

## **Sexed up: theorizing the sexualization of culture**

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## Sexed up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture

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### Abstract

This paper reviews and examines emerging academic approaches to the study of 'sexualized culture'; an examination made necessary by contemporary preoccupations with sexual values, practices and identities, the emergence of new forms of sexual experience and the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay. The paper maps out some key themes and preoccupations in recent academic writing on sex and sexuality, especially those relating to the contemporary or emerging characteristics of sexual discourse. The key issues of pornographication and democratization, taste formations, postmodern sex and intimacy, and sexual citizenship are explored in detail.

### Keywords

Sexualization, culture, discourse, postmodern, citizenship

'The most important permanent truth about sexuality is that there may be no important truths about sexuality that are permanent.' (William Simon, 1996:142)

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A woman sits at a computer screen, typing. The screen reads  
M says:    like this?  
F says:            yes, just like that  
F says:            god, yes  
F says:    mmm  
M says:    you want it now  
M says:    dont you?  
F says:            christ, yes, noww...

She frowns, retypes,  
F says:    now..  
adds a line,  
F says:            fuck, i'm close  
                  you are so good

She is concentrating hard; this has taken most of her morning. But she's excited too. He *is* good. She feels a rush of affection for this man whose profile says he is 32, green eyed, a journalist, in Minnesota, snowed in and horny, but who could, in fact, be anyone. The response comes straight back,  
M says:    (emergency!!, brb)

She groans with frustration, but he did say they might have to stop if the baby woke up. While she waits, she scrolls back quickly, looking at this script they are writing together; this document which is already disappearing and will never be read. She notices a phrase she's obviously culled from some porn film she doesn't remember, and the moment where she did something she's never done before - on or off line. As she waits for him to return she contemplates this fantasy which feels so real, this disembodied experience which has her wriggling in her chair, this encounter, this whatever-it-is, this 'sex'.

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### **Studying 'sex'**

What is 'sex'? Sex today 'serves a multiplicity of purposes, including pleasure, the establishing and defining of relationships, the communication of messages concerning attitudes and lifestyles, and the provision of a major mechanism for subjection, abuse, and violence'. It 'assumes many forms' and 'is bound up with more things' than ever before (Plummer, 2003b: 19). The study of sex has also been subject to dramatic change since the last quarter of the twentieth century. Accounts from feminist and queer theorists have radically disturbed the ways in which sex and sexuality have been conceptualized, and an approach to sex which focuses on its articulation and materialization within a whole range of social and cultural arenas and attempts to establish its socio-political significance, has become established. A more recent set of academic writings has focused on the notion of sexualization, and it is this, rather than the broader issues raised by theorizing sex and sexuality, that this paper is concerned with. This paper reviews and examines emerging academic approaches to the study of 'sexualized culture', a rather clumsy phrase used to indicate a number of things; a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex; all those manifestations that in our era, 'Sex...has become the Big Story' (Plummer, 1995:4). It attempts to map out some key themes and preoccupations in this writing, and, in particular, to focus on work which is attentive to the contemporary or emerging characteristics of sexual discourses and sensibilities. It seems important, given the widespread claims that older, modern conceptions of sexuality are breaking down, that there is 'a crisis of paradigms' (Simon, 1996:18), and that despite sexual overload, there is considerable uncertainty about what we

mean by sex or sexuality (Merck, 2000), to trace these responses, and to note where they might lead in future.

Given this uncertainty, it is particularly important to continue the project of thinking critically and carefully about the meaning of sex in work which investigates the sexualization of culture. When we say sex, what *do* we mean? Online sexual encounters, such as the one described at the beginning of this paper, are only one – though a particularly interesting – instance of the ways sex is taking on new forms which disrupt older conceptions of its status and its place in society. Today, ‘sex’ may be an out of body experience, very intimately performed across time and distance; it may be an intense act of communication between strangers; an encounter conjoining flesh and technology; an act of presentation and a representation which is consumed as quickly as it is produced; a way of articulating or disarticulating identity; a type of interaction never before possible in human history. This is very strange given the inherited and still powerful associations of sex with the body, essence and truth, and yet it is already unremarkable and routine to the many people who frequent sex chat rooms or use messenger systems to interact sexually at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If this can be sex, what does that do to our existing ideas about sexual practices, values, discourses and identities? And, what do changing constructions of sexuality like these tell us about the way we live now in contemporary societies, about the relation between bodies and machines, or practices and representations? What do they suggest about the way we envisage and organize the public and private worlds, or about changes in the management of intimate relationships? What do they say about the politics of race, class and gender? What characterizes a contemporary sexual sensibility? And perhaps most importantly, what do we *do* about any of this – can we develop an ethics for sexuality in the absence of a clear moral framework or paradigm of sex? In the following sections, I will trace some of the key issues and debates around the ways we are making sense of sexualization; its characteristic forms of expression; its potential for democratization; its changing status and formation; the attempts to rework it within a framework of ethical values, and map out the implications for the future of research in this area.

