying process is set in motion by which guilt may generate more guilt, secrecy leads to greater isolation and more secrecy, and lack of access leads to a greater sense of frustration. Worrying about worrying can turn minor problems into much bigger ones; and sometimes the sexually diverse may spend their entire adult lives in a state of anxiety generated by their inability to solve these problems.

How may the problems be resolved? Four great strategies seem available (undoubtedly there are others); denial, treatment, neutralization and ‘coming to terms’. Only in the latter is there a clear and positive acceptance of the diversity.
For some, and until recently this has been the most likely response, the answer is simply to leave well alone: denial. An attempt is made to block this ‘secret’ from one’s life. From time to time little ‘moral holidays’ may occur—some may occasionally wear female undergarments or purchase pornographic magazines harbouring their secret fantasies; but this reawakens all the old guilt and panic, and very quickly the undergarments or magazines are burnt or destroyed; and the cycle can start again. Paradoxically, brute denial may serve to strengthen the problems and lead to the diversity remaining a powerful experience.

Others may take their problems into the public domain and seek ‘help’. Their central coping strategy is to turn to ‘experts’ and professionals who claim to be able to help them with their problem. Since until recently such ‘experts’ were the only way a person could easily move from their private secret to another who knew about their problems, a considerable industry of ‘cure’ and therapy developed around these variations in the middle period of this century. Whether such treatments actually cured many people is a matter of great dispute: but they certainly performed the function of giving the ‘patient’ an opportunity to have their thoughts on diversity reorganized (often made even more negative!). Most recently this strategy has become less common with the perversities, but it has grown with the sexual dysfunctions. A multi-million-dollar industry has developed to restructure people’s private worries about dysfunctioning. These in general claim very high success rates (unlike the diversities); but they may also be seen as moments when sexualities are brought into a wider communication process and hence restructured.

A third strategy entails the neutralization of the experience. Here, the behaviour occurs whilst the meaning is denied. Paedophiles may have relationships with children but blame it on drink (McCaghy 1968), exhibitionists may say they were caught out and had to urinate (McDonald 1973), transvestites may restrict dress-wearing to acceptable occasions like parties and men may rape whilst denying the woman as a victim (cf. Weis and Borjes 1975; Jackson 1978). Crucial here is the existence of an ‘account’ which can permit the behaviour but give it a meaning that is not threatening.

It is only with the fourth coping strategy that a reorganized identity occurs. This strategy can, quite literally, be called ‘coming to terms’. What is important to grasp here is that an experience is not necessarily an identity. Thus sexual experiences and fantasies do not automatically announce themselves as well-coded and well-understood categories. Many experiences remain ambiguously uncristallized until circumstances permit or demand their codification: a person may very dimly sense that sex is better when a certain piece of dress is near at hand but in no way comprehend (or even know) the term fetishism; a person may be dimly aware of the fondness experienced in the company of certain children, but in no way see this (or know the term) paedophilia; a person may dimly know that their favourite sexual experiences are enhanced if they bring to it their own ‘peculiar’ little fantasy, but in no way is this little quirk to be read as a sign of perversion (however odd it may sound if it was actually revealed). It is very important to grasp that there is a great deal of sexual diversity which never gets coded into our existing categories. Many people are not even aware of their own secrets, let alone capable of working to hide them from anyone.

Nevertheless, for many people, the solution to their problems is to find a suitable category in which to place themselves. For finding a name—one even if it does not capture one’s experiences correctly—can be very useful. It allows one to think what until then was probably unthinkable; it puts one in a class, a group, and potentially bridges isolation; it is the first hint of a public world beyond one’s private secret; it may give an order to a hitherto chaotic world. No matter that later this very label may bring its own problems: for the time being it is a most potent unifying force.

