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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

Second Edition

STEVEN SEIDMAN

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK—ALBANY



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To my students, especially
Chet, Dalia, and James

W. W. Norton & Company has been independent since its founding in 1923, when William Warder Norton and Mary D. Herter Norton first published lectures delivered at the People's Institute, the adult education division of New York City's Cooper Union. The firm soon expanded its program beyond the Institute, publishing books by celebrated academics from America and abroad. By mid-century, the two major pillars of Norton's publishing program—trade books and college texts—were firmly established. In the 1950s, the Norton family transferred control of the company to its employees, and today—with a staff of four hundred and a comparable number of trade, college, and professional titles published each year—W. W. Norton & Company stands as the largest and oldest publishing house owned wholly by its employees.

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that associates femininity with purity and maternal feelings; still, these behaviors are disrespected for both men and women. Those who engage in such behaviors, regardless of gender, will be stigmatized and subject to ridicule and at times criminalization. Rubin's point is simply that gender influences patterns of sexuality, but that there is still a great deal about the organization and dynamics of sexuality that cannot be grasped solely through the lens of gender.

Chapter Three

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM: SOCIOLOGY, HISTORY, AND PHILOSOPHY

MARXISM AND FEMINISM have challenged biological and narrow psychological approaches to sex. They have also been influential in shaping new social approaches to sex, in particular through the work of sociologists, historians, and philosophers who have pioneered the rethinking of sexuality.

Sociologists have been at the forefront of researching sex from a social perspective. Since the early decades of the twentieth century, sociologists have studied patterns of heterosexuality. They have researched the role of religion, gender, class, race, and social values in shaping patterns of premarital, marital, and extramarital sex. Ira Reiss, a major sociologist of sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s, charted cultural and behavioral shifts among American youth during a time when sexual morality that associated sex exclusively with marriage gave way to one that permitted sex in a context of affection.¹ Reiss believed that this cultural change was related to women's increasing economic and social power. In this regard, he observed the decline of a double standard that had permitted men to have sex outside of marriage while it labeled women who engaged in the same behavior as "bad girls." The work of Reiss and many other sociologists was important because it documented the social character of sexual conduct. However, sexual practices that were not heterosexual or were not oriented to marriage were often treated as deviant; few sociologists investigated

the social factors that explained why some behaviors or identities were viewed positively and other ones were seen as deviant. Moreover, they did not inquire why certain feelings, desires, acts, and identities came to be viewed as sexual at all.

Some sociologists and social scientists argued for a more thoroughly social view of sexuality. In the United States, John Gagnon and William Simon proposed a "script" theory of sexuality.² Instead of understanding humans as being born sexual, they argued that sexuality is socially learned. In the course of growing up, we are taught by society what feelings and desires count as sexual and what are the appropriate scripts for sexual behavior. Sexual scripts tell us where, when, and with whom (based on age, race, or class) we are supposed to have sex, and what it means when we do. Gagnon and Simon suggested that sexuality is not an inborn property but a product of social labeling.

In Britain, sociologist Ken Plummer further developed a labeling perspective. In *Sexual Stigma*, he argued that individuals are not born homosexual but learn to be homosexual.³ An individual may feel desire for or attraction to people of the same sex, but he or she must learn that these feelings are sexual and that they indicate a homosexual identity. People learn this in the course of interacting with both the straight and gay worlds. For example, a high school student hearing derogatory comments about "fags" and "dykes" may begin to associate homosexuality with a stigmatized identity. This same individual may eventually be exposed to a gay subculture that champions a view of homosexuality as natural and good.

