

history of modern sexual identities

we're shifting our focus from how people learn and make use of gendered attributes, and both participate in and resist gender-based forms of power, to think about *sexuality* — how sexuality is, and isn't, part of the making of manhood and womanhood

Jonathan Ned Katz: "heterosexuality is a modern invention, dating to the late nineteenth century"

did this strike you as a surprising statement? If so, why?

SO, what IS "heterosexuality" that we can say is a recent invention?

an **identity** based on the object of one's *desire*, as classified by gender  
in contemporary understanding, one can "be" a heterosexual and not actually have  
"had" sex with anyone  
same with "a" homosexual  
heterosexuality is also the "norm" against which **homosexuality** defined as  
deviant

this is a RECENT and culturally specific way to think about persons, and about sexuality  
to recognize this is not to say it's right/wrong, good/bad way of thinking — simply that  
it's

a cultural construction

there have been and are many different ways in which people have viewed sexuality,  
attached "it" — doing various kinds of sex — to identity, various kinds of people

e.g.: ancient Greeks (Socrates and co.) categorized as active/passive sexual subjects  
what was important was whether one took active or passive position —  
penetrator/penetrated  
obviously gender is relevant, but not in same way as homo/heterosexual  
orientation  
men could be either active/passive (lust was roving); women only passive

the Sambia of Papua New Guinea (read about soon) practice ritualized fellatio  
(oral sex) — young male initiates ingest semen of older men as a "rite of passage"  
to adult manhood — they recognize pleasure afforded older men, but view the act  
of fellatio in terms of younger men ingesting semen, "making men" in a rather  
literalist reading — here "homosexuality" isn't at all what we imagine it be

*heterosexuality* and, corollary, *homosexuality*, are recent: an identity based on the gender  
of the generalized object of one's *desire*. origin story begins in 19th C, with — again —  
rise of industrial capitalism;

Katz joins Collier and Ehrenreich & English in his theoretical framework: new  
political-economic systems create new categories of person and claims to  
hierarchical status positions, and the ideologies to justify them

SO, according to Katz, where, and when, are we, historically, on the *eve* of heterosexuality?

Early Victorian era, of first half of 19<sup>th</sup> C — early capitalist economies emerging out of household production

the reigning sexual ideology is “True Love” in which sexual desire is domesticated; proper womanhood *and* manhood are based on “purity,” meaning that desire is channeled into proper (marital) procreation

in *pre*-capitalist society, having children meant gaining “extra hands” to help around house and fields; sex was valued b/c it led to more children, increased household stability

this agrarian PROCREATIVE ETHIC of SEX was incorporated into early social relations of capitalism, industrial capitalist value of production

Protestant work ethic was applied to people’s sex lives:  
the **body is about work** (both men and women) — expressed through sexuality [*rather* than, say, modern preoccupation with *fitness*] — proper body is not about **pleasure**

penis/vagina seen as instruments of production  
producing heirs, workers, property (slaves)

part of the new dichotomy of public/private space and sexual division of labor in society was extended to (was seen to mirror) sexual division of labor in marriage:

if men: production; women: reproduction  
men’s bodies: production; women’s bodies: reproduction

Q: How, then, did married couples (middle classes) experience sex/love in marriage?

seems that many internalized sense that legitimate “natural desire” was FOR procreation, through this proper manhood and womanhood were expressed

sex was an aspect of marital/civic duty

*ideology* of sex wasn’t organized around pleasure  
(especially for women, whose natural *desire* supposed to be directed at *maternal*, rather than sexual, love)

ideologically, sexuality subordinated to gender identity

remember, we’re talking about IDEOLOGY — doesn’t mean people didn’t actually experience pleasure in sex, but desire wasn’t part of how “proper” people talked about sex

sexual desire was something to struggle against — ANY desire

hence, masturbation not a proper part of “sex” — Gayle Rubin writes that in Victorian England, children caught masturbating were physically restrained at night to protect them — told it would lead to feeble minds and bodies

**sexual morality** revolved largely around where “it” took place

domestic, procreative sex **good**

ANY public sex, sex for pleasure, or money, or w/out possibility of procreation

**bad**

this was *early* Victorian morality

BUT, as we’ve seen, in urban settings the rise of industrial capitalism wedges a division b/w home and work, private and public spheres. As capitalism took hold, production moved out of the home.