There are many routes available for this process of coming to terms—through friends or counsellors, magazines and books, films and meetings—and such voyages of discovery are now well documented. An interesting example—interesting because it comes from a woman discovering her masochism—is Maria Marcus’s feminist study A Taste for Pain (1981). Books and literature of all sorts, from the earliest childhood stories like Uncle Tom’s Cabin through to the most intense readings of Freud, Kinsey and the like, played a particularly prominent role in the building of her identity—she shows quite vividly how each ‘reading’ gave her new senses, new ideas, new images to play with and build upon. From Fabricius Moll’s book she gets the term ‘masochism’ (‘so there was a name for it. . . . I think I was pleased to have a name as if I were no longer floating about in the air’—p. 21) but also a sense of the furtive little bands of perpetrators she belonged to (‘there I was together with a whole series of other abnormal phenomena’—p. 20):

But the most important thing I have gained was the simple matter of having acquired a name. So I was something definite. I was included in a definite category. I had my own place. The drawer I belonged in didn’t smell quite so nice as the others but it was a regular drawer with a label on it. In some way or other, this seemed comforting, a kind of acknowledgement. . . . Being given a name seemed to be the first act of consciousness raising, as if a whole disorganised mess of granules had gathered themselves into a solid picture, not only something definite, but also something special—something not really as it should be. Not quite like a crime, but something close to it. . . . I consulted many more books wanting to know much more. . . . (Marcus 1981, pp. 25–6)

Marcus takes her readers step by step through the literature that she, like so
many of the sexually different, explored. Finding those authors who saw it as normal, looking out for the figures on how many there were; scanning pictures to find herself; looking at the way which 'childhood experiences bound up with humiliating sadistic forms of punishment have been the cause' (p. 53); and finding new terms for herself ('algolagnia – for a moment I felt homeless, but then I saw I was surrounded by all my usual friends' – p. 53). It is through this long cultural search that she slowly comes to assemble her masochism.

Collective reactions to stigma

There is a strong tendency in modern thought to see sexual diversity as a feature of individuals. As I have suggested earlier, the nineteenth century transformed sexuality into a gallery of individual types – with their own aetiologies, their own particular traits and their own potential cures. Largely through the work of medical science and psychiatry, the possibility of seeing the social nature of sexual diversity was increasingly lost. Diversity became perversion; perversion was symptomatic of individual malfunctioning; it hence became individualized, pathologized and controlled (cf. Foucault 1979; Szasz 1981).

This is, however, only one way of approaching the problem. For since human sexuality usually involves the seeking of partners and always involves the use of social symbols, sexuality can just as plausibly be viewed in social terms: it is not much fun being a pervert on your own. Although, then, at certain historical moments the whole issue can be thoroughly individualized, there remains a constant possibility for the sexually diverse to come together in groups and this can be a major way of coping with diversity. There is much evidence, for instance, that people seeking same-sex experiences created some kind of 'gay subculture' in ancient Rome and in Europe during the middle ages (cf. Boswell 1980) as well as in Renaissance England (Bray 1982); and that from the eighteenth century onwards many cities came to possess their own gay taverns and bars (cf. Bullough 1976, p. 607; Adam 1979, p. 286). These subcultures did not have the same meaning as those of today, but they nevertheless indicate the existence of collective forms of coping with diversity.

Variant subcultures do not exist in all societies – there seems little evidence for their existence in contemporary China or USSR. And indeed it is likely that it is only under capitalism that such subcultures have really proliferated. Altman, talking about the modern gay culture in America, for instance, could remark that 'this development was only possible under consumer capitalism, which for all its injustices has created the conditions for greater freedom and diversity than are present in any other society yet known' (Altman 1982, p. 104). Indeed, since the 1960s, American social scientists have documented most of the nooks and crannies of different sexual subcultures from bars to baths to bordelloes (cf. Achilles 1967; Read 1980; Delph 1978; Humphreys 1975; Weinberg and Williams 1975; Styles 1979; Stein 1974; Stewart 1972). They have described the culture, roles, argot and codes of conduct experienced in nudist camps (Weinberg 1965) and on nudist beaches (Douglas and Rasmussen 1977); at swingers' parties (Bartell 1971) and in student bathrooms; in pornographic bookstores (Karp 1973; Perkins and Skipper 1981) and in massage parlours (Rasmussen and Kuhn 1976); at transvestite meetings (Feinblom 1976) and at drag shows (Newton 1973); in sadomasochistic gatherings (Weinberg and Falk 1980) and paedophilic groups (Rossman 1979; Plummer 1981). Very little, it seems, has been left unexplored.