One of the pioneers of a sociological approach to sexuality was British sociologist Jeffrey Weeks.⁴ He introduced the ideas of "essentialism" and "constructionism." Essentialism is the notion that sexuality is a basic and essential part of being human. Con-

structionism states that sexuality is a learned way of thinking and acting. Weeks proposed a strong view of the social character of sexuality:

First . . . we can no longer set "sex" against "society" as if they were separate domains. Secondly, there is a widespread recognition of the social variability of sexual forms, beliefs, ideologies, and behavior. Sexuality has . . . many histories. . . . Thirdly . . . we must learn to see that sexuality is something which society produces in complex ways. It is a result of diverse social practices that give meaning to human activities, . . . to struggles between those who have power to define and regulate, and those who resist. Sexuality is not given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle.⁵

Weeks not only proposed social constructionism as a theory but also researched the role of medical and scientific ideas in creating the idea of the homosexual as a distinct social identity.⁶

As Weeks was researching sexual identity as a social and historical event in England, American historians wished to explain the rise of a homosexual identity in the United States. This research paralleled the rise of gay and lesbian movements in America and in most European nations. In the 1970s and 1980s, the conventional view among gay activists was that homosexuals have always existed, but, because of homophobia and heterosexism, they have never been acknowledged. Activists and scholars sought to document homosexuals' existence throughout history and their contribution to civilization. If homosexuals have been valuable contributors to Western culture, shouldn't they be accepted? The new history of sexuality challenged this approach. Historians argued that the very meaning of same-sex behavior

has changed throughout history. A lesbian or gay identity is a historical, not a natural, fact.

Today there is a large body of historical research offering varied interpretations of homosexuality. Independent scholar Jonathan Ned Katz produced two pioneering books, *Gay American History* and the *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*, in which he documented the changing meaning of homosexuality in the United States.⁷ He found that between colonial times and the 1970s, the meaning of homosexuality changed from a behavior (sodomy), to a type of gender deviance (invert), to an abnormal personality (the homosexual), and finally to an affirmative social identity (gay/lesbian).

In a path-breaking article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg made a powerful case for a historical approach to sexuality.⁸ She documented that the lives of most (white, middle-class) Victorian women were very similar. Their lives were focused on household and domestic tasks; they raised children and took responsibility for maintaining the religious piety and moral well-being of the family. As a result, these women often formed close ties with each other. These intimate bonds sometimes developed into romantic relationships that were public and celebrated as complementary to marriage. Although we cannot be sure if these "romantic friendships" were sexual in the modern sense, they were often lifetime committed bonds.

Building on the work of Katz and Smith-Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman crafted pioneering histories of sexuality.⁹ In *Surprising the Love of Men*, Faderman studied romantic friendships between women, which were common in Europe for centuries. Faderman also wrote the first history of lesbianism in the United States, *Odd*

Girls and Twiligh Lovers. Both Smith-Rosenberg and Faderman make the unexpected argument that, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tolerance for intimacy between women actually decreased. As women started to attend college, work outside the home, and demand equal rights, those women who also chose to live independently of men were at times stigmatized as lesbians.

Building on this growing body of historical scholarship on sexuality, John D'Emilio offered the first detailed analysis of the rise of homosexual politics in the United States. In *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, he analyzed the social forces that shaped homosexuality into an identity, a community, and a social movement.¹⁰ For example, D'Emilio argued that World War II played a key role in shaping an awareness of homosexuality and in creating homosexual bonds. During the war, many soldiers were, for the first time, exposed to individuals who thought of themselves as homosexual. Moreover, the intense closeness among the men and women in the military encouraged some sexual experimentation. After the war, many of these men and women with homosexual feelings settled in Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. It was in these cities that the first major gay and lesbian political organizations initially took shape. D'Emilio traces the rise of gay liberationism in the late 1960s.

By the 1990s, an impressive body of historical research on sexuality had accumulated. Historians have continued to refine their conceptions of the sexual past. One significant revision is George Chauncey's *Gay New York*.¹¹ Whereas historians and sociologists had come to believe that the modern homosexual emerged in the early twentieth century and was immediately closeted, Chauncey argues that in working-class New York, individuals

were classified not as either heterosexual or homosexual, but as either "normal men" or "fairies." The former were masculine men; the latter were effeminate. In other words, the homosexual indicated a type of gender deviance. A masculine man who had sex with effeminate men was not necessarily considered a homosexual. Gender expression, not sexual preference, defined who was a homosexual. Moreover, rather than being closeted, gay life flourished openly in bars, taverns, speakasies, restaurants, ballrooms, and parks.

