
The Politics of Discourse

FRANZ X. EDER

What can we expect from Dagmar Herzog's book on *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*, published in a series on 'new approaches to European history'? First, the series title suggests new approaches to this booming historical subdiscipline. There are plenty of burning questions about the history of sexuality waiting to be answered: the specificity of European sexuality or, perhaps better, sexualities, during the twentieth century, in comparison to the US, in a global context, and even the differences between the twentieth century and earlier periods. On our wish list we also have a comparative view of regional and national sexual cultures during the 'century of sex'. A range of studies has been published on the history of sexuality in Europe during the last two decades, which could be used for reference and as templates.¹ According to the mission statement of the Cambridge book series Herzog has to write about all these complex questions at the level of undergraduates. Therefore the bar is set really high for a historian of sexuality. To get straight to the point, Herzog has managed most of these requirements well over most passages of her book. It presents a successful combination of general introduction and historical explanation richly illustrated with numerous examples and historical images. The

Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte/ Department of Economic and Social History, University of Vienna, Universitätsring 1, A-1010, Vienna, Austria; franz.eder@univie.ac.at.

¹ e.g. Gert Hekma, ed., *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Modern Age* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2010); Franz X. Eder, Lesley Hall and Gert Hekma, eds, *Sexual Cultures in Europe*: Vol. I: *National Histories*; Vol. II: *Themes in Sexuality* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press and St. Martin's Press, 1999); Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 1999); also on different periods: e.g. Harry G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook, eds, *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Annette F. Timm and Joshua A. Sanborn, *Gender, Sex and the Shaping of Modern Europe: A History from the French Revolution to the Present Day* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007); Katherine Crawford, *European Sexualities, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ruth M. Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Anna Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008); the list of publications on different countries and subtopics of the history of sexuality is nearly endless – see in my *Bibliography of the History of Western Sexuality*: <http://wirtges.univie.ac.at/Sexbibl/> (last visited 15 Jan. 2013).

volume therefore offers an easy entrance into this up till now fairly confusing topic. But, as will be shown, she gives only a rather one-sided insight into the state of the art of recent historical research on European sexuality in the twentieth century.

For this roundtable I will concentrate on those aspects of the book which one could discuss in a more general and longer historical perspective, particularly European sexual traditions and developments reaching back into earlier centuries. Furthermore I will call into question the theoretical premises of this book and the facets of the history of sexuality which it highlights.

The introduction makes it clear that this book has been written for undergraduates and college courses, but that it also asks really ‘big’ historical and epistemological questions. Among other questions Herzog wants to answer is ‘what exactly are the relationships between ideologies, social conditions, bodies, and emotions, and how might these relationships have changed over time?’ (p. 3). Another ‘task of this book, then, will be to try to reconstruct the ways people in the past *imagined* sex and what kinds of assumptions and emotions they brought to it’ (p. 5).

In the following chapters it becomes evident that Herzog is primarily writing about different discourses on sexuality. However the term ‘discourse’ is used – if I have counted correctly – only once, and in this instance as a synonym for debate or discussion (p. 186). In particular, her emphasis is on political discourses which were triggered and pursued by individuals and groups as well as political institutions and parties. This is the reason why we primarily learn about those forms of sexuality which have been discussed in public, e.g. in books and newspapers – such as contraception, abortion, prostitution, homosexuality, sexual violence, sexual politics, penal law, and so on. In contrast, topics in the ‘normal’, ‘average’ and ‘unproblematic’ sexual life of the majority of the population are hardly discussed.

One effect of this focus on discourses is that readers (and sometimes even the author) may extrapolate from discourses to attitudes, opinions and problems of individuals, of population groups, or even of men and women in general. In my view this results in a one-sided view of the recent state of discourse theory and history. It is perhaps particularly true of the field of sexuality that there is often a gap between public debates/discourses and individual as well as collective opinions, emotions and forms of behaviour. One of the tasks of the new approaches of the history of sexuality should be to discuss the theoretical assumptions of historical writing and narrative in this field and to explain the theoretical implications of the discourse perspective. Following the path-breaking books of Michel Foucault, a discussion of the historical controversies surrounding the term ‘discourse’ would be highly fruitful.²

Another consequence of the emphasis on discourses is that Herzog gives little attention to the sexual experiences – desire, emotions and practices – of ordinary people. She rarely discusses changes in everyday sexual life between (married) couples

² e.g. Chris Brickell, ‘A Symbolic Interactionist History of Sexuality?’, *Rethinking History*, 10, 1 (2006), 415–32; Julian Carter, ‘Theory, Methods, Praxis: The History of Sexuality and the Question of Evidence’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14, 1–2 (2005), 1–10; David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

or the social frame in which sexual scripts were enacted before, during and outside marriage and partnership. This is regrettable since we know a lot about these sexual habits from several historical studies. Even for the decades before the sex surveys of the 1940s and 1950s (p. 107ff) we possess enough source materials and information from surveys, diaries, letters and oral history interviews.³ It is really notable that Herzog hardly addresses aspects of everyday sexual life in the second half of the twentieth century. For these decades we can base our studies on rich empirical data from sex surveys and sexological research on all aspects of sexual life in several European countries, and on behaviour as well as attitudes, images and emotions.