The clearest example of sexual diversity becoming subculturalized is that of male homosexuality in the western world during the 1970s and 1980s. In most large cities, gays have created their own communities comparable to those of immigrant groups who create their own ghettos (cf. Lee 1979; Levine 1979; White 1980; Altman 1982). Gay communities appear to be the most developed and advanced form of subculturalization amongst erotic minorities, and insofar as they may provide a blueprint for others to follow, their growth can be seen as passing through three waves (cf. Weeks 1977).

In the first wave, covert meeting places and networks were established. As early as the eighteenth century, taverns existed where homosexual men – often effeminate men – gathered. They had a slow growth, and often were akin to brothels or, at the other extreme, gentlemen’s clubs. Whilst some homosexuals could therefore meet, they were strictly taboo and their hallmarks were probably secrecy and silence. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a few groups in Europe and American attempted to organize themselves more politically (cf. Lauritsen and Thorstad 1974): in France, André Gide’s 1911 defence of homosexual love, *Corydon*, and the subsequent *Arcadian* group; in England, Edward Carpenter’s 1894 pamphlet *Homogenic Love*; in America, more ambivalently, the work of Walt Whitman – especially his *1860 Leaves of Grass* and the much later Chicago Society for Human Rights (Katz 1976, pp. 385ff.); in Germany, the creation by Magnus Hirshfeld of the ‘Scientific Humanitarian Committee’ in 1897 and later the first Institute of Sexual Science (to be destroyed when Hitler came to power). Bullough comments of the latter: ‘In a sense, the committee, the group behind the clinic, journal and research centre, came close to being an association of homosexuals, and it has sometimes been regarded as the first effective organization of homosexuals’ (cf. Bullough 1976, p. 645).

Throughout Europe and America, then, the first few decades of the twentieth century began to see the emergence of something more than just covert meeting places: the beginnings of the transition of homosexuality from medical to political terms was under way. Self-declared homosexuals were of course few, organizations subject to constant harassment and closure,
reputations severely at risk: but the elements were there.

The second wave began in the decade immediately following the second world war: Europe and America witnessed a slow and cautious proliferation of homosexual movements and law-reform lobbies (the latter often arising outside overt homosexual groups). In America, a social club – the Veteran's Benevolent Association – was established in 1945 and lasted until 1954, by which time many organizations had been founded: SIR (Society for Individual Rights), Mattachine and the Daughters of Bilitis being the longest lasting and each producing their own fairly continuous (but much harassed) magazines. In England, the Homosexual Law Reform Association was set up in the wake of the Wolfenden Report (HMSO 1957) and worked assiduously so that a decade later the Sexual Offences Act was finally passed decriminalizing homosexual acts by men over 21 in many circumstances. The final symbolism of nearly thirty years of organization came in the Stonewall Riots, 28 June 1969. This marked a distinctive change from the days of the early homophile movement – gays showing active resistance to police harassing a local Greenwich village bar, with a two-day street battle following. From this moment on the approach to homosexuality shifted. Whereas before it had largely been apologetic, it was now ‘glad to be gay’; whereas before it had been secretive, now it was ‘coming out’. Homosexuality drastically increased in visibility and the language surrounding it began to shift from one of disease to one of politics and ‘rights’. A year later a small group of students met in a room at the London School of Economics and the English Gay Liberation Front was born. By that time, it had indeed become an international political movement, and it has remained so ever since.

