

SEX

It may seem odd to suggest that we take a dispassionate view of sex since it has long been understood as instinctual passion. Yet, when erstwhile opponents are united in their conception of sex, only divided in what, if anything, should be done about it, we know we are in the midst of an ideological thicket. In the interests of laying out the problem starkly, if a little schematically, the spectrum may be identified as being occupied at one end by those who seek to regulate sex, and at the other by those intending to free it from such restraints. Placing the issue on a spectrum enables us to concede intermediate positions that offer particular recommendations of proscriptions and prescriptions so far as sex is concerned.

What is it on which all parties are, for the most part, in agreement? Put simply, it is the notion that sex is an irresistible urge and, following from this, that response to sexual stimuli is spontaneous. To some, this makes sex potentially dangerous and in need of disciplining. Elaborate rules are proposed to govern sexual conduct and religious,

scientific, medical and 'moral' discourses are mobilised to this end. To others, the fact of it being an irresistible impulse makes it necessary to liberate it from such policing which has historically been unfair in what it has prohibited, and to whom the interdictions have applied. As those who take this position will rightly point out, women's sexuality and non-heteronormative sexuality have borne the brunt of such proscriptions. For it is individuals deemed 'other' by social prejudices like race or caste and practices not approved by bourgeois or feudal morality that have suffered the punitive force of disciplining. Still, whatever their disagreements about what to do about sex, those in favour of social regulation as well as those against it concur in conceiving of it as an irrepressible force. This sets the stage for treating sex as an exceptional realm of human experience.

II

If we look closely at mass media's representation of sexual desire or at debates over sexuality we find that sex tends to be placed in a distinct category. It would seem unlike other phenomena, even those with which it has much in common, like hunger, thirst or sleep. All four are sensory experiences, all impossible to suppress and all are integral to being human. If sex is a physical impetus it should share similarities with other impulses. However, it is unusual to claim that deprivation of food, water or rest inexorably provokes a spontaneous reaction in response. The threat of revolt by the toiling hungry does haunt our unequal societies but the irrepressible narrative seems solely reserved for sex. This conception of sex insists on its biological and thus natural basis and yet sharply distinguishes it from other aspects of the human experience which may also be described in this way.

Unlike food, water or sleep, one can live without sex; many do, whether by their own volition or to meet a social or religious requirement. The prevailing construct would regard sexual abstinence as requiring herculean self-denial. Thus the rolling of eyes and the knew-it-to-be-so-sniggers when those supposedly celibate are found to be sexually active. In its reckoning, to be sexually inactive would imply being repressed.¹

On the one hand we have the position that announces, 'Sex cannot be left to itself. It must be controlled'. On the other we hear the insistence that 'not only can sex not be controlled, it should not be controlled. It must enjoy freedom of expression'. To those in the former camp, endorsing permissiveness is to risk social chaos (their way of expressing fear of a loss of control — patriarchal, caste, racial, etc.). To the latter group, liberating sex from such control is crucial to the self-determination of individuals. Indeed, sexual self-determination is deemed crucial to the very idea of the modern individual subject and her or his freedom. In other areas of social life self-determination has a different valence; which is perhaps why issues like food security, education or shelter are more frequently spoken of as 'rights' rather than as 'freedoms'.

Sex differs from these other phenomena in one important way: it straddles the domains of need and desire. Acknowledging this fact, however, only raises further inadequacies in the way of thinking about sex we are examining here. To speak of desire — of longing, wish, hankering — is to bring heart and mind into the equation, to liberate sex from an exclusive association with the body. The notion that sex is a primarily physical impulse is called into question.

It is not that the current discourse accords no place to mind and heart in relation to sex. The idea of romance important to the symbiotic relations of mass culture, market and modernity evokes both, but especially the heart. The roles of the triad are mapped in the following way: the mind plans, schemes, imagines; the heart hopes, grieves, delights; the body senses, experiences, releases. This division of labour challenges neither the conception of sex as a primarily bodily impulse nor the narrative structure of sex as release or resolution. Mind and heart, present though they may be in the preparatory stage, are finally upstaged by the body which is conceived as the initiating agent and site of final fruition. The line of causality remains undisturbed.

It will be noted that this discourse is contradictory. It cannot be otherwise for it separates what is integral and intimately connected. To begin with, mind and heart are themselves part(s) of the body and not discontinuous from it. Further, the body is not a physical entity that is capable of sensation but devoid of intelligence. For one thing, sensation is itself knowledge-bearing awareness. For another, awareness as intelligence permeates all three: body, heart and mind. Heart has the ability to plan, body to imagine and mind to feel. Feeling (a term that evokes a depth not to be found in 'sensation') is also a kind of faculty that yields knowledge. To attribute thinking only to the mind, feeling only to the heart and regard the body as the site of instinctual expression is to disrespect the multidimensionality of all three. It is to disregard reality. And it leads to linguistic mayhem, as is evident in the contradictions in my own language as I describe this way of construing sex.

