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Sexuality, Repression, Civilisation

Is sexuality, in some sense or another, the key to modern civilisation? Many, mostly from the progressive side of the political spectrum, have answered in the affirmative. According to the usual interpretations at least – although these are surely inadequate – Freud would be something of an exception, since he connected his view of sexuality to a conservative view of modern civilisation. Followers of Freud, however, have often adapted his ideas, or certain of them, to radical ends. Modern civilisation is repressive, yes, but the release of sexual expression from its constraints could produce emancipation of a far-reaching sort. Sex, as Edward Carpenter said, 'goes first, and hands eyes mouth brain follow; from the midst of belly and thighs radiates the knowledge of self, religion and immortality'.[1]

Sex and repression: Reich

> Ye specious worthies who scoff at me
> Whence thrives your politics
> As long as ye have ruled the world?
> From dagger thrusts and murder!

Thus begins Wilhelm Reich's *Listen, Little Man!*, a book whose very title echoes a paranoiac aggressiveness which runs through the text, but which also defends a vision of radical social reform that Reich pursued for the whole of his life.[2] For the bold way in which he challenged authority, Reich was persecuted by a variety of groups, ranging from psychoanalytic orthodoxy, religious organisations and the US government through to those he decried as 'red fascists'. The first, and most famous, of the psychoanalytic sexual radicals, Reich saw his ideas traduced by all of these groups and more besides.

Reich was the scourge of bourgeois marriage and saw in genital sexuality – its frustration or cultivation – the clue to the ailments of modernity. The 'little man' to whom Reich addresses himself is indeed a member of the male sex, but not just the average man in the street; he is all those, including people in positions of power, who are slaves to convention, neurotics believing themselves to be healthy. The little man, Reich says, not mincing his words, is 'miserable and small, stinking, impotent, rigid, lifeless and empty'. He is his own slave-driver, compelled by his own anxieties to seek to prevent others from claiming their freedom.

The neurosis of the little man Reich traced to the damming up of sexual energy; but he was far from propagating the uncontrolled sexual licence of which his enemies accused him:

'You are a Miserable Little Man!' he proclaimed.

> You run your automobiles and trains over the bridges which the great Galileo invented. Do you know, Little Man, that the great Galileo had three children, without a marriage licence? That you don't tell your school children. And, did you not torture Galileo for this reason also? . . .
>
> You have no inkling of the fact that it is your pornographic

> mind and your sexual irresponsibility which put you in the shackles of your marriage laws . . .
>
> You have no woman, or if you have one, you only want to 'lay' her in order to prove the 'man' in you. You don't know what love is . . .
>
> You know, and I know, and everybody knows, that you go around in a perpetual state of sexual starvation; that you look greedily at every member of the other sex; that you talk with your friends about love in terms of dirty jokes . . . One night, I heard you and your friends walk along the street, yelling in unison: 'We want women! We want women!'[3]

Reich opposed sexuality to power, and saw in the reign of the 'little man' the origins of that authoritarianism he so vehemently resisted. Sexuality, appropriately expressed, is our main source of happiness and whoever is happy is free from the thirst for power. Someone who has a 'feeling of living life' has an autonomy which comes from nurturing the potentialities of the self. Sexuality oriented to the 'loving embrace' provides a way beyond domination – a route, as Reich puts it, to freedom from the constraints of unmastered sexual desire. In the place of 'driven sexuality', the sexuality which seeks 'to pinch every waitress in the behind', people should become 'openly happy in their love'.[4]

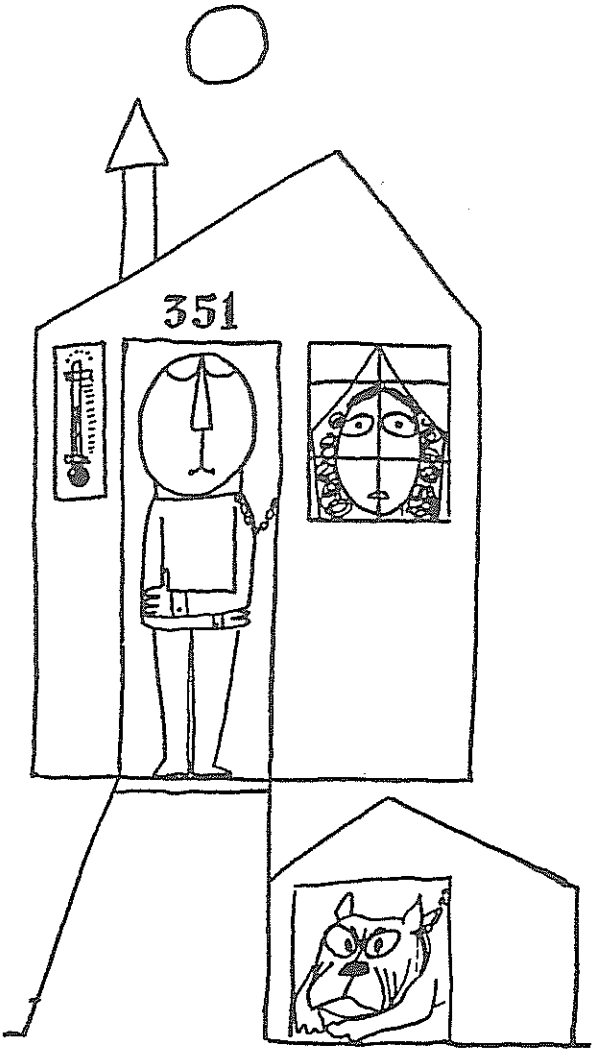
How can such a situation be brought about? Not just by political reform, Reich says, but by the reform of mass character. For Reich, character is a defensive formation, a protective 'armour' developed to withstand the vicissitudes of life. Character he describes as a chronic deformation of the ego, which takes the form of a rigidity. The armour a person develops protects against external and internal dangers, although at great psychic cost; it develops as a result of the blocking of libido. The 'hardening of the ego' results from various sets of processes. The identification with a frustrating reality or, more specifically, individuals who represent this reality gives the armouring its meaningful

