Innovations in Education : Teaching the History of Sexuality

(Series Editor Paul Lawrence Farber, Oregon State University)

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The history of sexuality permits an instructor to accomplish a remarkably wide range of tasks. It is an excellent way to present materials from the history of science and medicine to students in the humanities, and it is an opportunity to introduce science and pre-med students to sophisticated analyses of science and medicine as forms of knowledge and practice that have been reconfigured over time to meet the changing imperatives of culture, technological change, and the constraints of law. Though the field is young, it possesses a plethora of interdisciplinary secondary materials, reprinted primary sources, and scholarly journals. [i] Finally, the history of sexuality deals with subjects that interest most individuals deeply and personally and that touch on issues of political and ethical currency of great importance. One of the challenges of teaching the subject is striking a balance between these personal and contemporary concerns and sound historical method.

Because they think they know their own sexuality, most students assume they begin the history of sexuality with a head start; in no subject I have taught is there a greater temptation than this one to draw conclusions about the past based on personal experience and contemporary truisms. As a consequence, there is an incomparable pedagogical satisfaction in teaching students to historicize what they have taken to be “natural” and determined. Though some students may find this procedure unsettling, others are deeply transformed by the experience of rethinking their own sexual desire and that of others, and by learning that the judgments that societies have made about sexuality have, within certain limits, continued to evolve. Since the history of sexuality possesses a considerable potential to challenge and undermine personal and religious beliefs, it must come with the proper warning labels. As I say to every new class: “This course is x-rated; if you look through the reading materials and find anything that might offend you, this may not be for you.” I have received complaints from students in other courses about the propriety of language or images in the texts, but this proviso has worked like a charm for the history of sexuality.

I first taught a class in the history of sexuality while visiting at Harvard in 1988. Since then I have taught it almost every year at the University of Oklahoma and Oregon State University in several different formats: graduate seminar, honors seminar, large and small lecture classes. Though a course on this subject invariably oversubscribes, I have found that it works best if numbers are kept fairly low and the focus is on discussion of texts. This encourages broad student participation and provides an incentive for them to be prepared to discuss the material. Thinking analytically about sexuality is a new experience for many students, but most of them quickly get the hang of it.

Materials were scarce in 1988. Jeffrey Weeks, Peter Brown, K.J. Dover, John Boswell, Angus McLaren, Alan Bray, John D’Emilio and Estelle Friedman and a few others had written pioneering books, but a broad coverage of the subject was best attained in those days with a photocopied reader. [ii] After a decade of annual revisions of my photocopied volume, in 1999 I published an Oxford Reader, Sexuality, a collection of short passages from primary and secondary sources organized historically from ancient Mesopotamia to the present. There are some general texts now that cover broad swaths of time, but at this writing the Oxford Reader is still the only comprehensive historical survey of sexuality in the West. [iii] A global history of sexuality would be a truly ambitious undertaking; apart from various regional, religious or national studies, there is very little genuine
comparative history between the West and the rest of the world. [iv] One hopes that historians will one day go where only anthropologists have dared go before; meanwhile, let me suggest some strategies for teaching the history of sexuality in the West.

I begin the course by asking students to define the three central terms that we will confront throughout the term: sex, gender and sexuality. This question has produced more confusion than it once did; not many years ago my students confidently defined sex as the biological platform on which a compatible gender was socially constructed. With some exceptions, sexual orientation and desire took a “normal” heterosexual direction as if hardwired into the body. Nowadays, students are reluctant to use the term sex at all; in everyday usage gender has subsumed sex and has become, in the process, the new foundation of personal and sexual identity. We speak now of gender difference and gender discrimination when twenty-five years ago we’d have used the term sex. Students today also express the view that sexuality is not hardwired in the traditional heterosexual fashion and is perhaps even elective, which is compatible with the increasing openness of homosexuality, with a more public acknowledgement of transgender and transsexual individuals, and with the indeterminism and uncertainty of our postmodern era.

The most important historical lesson to be wrung out of this change is not simply that things have finally begun to change after a few thousand years, but that the self-contained isomorphism of sex, gender, and sexuality that is now being transformed was an artifact of the science, medicine, and culture of the relatively brief historical period between the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth. Prior to the late nineteenth century, the lingering influence of ancient medicine portrayed sexual identity in terms of the dynamic interactions of quantities of humidity, temperature, and vital fluids. [v] In the twentieth century we portray the body as the site of interactive processes that is fragmented by genes, chromosomes, and the fluctuations of hormones. New surgical procedures and hormone therapy permit the external markers of the body’s sex to be enlarged, suppressed, reshaped, or spectacularly reinvigorated by drugs, encouraging us to think of sex as infinitely malleable. Thus, in both earlier and later periods sexuality was considered to be less firmly grounded in the body, and sex was not a reliable indicator of sexual desire. Scholars must rightly qualify such sweeping generalizations, but for pure pedagogical shock value, beginning the course by setting out an interpretive framework with this counterintuitive power is very effective. [vi] Students sit up and take notice, and they work to find exceptions.