Sociologists and historians have produced an impressive body of scholarship that documents changes in the meaning and social patterns of homosexuality, changes that have shifted the way we think about sexuality. But the work of philosophers is equally central. By far the most important theorist of sexuality has been French philosopher Michel Foucault.¹²

If there is one main idea in Foucault's writings, it is that "sexuality created sex." Foucault challenged the view of sexologists and psychologists that sex was something fundamentally biological and natural. We recall that these scientists claimed to have charted the true nature of human sexuality. Foucault proposed that it was the very idea—or, in his term, the discourse—of sexuality that created what we today know as sex. In other words, we are not born sexual; rather, we learn to be sexual beings; this occurs only in societies that have created the idea of "sexuality."

But when did this idea of sexuality originate, and why? Foucault's explanation begins with the early Christian practice of confession. The Christian duty to confess sinful desires compelled individuals to approach their erotic feelings as having moral meaning. Individual Christians began to analyze their

sensual desires and pleasures as a path to self-knowledge and moral purity.

If Christian confessional practices provided the initial impulse to think of our erotic feelings as a separate sphere invested with moral significance, the birth of the science of sexuality in the nineteenth century was the crucial modern event. Scientists aimed to discover the hidden truth of human nature by uncovering the secrets of the sexual instinct. These scientists wished to lay bare the basic principles of sexuality—its normal progression and its pathologies. Sexologists charted the physiology of sexual desire and its varied practices while psychiatrists listened to their clients confess a shadowy world of sexual fantasies, and demographers surveyed human fertility. But these researchers did not discover an uncharted territory of sex; they fashioned human pleasures, excitations, and acts into a new object of knowledge and social regulation: human sexuality. Foucault is not saying that the feelings and behaviors associated with the body are created by these discourses. Rather, as a result of these new discourses, these bodily experiences are now viewed as expressions of human sexuality—as indicating a sexual type and a normal or pathological sexuality. In other words, the science of sexuality organized and unified our diverse somatic experiences into a coherent entity called *sexuality*.

Why did a discourse of sexuality appear and what was its social importance? Foucault advanced a twofold answer. First, he argued that these discourses are part of the rise of what he called a disciplinary society. In the military, churches, hospitals, factories, and schools, a type of social organization developed that exercises strict control over our bodies, aims to carefully manage those bodies in space and time, involves a great deal of surveillance and

supervision of bodies, and uses judgments about what is normal to control individuals. Disciplinary control relies less on the power to censor and silence individuals than on the power of normalizing ideas to shape individuals into productive and controllable agents. Sexuality is at the core of disciplinary control. Controlling people's sexual feelings, behaviors, and identities makes possible a great deal of social control over their bodies and actions. Foucault thought that sexuality had become a crucial part of the way modern societies control their citizens.

Second, Foucault believed that the modern state and other social institutions had good reasons to want to control people's sexuality. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, in many European nations, large numbers of people were migrating to cities; there was an increasing need for mass literacy and schooling and a growing dependence of national power on economic prosperity. These developments created a strong political interest in gaining accurate, detailed, and useful information about human bodies—how they reproduce, stay healthy, react to different external stimuli, and can be made more productive, efficient, cooperative, and so on. For example, as cities became social and economic centers, governments and other institutions responsible for keeping order and for the care of the needy and indigent sought information about nutrition, health, migration patterns, and fertility rates. This growing need to understand and control bodies helped to create the idea of sexuality. A society that can control sex can manage the behavior of individuals and whole populations.

Foucault believed that patterns of sexual control have changed in modern societies. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, marriage was the focus of social regulation. Sex outside of marriage

was proscribed and the emphasis within marriage was on procreation. Social institutions aimed to channel individual sexuality into marriage and families. This focus changed during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Social institutions no longer concentrated solely on sex in its relation to marriage; they took an interest in a wide range of sexual behavior—in young people's sexuality, in homosexuality, and in heterosexual behavior outside of marriage. Furthermore, whereas the state and the family were the key agents of social control in the past, today medical and scientific institutions, the criminal justice system, and the mass media play key roles in regulating sexual behavior.

Foucault's perspective helps to explain why many Europeans and Americans are preoccupied with their own sexuality and that of their friends, neighbors, and public figures. Sex has become something we think of as basic to self-identity; it is often understood as the hidden truth of who we are.

