Histories of Sexuality

The gay community than elsewhere, with heterosexual men proving particularly resistant to its messages (see Taiarin Wilton and Peter Aggleton, 'Condoms, coercion and control: heterosexuality and the limits to HIV/AIDS education', in Aggleton et al., AIDS: Responses, Interventions and Care). But another history, that making important generational differences within the gay community, was apparently reasserting itself.

40 V. Berridge and P. Strong, 'AIDS policies in the UK: a study in contemporary behaviour', Twentieth Century British History, 2, 2 (1991), 150–74; Berridge, 'The early years of AIDS in the United Kingdom'.
41 Berridge, 'The early years of AIDS in the United Kingdom'.
43 On the background to Section 28 see Smith, 'A symptomology of an authoritarian discourse'; also my essay 'Pretended family relationships', in Weeks, Against Nature.
44 See Berridge and Strong, 'AIDS policies in the UK', and Strong and Berridge, 'No one knew anything: some issues in British AIDS policy'.
48 Dennis Altman, 'AIDS and the reconceptualization of homosexuality', in van Kooten Niekerk and van der Meer, Which Homosexuality?

What do we mean when we write about 'sexuality'? Sexuality pervades the air we breathe, but we still lack a common language for speaking about it. It is a topic which we can all say something about, and on which we are all in one way or another 'experts', but that, somehow, increases rather than decreases our confusions: sexuality, it seems, has so many 'truths' that we are left with a cacophony of noise, and precious little good sense. There has been an ever expanding explosion of discourse around sexuality in the past century, and the volume seems unlikely to diminish in the near future. Yet it is a subject which arouses the greatest anxieties and controversies, and increasingly has become a front line of divisive political controversy and moral debate.

This is because the sexual touches on so many disparate areas of individual and social existence. When we think of sexuality we think of a number of things. We think of reproduction, which has traditionally been seen as the main justification of sexual activity, and with which western cultures at least have historically been most preoccupied. We think of relationships, of which marriage is the socially sanctioned, but far from being the only, form. We think of erotic activities and of fantasy, of intimacy and warmth, of love and pleasure. We relate it to our sense of self and to our collective belongings, to identity, personal and political. But we also think of sin and danger, violence and disease.
Nothing is straightforward when we try to think or speak of sexuality. It is both the most private and personal of activities, and the most public. We still often speak of it in whispers, while it is all the time shouting at us from bill-boards, newspapers, radio and television, pulpits, the streets. Our own voices compete with, or may even be, those of priests and politicians, medics and militants, and all too many, many more.

So anyone rash enough to try to analyse its social forms, or predict what shape the kaleidoscope will next take, is treading on very dangerous ice. There are so many conflicting elements at play. For sex, despite its immediacy, is very much a cultural and a historical phenomenon. Whatever we like to think, we are not entirely free agents in this matter, any more than we are of anything else. Our choices are real and important, but they are also constrained by a very long and complex history and intricate power relations, which tell us, amongst other things, what is natural or unnatural, good or bad, permissible or impermissible. If there is a 'crisis of sexuality' today, it is because many of the fixed points which we think we need to guide us through the maze have been pulled down or obscured; and because the language of sexuality is muddied by a long and often painful history.

If there is a confusion about values and attitudes, that should not surprise us, nor should we imagine it is anything unique to us. We can find in the history of the past two hundred years or so almost all the themes that preoccupy us now, and similar laments about the decline of morals and a confusion of values. Two hundred years ago, two hundred years before the French Revolution, one of the formative moments of modern Europe, we find middle-class evangelists worried about the state of morality in Britain: they saw, or believed they saw, a dissolve, amoral aristocracy, a feckless, overbreeding working class. Surely, these moralists felt, we would end up like the French, drowned in chaos and blood, unless we all learned the importance of 'respectability', what became 'Victorian values'.