### **The shock of the new**

The need to identify key shifts in the construction of sexual and other intimate relations in the late modern period has been noted by a number of writers as a precondition for examining how sexual discourses are changing and how sexual values and practices might develop

in the twenty-first century (Giddens 1992, Plummer 1995, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Simon 1996, Bauman 1999 and 2003). Late modern cultures are characterized by a move to more permissive attitudes to sex, though sex is also a regular focus of public concern in the context of an apparent disintegration of moral consensus around issues of sexual propriety. Within the context of a 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992), sex has become domesticated and intimate relationships are eroticized, though at the same time there is a tendency to conceptualize the erotic as a highly individualized form of hedonism which is pursued through episodic and uncommitted encounters and through forms of auto-eroticism. There has been a huge growth in the provision of commercial sex services such as escort agencies, lap dancing clubs and sex tours, as part of a 'shift from a relational to a recreational model of sexual behaviour, a reconfiguration of erotic life in which the pursuit of sexual intimacy is not hindered but facilitated by its location in the marketplace' (Bernstein, 2001:397). Developments in communication technologies have also allowed sexual texts to proliferate, and made possible new forms of sexual encounter; phone sex, email affairs and cybersex have become part of the late modern repertoire of sexual practices. We respond to our culture's 'incitement to discourse' about sex with a kind of weariness; the explicit has become so familiar and sexual transgression so mainstream. All the same, sex is the occasion of public fascination in the form of scandals, controversies and moral panics. Sex is increasingly linked to youth and consumer cultures; sexual discourse is increasingly organised by new cultural intermediaries and, in particular, is articulated in terms of a 'therapeutic' culture which promotes a focus on sexuality and the self as a means to personal development and fulfilment (Plummer, 1995:124-5). Clearly marked categories and identities are replaced by a proliferation of 'diverse eroticisms' (Bristow, 1997:219).

In this context, sexual discourse takes on new forms of expression. Modern narratives of sexuality are causal, linear, and driven, constructing sex as a clear category of 'truth' waiting to be discovered (Plummer, 1995:132), but newer post-modern narratives are emerging too. In these, sexuality is articulated in more uncertain, variable and self-conscious ways. It is more dependent on 'borrowings from the mass media' and more likely to be played out in a variety of media or communication forms. There is a move away from the expert authority of the teller towards 'participant stories', and towards a society in which stories are increasingly directed to different taste cultures and told within groups which are less and less homogenous' (Plummer, 1995:137). Such narratives may blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, private and

public, and even between the real and the representational (Plummer, 1995:137).

Although modern tales of sex are still dominant in Western societies, post-modern narratives are already established in artistic and academic contexts, while new technologies make possible their wider production and circulation, for example in various forms of cybersex. Cybersex may be seen as particularly post-modern, not only because of the disruption to traditional narrative it affords, but because of the very radical ways in which it combines intimate acts in 'public' space, its ability to join body and machine, reconfigure presence and absence and complicate categories of act and image (Wiley 1995, Kibby & Costello 2001, Gillis 2004). 'Space, time, social interaction, social networks...intimacy, and the relationship between "representation" and "reality" are all disrupted (Wiley, 1995:161). These narrative shifts significantly change the ways in which we are able to conceptualize and experience sexuality. Post-modern styles of sexual discourse also emerge; irony, pastiche, excess and camp articulate our 'knowing' relationship with sexuality and our awareness of how mediated that relationship is (Plummer, 1995). Matter of fact explication and intellectualism (McNair, 2002) betray our attempts to maintain a common-sense view of sexuality, while simultaneously making sex 'mean' any number of things. Crucially, all these styles allow us to acknowledge, expand, extend and excuse our pleasures in *talking about* talking about sex. What sex means and the way it means is changing dramatically. For some writers this change is also seen as a democratic one - a claim I will pursue in the following section.