Did Foucault give up the notion of sexual freedom? He wrote during a period of sexual rebellion in which many individuals and movements believed that a new era of sexual freedom was beginning. Sexual liberationists of all types saw the past as a dark period of repression due to ignorance. They declared that, in contrast, we had become more enlightened; for them, the present was full of possibilities for sexual freedom. Sexual liberation had two aspects. The first was a negative freedom—escape from unnecessary control, so people might exercise sexual choice. The second was a positive freedom—the right to express one's true sexual nature and identity.

Foucault agreed that expanding individual choice and promoting sexual variation were good things. In this regard, he supported the fight for gay rights. But gay rights is not liberation.

It does relieve individuals of a horrific stigma and frees them from social discrimination. Yet it leaves in place a system of sexuality that sexualizes people's desires and feelings, forces them to declare a mutually exclusive sexual identity, and divides sexual feelings and acts into normal and abnormal. For all the good it has done, the gay rights movement has reinforced a system that forces individuals to declare themselves either straight or gay, and it potentially makes bisexuality into a deviant sexual identity. Moreover, a gay movement has its own ideal of how a gay person is supposed to look and act. In other words, the gay movement exercises control over its members, pressuring them to identify exclusively as gay and to act in ways that are recognized as gay.

If sexuality is today tightly linked to a system of social control, then, ironically, sexual liberation might involve freeing ourselves from the idea of sexuality. This would mean approaching our erotic desires and acts not as expressions of sexuality but as simply feelings and acts that give pleasure, create social ties, or act as a source of cultural creativity. Foucault advocates a politics against sexuality—against sexualizing selves, identities, and acts. Why would this be a good thing? If society did not assign a moral meaning (either normal or abnormal) to adult, consensual sexual desires and behaviors, individuals would be subject to considerably less social regulation. For example, instead of reversing the stigma of homosexuality by championing a normal gay identity, according to Foucault we should approach homosexuality simply as a desire and as a source of erotic pleasures, new relationships, and cultural expressions. Instead of celebrating the sexualization of the human body and all of its feelings and sensations, perhaps it would be more liberating to desexualize pleasures, focus on nonsexual pleasures, learn to enjoy a wide range

of sensual pleasures, and be free of controls that rely on notions of normality. To the extent that sexuality is tightly intertwined with social control—for example, with advertising or with judgments of good and normal character—to be against sexuality is to support individual freedom.

Foucault has shaped the field of sexual studies in far-reaching ways. Yet his work has also been challenged. In particular, critics believe that Foucault did not go far enough in analyzing sexual identity. Although Foucault argued that sexual identities are social and historical, he did not address the way sexual identities vary by gender, race, class, and age. For example, in male-dominated societies the social pattern of homosexuality differs between men and women; accordingly, lesbians may have a somewhat different history than gay men. Furthermore, the varied histories of gays and lesbians are further differentiated by such factors as race or class. Historians and sociologists have begun to sort out these factors. Foucault is also criticized for failing to explain how sexual identities are created and sustained in everyday life. He assumed that discourses of sexual identity are somehow brought into social institutions and mainstream culture, which in turn shape individual identities. How exactly individuals create sexual identities and what social forces exact pressure to sustain these identities are key questions left unaddressed by Foucault. These questions became a focus for scholars in the 1990s as attention turned to questions of identity and politics.

Among those who have thought hard about the question of identity, perhaps none has been more influential than philosopher Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler proposed a "performative" theory of gender identity that has proven to be very useful for analyzing sexual identity.¹³

The idea that nature has created two distinct, opposing genders—men and women—has been basic to modern Western culture. This notion is promoted in law, science, and popular culture, and it is part of the common beliefs of probably most Americans and Europeans. But where does this belief come from? Is this idea true?

Butler holds that the idea that nature has created two distinct, opposing human types should not be uncritically accepted. We have come to believe this view, she says, because we live in a society organized around heterosexuality, marriage, and the nuclear family. Viewing men and women as naturally different and complementary makes heterosexuality—and therefore also marriage and the heterosexual family—seem like the natural, normal, and right way of living. This explains why there is so little tolerance for men who act feminine or women who act masculine. Men and women who challenge gender roles threaten the norm of heterosexuality and the primacy of marriage and the nuclear family.