Some of the implications of these Victorian values became clearer a generation later as the poverty and disease of the new industrial towns began to confront policy makers. Just as today some conservative commentators seek to blame social ills on the existence of one-parent families, so in the 1840s and 50s individual behaviour was blamed for the spread of syphilis by enforcing compulsory examinations of those who were suspected of being prostitutes. The model for the acts was allegedly measures to control cattle. The result was inevitable: the intimidation of large numbers of women, growing hostility to state regulation, a radical movement of resistance, and no obvious impact on the incidence of the disease. Many of the more extreme measures proposed in the 1980s to control the spread of HIV - compulsory testing, detention of those suspected of spreading the disease - were prefigured a hundred years before.

As another example, let's take sexual abuse of children. Today we worry rightly about child sex abuse. But sexual abuse of children was raised in the 1830s in the context of debates about the impact of children working in the factories and mines; in the 1870s, in the report, no less, of the Prince of Wales's Royal Commission on Housing, in the context of how poor overcrowding and the danger of incest; and in the 1880s, as a result of the panic about the 'white slave trade', when the age of consent for girls was raised eventually from 13 to 16. It takes different forms at different times, but abuse of children is not a new discovery, any more than our confusions and hesitations in confronting it are new.

The history of birth control reveals a similar pattern. Although the roots of the birth-control movement are many and various, and its practices in many forms is probably as old as sexuality, two hundred years ago the preoccupations of the French Revolution, one of the formative moments of modern Europe, we find middle-class evangelists worried about the state of morality in Britain: they saw, or believed they saw, a dissolve, amoral aristocracy, a feckless, overbreeding working class. Surely, these moralists felt, we would end up like the French, drowned in chaos and blood, unless we all learned the importance of 'respectability', what became 'Victorian values'.

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Then take sex-related disease. Today our experience of sex is shadowed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the nineteenth century the most feared scourge was syphilis, and we can find in the response to this ominous pre-echoes of our modern reaction. In the 1860s a series of measures, the Contagious Diseases Acts, sought to control the spread of syphilis by enforcing compulsory examinations of those who were suspected of being prostitutes. The model for the acts was allegedly measures to control cattle. The result was inevitable: the intimidation of large numbers of women, growing hostility to state regulation, a radical movement of resistance, and no obvious impact on the incidence of the disease.

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Finally, there's the question of sexual identity. It is easy for us today to assume that the sexual categories and identities we work within, pre-eminent only those of heterosexual and homosexual, are fixed and eternal,
corresponding differences transmitted (who knows how?) from the dawn of time. It is now dear, however, that these distinctions of the nineteenth century, the result of a complex process whereby the norm of heterosexuality was established and reinforced by the rise of boundaries between it and its dangerous other, homosexuality. This in turn was intricately related to the reformulation of gender relations, so that sexual and gender identities were locked together: manhood, in The developments of the twentieth century have made possible the emergence of strong and vibrant lesbian and gay identities that have challenged the heterosexual norm. Contemporaneous feminism have undermined the hierarchies of gender, but the point that I want to underline is that the nineteenth century, like the Crim, Law Amendment Act of 1885 made all forms of male homosexuality illegal, the promotion of homosexuality' by local authorities was banned (through what became known as 'Clause 28'). Circumstances change, and so do laws; but a fear of homosexuality apparently remains.

We can, in other words, see in the fairly recent history of sexuality many problems, dilemmas and anxieties remarkably similar to our own. They revolve essentially around boundaries, between men and women, adults and children, 'normal' and 'perverse' sexuality, between orthodox and unorthodox lifestyles and identities, between health and disease. I offer these examples not to suggest that nothing ever changes; on the contrary, I hope to show that there have been profound changes in attitudes towards sexuality. My intention, rather, is to warn against that facile history which looks back to a 'golden age' when somehow everything was better, more fixed and certain, than it is today. Nostalgia for a golden age of order and harmony is one danger when thinking of sexuality. There is another temptation as we approach the end of the millennium, to identify with that sense of an ending which seems to characterize the closing of a century, to reconstruct a fin de siecle mood which sees the uncertainty of our own age of anxiety as being the same as that of the most famous fin de all, that of the late nineteenth century. Rather than regretting a past this mood wallows in the sexual anarchy which some contemporary commentators saw as characterizing the ending of the nineteenth century. This in turn fits into postmodern consciousness which in its most deconstructive mood celebrates the impossibility of a master, legitimizing discourse for sexuality, glories in heterogeneity, the return of the repressed of sexuality, the bouleverasure of all values, and the subversive power of the perverse.