### **Pornographication and democratization**

One key approach in the study of sexualization has been to focus on the potential for democratizing sexual discourse. The shift within which sex has increasingly become a subject of debate in popular rather than expert arenas, the breakdown between mainstream and restricted, 'obscene', categories of sexual representation, and the increased entrenchment of sexualities within media forms (Plummer, 2003a:275) has become a particular area of interest in this respect. These processes have come under scrutiny because of the way they reveal a potential dislocation in the construction of sexual meaning, an apparent breakdown in sexual regulation, and the possibility of increased access to public debates about sexuality (Kendrick 1996, Lumby 1997). They are particularly visible in the form of what Brian McNair (1996) terms 'pornographication', a process evident in both art and popular culture where the iconography of

pornography has become commonplace, and in a more widespread fascination with sex and the sexually explicit in print and broadcast media. In our culture, sex is becoming more and more visible, and more explicit. Sexual representations, products and services are becoming more accessible to a wider group of consumers, and the development of new communication technologies to support, replace or reconfigure sexual encounters are increasingly part of ordinary people's everyday lives. These real cultural shifts have made it necessary to develop an existing literature on sexually explicit texts and their significance in order to make links between forms of sexual discourse, economic and cultural exchange and social practice (Attwood, 2002).

According to McNair, the perceived 'pornographication of the mainstream' (McNair, 1996:23) has developed alongside an expansion of the 'pornosphere' within which obscene, though increasingly accessible, texts proliferate. Both developments can be set in the context of a wider shift which has disrupted the boundaries between public and private discourse in late modern Western culture, and which is also evident more generally in media trends which privilege lifestyle, 'reality', interactivity and the confessional. Brian McNair has described this shift as a movement towards a 'striptease culture' that can be understood as the latest stage 'in the commodification of sex, and the extension of sexual consumerism' (2002:87); and as part of a broader preoccupation with 'self-revelation...exposure' (2002:81) and 'public intimacy' (2002:98). It is 'one specific manifestation of the privatization of the public sphere; the turning over of at least some of its discursive space to the human interests of the people' (2002:108).

McNair's schematization of this shift is a useful one because of its attempt to contextualize recent developments in sexual representation and suggest how these connect to wider cultural shifts taking place in Western capitalist societies. However, there are problems with his view of the sexualization of culture. For example, McNair's characterization of striptease culture as a capitalist response to 'popular demand for access to and participation in sexual discourse' (2002:87), and as a progressive force for the 'articulation and dissemination of diverse sexual identities and radical sexual politics' (2002:206) implies a rather too direct relation between radicalism, demand, capitalism and media output. It may be true that our sexual repertoires are broadening, that sexual discourse is increasingly accessible to all, and that 'sex' now functions as a privileged site through which the ordinary, the personal and the individual are embodied in the public sphere, but a simple celebration of these developments

ignores the ways in which they also make our sexual practices and identities more available for regulation. This approach also oversimplifies the ways in which developments in sexual taste, representation and practice may be related to positions of power, particularly in terms of class and gender relations.

The political significance of sexualization has been taken up elsewhere in a recent feminist critique. Imelda Whelehan (2000) argues that the explosion of sexualized imagery in popular culture is often a form of 'retrosexism' which can be understood as a hostile response to feminism, masquerading as irony and pastiche. In particular, as Judith Williamson also notes, the development of 'lad culture', with its emphasis on male hedonism and female exhibitionism, and its 'tongue-in-cheek' sexist and anti-feminist comments, looks 'sexy' but is really only 'sexism with an alibi' (Williamson, 2003). A related fashion for 'fetishistic sexual imagery' in popular culture has become another form of textual disavowal, recasting power relations between the sexes as a series of glossily stylized sexy encounters, thereby diverting attention away from real gender inequalities.