The central issue of this third wave was ‘coming out’ and a politicization of sexual diversity, and it has led to an ever increasing proliferation of gay institutions. Whereas once the secret bar and the clandestine ‘cottage’ were all that existed for homosexuals, the 1970s witnessed the growth of gay publishing, gay industries, gay bath-houses, gay counselling services, gay switchboards, gay churches, gay trade unions, gay political parties, gay fashion, gay discos, gay ramblers – gay everything. Sexual diversity had become the explicit, overt organizing point of hundreds of thousands of lives (Lee 1978; White 1980; Altman 1982). Whole communities in America and Canada became colonized into ‘gay ghettos’. Whatever evidence there was for ‘gay subcultures’ in the middle ages or for institutionalised homosexuality amongst certain tribes, it seems likely that world history has never seen the organization of stigmatized sexual diversity on such a massive scale before. And arguably it has set a model for other sexually diverse experiences to follow. The model suggests that in a first phase there must be minimal conditions for some like-minded people to come together – usually in secrecy and shame. From this, a gradual case can be made for changes in attitudes or

law: this will be a low-key debate, virtually silenced in the public sphere. By now, though, two crucial conditions will have been established: that people experiencing diversity can meet and that arguments can be made in their defence. It becomes therefore increasingly plausible to accept and extend the diversity until a third phase is (unexpectedly) reached: the take-off into coming out and mass political protest. Once sexuality enters this sphere, the conditions are ripe for the proliferation of many institutions for the sexually different – and coping with such diversity ostensibly becomes much easier.

Few other patterns of sexuality have been either so visible or so successful in their organizing and campaigning as the gay movement, but most have made some attempts. In general they remain lodged at the first two stages of development – providing services and supports for a small group of interested members and creating the beginnings of a legitimation. Transvestism, transexualities, paedophilia, sadomasochism, prostitution, fetishism, group sex, and nudism have all created such mini-worlds.

This collective way of coping with sexual diversity seems a distinctively modern development, a feature indeed of advanced capitalist societies. Small coteries may have existed in the past, and in some cases extensive subcultures; but never before in history has there been such an extensive proliferation for such diverse groupings. That paedophiles should now have become organized (admittedly in a small way) in most western countries, and that prostitutes should have set up their own union would have been unthinkable a century ago.

There is nothing particularly surprising about the evolution of so many collective forms of sexual diversity. It is completely congruent with the proliferation of subcultures more generally that seems to have accompanied industrialization (cf. Yinger 1960; Irwin 1977): it is part of the wider process of social differentiation that has been a key concern of sociologists since the work of the founding fathers. It could be seen, following Weber, as evidence of the increasing rationalization of our sexual lives – taking it out of the domain of the unpredictable and even the unavailable into the domain of the orderly, the rational and the available (and the potentially disenchanted). It could be seen, following Marx, as evidence of the ever increasing commoditization of sex; removing sexuality from the realm of spontaneous experience into the realms of marketing, packaging, selling. Certainly, many of the subcultural forms develop their own mini-economies. It could be seen, following Durkheim, as evidence of the increasing growth of small associations and communities which lessen the anomie experience of an increasingly differentiated society – the mini-worlds of erotic sexuality providing comfort, community and support. It could be seen, following Simmel, as evidence of the city fostering segregation and diversity side by side with indifference and tolerance – nobody is concerned about the other person’s sexual quirks providing they are
left to their own. And even some of the more recent cultural theorists, Lasch, Sennett, Foucault, could all explain this trend: as signs of increasing self-absorption, as the retreat from public life, as the proliferation of new discourses. One day a hefty study could be made of such developments: for the time being it will suffice merely to comment that there is nothing surprising about the growth of such erotic subcultures of diversity. The sexual life flows and meshes with the very texture of changes in the wider society.