This opens up challenging perspectives for thinking about sexuality anew. This is especially the case as a new scholarship undermines the dominant myths and meanings that emerged in the late nineteenth century. As hallowed traditions crumble, we are being forced to raise questions of value: by what criteria, and by whose sanction, can we say that this activity, desire, style, way of life, is better or worse, more or less ethically valid, than any other? If the gods are dead, or dying, or the secular myths of History and Science lie discredited before us, is anything permitted? Postmodernist writing has been effective in tearing apart for scrutiny and critique many of our taken-for-granted beliefs. It has been less effective in elaborating alternative values. I shall return to this issue later.

I want now to look at certain key trends which seem to me to underlie the changes we have experienced over the past century, and whose consequences look set to dominate the 1990s. I identify these as, first, the secularization of sex, an inadequate term which does, none the less, pinpoint some key changes; second, a liberalization of attitudes, which has reshaped both the law and social attitudes; and third, the challenge of diversity, perhaps the key change to which everything else is secondary. Finally, I want to look at the future of all three in the context of the current crisis around HIV disease and AIDS. I am not going to offer predictions, because nothing is predictable in the world of sexuality; nor do I wish to suggest a blueprint for a new ethics:蓝prints are what have so often led us astray. But I shall try to offer a framework for understanding what too often seems like a meaningless flux.

The secularization of sex

First of all let's look at what I am calling the secularization of sex. By this I mean the progressive detachment of sexual values from religious values - even for many of the religious. This has a long history, but perhaps the key feature was the process, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, whereby the initiative for judging sexuality passed from the churches to the agents of social and mental hygiene, primarily in the medical profession. Science promised to prop up, or replace, religion in explaining or legitimizing sexual behaviour. Already by the end of the century, some feminist and other critics were arguing that doctors were the new priests, imposing their new (overwhelmingly masculine) imperatives on the bodies of women. Since then, the arbiters of sexual values have
tended to be increasingly doctors, sexologists, psychologists, social workers, even politicians, rather than priests.

This is, of course, an unfinished revolution, as all those who have campaigned for birth control, sex education, the rights of sexual minorities or the right of sexual choice know very well. You can still be labelled as both immoral and sick, sinful and diseased, all at the same time, if you offend the norms. Nor have the churches of various kinds given up the struggle. It is only a few years since the British chief rabbi welcomed the 'swinging of the pendulum' back to traditional values (though as I have suggested, that tradition was itself pretty confused). Elsewhere in the world, as well as in Britain, we have seen what W. H. Auden called the 'fashionable madmen' attempting to assert the links between religious fundamentalism and a particular (restricted) type of sexual behaviour, and these attitudes have had many local successes to their credit. The Republican Party convention in the USA in 1992, to quote just one example, managed to impose on the party an extremely conservative moral agenda: opposing abortion, campaigning against the recognition of homosexual rights and affirming the merits of 'family values'.

Yet it seems that despite all the huffing and puffing, the anguished debates and the like, the process of secularization has gone too far to reverse fundamentally, as the spectacular electoral failure of the Republicans in 1992 suggests. Even in the most traditional of churches, such as the Roman Catholic, perhaps the majority of the faithful (and a significant minority of its own priesthood, apparently) ignore the pope's injunctions against birth control, and in the USA we see openly gay Catholic priests and lesbian nuns. The fevered efforts of religious traditionalists to turn back the tide testifies, I would argue, as much to the success of secularization as to the power of religion.

But at the same time as the power of religion is undermined, so the claims of a scientific morality have been subverted. The early sexologists, men (usually men) such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Magnus Hirschfeld, even Freud, believed that what they were doing was to put the laws of sexuality onto a scientific basis, to provide a rational basis for sex reform; 'through science to justice', proclaimed Hirschfeld in Germany before his library and legacy were piled on the Nazi book-burning pyre. Today we are a little more sceptical of the claims of science to guide us through the moral maze. Many of those labelled and categorized by the early science of sex (women as the 'dark continent', homosexuals as a biological aberration) have resisted the labels, and developed their own definitions in a sort of grassroots sexology which plays with and subverts inherited descriptions.