content. Aggression, generated by the frustrating other, produces anxiety which is turned against the self; an individual's energies are thus blocked from motor expression and become inhibitions. Such energies become drawn in to the warding off of sexual impulses, which surface only in a compulsive way.

Reich's therapeutic method involves piercing the character armour by undermining the 'neurotic equilibrium' of the individual. For many people, the capacity for spontaneous enjoyment, which has its origins in sexual pleasure, has become distorted by sadism, greed and selfishness. Character is a mark of insincerity which, however, can become changed in such a way as to produce happiness. The neurotic equilibrium can be broken through by freeing libido from pregenital fixations. During the course of therapy, infant genital anxiety is reactivated, but as a means of re-establishing 'orgastic potency' lost as a result of distorted psychosexual development.[5]

According to Reich, Freud wrote *Civilisation and Its Discontents* in some part as a refutation of the 'danger' presented by Reich's interpretation of modernity.[6] In Reich's view, Freud mistakenly equated modern institutions with civilisation in general. Anticipating the path later charted by Marcuse, Reich argues that modern culture is specifically repressive; but he rejects the idea of the death instinct, arguing that destructiveness results from frustrated libido. Freud had deliberately sought to undermine the possibilities of sexual liberation by blocking off the radical implications of his own ideas.[7]

There is some truth in the assertion. As against Foucault's thesis that Freud epitomises the modern preoccupation with sexuality, in his later writings Freud deliberately set out to modify his earlier, 'exaggerated' emphasis upon libido. His lead was followed by the majority of the members of the psychoanalytic profession, even where they rejected the conception of the death instinct. Reich saw himself as a



You beg for happiness, but security is more important to you
from Wilhelm Reich *Listen, Little Man*, London, Souvenir Press, 1972.

defender of a true faith. Modern society is patriarchal and its emphasis upon monogamous marriage serves to develop authoritarian traits of character, thereby supporting an exploitative social system. Behind this phenomenon stands

a crucial transition in early history, from a matriarchal society in which the repression of infantile and adolescent sexuality was unknown.

Reich believed that sociopolitical reform without sexual liberation is impossible: freedom and sexual health are the same thing. While he advocated equality of sexual expression for women, he gave particular attention to the sexual rights of children and adolescents. Children are to be given the right to engage in sexual play with others and to masturbate; they are also to be protected from the domination of their parents. Adolescents are to have the opportunity to fulfil their sexual needs in an unbridled way, in order that they might be the agents of future social change. Homosexuality Reich regarded as the product of thwarted libido; he considered that it will disappear with the progressive liberation of sexuality – as will pornography.

The later work of Reich has been seen by many as bizarre, the ideas of a person who towards the end of his life himself became deranged. Yet its direction of development is important, and there are in fact strong continuities between his earlier and later writings. Reich was long suspicious of Freud's talking cure. Free association, according to Reich, often leads away from a person's problems rather than helping to disclose them. The body and its dispositions, he came to see, have their own expressive language; in order to get a true evaluation of an individual, the therapist should ask him or her *not* to speak for a while. 'For as soon as the patient ceases to talk, the bodily expression of emotion becomes clearly manifest.' 'Orgone therapy' is based on promoting sexual expressiveness through the genital orgasm. The underlying aim, however, is to allow the individual to express her- or himself somatically, in such a way that 'language is eliminated to a far-reaching degree'.[8] Reich's idea that sexual energy becomes imprisoned in the individual's musculature carries residues of nineteenth-century views of hysteria, but also anticipates the arrival of

'stress' as a physical pathology later in the present century. More significantly, reflexive control of the body is recognised as being at the centre of psychological difficulties. There is no confessional here: Reich abandoned the talking cure in favour of programmes of relaxation, massage and the dissipation of bodily tension.