Political reactions to stigma

From the foregoing, it will be clear that the collective response to diversity has been accompanied by an increasing politicization. In one sense, this is nothing new. Throughout history there have been sexual heretics – from Socrates to de Sade – who have challenged the orthodoxy and brought about change. The political edge of sexual conduct has long been recognized – and not least by those who seek to contain it. But this century has slowly witnessed the transformation of a political edge for the few into a front-line battle-field for the many. Two major forces seem to be at work. One, the gay movement, has provided a blueprint for many other sexual minorities to follow – and there have been organized attempts to legitimate most patterns of sexual and gender diversity – from paederasty and sadomasochism to transvestism and transsexuality. The other, the second wave of feminism, has become much more acutely concerned with ‘examining the role of sexuality in the construction of male domination and female subordination’ while creating a ‘space in which women can refuse sexual exploitation’ and ‘reflect on our (their) own desires’ (Feminist Review 1982). Often with widely divergent – even contradictory – arguments, these two movements have created a major alternative response to the problem of sexual diversity. At base, however, they all refuse to countenance the stigma that has been their historical birthright; they gain strength from the solidarity of working together for a common goal; and – to greater or lesser degrees – they have shifted the public rhetoric of sexuality from the individual and medical sphere to the public and political one.

Disregarding the positions of the conservative and the liberal lobbies, the main debate is currently set up between the politics of desire (the sexual liberationists) and the politics of sexism (the gender liberationists). Both attack the traditional views of sexuality, and the assumed connections between heterosexuality, procreation, marriage and the normal, and seek alternative constructions of sexuality. But the former seek a proliferation of new forms of sexualities, while the latter seek a reduction of gender inequalities. The former centres around debates to ‘liberate’ paederasty, sadomasochism and the fetishisms and to make pornography more freely available: it wants to extend the claimed successes of the gay movement (and indeed the so-called ‘permissive era’) to other areas of sexuality. Desire can come in many wondrous forms and should be experienced as such: it is only because we are still suffering from our historically repressive view of sexuality that we fail to see how much joyful sexuality could be constructed. In contrast, the politics of sexism centres around the same debates but draws different conclusions. Paederasty and boy-love is ‘a euphemism for rape’ (Morgan, in Califia 1981, p. 157); sadomasochism is the perpetuation of male power games and displays the delusion that life and its meaning can be contained in an orgasm ‘(Woman’s Touch, cited by Valverde 1980); pornography is ‘propaganda for and a tool of sexual suppression of women that is unbelievably powerful in its effects’ (Dworkin 1982, p. 26). More than this, even male homosexuality becomes deeply suspect – as a celebration of male desire and an ignoring of women (cf. Stanley 1982).

Both these positions claim to be ‘progressive’ and provide political responses to the issue of sexual diversities. But they are diametrically opposed – since the former seeks to liberate a male model of desire while the latter sees this as the very source of oppression. A deep antagonism appears, and all the earlier medical perversions become a battle-ground for redefinition: as positive sexuality or oppressive to women. A complex debate is likely to emerge on this in the next few decades; but at least one writer has suggested the need for a reconciliation. Thus Gayle Rubin comments: ‘Both the mobilization of the sexual fringe, and the increasing politicization of sexuality, challenge feminism to develop a political union which can be pro-sex while remaining anti-sexist’ (Rubin 1981, p. 115).

In conclusion, I hope the preceding discussion demonstrates the extent to which human sexual diversity is not a timeless given: it twists, grows and refashions itself as the culture of which it is a part constantly changes. The early days of medical writing on sexuality can now only be viewed with amusement or alarm: who can say how our current constructions of sexual diversity will appear in one hundred years from now?

NOTES

1 The debate about values and ideology in social science generally has a long and complex history. I have found the discussions by Mills (1945), Goudner (1971) and Douglas (1970) especially influential. More particularly, for different positions on the study of sexuality see Sagarin (1968), Trilling (1954), Masters et al. (1977) and Morin (1977). Whatever else they achieve, they certainly indicate the multifarious values – usually hidden – within ‘sexology’.

2 Earlier studies like those of Allen (1969), Rosen (1964) or Storr (1964) exemplify this point. One problem here is that each generation of researchers seek what they
believe to be objective and neutral terms — only to find the next generation has rendered them pejorative.