The significance of all this is profound, because what it does is to take responsibility for sexual behaviour away from external sources of authority and to place it squarely on to the individual. This introduces into the debate on sexuality a contingency that is, for many, troubling and enfeebling. But it is important to recognize that this sense of contingency is not just confined to the domain of sexuality. On the contrary, the existence of a dual consciousness, of the necessity, but difficulty and pain, of individual choice, can be seen as a key element of our late modern sense of self. As the 'juggernaut of modernity', in Anthony Giddens's phrase, gathers momentum, dissolving all fixed identities and relationships, so the sense of the contingency of self, its provisional placing in a changing world, a narrative quest for partial unity rather than a fixed attribute of essential being, becomes paramount. In the twentieth century the Enlightenment belief in the constitutive individual, Man (and it was usually male), as the measure of all things has been severely challenged: by Freud's discovery of the dynamic unconscious, by the recognition of cultural and sexual diversity, by the challenges of feminism and lesbian and gay politics, by the historical and deconstructive turns in the social sciences, by the experience of fragmentation which for many characterizes late or postmodernity. In all these contexts sexuality becomes problematized, dethroned from its position of being a determining essence. Yet at the same time, as if by a necessary reflex, sexuality becomes a source of meaning, of social and political placing, and of individual sense of self.

This of course poses many problems, and is probably the main focus of anxiety about sexuality today. The public debates about sexuality since the 1960s, including those around the so-called 'permissive reforms' of the law on abortion, homosexuality, divorce, censorship and birth control, far from being a licence to do what you want, were actually about finding the right balance between private pleasures and public policy, between freedom and regulation. In other words, the rise of the caring professions, the pressure on organizations like Relate (the National Marriage Guidance Council), and the proliferation of experts and therapies of various sorts indicate the difficulties of relying on ourselves alone. But the conclusion we must draw from this secularization seems to me inescapable: today we see sexual matters as essentially about individual choice. The debate is about the legitimate limits of choice, not about the legitimacy of choice itself.

A liberalization of attitudes

This is closely related to the second trend I have identified, the growing liberalization of attitudes over the past generation. By this I mean the gradual abandonment of authoritarian or absolutist values, and a
historically more accepting of birth control, abortion, premarital sex, cohabitation before or instead of marriage, divorce, and homosexuality, by 1987, in the wake of the AIDS panic, this had risen to 74 per cent of those interviewed. Public hostility was even sharper when asked their attitudes to lesbians and gay men having the right to adopt children. In 1987, 86 per cent would forbid lesbians adopting children, and 93 per cent gay men. A Gallup poll shortly after the Section 28 controversy in late 1987, early 1988, confirmed a deep-seated hostility: 60 per cent thought that homosexuality should not be considered an accepted lifestyle, compared with 34 per cent who did approve—though perhaps significantly for the coming decade, 50 per cent of those under 35 were accepting. What seems to be happening is a greater acceptance of the fact of homosexuality ('live and let live') whilst there remains an ingrained refusal to see it as of equal validity with heterosexuality.

There is a sharp paradox in attitudes towards homosexuality. While prosecutions for 'homosexual offences' reached a height in the late 1980s, only previously attained in 1954, before legalization, suggesting an increase in police interest in the issue, while the popular press pursued people suspected of homosexual tendencies fervently, and while the incidence of 'queer-bashing' increased dramatically, there were abundant signs of a more general growth of the homosexual community. Social facilities continued to expand, gay characters appeared in soaps and on television, people spoke more easily about homosexuality than ever before. The prosecutions, 'queer-bashings', and Section 28 can be seen as distorted responses to real changes taking place in attitudes to non-heterosexual behaviour. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that Mrs Thatcher, despite her rhetoric and actions, presided over the biggest expansion of the lesbian and gay community in its history.