How does Herzog assess the discursive and practical politicisation of sexuality in the twentieth century? On page 6 we can find her 'credo' on this question: 'At the beginning of the twentieth century, in short, and in a multitude of ways, sex became political.' This statement does not stand up to scrutiny in a long-term historical perspective. Even in earlier centuries there were political sex-discourses and sexuality was discussed in political categories. Political forms of regulation, discipline and sanction were used to change sexual behaviour, habits and mores – because the authorities, professionals and institutions were interested in the outcomes and effects of procreation, or the social status and place of men and women, or the prosecuting and punishing of prostitutes. Depending on the genre of sources they use, historians can explore political sex-discourses even in ancient times as well as in the medieval or early modern periods. However in most of these sources sexual politics is not an explicit topic, but a more indirect issue of population politics, changes in the legal system or practices in religion and education.

In earlier centuries we can also find public and political debates between different social groups and institutions. To mention only two examples: when the Christian 'sect' of the Cathars, living in southern France, parts of Spain, Italy and Germany from the middle of the twelfth to the early fourteenth century, were accused by the Roman church of heresy, this was also a political controversy about sexuality. The Cathars voted for an ascetic life and declared themselves against marriage. According to them, the church was ruled by an amoral clergy, and fornication as well as sodomy was common in Christian cloisters and among bishops and priests. On the other hand, the church leaders and monastic writers assumed that the sectarists were engaged in sexualised rites and even orgies, and that they planned to revitalise the ecstatic practices of old natural religions. In this case sex became political in the debate or discourse about the supremacy of the church hierarchy.⁴ My second example issues from the time of the Reformation: during the sixteenth century some of the Reformers

³ e.g. Anne-Claire Rebreyend, *Intimités amoureuses: France, 1920–1975* (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2008); Anne-Marie Sohn, *Du premier baiser à l'alcôve: La sexualité des français au quotidien, 1850–1950* (Paris: Aubier, 1996); Lesley Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900–1950* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); Kirsten von Sydow, *Psychosexuelle Entwicklung im Lebenslauf: Eine biographische Studie bei Frauen der Geburtsjahrgänge 1895 bis 1936* (Regensburg: Roderer, 1991).

⁴ Peter Dinzelbacher, 'Gruppensex im Untergrund: Chaotische Ketzler und kirchliche Keuschheit im Mittelalter', in Albrecht Classen, ed., *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2008), 405–28.

established so-called marriage courts and consistories, which in co-operation with the urban authorities had to supervise and control the practical implementation of the new moral standards. The first marriage court was opened by Ulrich Zwingli in 1525 in Zurich and clerical judges were appointed. These men had to deal with delicts or crimes such as unfulfilled marriage promises, clandestine marriages, pre-marital or extra-marital sexual activities, and prostitution. Basle followed Zurich's example in 1529 and installed a mixed court with the same task of prosecuting sexual and moral offences.⁵

Church discourses on the Cathars and Protestant measures to prosecute moral deviants were a form of sexual politics or a politicisation of sexuality. The discourse on the Cathars was far from their real sexual practices and from the ideas of the believers who tried to live a moral life according to the principles of the Bible. The debates on the marriage courts and their institutionalisation in Switzerland corresponded to the aims of the urban authorities and the religious principles of important social groups of these towns. The major difference between these forms of politicisation of sexuality and the ways sex became political during the twentieth century can be seen in the agents and institutions of politics. During the last century sex became a topic of 'official' discourses of political parties and their representatives and media.

We also have to ask how far the sexual debates of the early twentieth century could reach. Herzog argues that discourses on prostitution, fertility control and sex scandals were able to profoundly affect 'people's expectations – about love and physical sensations, about purposes of sex and preferences while having it . . . No less deeply affected were people's experiences' (p. 6). In my view, during the first decades of the twentieth century this could be said only about social groups such as the aristocracy and the middle classes, who were able to buy and to read books and newspapers. Most members of the working class and most peasants had no direct access to sexual knowledge and discourses. They derived their mores and sexual scripts from social traditions, from religious indoctrination and their own everyday experiences. Some of them did not even know about the legal regulations and the penances of the penal codes. One important task of the history of sexuality is to compare the sexual life of social classes and groups and not to speak of human sexuality in general. Alongside a focus on the sexual life of workers and the (petty) bourgeoisie, Herzog could also consider changing sexual practices during the life course and differences between the generations. To compare the possibilities and experiences of younger and older people will be a fruitful new approach for the history of sexuality.