Of course there are other important watersheds in the history of sexuality in the West. The tolerance of pederastic relations in the Greek and Hellenic worlds ended with the rise of Christianity; the pleasures of the flesh seemed directly at odds with the prospect of salvation in the last days. The Western church was satisfied with the compromise of priestly celibacy and lay procreation, but it took hundreds of years before the church was able to fully subject Christian marriage to its authority, proscribe fornication and adultery, and condemn all non-procreative sexual practices to the realm of the sodomitic “unnatural.” [vii] State-building Christian princes completed the task of disciplining sexuality by anointing fathers as sovereign rulers of their families, thereby giving them the legal authority to control the sexuality and procreation of their womenfolk that they had always enjoyed in custom. [viii]

The most influential explanation for how these externally-enforced regulations came to be internalized was provided by Michel Foucault in his History of Sexuality: An Introduction (1980). A small but increasingly influential middle class made the sexual hygiene of marital reproduction the cornerstone of its personal individuality and class identity, stigmatizing the sexual practices of
aristocrats, peasants, and the working class as moral and medical pathologies. On this point Foucault’s schema is in agreement with Norbert Elias’s socio-historical account of the refinement and expansion of manners in civilization and with the findings of anthropologists and demographers who have studied urbanization and the population explosion of the “demographic transition” that accompanied industrialization. [ix] For the theoretically inclined, this is the place to explore the fruitfulness and shortcomings of grand schemata in the history of sexuality. [x]

There is an extraordinarily rich literature on these developments and on the history of medicine in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that rationalized the bourgeois conception of marriage and procreative health. Sexual difference was provided with a biological and eventually an evolutionary logic, and departures from heterosexuality were turned into pathological deviations from physiological norms. The emergence of scientific sexology at the end of the nineteenth century completed these developments by identifying as sexual “others” the prostitutes, masturbators, and perverts whose sexual practices posed a bio-moral danger to the health of families, nations, and the “race.” [xi] This is the pivotal moment in the modern history of sexuality when homosexuality, sadism, masochism, and the other perversions were invented. It was not a simple medical conspiracy but a decisive cultural revolution that marks us still. [xii]

The history of biology is a crucial part of the story we tell about the constitution of the twentieth-century sexual body. The “rediscovery” of Mendelian genetics, the isolation and synthesis of human “sex” hormones, the role these hormones play in human developmental biology, and the first systematic studies of intersex individuals were all initiated in the first three decades of the century. Second-wave sexologists such as Alfred Kinsey have drawn on modern understandings of the physiology of sexual function and variations in sexual orientation to reconfigure the landscape of sexual desire. [xiii] And new surgical procedures and synthetic hormones have made transsexual operations a reality, given us the contraceptive pill, and allowed us to intervene in a variety of ways in the “natural” reproductive process. Nothing short of a scientific revolution in reproductive science has occurred as a result of these developments; it is a rich new field for the history of science and medicine. [xiv]

Many of these scientific breakthroughs had a profound influence on the origin and course of the cultural phenomenon we call the sexual revolution. The cause of sexual emancipation helped swell the ranks of other protest movements in the 1960s. It nourished a women’s movement that was firmly based on the issue of reproductive rights, gay and lesbian liberation movements demanding civil protections against discrimination, and, more recently, organizations promoting the interests of transsexual, transgender and other sexual minorities. New forms of pornography have also profited from the expansion of sexual liberties. Finally, the complicated epidemiological history of HIV/AIDS has more or less followed the patterns of change in sexual behavior worldwide; it has generated a fascinating literature that bridges cultural history, science and medicine, and public policy. [xv]

We have become accustomed to writing and speaking about sexuality in public. The news is full of stories relating to it: gay marriage, the legal limits of sexual behavior, sexual offender and rape laws, reproductive technologies and rights, sex education and religion. The list goes on and on. I try to profit from the contemporary transparency of sexuality by encouraging students to bring news stories on these issues to class and by personally combing the news for current events we can clarify with historical perspective. I try to act as a moderator and expert of last resort, but it is sometimes a struggle to keep such discussions from becoming intensely partisan. I am, however, convinced that students learn from my course how the history of sexuality is able to illuminate issues we struggle
with as citizens and how to speak about sexuality analytically. Reflecting the demographic shifts in higher education, my classes these days are predominately female. The real challenge now is to get the men to talk.

[i] There are at least four journals publishing material on the history of sexuality at this time: Journal of the History of Sexuality (1990); GLQ A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies (1994); Sexualities (1998); Studies in Gender and Sexuality (2000).


[v] An excellent summary of the application to sexuality of the competing Greek medical traditions is Joan Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[vi] An interesting exchange in a recent Isis highlights the scholarly debates on the one-body, two-body question in early modern anatomy. Michael Stolberg doubts the claims of Londa Schiebinger and Thomas Laqueur about the decisiveness of an eighteenth-century shift between a single-sex body differing sexually only in inverted genitalia, and two very different sexed bodies. The works in question are Laqueur’s, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1990), and Londa Schiebinger’s “Skeletten in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton In Eighteenth-Century Anatomy,” Representations, 1986, 14: 42-82. Stolberg’s article is “A Woman Down to Her Bones: The Anatomy of Sexual Difference in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” Isis, 94 #2 (June, 2003), 274-300. Laqueur and Schiebinger reply respectively in “Sex in the Flesh” Isis 94 #2 (June, 2003), 300-306; “Skelettestreit” Isis 94 #2 (June, 2003), 307-314.


The best place to begin theoretical investigations is with David Halperin, whose work is a crossroads of these debates. See David J. Halperin, Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Historiography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and How to Do the History of Homosexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).


John Farley is excellent on this transition in the history of reproductive science in Gametes and Spores: Ideas About Sexual Reproduction, 1750-1914 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,