This is in line with the wider point I am making: there seems to be a long-term shift both in beliefs and in behaviours taking place which threatens to hold up German unification in 1990, because of the conservative fear in west Germany of the liberal laws in the east), and a highly divisive issue in the USA. Despite strenuous efforts since the law was liberalized in Britain in the 1960s to reduce the time during which termination is permitted, all have failed, not only because a majority of MPs were resistant or because of the campaigns of pressure groups, for example, the National Abortion Campaign, but because access to abortion had become the wish of the majority of the population. I am sure that abortion will continue to be a key moral issue, but it is difficult to believe that there will be a consensus in Britain in the near future for restrictive change.

These examples suggest to me that there has been a crucial long-term shift in the way we see sexual activity and relationships. I would be cautious about calling it a revolution. In many ways it is startlingly like a reversion to much earlier, pre-'Victorian values' mores, with a high rate of formal illegitimacy, toleration of certain forms of premarital sex, and a relatively late age of marriage. This is accompanied, however, by a new explicitness in talking about sex which magnifies and dramatizes the impact of the transformations that have taken place.

There is, however, an ambiguity in this continuing liberalization, which underlies the limits of the changes that have taken place, and this is seen most clearly in relation to homosexuality. According to opinion surveys, there was a continuing liberalization in attitudes towards homosexuality from the late 1960s into the early 1980s, then a shuddering setback, which has only recently, according to the survey British Social Attitudes, been partially reversed. So while in 1983, 62 per cent censured homosexual relationships, by 1987, in the wake of the AIDS panic, this had risen to 74 per cent of those interviewed. Public hostility was even sharper when asked their attitudes to lesbians and gay men having the right to adopt children. In 1987, 86 per cent would forbid lesbians adopting children, and 93 per cent gay men. A Gallup poll shortly after the Section 28 controversy in late 1987, early 1988, confirmed a deep-seated hostility: 60 per cent thought that homosexuality should not be considered an accepted lifestyle, compared with 34 per cent who did approve—though perhaps significantly for the coming decade, 50 per cent of those under 35 were accepting. What seems to be happening is a greater acceptance of the fact of homosexuality ('live and let live') whilst there remains an ingrained refusal to see it as of equal validity with heterosexuality.

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behaviour, and the domain of morals, increasingly seen as a matter of private choice (the ‘Wolfenden strategy’). In practice this meant allowing, in the famous phrase, 'consenting adults in private' to pursue their personal ends without interference so long as the public were not unduly frightened. The actual implementation of the new legal framework was less clear cut, however. For example, abortion on demand was tempered by the need for medical authorization of abortions. The rights of homosexuals were restricted by narrow interpretations of 'consent' (which could be given only by those over 21, not at all in Scotland or Northern Ireland until a decade later, and never in the armed forces), and of 'privacy' (which was not recognized if more than two people were present, or potentially present). Regulation was changed, but not abandoned; the locus of control shifted. A form of sexual pluralism was recognized, but it was not fully legitimized. Yet it provided a space which has allowed sexual autonomy to grow. During the 1970s and 1980s there were various challenges to this legal compromise, especially with regard to pornography, but despite a harsher climate and a closing of space for social experimentation, the framework held, even under a political regime committed to moral conservatism. Section 28 is again a test case. Although its intention was restrictive and punitive, it was still clearly within the framework of the Wolfenden strategy. It did not propose making homosexuality illegal, intending instead to prevent 'promotion'. Of course, by doing that, the government's intervention gave unprecedented publicity to homosexuality, and helped to forge a stronger sense of identity and community amongst lesbians and gay men than ever before. But that is one of the paradoxes of legal involvement in sexual lives. The unintended consequences are often more important than the intended. The liberal legal experiment attempted as much to regulate as to free individuals, but its consequences have been to institutionalize a form of tolerance of diversity and choice. That tolerance falls far short of full acceptance of difference, as the case of homosexuality underlines. Nevertheless, it highlights my central points: legal and moral absolutism are fading as the guidelines of policy, but the alternatives have still to be fully worked out.