In this approach, both retro and fetish images are seen as working to *disguise* sexism. They succeed too, being mistakenly perceived by many academics as 'cutting edge and radical' as a result of a misplaced theoretical focus on sexuality rather than gender, and of a populist tendency to embrace, rather than critique, popular culture (Williamson, 2003). Rosalind Gill has developed this argument, noting that the contemporary sexing up of culture involves a 'deliberate *re-sexualisation* and *re-commodification* of bodies' which, though incorporating depictions of women as 'knowing, active and desiring', only works to instate a feminine 'self-policing narcissistic gaze' (Gill, 2003:101-104). The 'sexual subjectification' which new popular representations appear to offer women are simply mechanisms of 'objectification in new and even more pernicious guise' (Gill, 2003:105). Women are offered a limited and commodified vision of active female sexuality in place of the new languages and practices of eroticism demanded by feminism.

The points made here are useful correctives to any easy assumption of a democratization of, and indeed through, sexualization, and they also point to the ways in which sexist views of women may be recuperated in new forms of post-feminist representation and practice. However, the extent to which these embody transgressive female sexualities also needs to be considered, and their emergence across a range of representations and practices - in the work of alternative practitioners like Annie



Sprinkle and Susie Bright, as well as in more mainstream contexts in the work of performers like Madonna and The Spice Girls - deserves further consideration. Although it is easy to criticize these attempts to re-engage with femininity and with sex, this may be to close down an important debate about how an active female sexuality can be materialized in culture, as well as working to position feminism in terms of an unhelpful and unimaginative 'anti-sex' stance (Given-Wilson n.d, Stoller 1999). It is also indicative of a feminist tendency to downplay any shifts in representation, so that new developments are *only* seen as part of the 'same old story' of sexist discourse. In a sense, this response suffers from the same problem in McNair's approach; there is a rush to simplify what is happening as a continuation of a worn-out system of sexual inequality, just as there is a rush in McNair's account to interpret sexual change as a new and radical move to democracy. A more considered account of the ways in which sexualization, commodification, objectification and politics are currently being connected is needed here. Work which focuses on taste formations may be a useful way of developing a more precise understanding of these issues.

## 'Classy sex'

Struggles over sexual discourse are struggles over sex on a number of different levels and with a range of different meanings. For example, while it may be true that the ironic humour of 'new lad' sexuality works as a handy way of recirculating old-fashioned sexist views, it is also part of a new playful and knowing tone used in popular culture to discuss sexuality. This is clearly very different from the rather earnest speech style originating in a medical discourse of sex, and its knowingness also differentiates it from an existing tradition of bawdy or smutty talk. It is also a tone which is increasingly found in texts which appear to 'speak sex' from a woman's point of view; in advertising, in magazines and lifestyle journalism and in a range of fictional texts. This question of tone is an important one in locating the particular sexual sensibilities which characterize late modern culture. For example, although an earlier incitement to discourse through confession persists in our culture, the contemporary tone of these confessions may modify their cultural significance and impact. As Buckingham and Bragg note, the sexual confessional of the TV talk show takes on quite a different quality when it is framed and understood as 'a kind of entertaining performance', rather than as a serious and heart-felt revelation of the truth (2004:154). The remaking of confession as entertainment is, of course, symptomatic of a culture in which sex signifies both the truth of the self and its performance; authenticity and artifice. The contemporary prominence of this formulation of sexuality as identity, hedonism and spectacle derives from the cultural prominence of a particular class grouping. As Mark Jancovich and others have argued, late modern hedonistic sexuality can be associated with the rise of a new petite bourgeoisie whose members are typically located in occupations concerned with presentation and representation such as marketing, advertising, fashion and the media. For this group, a view of sex as 'fun', and a corresponding concern with sex as aesthetic rather than ethic, has functioned as a means of defining itself as sophisticated, and as a way of distinguishing itself from a stuffy and 'unliberated' older bourgeoisie (Jancovich, 2001). This process, identifiable in a number of late twentieth century shifts in sexual representation - most notably the development of a 'Playboy' sexual ethic for men and the mainstreaming of a gay lifestyle aesthetic - is accelerating at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The taste formations accompanying this class shift can be traced in many contemporary practices, discourses and representations of sexuality, as well as in sexual politics that define themselves as in some way 'alternative'. They can be detected in many of the glossy, sexy representations