Herbert Marcuse

Marcuse also sought to discern 'the hidden trend in psychoanalysis' towards radicalism.[9] Critical of Erich Fromm and other 'revisionists', Marcuse tried like Reich to lay bare the liberative potential in Freud's work. Libido is rescued, but the death instinct is sustained as a sobering reminder of the limits to pure pleasure. All civilisation presumes 'basic repression' of the life and death drives, but in modern society the demands of economic discipline introduce an historical, and dispensable, burden of repression. In adjusting to Freud's 'reality principle', the individual is in fact responding to the exigencies of a form of exploitative domination.

Marcuse's interpretation of Freud has something in common with the Lacanian version, although the end-result is very different. Like Lacan, Marcuse criticises ego psychology, and places a strong emphasis upon the unconscious. In contrast to Lacan, however, Marcuse believes that a recovery of the unconscious offers a powerful medium for radical social criticism; for Marcuse, this is because ego psychology accepts the world as it is. By turning to the instincts, in Freud's sense of that term, we can lay bare mechanisms of social repression and we can also give a content to the emancipatory promise of modernity.

The key conceptual moves in Marcuse's diagnosis of the possibility of emancipation are the division of repression

into basic and surplus repression and the adding of the performance principle to the reality principle. Some forms of repression, in other words, result from the 'innerwordly asceticism' of modern institutions, and can be dispelled when those institutions are transcended. They are 'surplus to requirements' in a psychological sense. The performance principle is the principle implied in facing, not 'reality' as such, but the (impermanent) historical reality of a particular social order. What Marcuse describes as the 'monogamic-patriarchal' family, for example, is one social form where there is a surplus of repression. However, he concentrates by far the bulk of his attention upon surplus repression in the context of the workplace.

Emancipation for Marcuse is linked to the primacy of pleasure, which he sharply differentiates from hedonism. Modern work discipline is only possible to the degree that the body is de-eroticised; if libido were allowed to escape surplus repression, it would threaten or destroy that discipline completely. Hedonism, Marcuse affirms in one of his early writings, 'embodies a correct judgement about society'. The pursuit of the sensuous strikes at the heart of surplus repression and thus has an inherently critical edge. Hedonism, nevertheless, is anarchic and is only emancipatory if linked to truth. Truth in this sense appears quite distinct from Foucault's conception of the 'truth' of sexuality: it is pleasure realigned with norms of happiness and aesthetic appreciation. For happiness, Marcuse agrees with Plato, is pleasure 'subjected to the criterion of truth'.[10]

In an interesting passage of *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, Marcuse points out, Freud connects the repressive character of civilisation, not to the sublimation of the instincts as such, but to the exclusiveness of sexual relationships. 'Sexual love', Freud says, 'is a relationship between two people in which a third can only be superfluous or disturbing.'[11] A pair of lovers has no interest in anyone else; civilisation

cannot tolerate this, because it depends upon relations between larger groups of persons. Freud here reproduces, as it were, the traditional objection to *amour passion*. Yet, as Marcuse quite properly observes, sexual love can be liberating in a double sense: when harnessed to respect for the other as an equal, love shatters the framework of the monogamic-patriarchal family, but also is positively compatible with wider social citizenship. 'Free Eros' is not only consistent with, but the very condition of, 'lasting civilised societal relationships'.[12]

Marcuse constantly uses Freud against himself to demonstrate that Freud's interpretation of the psychic demands of modernity is as revolutionary as it is conservative. Thus Freud says that primary narcissism survives in modern civilisation, not only as neurosis, but as something of an 'alternative reality'. Especially, although not exclusively, in relation to sexuality, narcissism can generate an oceanic feeling of 'oneness with the universe'. Narcissism, usually understood (and one could add here, not only by Freud, but by current cultural critics like Christopher Lash, as well as by Foucault in his picture of the 'Californian cult of the self') as a defensive adaptation to the wider world through withdrawal from it, reveals a potential for transcendence. Narcissism 'may become the source and reservoir for a new libidinal cathexis of the objective world – transforming this world into a new mode of being'.[13]

Marcuse differs sharply from Reich in his evaluation of the nature of genital sexuality. Freud proposed, Marcuse says, that the sexual excitation of the child takes the form of a generalised bodily eroticism, which later becomes focused upon the genitals as a normal process of psychosexual development. (Actually, as noted in Chapter 7, Freud stated that a focusing upon genital sexuality is characteristic of boys; girls are forced to 'make do' with a more diffuse eroticism.) In Marcuse's view, Freud failed to see that the progression towards genital sexuality is a restriction upon

the possibilities of pleasure imposed by the modern social order. 'Genital tyranny' results from the fact that libido has been stripped away from the parts of the body needed to participate in industrial labour. A resexualising of the body, together with a renewal of the original meaning of eroticism, which is linked to aesthetic appreciation, is called for as part of future revolutionary change. Marcuse does not fully endorse plastic sexuality, but instead regards 'perversions', including homosexuality, as behavioural critiques of the regime of genital sexuality. They mark sites of resistance to the subjugation of sexual activity to procreation.[14]