To close this discussion of what I have called liberalization, I want to pinpoint two further historic shifts that underlie some of the patterns I have mentioned. The first is the changing balance of relations between men and women. This is most obvious in the taken-for-granted assumption today that women have their own sexual needs and desires, that they live in different types of household and have various sorts of relationship. But we are reluctant to accept the norm of diversity: that is, we still seek to judge people as if there were a common moral standard by which they should live. One of the key issues of the 1990s has been precisely the attempt to move from recognition to normalization of diversity.

The challenge of diversity

The heart of the challenge is this: we increasingly have to accept the fact of diversity. We know that people have different needs and desires, that they live in different types of household and have various sorts of relationship. But we are reluctant to accept the norm of diversity: that is, we still seek to judge people as if there were a common moral standard by which they should live. One of the key issues of the 1990s has been precisely the attempt to move from recognition to normalization of diversity.

The constant laments about the impact of permissiveness and the evocation of 'Victorian values' during the 1980s suggested that the key changes we have noted - the rise of illegitimacy, the rising divorce figures, the new presence of homosexuality, etc. - indicated a drastic decline of moral standards, a disintegration of old values, leading to a threat to the very existence of the family. Interestingly, more recently, there has been a dawning recognition that something else is afoot: not so much a collapse of morals as a change in their form, not so much a decline of the family as the rise of different sorts of family. Angela Rumbold, when briefly the minister for the family in the late 1980s, suggested that these facts were beginning to filter through into government thinking. The point was men. Against this it is important to remember the struggles of women themselves for sexual autonomy and freedom of choice. Beyond this is a more profound questioning of the power relations between women and men, the result both of feminism and of the changing role of women in the economy and society. Despite ups and downs in the path to full equality, there is no doubt that this represents a radical transformation of relationships, whose effects in the next decade are impossible to overestimate. We have already seen its impact in, amongst other things, the changing agenda on rape and sexual violence and a new concern with the sexual abuse of children, in all of which questions of power are to the fore.

The second shift that must be recognized is the growing acknowledgement of the fact of sexual diversity. I have mentioned homosexuality, and the contradictory responses it evokes. But it is clear today that there is a much greater variety of beliefs, identities and relationships than our moral codes allow. The truth is that people's sexual needs and desires do not fit easily into the neat categories and moral systems we build to describe and contain them.

Both these shifts are critical elements in the third major trend I want to outline: the challenge of diversity.
made more sharply by the then leader of the Opposition, Neil Kinnock, in a speech in 1990: "Anyone concerned about the future of the family", he said, "should understand that in our generation the family is changing, it is not collapsing." Those who regarded the rise of the non-traditional family as evidence of social delinquency, he went on, showed not only prejudice but impracticality in the face of the problems accompanying change.

Behind such statements is a growing body of social research which has traced the shifts in the domestic patterns which frame sexual behaviour. In many ways, we are still deeply familial in our behaviour patterns. Although the age of marriage has crept up in recent years, most people still get married. Though there has been a recent decline, a high proportion of divorced people remarry. And even though there is a growing percentage of children born outside marriage, they are more often than not born into marriage-like relationships. A majority of 'illegitimate births' are jointly registered by both parents. Although we are more tolerant of premarital sex, we remain very censorious of extra-marital sex. And the majority, as we have seen, still disapprove of homosexual relationships, and the adoption of children by lesbians and gay men. We remain, in the words of the sociologist David Clark, deeply 'wedlocked'.

Yet these overall figures conceal a great deal of variety. A survey by National Opinion Polls for the Independent in 1990 showed that the traditional view of the family was held by only a minority, while the under-35s had a 'radically different view of family life to that of their parents' generation'. These different views of the under-35s included a more relaxed attitude to both partners working, joint rearing of children, and a more tolerant attitude (though still only amongst about a third of those polled) to homosexual adoptions. All surveys during the 1990s confirmed these trends.