A system of compulsory heterosexuality may help to explain why societies divide individuals into two gender types, but it does not explain how gender identities are created and sustained daily. Feminists have explained the making of gender identity as socially learned or forced upon individuals. Butler asks us to consider gender in theatrical terms as a kind of performance.

Growing up in a society that classifies feelings, behaviors, and social roles in gender terms, as appropriate either for men or for women, we learn not only what our gender is supposed to be but also how to act in gender-correct ways. Through a mostly unconscious learning process, and by means of a system of rewards and sanctions, each of us learns to present him- or herself as either

a man or a woman. We come to know, almost without thinking, what gestures, styles of dress and grooming, and ways of walking and talking are considered normal for men and women. If a male acts "masculine"—if his posture, talk, friends, dating, and jobs conform to masculine norms—his gender identity as a man will be taken for granted. If a male acts "feminine," he will still be viewed as male but he may be considered an "abnormal" man.

Furthermore, Butler argues that as we conform to gender norms, others will likely interpret our behavior as expressing a core gender identity. For example, most of us would probably assume that a male who looks and acts like a man (for instance, is aggressive, competitive, and decisive) is a man and that this status is basic to his identity. In other words, his masculine actions are understood as expressing a deeply rooted gender identity. However, Butler suggests that there is no core gender identity that drives our behavior. Rather than viewing our gender performances as expressing an inner gender identity, she says that these behaviors are modeled after images of what it means to be a woman or man that we learn from our families and other institutions. The illusion of core feminine and masculine gender identities conceals the social and political forces that shape us into gendered and sexual beings. Similarly, the ideology of a natural gender order conceals the role of gender in the perpetuation of heterosexual dominance.

The idea of gender as a performance has been used by researchers of sexual identity.¹⁴ Rather than approaching gay, straight, or bisexual identifications as stable, core identities that motivate our behavior, a performance approach emphasizes sexual identity as a process. We fashion and project our identities by our actions. Accordingly, researchers analyze the micro-dynamics of identity

formation. For example, they try to explain which behaviors and objects (such as clothes, cars, homes, furniture, and eyeglasses) come to be signs of sexual identity and why. How do individuals acquire the skills to read each other's behaviors in terms of sexual identity categories? A performative approach to sexual identity should not be interpreted as saying that identities are freely chosen or that they are somehow not real because they are produced through a performance. They are quite real as we experience them and in terms of their personal and social consequences. In addition, although they may be performances, they are not freely chosen; a system of compulsory heterosexuality exerts enormous social pressure on each of us to "perform" the appropriate gender and sexual identity. Deviance from gender or sexual norms carries serious risks and dangers, from being denied respect to being the target of harassment or violence.

TO SUMMARIZE PART I, there has been a revolution in the way many scholars think about sexuality. Until recently, it was believed that humans were born with a sexual nature and that the natural order created a series of sexual types: heterosexuals, homosexuals, masochists, pedophiles, and so on. Scientists thought that a science of sexuality would reveal the nature of the sexual instinct, its normal and abnormal expressions. The idea of sexual normality would serve as the standard to judge and regulate sexual behavior.

Today, the leading edge of scholarship views sex as fundamentally social. We are born with bodies, but it is society that determines which parts of the body and which pleasures and acts are sexual. Also, the classification of sex acts into good and bad or acceptable and illicit is today understood as a product of social

power: the dominant sexual norms express the beliefs of the dominant social groups. If we are supposed to grow up to be heterosexual, and if we are expected to link sex to love, monogamy, marriage, and family-making, that is not because nature dictates this moral order but because specific groups impose these social norms. Beliefs that there are natural and normal ways to be sexual are understood as ideologies. How we come to have such beliefs as well as their personal and social consequences are important questions for the study of sexuality. Indeed, the question of who gets to define what is sexual and which institutions are responsible for regulating our sexualities are key political questions. In the coming chapters, I will illustrate this social perspective by addressing the politics and ethics of sexuality.