For Marcuse, as for Freud, the death instinct is not a wholly destructive force. Human creativity is a consequence of a fusion of life and death instincts, and the problem with modern civilisation is that the death instinct has become detached from its necessary interaction with libidinal energy. Thanatos has become incorporated into the rigid, mechanical character of modern discipline, which permeates more than only the workplace. The overcoming of alienated labour will release surplus repression and also reconnect the death instinct with the sources of sexual pleasure. Release from toil allows for the re-eroticising, not only of the body, but of nature. For the pre-eminence of genital sexuality is associated with an instrumental outlook towards the natural environment. 'Non-repressive sublimation' would be a basis for a renewed harmony with nature.[15]

A non-repressive culture – one sustaining only basic repression – Marcuse argues, would be in some part regressive, in a psychic sense. It would be a reversal of civilisation which is at the same time an overcoming, a going back in order to progress forward. Liberated from 'sex', Eros has culture-building capacities well beyond those available in present-day society. So far as political theory goes, Charles Fourrier has more to teach us than Marx. Pleasurable co-operation based upon *attraction passionée*, not passionate love but the flowering of Eros in communicative love and

friendship, would become the dominant medium of sociability. In Marcuse's words, 'With the transformation from sexuality into Eros, the life instincts evolve their sensuous order, while reason becomes sensuous to the degree to which it comprehends and organises necessity in terms of protecting and enriching the life instincts . . . repressive reason gives way to a new *rationality of gratification* in which reason and happiness converge.'[16]

The possibilities of sexual radicalism

A major source of difficulty for anyone who, like Reich and Marcuse, says that modern civilisation is inherently repressive is that very public fascination with sex which Foucault notes. The maturation of modern institutions is not associated with the increasing constraint, but with its growing prominence almost everywhere. Marcuse was aware of the issue and had an answer. Sexual permissiveness is not at all the same as liberation. The commodifying of sexuality is pervasive, but eroticism is more or less thoroughly expunged from view. The antagonism with which sexuality was regarded in earlier phases of the development of the West is actively preferable, Marcuse argues, to 'sexual freedom' which conceals its oppressiveness beneath a gloss of enjoyment. Previously an awareness of what was disbarred was preserved; we may seem freer, but are in fact living in subjection.

Who defends the ideas of Reich and Marcuse today? Very few and it is instructive to ask why. Foucault might claim that, like their mentor, Freud, they were taken in by the repressive hypothesis. Each believed that modern societies depend upon a high level of sexual repression, signalled first of all in Victorianism. They were wrong in this supposition and therefore the rest of their ideas are suspect. Yet

the repressive hypothesis aside, the gap between the views of Reich and Marcuse, and Foucault, is not as wide as might be thought. Repressive desublimation is not a term Foucault would use and is alien to his thought; but for him as for the others the permissiveness of the present era is a phenomenon of power and is not a pathway to emancipation. 'Perhaps one day', Foucault muses, 'there will be a different economy of bodies and pleasures.'[17] Marcuse and Reich would agree, although both had a rather fuller view of how this might come about than Foucault chose to elaborate.

To grasp the limitations (and also what seems to me the persistent importance) of the views of the 'sexual radicals' we have to look elsewhere than to Foucault. In the writings of Reich and Marcuse, little is said about gender, or about changes influencing the development of love relations in the modern social order. Reich wrote a good deal about love, as well as about the patriarchal family. Following Freud in this respect, at least, he argued that the good life would be built around the 'three pillars' of love, work and knowledge. Yet neither in his work nor in that of Marcuse do we find any systematic theory of gender and love as themselves revolutionary influences. Sexuality is usually described as though it were androgynous, a direct result of following a conception of libido that is anonymous in respect of gender. Marcuse simply seemed to ignore Freud's analysis of the different paths of psychosexual development. While both Reich and Marcuse were enthusiastic supporters of the women's movement, neither built into their writings an interpretation of the impact of the struggles of women in the domestic environment or elsewhere. The omission of a concern with love is a puzzling feature of Marcuse's work – although a moment's reflection will remind the reader that such an absence is characteristic of most versions of social theory. The troubles of modernity which Marcuse stresses for the most part are very much those of a male-dominated domain. Love, one has to presume, is once more somewhere

behind the scenes as that specialisation of women which in fact it became. In the foreground there is only the world of paid labour, taken for granted as a male enterprise. Is it surprising that the burdens of modernity, as depicted by Marcuse, resonate strongly with 'damaged masculinity' as interpreted by Goldberg and others?