But beyond such generational shifts is a growing recognition that the word 'family' covers a multitude of forms. In the early 1980s the family sociologists Rhona and Robert Rappaport distinguished five types of family diversity: by internal organization of the family; as a result of cultural factors such as race and ethnicity, religious and other factors; class differences in family life; changes over the life-course; and differing patterns by generation. Others have listed different types of 'family', ranging from non-married cohabitation to single parenthood, from 'roommate marriages' to lesbian and gay relationships. As we know, the latter were labelled 'pretended family relationships' in the Local Government Act of 1988, but once you broaden the definition of the family to include non-traditional forms, it is difficult to know what you can legitimately exclude.

The impacts of AIDS

Finally, I want to look at an experience which fed into the moral absolutism of the 1980s, threatened to create a sort of backlash against sexual liberalism, and had a tragic effect on the lives of many people - the impact of the health crisis associated with HIV disease and AIDS.

The response to HIV has been coloured by the fact that it has been seen as a disease, in the west at least, of the marginal and the execrated. In America and Britain - but not, it must be said, in all European countries - largely, it has so far affected gay men and intravenous drug users, the so-called 'guilty victims' compared to supposedly 'innocent victims' such as haemophiliacs. It was only when it seemed that HIV was likely to seep through into the heterosexual community that governments in the USA and Britain displayed any urgency on the matter. The British government's launch into urgent action at the end of 1986 was precipitated by the US Surgeon-General's report on the danger of a heterosexual epidemic earlier that year. A tailing off in urgency followed in 1989 after reports circulated that rumours of a heterosexual threat were much exaggerated. It seems that urgency is not required if only unpopular minorities are at risk (see chapter 7, above).

But, and it should not need saying, we are complacent about the risks of HIV and AIDS at our peril. The problem is that the population as a
whole seems pretty resistant to warnings about the dangers. The gay community quite early on learnt the need for safer-sex techniques, and the avoidance of high-risk activities. The results were seen in a drop of sexually transmitted disease (STD) infections amongst gay men in the late 1980s, and a slowing down of the expected rate of increase of infection. But there is no similar evidence for a widespread adoption of safer sex amongst heterosexuals.

This suggests that the doom-laden warnings that have characterized much of the public education on AIDS are not effective. Equally ineffective, however, were the calls for a moralization of behaviour that we heard in the 1980s. There was certainly, as we have seen, a renewed hostility towards homosexuality, and this had very unpleasant effects. A British Social Attitudes survey in 1991 indicated that there had been a slight decline in the tendency to see AIDS as moral terms, though there remained strong support for statements that certain sexual practices are morally wrong. Yet there is overwhelming evidence that this does not stop people doing them. What such moralism does do, however, is prevent the full dissemination of knowledge about risk activities and safer-sex techniques.

That moralism is not surprising, however, because the HIV/AIDS crisis dramatizes many of the uncertainties and ambiguities that are shaping sexual mores at the end of this century. It feeds into that sense of an end of an era which I have already noted as an important component of our culture at the present. It dramatizes the existence of sexual and cultural diversity. It undermines the absence of a consensus concerning what is ethnically valid and invalid, acceptable or unacceptable, right and wrong. People with HIV and AIDS have had to endure stigma because our culture has been unable to come to terms with the changes that have transformed sexual life in the twentieth century.

I have suggested in this chapter that sexual behaviour and sexual beliefs are being shaped and reshaped by a number of long-term trends: secularization, liberalization, and the growth of social and moral diversity. During the 1980s, under the impact both of political forces and of AIDS, a number of these trends seemed to be on the point of going into reverse. But it is already looking as if these were blips rather than fundamental shifts. If this is so, then we need to adjust to these trends in our thinking about sexuality. It's time, I suggest, that our moral systems begin to move closer to what we actually do and are, rather than what inherited traditions say we should do and be. If that were to happen we would, I believe, see the development not only of a more humane and tolerant culture, but of one that was also more responsible and healthier in facing the challenges of this particular fin de siècle.


18 Peter Kellner, 'Traditional view of family "held by minority of people"', *Independent*, 21 September 1990.


20 For the effects of that policy see Sally Malcolm-Smith, 'Single mothers harassed to name absent fathers', *Observer*, 22 September 1991.


22 Jowell et al., *British Social Attitudes – the 7th Report*. 

PART III
Making History