Herzog's book also demonstrates that a focus on the twentieth century narrows the historical perspective. Particularly in the first chapters we hear about developments which have their origins in the second half of the nineteenth century or even earlier,

⁵ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 67 ff.; Susanna Burghartz, *Zeiten der Reinheit, Orte des Unzucht: Ehe und Sexualität in Basel während der Frühen Neuzeit* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1999), 107ff.

for example shifts in political discourse about prostitution, venereal diseases and birth control. For these and other cases it is really difficult to determine when a discourse or development had its exact origin or starting point. For example the discourse on masturbation has a longer tradition and even during the eighteenth century – rather than beginning in the nineteenth century as Herzog writes – pedagogues, pastors and physicians thought that masturbation could infect and harm a society as a whole and not only the health and social future of a person concerned.⁶

A longer historical dimension also problematises Herzog's claim that 'there was up until the late nineteenth century no clear sense of these men who loved and/or sought sex with men as some kind of distinct species' (34). In the light of the historiographical debate on the genesis of a homosexual/gay/lesbian identity and subjectivity one has to differentiate between more or less verified historical 'facts' and on-going controversies. According to some historians homosexuality had already taken shape as a visible identity in the Italian towns of the Renaissance or in England in the early eighteenth century.⁷ Especially for students it is important to hear about history as a science in discussion.

Herzog's political master narrative is more or less orientated around terms like progress, conservatism, liberalisation and backlash and doesn't tell us an ambivalent and controversial history of sexuality. Although her (political) view is critical and reflective, her history is primarily orientated on recent values and sees the history of sexuality as a 'struggle over sexual freedom', as a history of 'emotionally dissociate sex' and of 'romantic mutuality' (218f). For most people in former decades categories like these were far from their life context and experiences.

I also do not agree with Herzog's view of the 1950s and early 1960s as a period of primarily moral conservatism and family values: I think that she underestimates the power and diffusion of the 'first sex wave' we can observe in some European countries. Besides all legal repressions, despite the moral pressure from the churches and other 'sexual backlashes', these years also brought important 'liberal steps': public eroticisation by pin-up girls and movie stars, the popularisation of the Kinsey reports as well as the debates about them, and an increasing commercialisation of the sexual in the media and by mail order (Beate Uhse and co.).⁸ These and other 'subcutaneous' forms of sexualisation also had an impact on the attitudes in broader sections of the population and even practical changes in sexual behaviour in some groups, especially in the working classes and lower middle classes during the early 1960s. In this light the metaphor of the sexual 'revolution' has to be judged critically. Subsequently the 'sexual revolution' of the second half of the 1960s and the 1970s has to be seen as a

⁶ For a longer perspective see Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

⁷ Robert Aldrich, ed., *Gay Life and Culture: A World History* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2006); some articles in Julie Peakman, ed., *A Cultural History of Sexuality*, 6 vols (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2010).

⁸ e.g. for German-speaking countries: Franz X. Eder, *Kultur der Begierde: Eine Geschichte der Sexualität*, 2nd edn (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2nd ed., 2009), 211ff.; Sybille Steinbacher, *Wie der Sex nach Deutschland kam: Der Kampf um Sittlichkeit und Anstand in der frühen Bundesrepublik* (Munich: Siedler, 2011).

part of a longer change and 'sexual liberation' and not as a fast and radical upheaval initiated by some revolutionary agents.

Reading the book I was not quite sure whether there is one common sexual culture in Europe or there are different cultures or regional sexualities. Although Herzog offers a wide range of national examples, we rarely read about long-lasting divergences and their historical background. It would be very interesting to hear more about the social, economic and cultural reasons for stereotypes like the amorous and sexually well-educated French and the prudish and sexually inhibited English and whether these images were destroyed during the twentieth century or not. What about the long-lasting Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions? Did they lose their power during the 'century of sex'? Of course, a concise book of 230 pages cannot answer all elaborate questions, but I think that new approaches to European history should deal with such regional (and even global) aspects of the geography of sex. Because of the aims of the book series, Herzog has based her book and the further readings at the end of every chapter on the English literature. Some of the sources reproduced also stem from German-speaking countries and other countries. As this book will be translated into other European languages, hopefully the author will include major publications and sources from other languages.

To sum up, Dagmar Herzog has written a very readable volume about the discourse and the politicisation of sexuality in Europe in the twentieth century. A more general synthesis which considers all aspects of the history of sexuality has still to be written.