currently circulating in our 'striptease culture'. For example, the depiction of active female sexuality in the very popular, post-feminist TV show, *Sex and the City*, addresses a female audience and a very particular class configuration. Here, as Jane Arthurs notes, sexual permissiveness signifies both 'the emancipatory politics of the 1970s and 1980s' and 'the materialist priorities of consumer culture' for a new class formation addressed as 'bourgeois bohemians' (Arthurs, 2003:86). The point here is that the representation and consumption of the programme needs to be understood not only in relation to notions of sexual democratization or female objectification, but to the ways that these intersect with a vision of 'liberated' sex, with class distinctions and with the lifestyle and commodity preoccupations of consumer culture. To take any one of these elements out of the analysis is to miss what is distinctive about the particular types of sexual sensibility that typify late modern culture. A clear sense of this distinctiveness is really necessary if we are to be able to examine the ways in which contemporary sexual sensibilities reconfigure relations between codes of gender, class, race and sexuality. For example, it is notable that the sexually liberated female consumer imagined and addressed by much of contemporary media culture depends on signs of class and race. Available constructions of a female sexuality in which activity and power are expressed in terms of 'low' characteristics - for example, in pornography and other forms of obscene or bawdy culture - are firmly eschewed here. Indeed, the bourgeois sexuality of this mainstream female figure appears to derive quite precisely from the rejection of the low class characteristics expressed most coherently in the production of a 'white trash' figure of the 'slut' elsewhere in the culture. The 'classiness' of female sexual activity is extremely important here both as a way of establishing its legitimacy and of linking sexuality to a range of other contemporary bourgeois concerns such as the development and display of style and taste and the pursuit of self-improvement and self-care. The resulting figure of the glamorous, white 'sex goddess' is one facet of a broader post-feminist middle class ideal in which femininities and sexualities are understood as styles, and, indeed, as style (Attwood, 2004).

Although other figures of sexuality may be as contemporary as the urbane, glamorous, sharpwitted, promiscuous consumer which the *Sex and the City* woman embodies so clearly, this particular figure has become very prominent in popular culture as a 'chic' signification of post-feminist, post-modern bourgeois sexual identity, and of the pornographication which Brian McNair documents. It is also a figure which demonstrates the extent to which contemporary sexuality becomes, in this move, more clearly

a question of taste and aesthetics than one of morality or ethics. Jane Juffer (1998) notes how important aesthetic codes have become in defining and circulating sexually explicit materials, and how these work to create new forms of address and open up or close down access to particular groups. In contemporary culture, women are increasingly addressed as sexual subjects and consumers, and this is characteristically achieved through claims to aesthetic value and 'class'. For example, literary erotica, a form of sexual representation which has become extremely popular with female audiences, depends precisely on its distinction from pornography, a distinction which is constructed not only in the literary conventions of the texts, but in their location in smart bookshops. As in *Sex and the City*, this re-construction of sexually explicit material as 'classy' is played out around a contemporary formulation of a 'New Woman' figure, a type of 'narcissistic professional' associated by Hilary Radner (1995) with female independence, self-fashioning and consumption. This figure is evident not only in the marketing of erotic fiction, but in a range of popular and relatively explicit media texts addressed to female consumers. The advertising of sexy lingerie and the construction of some erotic dramas on cable TV combines soft-core imagery with an address to women 'as consumers in pursuit of their own pleasures' (Juffer, 1998:147), while 'tasteful' porn and sex advice for couples recirculates obscene iconography in the service of sexual health and wholesomeness (Juffer, 1998:167-199). This sophisticated form of presentation makes use of aesthetic distinctions in order to create access for an audience which has traditionally been excluded from the consumption of sexually explicit material. In the process, a whole series of signifiers are linked to connote a new, liberated, contemporary sexuality for women; sex is stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, a form of body work, self-expression, a quest for individual fulfilment. What is notable here is precisely the way in which the claim to aesthetic value is combined with 'progressive sexual politics' (Juffer, 1998:123) to create a set of texts which are fairly explicit, relatively progressive, and yet accessible to and popular with women. These texts are interesting hybrids, combining familiar associations of femininity with those of desire and physical pleasure. As forms of 'domesticated porn' they work to establish new connections between sex and everyday life, and also between discourses of sexuality and those of consumerism, style, fashion and therapy. It is these connections which demonstrate quite precisely the post-feminist, post-modern, bourgeois character of this construction of sexuality. Though clearly one amongst many expressions of sexuality, this particular formulation is becoming more prominent in contemporary cultures.