Marcuse has no explanation of the origins of the sexual permissiveness that he excoriates. Nor, it seems to me, has Reich, or indeed anyone who begins from Freud's theory of civilisation and repression, however much it is radicalised. For radicalising Freud means showing that what he took to be characteristics of civilisation in general are really specific to the modern order. That order is presented as much more monolithic, and resistant to change, than it really is. If modern institutions in fact depended upon sexual repression, this should increase, not decline, with their further development. To say that 'permissiveness' is a distorted form of sexuality provides a label for a process of increased liberalisation, but does not explain how it could have occurred. Moreover, these thinkers do not see in such liberalisation a sign of progress; an increase in sexual licence does not threaten the edifice which entombs us in the all-enveloping disciplinary system.

Foucault has as his very starting-point the Western preoccupation with sex, and in addition casts doubt on the idea of repression. Concern with sexuality, including the invention of 'sexuality' itself, is an outcome of the spread of surveillance as a means of generating power. Such power was early on concentrated upon the body as a machine – shades of Max Weber and even Marcuse here – and later upon biological processes affecting reproduction, health and longevity. Modern societies are not based, as were premodern systems, on the power to take life, but upon the power to develop it, 'to invest life through and through'.[18] The former influence, one could say, marks Foucault's acceptance of the asceticism in which modern social life is

supposedly steeped. The 'contact between life and history', as Foucault puts it, which represents the second element, is something else again. For millennia human beings lived under the imprint of nature. The natural environment held sway over human activity; demographic growth was largely governed by the vagaries of nature. From about the eighteenth century onwards, however, these processes were increasingly subjected to human control.

Sex became such a pre-eminent concern, according to Foucault, because it formed the main connecting point between these two influences over bodily development. It 'was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species'. This is why 'sexuality was sought out in the smallest details of individual existences; it was tracked down in behaviour, pursued in dreams; it was suspected of underlying the least follies, it was traced back into the earliest years of childhood'.[19] The deployment of sexuality as power made sex a mystery but also, in Foucault's view, constituted 'sex' as something desirable, in which we must engage to establish our individuality. Reich's critique of sexual repression, for Foucault, was the prisoner of that which it sought to liberate. The very fact that so many shifts in sexual behaviour have occurred since the nineteenth century, without being accompanied by the other changes Reich anticipated, indicates that this 'antirepressive' struggle is part of the field of sexuality, not a subversion of it.[20]

Yet Foucault's own view, already criticised in Chapter 2, is wanting. What Foucault terms power – that 'power' which mysteriously does things of its own volition – was in some fundamental respects gender power. It was women who were de-energised, taken out of modernity's core arenas, their capability for sexual enjoyment denied – at the very same time at which they were beginning to construct an infrastructural revolution. Love, together with that affective individualism of which Lawrence Stone speaks, was at the

centre of the changes in family organisation, and was also important in other transformations affecting intimate life. These changes did not originate with the state, or from administrative power in a more general sense. If it be accepted, as it must be, that power is distributive as well as generative, we can say that they derived not from power but from lack of it.

Foucault offers a specific interpretation of why the constraining form of biopower was succeeded by the more dynamic one. The first was dominated by the requirement to create a compliant labour force; the second corresponded to a later phase of development in the twentieth century in which labour power no longer had to be subjected to the same degree of direct control. Once such a transition had been effected, sexuality became channelled into a diversity of social circuits and thereby more or less all-pervasive.

This idea is surely not convincing, even if it relates only to sexual behaviour as narrowly understood, let alone to changes affecting personal relationships more generally. It suggests that our fascination with sex derives from the sheer expansion of sexuality as a discursive phenomenon, which enters areas where previously it was absent. I don't believe that biopower, such as Foucault describes it, explains changes in sexual attitudes and outlooks described in earlier chapters. Such changes are at least in some part a result of struggle and it is impossible to deny that there are emancipatory elements involved. Not emancipation, perhaps, exactly in the manner envisaged by Reich or Marcuse, but not merely a grapple with an entangling spider's web such as Foucault proposes. Women in particular have achieved sexual freedoms which, however partial they may still be, are remarkable compared with even a few short decades ago. Whatever the limitations and distortions to which it is subject, there is far more open dialogue about sexuality, in which virtually the whole population is involved, than would have seemed conceivable to earlier generations.

Institutional repression and the question of sexuality

Let us therefore rethink the relation between sexuality and power, beginning from the assertion that power, as such, does nothing. The generative aspects of power, like its distributive characteristics, are bound up with specific properties of social organisation, with the activities of situated groups and individuals, as well as with varying contexts and modes of institutional reflexivity. Sexuality was not created by 'power', nor is the pervasiveness of sexuality, in any direct way at least, the result of its focal importance for such 'power'.

In my view, there is no such thing as biopower, at least in the generic sense in which Foucault conceives of it. Instead, we can distinguish several threads of organisational and personal transformation in the development of modern societies. The administrative development of modern institutions should be separated from the socialisation of nature and reproduction – fundamental processes, and directly related to sexuality, but not to be analysed in the manner suggested by Foucault. These in turn should be distinguished from the reflexive project of the self and the innovations in personal life linked to it.

