Making Sexual History
For my mother
Making Sexual History

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book attempts two closely related tasks. First of all, it argues that in order to understand the world of sexuality we need to grasp that it is not made behind our backs, by Nature, History or Society. We are the makers of sexual history, in our everyday lives, in our life experiments, in the tangle between desire, responsibility, contingency and opportunity. We may not make it in circumstances entirely of our own choosing, but we have more choice than we often believe or seize. Secondly, in various essays, written over a number of years, it records my own efforts both to understand and to help to remake the history of sexuality.

Though the essays were written for different occasions, and varying audiences, I would suggest that they reveal a consistency of outlook, though a constantly developing rethinking of issues, which gives the collection a coherence and value beyond the contingencies of the first appearance of the chapters. The organizing theme is the relationship between writing about, and acting on, the history and social organization of sexuality: the process of making sexual history in an ever more complex world.

Part I is concerned with writers on sexuality, from Havelock Ellis to influential contemporaries. The persistent theme is less the truth or scientific validity of the topics these writers discuss than the social and political context in which they wrote, and the significance of their writings for shaping the meanings given to sex and intimacy. In an important sense, as we move through these writers, we can witness a major shift from an expert discourse to an activist discourse: from science to grass-roots sexology.

Part II is more concerned with the historical and sociological rethinking of what sexuality is (a ‘historic invention’), and the ways in which the
erotically being reinvented by the new sexual movements and day-to-day experiments in living. The impact of AIDS is a prominent theme, but so is the incremental change which has transformed personal lives.

Part III looks in more detail at recent examples of the everyday remaking of the sexual world: in the development of sexual communities, through the community-based response to HIV and AIDS, and in the emergence of ‘families of choice’. The concluding chapter looks beyond the millennium, looming as I write, and argues that these grass-roots endeavours, everyday experiments in living, are both products and harbingers of profound changes in the opportunities open to us for living based on freedom, justice and choice rather than the harsh certainties of tradition. We live, I have argued elsewhere, in an age of uncertainty. That should not mean that we surrender to pessimism and despair. On the contrary, there are new opportunities to be grasped, new meanings to shape, better ways of making, and remaking, sexual history.

My debts to friends and colleagues over many years are too many to list here. The essays themselves testify to specific intellectual debts. I want to thank, however, all the editors and publishers who helped navigate the individual pieces to original publication, and who generously allowed me to republish here. I must thank Peter Aggleton, Chris McKevitt, Kay Parkinson and Austin Taylor-Laybourn, who were my research, and writing, colleagues on the ‘Voluntary Sector Responses to HIV and AIDS’ project, discussed in chapter 10. I owe Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan an immense debt for their friendship and collegiality in working on the ‘Families of Choice’ project, whose findings are outlined in Chapter 11. The British Economic and Social Research Council funded the research for both projects, and I am deeply grateful for their generosity and wisdom at a difficult time for funding sex-related research. My colleagues at South Bank University provided the usual academic distractions, but also a deep support, for which I am grateful. I owe especial thanks to Donna Thompson for her calm and deliberate administrative backing at all crucial times. Matthew Waite proved a loyal and thoughtful ally in helping me to make the final choice of these essays, and in helping me to make them suitable for publication here. I owe him many thanks.

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sion of the publishers.
Introduction: Making Sexual History

Who makes sexual history? A generation ago the question would have been absurd. It was taken for granted that the truths of sex were timeless. Attitudes, legal forms, religious injunctions, moral codes, literary expressions, subcultural patterns might change, but the substratum of erotic energy and gendered (as it was not then called) relationships remained locked into biological necessity, beyond the realms of history or social science. There was a world of social life, susceptible to understanding through learning the laws of society or of historical necessity; and there was the domain of the essential, graspable only through uncovering the laws of nature. As a result, historians and sociologists (the two categories I could myself identify with) left the quest for sexual knowledge to others: psychologists, mythologists, anthropologists, sexologists could delve, but my own disciplines largely stood aloof. Ken Plummer as late as the 1970s (Plummer 1975) noted the lamentable absence of a sustained sociology of sexuality, and I began my own work on the modern history of sexuality in Britain, what became *Sex, Politics and Society* (Weeks 1981/1989), with a similar sense that this was *terra incognita*.