## Post-modern sex

Although the mode of sexual address described above has quite clear relational aspects, particularly in texts that recuperate women's sexual pleasure in the service of heterosexual relationships, there is also a perceptible shift towards the notion of sex as self-pleasure - as indulgence, treat, luxury and right. This construction of a pleasurable 'autosexuality' is now quite widespread in contemporary Western cultures. This is the legacy of the historical shifts that have gradually divided sex from reproduction and kinship and reworked our notions of sex and of the self. In late modern societies, a preoccupation with individual experience and with the individual as the unique and powerful creator of its own meaning has produced a notion of the self, not for others but '*for itself*' (Simon, 1996:13). Individuality is increasingly linked to a 'plastic sexuality' that indicates the malleability of identity (Giddens, 1992:58). In this manifestation, sex becomes a question of individual desires, episodes and self-narration, and sexuality is decentred and dislocated, becoming an 'unstable chemistry of social and personal meanings' (Simon, 1996:29). This dislocation has important implications, given that sexuality is still immensely significant as a 'prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms' (Giddens, 1992:15), and that it remains central to our understanding of contemporary forms of relationship. Anthony Giddens' work on the 'transformation of intimacy' has drawn attention to two important developments in the place of sexuality in organizing those relationships. The first is of particular concern for the future of heterosexual intimacy, and arises from the tension between the types of relationship currently pursued by men and women. On the one hand, there is a shift towards an 'episodic' sexuality, chiefly, though not exclusively, associated with a masculine avoidance of intimacy. This is characterized by an instrumental view of sex and a compulsive quality of sexual behaviour expressed in episodic form. On the other, there is a new pursuit of intimate relationships that combine love with sexual pleasure, generally associated with women. In this situation, the quest for sex becomes particularly prone to conflicts between men and women. The second of these developments is the evolution of the 'pure relationship' as 'the prototypical form of personal life' (Giddens, 1992:154). This contemporary ideal of intimate relationship is based on a form of democratic mutual self-interest. According to this model, a relationship is 'entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and...continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it' (Giddens, 1992:58).

These developments have far-reaching and potentially radical consequences for the organization of everyday lives and gender relations, and for the reconfiguration of what we mean by sex and, indeed, love. Although Giddens is careful to highlight the important differences between 'episodic' and 'pure' forms of relationship, what is central to both is their provisional and conditional nature. According to Zygmunt Bauman, contemporary sexual and romantic encounters embody a form of 'liquid love' in which relationships have become 'easy to enter and to exit' (Bauman, 2003:xii) and human bonds have become 'light and loose' (Bauman, 2003:xi). Earlier conceptualizations of the binding love relationship - characterized by duty, family, fate or romance - are replaced by a vision of an individual love life as a series of effortless but intensely fragile encounters. Whether these are relational or recreational, they are increasingly marked by a consumer sensibility. As post-modern subjects, we are addressed as the consumers of our own sexual experiences; like browsers in a shopping mall we expect to be easily aroused and instantly gratified, and if we see what we like, we have it and worry about paying for it later. Once the novelty wears off, we discard it and move on. In less spendthrift mode we imagine our encounters with others as 'investments' which may or may not repay our interest and our efforts. This form of intimacy makes us very free, but the liquid love we pursue is a constant source of uncertainty and insecurity. The kind of 'commitment' we are able to make, without real bonds, has become a meaningless form of contract. While we may acquire a sense of our own power as we browse for love, we are also uneasily aware that, for others, we are sexual commodities, stocks and shares, and that we may not retain our value for them for very long. We are thrown back on ourselves and our own marketability, our status as commodity.

In this situation, our sexual sensibilities take on quite a different quality to that which characterized the modern period. According to Bauman, as the bonds between sex and reproduction, sex and commitment become looser and looser, eroticism develops 'substance', becomes its own and only 'reason and purpose'. At the same time, it paradoxically acquires 'an unheard-of lightness and volatility' (Bauman, 1999:22). A drive towards 'excitation' and 'adventure', already present in modern narratives of passion is compressed in the pursuit of 'choice', 'variety', 'transient but renewable pleasures' and the experience of intense and pure sensation (Illouz, 1999:176). According to Eva Illouz, the love experience is flattened and fragmented in post-modern consumer societies, typified by the 'affair' rather than the stable relationship or grand passion. Other forms of sexual

experience also possess these characteristics; the one-night stand, forms of auto-eroticism constructed around the use of pornography and sex toys, forms of commercial sex, and more recently, cybersex. That such hedonistic and intense practices are experienced both as 'authentic' and 'unreal' makes the pursuit of passion a desperately difficult affair.

