

# PREFACE

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A number of people have read, and commented upon, earlier drafts of this book. I have tried to take account of most of the criticisms they raised in so far as it was within my capacity to do so. I would like especially to thank the following: Grant Barnes, Michèle Barrett, Teresa Brennan, Montserrat Guiberneau, Rebecca Harkin, David Held, Sam Hollick, Graham McCann, Heather Warwick, Jeffrey Weeks and an anonymous reviewer of Stanford University Press. I would also like to thank Avril Symonds for her work on the preparation of the manuscript and Helen Jeffrey for her very conscientious copy-editing.

I wanted to produce a book which would be accessible to most readers who might care to pick it up. So I have avoided technical verbiage whenever possible, even when I stray into intellectual areas of some complexity. I have made use of a wide variety of sources, but in the interests of readability I have kept references and footnotes to a minimum. One resource upon which I have drawn extensively perhaps needs some comment here: the literature of self-help. Scorned by many, to me it offers insights unavailable elsewhere and I deliberately stay as close to the *genre* as possible in developing my own arguments.

# INTRODUCTION

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Sexuality: a subject which might seem a public irrelevance – an absorbing, but essentially private, concern. A constant factor also, one might imagine, since it is given by biology and necessary for the continued life of the species. Yet in fact sex now continually features in the public domain and, moreover, speaks the language of revolution. Over the past several decades, so it is said, a sexual revolution has occurred; and revolutionary hopes have been pinned to sexuality by many thinkers, for whom it represents a potential realm of freedom, unsullied by the limits of present-day civilisation.

How should one interpret such claims? That question prompted me to write this book. I set out to write on sex. I found myself writing just as much about love; and about gender. Works on sex themselves tend to be gendered. In some of the most notable studies of sexuality written by men there is virtually no mention of love, and gender appears as something of an addendum. Today, for the first time in history, women claim equality with men. In what follows I don't attempt to analyse how far gender inequalities persist in the economic or political domains. I concentrate instead upon an emotional order where women – ordinary women, going about their day-to-day lives, as well as self-consciously feminist groups – have pioneered

changes of great, and generalisable, importance. These concern essentially an exploration of the potentialities of the 'pure relationship', a relationship of sexual and emotional equality, which is explosive in its connotations for pre-existing forms of gender power.

The rise of romantic love provides a case-study of the origins of the pure relationship. Ideals of romantic love have long affected the aspirations of women more than those of men, although of course men have not been uninfluenced by them. The ethos of romantic love has had a double impact upon women's situation. On the one hand it has helped to put women 'in their place' – the home. On the other hand, however, romantic love can be seen as an active, and radical, engagement with the 'maleness' of modern society. Romantic love presumes that a durable emotional tie can be established with the other on the basis of qualities intrinsic to that tie itself. It is the harbinger of the pure relationship, although it also stands in tension with it.

The emergence of what I term plastic sexuality is crucial to the emancipation implicit in the pure relationship, as well as to women's claim to sexual pleasure. Plastic sexuality is decentred sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction. It has its origins in the tendency, initiated somewhere in the late eighteenth century, strictly to limit family size; but it becomes further developed later as the result of the spread of modern contraception and new reproductive technologies. Plastic sexuality can be moulded as a trait of personality and thus is intrinsically bound up with the self. At the same time – in principle – it frees sexuality from the rule of the phallus, from the overweening importance of male sexual experience.

Modern societies have a covert emotional history, yet to be fully drawn into the open. It is a history of the sexual pursuits of men, kept separate from their public selves. The sexual control of women by men is much more than an

incidental feature of modern social life. As that control starts to break down, we see the compulsive character of male sexuality more plainly revealed – and this declining control also generates a rising tide of male violence towards women. At the moment, an emotional abyss has opened up between the sexes, and one cannot say with any certainty how far it will be bridged.

Yet the radicalising possibilities of the transformation of intimacy are very real. Some have claimed that intimacy can be oppressive, and clearly this may be so if it is regarded as a demand for constant emotional closeness. Seen, however, as a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals, it appears in a completely different light. Intimacy implies a wholesale democratising of the interpersonal domain, in a manner fully compatible with democracy in the public sphere. There are further implications as well. The transformation of intimacy might be a subversive influence upon modern institutions as a whole. For a social world in which emotional fulfilment replaced the maximising of economic growth would be very different from that which we know at present. The changes now affecting sexuality are indeed revolutionary, and in a very profound way.