Today that has all changed, in large part at first as a result of the efforts of self-proclaimed sexual dissidents: the new feminist and lesbian and gay scholarship led the way in politically charged interventions, recovering a lost or ignored history or experience, and inventing or reinventing the idea of women’s history, lesbian and gay history and the like. More recently senior scholars from more traditional backgrounds have engaged seriously with the sexual (and of course many of the pioneering explorers are today themselves senior members of the academy). Now bookshops groan with shelves of books on the history, sociology,
psychology, literature, philosophy, theory, theologies, practices and politics of sexuality. Publishers large and small have (more or less) profitable lists. Universities run courses. Many of us thrive on an extensive international conference circuit. There has been an unprecedented discursive revolution in writing about sexuality, gender and the body.

As I argue later in the book, writing about sexuality can be dangerous, but it is also constitutive: through the web of meaning we writers about the erotic weave in our intricate ways not only are beliefs and behaviours shaped, but the very definition of what sexuality is can be refined and then radically rethought. After Michel Foucault (1979) we have become accustomed to seeing ‘sexuality’ as an invented ensemble of related but disparate elements sometimes only contingently related to bodily needs or desires, and ‘performed’, as Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has suggested, in power-laden situations. After Plummer (1975, 1995) we have become aware of the impact of stigma in defining the boundaries of acceptability, and the impact of sexual ‘stories’ in both voicing and giving meaning to erotic activities. A vast literature on sexual identities, to which I myself have contributed (Weeks 1977/1990, 1985, 1991, 1995), has conclusively demonstrated the power of culture in giving definition to what or who we are, even as cultures of power are at last recognized as central to the construction, legitimization and delegitimization of patterns of sexual interaction. Now even the body and its pleasures, which Foucault saw as the last point of resistance to the controlling apparatus which delimited the erotic, are seen as part of a ‘reflexive project’ in which thoughts and meanings - even virtual reality - have as much weight as physiognomy and genetic imprinting (see Giddens 1991).

So we need to explore how sexual history is written because its contribution to how sexuality is lived is central. Hence my own preoccupation with theories of sexuality, and the construction, and contestation, of sexual knowledge, from Havelock Ellis to the present. Unless we can understand what they (we) were trying to do it becomes impossible, I believe, to understand fully the web in which we are entangled.

Yet most people live their sexual lives without a sense of history (or at least a detailed knowledge of the history of sexuality), and certainly without reading books on sexual history. Whatever the genuine theoretical breakthroughs of thinking of the erotic in terms of ‘performativity’, inventions, narratives or fictions (see Weeks 1995), we must always be aware that sexuality is lived as well as written about. The ultimate makers of sexual history do not dwell in the ivory towers of academe but on the ground, or perhaps, better, in the bedrooms or even at what AIDS researchers call the PSEs (public sex environments), negotiating their everyday lives as best they can in the circumstances in which they find themselves. The writers of sexual history must necessarily balance
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their theories with an understanding of practices, weighing their discursive analysis against an analysis of how discourse is lived.

Transformations

My own practice as a professional social scientist, grounded in a historical training and performing as a sociologist, dabbling in a host of other intellectual activities, but specializing in the sexual, has been tempered by my own practice as a sexual being and my wider socio-cultural belongings and political engagements and alignments. This nexus has demanded simultaneously a commitment to traditional canons of scholarly achievement and to the perceived truths of my experience. I have sought, in my own way, to be both a truth-teller and a yeah-sayer, to analyse and to tell my personal stories and preoccupations. My local, particular experience has not been purely individual, however, because I profoundly believe that personal life and macro-historical trends are inextricably combined. In the contingencies of everyday life we can see the impact of world-historical events; and through our understanding of the long-term shifts in social and economic transformation we may grasp the limits and possibilities of change in the sphere of the intimate. The changes in our own private lives are part of wider, collective transformations. The challenge lies in teasing out the hidden connections, making sense of what often seems incomprehensible, or merely idiosyncratic.

Of course, such thoughts were only latent in my mind when I began what has become, despite my original best intentions, a career in sexual studies, an intellectual sex-worker if you like. At the beginning of the 1970s I was completing a postgraduate study in political theory, an exploration of early twentieth-century socialist pluralist writings (the work of the British Guild Socialists largely), to which I gave the title ‘The Search for Community’. The title seemed apt for that particular piece of research, but in a peculiar way it became a leitmotif in my subsequent intellectual career - and personal life. For it was another definition of community that grabbed me as I finished the study - the new idea of a gay community, condition for and product of the eruption of lesbian and gay activism after 1970. Working at the London School of Economics from October 1970, in my first academic research job, I soon got drawn into the London Gay Liberation Front, which had its first meetings there. It is not too extreme or exaggerated a description when I say that everything changed for me from then on: my personal life and commitments, my political engagement and eventually my intellectual trajectory and research agenda. It was, in Anthony Giddens’s (1991) graphic phrase, a ‘fateful moment’ which forced a reordering of my