Sex cannot be sequestered as a bodily activity autonomous of mind and heart to any degree. We readily acknowledge

this fact in understanding that the trauma caused by rape is not merely physical but also mental and emotional. But this recognition has failed to unsettle the conception of sex that currently prevails.

III

As we contemplate the interconnectedness of mind, heart and body, we are led to discover the limitations of aspects of feminist, queer and Left arguments regarding sexuality, pornography or sex work. The chief target of this critique tends to be the duplicity of the regulatory mechanisms of the state (law, police, etc.), the double standards of dominant society's policing of behaviour and the denial of the right of sexual self-determination to certain groups. In so far as these arguments unravel the hypocrisy of normative notions and the negations and evasions they entail we may readily support them. We may also join in celebrating queer, transgender and women's sexuality. However, to the extent that this intervention shares presumptions with the normative notions it avowedly opposes, it fails to offer a radical reframing of either sex or sexuality. It may succeed in pluralising the content of the normative but it leaves its basic structure intact.

Take for example the exceptional status accorded to sex which is retained in these perspectives. This removes sex from the flow of life activity, severs the interrelationships that constitute embodiment and turns what is a process into a series of discrete practices with a pre-defined terminus. We may distinguish here between Left, feminist and queer representation of sex and of sexuality. The latter is understood as a thoroughly embedded sociocultural practice. The conception of sex, however, continues to retain the sense

of an irrepressible natural force notwithstanding the claims regarding its social construction.

What would it be like to think of sex as simply another aspect of life, neither inherently shameful nor intrinsically liberating or revolutionary? What if sex were to be conceived as an ordinary activity like eating or bathing? How might this disrupt the interweaving of pleasure, danger and shame that has long shaped understandings of sex, even casting its shadow on discussions critical of conventional mores? After all, an in-your-face insistence in the matter of sex suggests that, in some way, shame persists as an interlocutor that must be engaged. What would normalising sex in this way do to pornography which depends on the notion of sex as illicit, as naughty but nice?

Sex is a practice that is similar to, and dissimilar from, other life practices. Part of the burden it has had to carry has been the attribution to it of extraordinariness. Social conservatives moralise against it on this basis and sexual libertarians valorise it in response. However, to posit sex as something unique or out of the ordinary is to exaggerate its potential as a source of pleasure and fulfilment; it sets the stage for the promise of sex to remain elusive (perhaps even illusory?). And given the ensemble of ideas that surround sex — from the nature of sexual desire to what counts as sexual desirableness — it initiates a drama of seeking in which uncertainty and disappointment may be experienced in equal measure as pleasure and satisfaction (a cycle that the market economy routinely exploits to its benefit).

To speak of sexual rights without also considering the broader issues posed by our conception of sex is to minimise the

challenge before us. Genuine self-determination in sexual matters requires us to confront this ideological formation, not merely settle for insisting on social legitimacy for those persons and practices hitherto excluded. The question of agency is not meaningfully engaged when we limit ourselves to arguing for access to pornography or sex work on the basis of equality or freedom of speech as though these exhaust the issues posed by them. The breadth of what such a confrontation with the construct of sex would involve in intellectual, emotional, cultural, and political terms is a sobering reminder of the interconnectedness of phenomena.

Reclaiming sex as ordinary is far more radical than proclaiming it as revolutionary. To think of sex as ordinary is not to assign it an inconsequential or grudging place but to embrace it as one among myriad life practices in which we may be present to self and other in a loving and reciprocal manner. This would challenge the affiliation of sex with power; with notions of duty on the one hand and valour or conquest on the other. It would also undo the pleasure–danger–shame nexus and the idea of sex as illicit on which it depends. Both have contributed to the way in which a natural aspect of humanness has come to evoke embarrassment; worse, to carry the spectre of immorality.

We need a fresh way to think about sex. Integral to such a project would be honouring the triadic fluidity of mind, heart and body and bringing the awareness of all three to bear on sex conceived as a non-narrative process. To transform sex (and by extension, sexuality) in this direction would require us to heal the alienation that has come to characterise our relationship to our bodies (understood as always already inclusive of heart and mind). Alienation is a

state of estrangement. To alienate is to turn away the feelings and affections of someone, of some aspect of self even. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that one obsolete meaning of 'alienate' is 'to alter, change or make a thing other than it is'. It seems an apposite description of how we have come to perceive sex.

Note

1. This is not to deny the unskilful way in which many religions handle the issue of monastic celibacy, just to note that within this way of thinking to be sexually inactive would be to live unnaturally.