The post-modern articulation of sexuality as free-floating sensation also means that it can be easily linked to any other substance, emotion or activity (Bauman, 1999:26). In this way, sexuality appears to permeate every level of our experience, and the slipperiness of its nature makes it increasingly difficult to pin down what we mean by 'sexuality'. It is thus both everywhere and nowhere in the post-modern world, central and decentred, the most obvious and the most ambiguous of 'things'. In this setting it becomes harder and harder to report our sexual feelings and compare our sexual experiences, a particularly frustrating situation given the continuing 'incitement' to speak about sex. An endless seduction by sex - whatever that is - and constant self-scrutiny, becomes the newest and most uncertain form of regulation. As 'sensation-seekers' who must cultivate the capacity for endless stimulation and an openness to new experience (Bauman, 1999:23) we are caught in an endless pursuit of a 'fitness' for sex which we can never fully attain. The expectation that sex will continue to provide us with new and endless pleasures means that the 'ultimate sexual experience remains forever a task and no actual sexual experience is truly satisfying, none makes further training, instruction, counsel, recipe, drug or gadget unnecessary' (Bauman, 1999:24).

Sexuality therefore takes on a very particular set of qualities as it assumes such a central, yet nebulous role in articulating our bodies and our pleasures and in making our claims to individuality, to a self for itself, to our status in the world, to our embodiment for others and for sex itself. These qualities mark out a quite specific sensibility of sex which is linked to the broader conditions of our social world; the injunction to be authentic, spontaneous, involved, hedonistic, a sensation-seeker, and yet to maintain control of our sexual selves; to self-fashion, remain detached and forever open to offers. Given this, it is hardly surprising that sex is able to signify so much, and to signify so contradictorily both the personal and the political conditions of our existence. Nor is it remarkable that the new tone of much sexual expression is one that plays endlessly with straightforward pleasures and a sense of 'knowingness', or becomes a rueful, anxious monologue. We are left with the task of *managing* our sexuality, even as we are incited to abandon ourselves to it, a situation that, in the absence

of a contemporary ethics of sex, and of swiftly changing norms, is 'pregnant with psychic neuroses' (Bauman, 1999:32).

### **Sexual citizenship and beyond**

Despite, or perhaps because of, the difficulties of our post-modern sexual condition, the need to forge a new ethics of sex has been seen as a particularly urgent issue. It has been argued that a sense of real dislocation around sexuality is likely to increase as the gap between the still dominant modern discourses of sexuality and an emerging post-modern sensibility widens, and as the disjuncture between an anachronistic eroticism which naturalizes male power and the dramatic changes in heterosexual relations becomes more pronounced (Hardy, 2000:80). Perhaps most importantly, our contemporary self-consciousness about sex and the establishment of a discourse of sexuality which militates against essentialism and privileges the notion of reflexive forms of self-regulation - or 'responsibilisation' (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004:245) - makes it all the more important to ask how we might develop an ethics which can provide a framework for our sexual activities.

The debate about sexual ethics has, to date, largely been articulated in terms of sexual citizenship. Although some writers such as David Evans have seen sexual citizenship principally as a side-effect of capitalism; a 'partial, private, and primarily leisure and lifestyle membership' of society (1993:64) in which we trade the commodification of our lives for limited social rights, others have used the term to denote something which is a real cause for optimism. Jeffrey Weeks argues that the 'sexual citizen' is 'a harbinger of a new politics of intimacy and everyday life', a 'hybrid being' arising from the 'intermingling of the personal and public' and made possible by the shift towards detraditionalization, egalitarianism and autonomy in late modern societies (Weeks, 1999:36-40). The need to rethink relations between private and public, personal and political, provides an opportunity for developing new forms of citizenship and democracy. Issues of enfranchisement, inclusion, belonging, equity, justice, rights and responsibilities are as important here as they are in more public forms of citizenship, but in addition, the private and the everyday, those 'experiments in living' hitherto marginalized in our society, come to be of central and public importance.