As regards the impact of surveillance, one can agree with Foucault that sexuality, like most other aspects of personal life, has become thoroughly caught up in, and restructured by, the expansion of power systems. Modern organisations, including the state, penetrate local activities in ways that were unknown in pre-modern cultures. Discourses of science – including social science – have been directly embroiled in these processes. Yet as stated earlier, the creation of administrative power is much more of a dialectical phenomenon than Foucault admits. Spaces for mobilisation and countervailing power are produced by the very expansion of surveillance. A society of developed

institutional reflexivity is a highly charged one, making possible forms of personal and collective engagement which very substantially alter the sexual domain.

The characteristic movement of modernity, it can be argued, is towards the creation of internally referential systems – orders of activity determined by principles internal to themselves.[21] Certain distinctive areas of social life in pre-modern cultures tended to be governed by 'external' influences (sometimes stabilised as taken for granted phenomena by tradition, but including also biological and physical factors). With the advent of modern institutions, however, these became more and more subject to social intervention. Thus the invention of 'deviance' socialised a miscellaneous set of external characteristics, among them poverty, vagabondage and madness, all of which once upon a time were taken as natural parameters of existence, as 'given by the will of God'. Deviance was socially constituted and at the same time separated from the main arenas of social activity, through a process of sequestration. Similarly, sickness and death, once 'limiting points' of the influence of the biological upon the social, became increasingly socialised and concealed from view.

Sequestered nature and sexuality are connected in a crucial way through the socialisation of reproduction. While modern contraception is the most obvious technological expression of reproduction as an internally referential system, it is not its original impetus. This has its main source in the very separation of reproduction from Malthusian conditions which Foucault mentions.[22] Once family size starts to be carefully limited – something which develops mainly from within the family itself – reproduction comes to be governed primarily by the desire to rear children as an autonomous concern. The inventioon of childhood and of motherhood have their origins here. 'Sexuality' had no distinct existence so long as sexual behaviour was bound up with reproduction and with the generations. Sexual activity

was divided up between an orientation to reproduction and the *ars erotica* – that split which also classified women into the pure and the impure.

Sexuality becomes a property of the individual the more the life-span becomes internally referential and the more self-identity is grasped as a reflexively organised endeavour. As it is constituted as such a domain, sexuality also retreats behind the scenes, sequestered from view in a physical as well as in a social sense. It is now a means of forging connections with others on the basis of intimacy, no longer grounded in an immutable kinship order sustained across the generations. Passion is secularised, taken out of *amour passion*, and reorganised as the romantic love complex; it is privatised and redefined.

What can be termed 'the sequestration of experience'[23] is a consequence of the ever-more radical break of the institutions of modernity with tradition, and the growing intrusion of its systems of control across pre-existing 'external boundaries' of social action. It has as its consequence the dissolution of the moral and ethical lineaments which related social activity to the transcendental, to nature and to reproduction. These are exchanged, in effect, for the security in routine which modern social life offers. A sense of ontological security comes primarily from routine itself; the individual is morally and psychologically vulnerable whenever established routines are broken through. Given what has been said so far, it is clear that such vulnerability is not neutral in respect of gender.

Sequestration is a form of repression, a 'forgetting', but it does not presume an ever-increasing burden of guilt. Instead, mechanisms of shame, linked to the reflexive project of self, interlace with, although they do not wholly replace, those involving guilt anxiety. A rising propensity to the experience of shame – the feeling that one is worthless, one's life empty and one's body an inadequate device – follows upon the spread of modernity's internally referential

systems. The reflexive project of self, which carries so many possibilities for autonomy and happiness, has to be undertaken in the context of routines largely devoid of ethical content. Sexual activity is liable to be dogged by that 'emptiness', that search for an ever-elusive sense of completion, which affects both sexes, although in different ways. For many men, this is a restless search to overcome the sentiments of inadequacy which so deeply wound the little boy who must forsake his mother. For women much more prominent is that 'quest romance' for the desired but unavailable father. In both cases, however, there is a longing for love.

Modernity as obsessional

We should pause at this point to consider what it might actually mean to say that there is a general preoccupation with sexuality in modern culture. One interpretation, somewhat in the manner of Marcuse, might look to commodification as the prime domain in which such a preoccupation is evident. Sexuality generates pleasure; and pleasure, or at least the promise of it, provides a leverage for marketing goods in a capitalistic society. Sexual imagery appears almost everywhere in the marketplace as a sort of gigantic selling ploy; the commodifying of sex, it might be argued, is a means of diverting the mass of the population from their true needs, whatever these are thought to be. The prominence of sexuality might then be interpreted in terms of a movement from a capitalistic order, dependent upon labour, discipline and self-denial, to one concerned to foster consumerism and therefore hedonism.