3 In some earlier writings I have spoken as if biology was insignificant — I now think it is very important: but not as important for human life as the symbolic. The thesis that man is twin born — that we are “little Gods who shit” — has been most stimulatingly put for me in the work of Ernest Becker (e.g. Becker 1973, 1975).

4 The most prominent recent tradition in approaching human sexuality through society and symbolism is that of symbolic interactionism. I have outlined this orientation in Plummer (1982), but the key text is that of Gagnon and Simon (1973).

5 In psychology, the nearest parallel is that of cognitive theory, e.g. Rook and Hammes (1977).

6 This problem of interpretation is, of course, a central one in all social science and there is not space in a short chapter such as this to deal with the deeper issues. Two issues would be crucial, however, for a full analysis. Firstly, the problem of human nature — whilst there may be a unity of humankind, is there in fact a sexual ‘essence’ that transcends time and place? Secondly, the problem of epistemology and relativism — whilst there may be limited truths from particular perspectives, is there any way in which a whole truth maybe grasped — one which is non-relative and independent of all positions? These are age-old questions which still generate heated debate. See, for example, Glassner (1980); and for its applicability to homosexuality see especially Boswell (1982), which advocates a middle position.

7 Annabel Faraday (1981) has recently analysed the literature on female same-sex relationships in the social science literature and shown how they have been informed by male bias. Most notably, such experiences are discussed within the framework of male homosexuality, instead of within the framework of female sexuality. It is a point hinted at, but not adequately developed, in the paper by Gagnon and Simon (1967). A much more personal and polemical view of female sexuality is argued out by male and female homosexuality is to be found in Stanley (1982).

8 Some have argued that there is a pornography for women in romance magazines — but since pornography is defined through male drives it is not recognized as such. See Faust (1982).

9 It is only very recently that ‘female deviance’ has become a significant area of enquiry. See, in particular, Smart (1976), Hutter and Williams (1981).

10 It is beyond my scope to deal with the full range of such experience — with the victims of diversity (e.g. Burgess and Holmstrom (1974); Burgess et al. (1978); Finkelhor (1979); Rush (1980); Scacco (1982)), and the friends and families of those close to the sexually diverse (e.g. Warren (1976); Maddox (1982)). Rather I will deal only with a specific cluster of experiences — I will call them the socially stigmatized diversities — where a broadly comparable set of problems and solutions have been detected. The model for this mode of thinking has been developed most fully in studies of male homosexuality during the 1960s and 1970s, but in fact it is substantially applicable to other experiences — transvestism, sadomasochism, paedophilia, prostitution, lesbianism and fetishes. In the broadest terms, it attempts to understand the diversities on a social level (rather than on a clinical one) and suggests that many of the distinguishing features of sexual diversity arise not from the experience itself but from the stigma and procreative assumptions in which it is enmeshed. For these generate problems, which if not resolved will transform the experience into something much more significant and damaging than it would otherwise be. I have dealt with some of these matters in detail elsewhere (Plummer 1975, 1981a), so here my aim is to provide a broad overview.

11 For a general discussion of such legitimation processes, see G. Marshall (1978). For specific application to the sexually different, see, for example, Feinblom (1976) and Plummer (1975).

12 I have discussed this in detail elsewhere as a series of career stages. See, in particular, Plummer (1975, pp. 135–52); Plummer (1981c).

13 For specific discussions of such movements, see Sagarin (1969); Greene (1974); Feinblom (1976); Gosselin and Wilson (1980); Plummer (1981d); and McLeod (1982).

14 For example, see the polarization of positions over pornography set out by Ellis (1980). There is a vast ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ literature on sexuality which is relatively commonplace: I have elected to describe the more radical fringe here because it is less well known.

15 For a sample of these debates see O’Carroll (1980), Tsang (1982); Lee (1978); Altman (1982) and Samois (1982).

16 There are some very powerful statements of this view but see in particular Dworkin (1982); Raymond (1980); Stanley (1982); Linden et al. (1983); Lederer (1980) and the earlier classic statement by Brownmiller (1975).

REFERENCES


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