For Anthony Giddens, this move towards democracy is based on the transformation of intimate relations in the 'pure relationship'. Managed largely by women, this project involves the development of equality and self-determination



in personal relationships. The key factors in this development are autonomy, respect, communication, the negotiation of rights and obligations, and the cultivation of accountability and trust. This evolution of life politics also makes possible the reintegration of sexuality and emotion in a form of eroticism deployed in the service of pleasure, communication and mutuality, rather than instrumentality and unequal power relations (Giddens, 1992:202). The establishment of what Ken Plummer terms an 'intimate citizenship' (Plummer, 1995, 2003b) which emphasizes radicalism, pluralism, democracy, participation, choice and difference are seen as providing an important corrective to the 'anything-goes libertarianism' (Weeks, 1999:44) associated with the hedonistic, consumerist and capitalist organisation of society.

These articulations of sexual citizenship have been vital in trying to formulate a vision of the ways intimate relations may come to signify in the future. They demonstrate how changes in the social and cultural spheres necessitate responses which reach across disciplinary and other boundaries - precisely because those changes impact on boundaries we have come to accept as 'natural' - between public citizenship and private life, love and sex, self and other, freedom and responsibility, in 'a world in which our intimate lives are lived in the throes of major changes and conflicts' (Plummer, 2003b:145). They also reveal how central sexuality has become in the late modern world, and how sexualization has become such an important focus for social and cultural change - and for academics concerned with those changes. At a historical moment when sex lives right at the heart of - and is driving - new developments in technology, when it is the obsessive focus of high and low culture, when it becomes the site for the most radical changes in our sense of the relationship between self and other, and when it is of such crucial importance for the global economy and for the minutiae of our intimate lives, this is inevitable and necessary. Attempts to imagine sexual citizenship are, perhaps necessarily, rather vague, but they do sketch out the key elements of an ethics which cannot afford to depend on outdated moral frameworks of thought or to abandon the question of morality altogether. However, like the other responses to sexualization discussed here, they raise a number of problems that need to be thought through carefully. To a great extent, these centre around the need to be much more precise about the terms of the debates inspired by sexualization. Academic attempts to specify how sex and sexuality signify at the beginning of the twenty-first century; through texts and technologies, in discourse, across genre and between categories, as experience and sensibility, to construct narratives of the self or intimate relationships, are still in their infancy. Much more remains to be done. There is a

particular danger that theorizing the sexual will continue to deal primarily with issues of representation, with individual experience, and with Western cultures. As Stephen Maddison has argued, a 'consideration of the material' is crucial if, for example, we are to make full sense of our 'pornographied culture', particularly in terms of the impact the sexualization of media is having on 'corporate practice, information exchange, and new technological forms' (2004:56). A concern with the politics and economics of sex, not only in the West but around the world, is needed to provide a clearer grounding and context for studying particular aspects or manifestations of sexualization, as well as for developing 'a meaningful sexual politics in a globalizing world' (Altman, 2001:163). From this perspective, we need both a broader and a more precise focus when we discuss commodification and democratization, the intersection of sexuality with race, class and gender, and forms of community and citizenship. In terms of the practices we hope to develop, we will need to interrogate much more thoroughly the precise terms by which citizenship is accorded to groups and individuals. In particular, the questions of who will decide which sexual practices and identities are acceptable and unacceptable, and of the compromises which may be demanded to attain acceptability and respectability remain important and difficult ones. Common-sense notions of what we mean when we talk about 'equality' or 'rights', or about 'sex' and 'love' need to be avoided. It is particularly important that a vision of sexual citizenship is not allowed to drift towards the familiar westernized, masculinized, heterosexualized models which we have inherited (Richardson 1998, Bell & Binnie 2000), and that we think through the extent to which sexual practices can avoid being linked to individualization and commodification in capitalist societies. Finally, we need to think very carefully about the possibilities of how the very real tensions between rights and responsibilities, autonomy and belonging, freedom and love can be negotiated, not just in theory and in policy, but in the everyday practice of our sexual lives. There is a tightrope to be walked here, between the models we can make and the futures we can imagine, between what we cannot yet envisage but need to remain open to. In order to walk it, we will need a much clearer sense of the ways in which sexual sensibilities, tastes, practices and discourses are developing and diversifying in the late modern period. This is an urgent task, intellectually and politically, and it is one that can and should bring together academics across a range of approaches and disciplines.

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