The limitations of such an idea, however, are obvious enough. It does not explain why sexuality should have the prominence it does; if sex is a powerful adjunct to consum-

erism, it must be because a driving concern with it already exists. Moreover, there is plenty of evidence to the effect that sexuality is worrying, disturbing, fraught with tensions. Pleasure is hedged about with too many countervailing tendencies to make plausible the idea that sexuality forms the centrepoint of a hedonistic consumer society.

Another view might draw once more on Foucault. Sex would be our 'truth', the core of a generalised confessional principle of modern civilisation. I have already suggested reasons why this view will not do on the level of analysis; taken as a descriptive characteristic of modern culture it is also quite unconvincing. Freud's thought was immediately challenged by other therapies which questioned the decisive importance he attributed to sex. The idea of 'sex as truth' has made some headway, but one could hardly claim that it has become the energising principle of modern thought as a whole.

A third interpretation might point to the phenomenon of sex addiction. The centrality of sexuality in modern societies is indicated by the compulsive qualities of sexual behaviour today. Such compulsiveness is evident, it might be said, in widespread addiction to pornography, salacious magazines, films and other media, and in the dedicated pursuit of sexual experience to which many devote themselves. Descriptively this is more adequate, but we still have to ask what the origins of this situation are, as well as considering how such a state of affairs could come about in a society supposedly based upon sexual repression.

I think these conundrums can be solved in the following way. Sexuality became sequestered or privatised as part of the processes whereby motherhood was invented and became a basic component of the female domain. The sequestering of sexuality occurred largely as a result of social rather than psychological repression, and concerned two things above all: the confinement or denial of female sexual responsiveness and the generalised acceptance of male

sexuality as unproblematic. These developments were reworkings of age-old divisions between the sexes, particularly the schism between pure and impure women, but they were recast in a new institutional format. The more sexuality became detached from reproduction, and integrated within an emerging reflexive project of self, the more this institutional system of repression came under tension.

Women became charged, *de facto*, with managing the transformation of intimacy which modernity set in train. The system of institutional repression was from the beginning subject to strain because of the exclusion of women from the public sphere. The enquiries which men carried on into the nature of women were not just an expression of traditional sexual otherness; they were investigations into unacknowledged arenas of self-identity and intimacy, as reordered areas of social life to which men had little entry. Sexuality thus did indeed become a matter of prime concern to both sexes, although in divergent ways. For women, the problem was to constitute love as a medium of communication and self-development – in relation to children as well as to men. The claiming of female sexual pleasure came to form a basic part of the reconstitution of intimacy, an emancipation as important as any sought after in the public domain. For men, sexual activity became compulsive to the degree to which it remained isolated from these more subterranean changes.

Sexual emancipation

In the wake of Foucault's work, versions of sexual emancipation have been suggested which differ markedly from those of Reich or Marcuse. For the most part these are variations on the theme of plastic sexuality. The 'biological justification' for heterosexuality as 'normal', it might be

proposed, has fallen apart. What used to be called perversions are merely ways in which sexuality can legitimately be expressed and self-identity defined. Recognition of diverse sexual proclivities corresponds to acceptance of a plurality of possible life-styles, which is a political gesture:

> The speaking perverts, first given a carefully shaded public platform in the volumes of early sexologists, have become highly vocal on their own behalf. They no longer need to ventriloquise through the Latinate and literary prose of a Krafft-Ebing or Havelock Ellis, or engage in the intricate transference and counter-transference of analyst and analysed. They speak for themselves in street politics and lobbying, through pamphlets, journals and books, via the semiotics of highly sexualised settings, with their elaborate codes of keys, colours and clothes, in the popular media, and in the more mundane details of domestic life.[24]

The approach of 'radical pluralism' is an emancipatory endeavour which seeks to develop guidelines for sexual choice, but makes no claim that these represent coherent moral principles. The radical value of pluralism derives, not from its shock effects – little shocks us any more – but from the effect of recognising that 'normal sexuality' is simply one type of life-style choice among others. 'Subjective feelings, intentions and meanings are vital elements in deciding on the merits of an activity. The decisive factor is an awareness of context, of the situation in which choices are made.'[25] Sexual pluralism, its advocates argue, would not be a succumbing to sexuality, but could offer just what Foucault seems to hold out as a possibility, an overcoming of the dominance that sexuality exerts over our lives.

As it stands, however, such a programme is vague and any version of sexual liberation which emphasises only the factor of choice faces a whole battery of objections. The meaning and potentialities of sexual emancipation need to

be understood in a different fashion, although acceptance of the legitimacy of plastic sexuality is certainly part of the matter. A few provisional observations might help at this point. No viewpoint which pits the energy of sexuality against the disciplinary characteristics of the modern social order is likely to be of much value. Nor is one that looks to the more eccentric or non-conventional forms of sexuality as an avant-garde, which will batter the citadels of orthodoxy until they yield. Finally, if sexual pluralism is to be embraced, it has to offer more than just a sort of casual cosmopolitanism, particularly if other issues intrinsic to sexuality, including gender difference and the ethics of the pure relationship, are not addressed.

I have argued that sexuality has the importance for us today that it does, not because of its significance for the control systems of modernity, but because it is a point of connection between two other processes: the sequestration of experience and the transformation of intimacy. The separation of sexuality from reproduction and the socialisation of reproduction develop as traditional modes of conduct, with all their moral richness – and their imbalances of gender power – become replaced by modernity's internally referential orders. At the same time as what used to be 'natural' becomes increasingly socialised, and partly as a direct result, the domains of personal activity and interaction start to become fundamentally altered. Sexuality serves as a metaphor for these changes and is the focus for their expression, particularly in respect of the reflexive project of self.

The sequestration of experience separates individuals from some of the major moral reference-points by means of which social life was ordered in pre-modern cultures. In these cultures, relations to nature and to the succession of the generations were coordinated by traditional forms of practice, and by religiously inspired ethical codes. The extension of internally referential systems shields the individual from

disturbing questions raised by the existential parameters of human life, but it leaves those questions unanswered. Sexuality, it could be suggested, gains its compelling quality, together with its aura of excitement and danger, from the fact that it puts us in contact with these lost fields of experience. Its ecstasy, or the promise of it, has echoes of the 'ethical passion' which transcendental symbolism used to inspire – and of course cultivated eroticism, as distinct from sexuality in the service of reproduction, has long been associated with religiosity.

Conclusion

Few, as I have said, now read either Reich or Marcuse. Yet their respective visions of a non-repressive order retain a certain beauty and it is not at all clear that those visions should simply be consigned to oblivion. Sexuality is a terrain of fundamental political struggle and also a medium of emancipation, just as the sexual radicals claimed. A non-repressive society, as Reich and Marcuse both stress, would be one in which sexuality is increasingly freed from compulsiveness. Emancipation thus presumes autonomy of action in the context of the generalisation of plastic sexuality. It is separate from permissiveness in so far as it creates an ethics of personal life which makes possible a conjunction of happiness, love and respect for others.

The sexual radicals presumed that a double order of revolution would be necessary before we could even begin to contemplate such a state of affairs. Society would have to undergo a thorough-going upheaval, and a great deal of psychic change would also be necessary. Yet if, as I have suggested, sexual repression has above all been a matter of social sequestration coupled to gender power, something of a different slant can be put on things. We have no need to

wait around for a sociopolitical revolution to further programmes of emancipation, nor would such a revolution help very much. Revolutionary processes are already well under way in the infrastructure of personal life. The transformation of intimacy presses for psychic as well as social change and such change, going 'from the bottom up', could potentially ramify through other, more public, institutions.

Sexual emancipation, I think, can be the medium of a wide-ranging emotional reorganisation of social life. The concrete meaning of emancipation in this context is not, however, as the sexual radicals proposed, a substantive set of psychic qualities or forms of behaviour. It is more effectively understood in a procedural way, as the possibility of the *radical democratisation* of the personal. Who says sexual emancipation, in my view, says sexual democracy. It is not only sexuality at stake here. The democratisation of personal life, as a potential, extends in a fundamental way to friendship relations and, crucially, to the relations of parents, children and other kin.

NOTES

1 Edward Carpenter: *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: *Sex*, London: GMP, 1984, frontispiece.
2 Wilhelm Reich: *Listen, Little Man!*, London: Souvenir, 1972.
3 Ibid., pp. 43, 61.
4 Ibid., pp. 111–12.
5 Wilhelm Reich: *Character Analysis*, London: Vision, 1950.
6 Wilhelm Reich: *The Function of the Orgasm*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961, pp. 165–8.
7 Wilhelm Reich: *The Sexual Revolution*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962, pp. 247ff.
8 Reich: *Character Analysis*, p. 362.
9 Herbert Marcuse: *Eros and Civilisation*, London: Allen Lane, 1970, p. 11.

) Herbert Marcuse: 'On hedonism', in *Negations*, London: Allen Lane, 1968.
1 Quoted in Marcuse: *Eros and Civilisation*, p. 48.
2 Ibid., p. 49.
3 Ibid., p. 138.
4 Ibid., pp. 164–6.
5 Herbert Marcuse: *One-Dimensional Man*, London: Allen Lane, 1972.
6 Marcuse: *Eros and Civilisation*, pp. 179–80.
7 Michel Foucault: *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1981, p. 159.
8 Ibid., pp. 139–42.
9 Ibid., p. 146.
0 Ibid., pp. 130–31.
1 Anthony Giddens: *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge: Polity, 1991, ch. 5 and *passim*.
2 Cf. Mitchell Dean: *The Constitution of Poverty*, London: Routledge, 1991.
3 Ibid.
4 Jeffrey Weeks: *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, London: Routledge, 1985, p. 213.
5 Ibid., p. 219.