The home became site for consumption rather than production; children no longer “extra hands” to help but “mouths to feed” — as a Greek grandmother put it to me. The fertility rate goes down dramatically.

Without a “procreative imperative,” when having children is not so essential to economic success (and in fact, too many children can create poverty!), people start to talk differently about **sex**.

**Sex starts to be separated from procreation** (this will be more fully accomplished with modern birth control), and is begun to be talked about on its *own terms, for pleasure*. Site of consumption rather than production — what Katz calls the PLEASURE ETHIC of sex

By **late** 19<sup>th</sup> C, the erotic became the raw material for a new consumer culture. Sex enters into the new *commoditized entertainment industry*: newspapers, magazines, books, plays talking about sex in ways that thrill and excite.

IN CITIES: restaurants, bars, clubs bath houses open, catering to consumers who seek sexual pleasures (including flirtation) in public spaces. And men had easier access than women to such public spaces, and more disposable capital with which to purchase pleasures.

but, as Katz writes, this new openness about sexuality, sex for pleasure, commoditized sex ALSO provides new means for

classifying differences between “normal” and “abnormal” desires

famously in London: Oscar Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1891) — depicts, if subtly, emotional and physical relationships among men — “the love that dare not speak its name” — but as one aspect of generally decadent fin-de-siecle aristocratic male society — society of men’s clubs and amusements (these are men who don’t “work” for a

living, remember)

shortly after the book's publication, Wilde was put on trial for "gross indecency"

Importantly, by end of 19<sup>th</sup> C sexual morality, propriety was classified on the basis on specific **acts** — NOT on entirety of individual identities; persons not classified by sexual "orientation"

"gross indecency" referred to sexual relations of varying degrees among men, but these men were not "homosexuals" — not only were many married to women (including Wilde); *all* men were thought to have insatiable sexual needs and roving lust

why was sex between men thought to be a problem, then?

1) *morally*, it demonstrated a lack of self-control (and was *unmanly* in this regard — not True Manhood)

2) *socially*, it posed an ideological threat to the newly normative manhood based on a "breadwinner" model of supporting a dependent wife and kids — he's spending his \$ in the wrong places

Wilde (and his book) also constituted a social "problem" because it — attraction and sexual contact between men — was becoming more and more *visible*

What was happening, according to historian Jeffrey Weeks and others, was that **urban capitalism** opened up the possibility for men with means to live independently, without wives — outside of the heterosexual imperative, "as" homosexual men

Not only were industrializing cities creating population centers where men could meet and socialize, there were also settings where men could LIVE quite well without marrying,

b/c of **consumerism**: they can go to a tailor, bakery, laundry, restaurant, live in a hotel with a chambermaid — pay women and men to do the kinds of tasks wives were doing out of "love" and domestic duty

So, cities like London and NY started to see men who *openly* lived without women, socially or domestically. And to *flaunt* that independence — part of which was perhaps aimed at taunting married men, tied down to nagging wives.

This openness, visibility, led to the **criminalization of sodomy** — *acts* of anal and oral sex — as recently as the 1960s, anti-sodomy laws on the books in all 50 states  
OVERHEADS from mid-80s; and from 2003 — eve of ...

November 2003 Supreme Court on a 6-3 decision reversed a ruling from 1986 that states could punish homosexuals for so-called "deviant sex." The 2003 ruling enshrined for the first time a broad constitutional right to sexual privacy

BUT, back to our historical tale...

the early 19th C openness of homosexual desire — public performance of sexual preference — also led to the invention of “homosexuality” as something that one WAS — a kind of person; i.e., not only new sexual “lifestyles,” but “identities”

John D’Emilio: “Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity — an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex” (19405)

Remember, earlier in agrarian settings — Desdemona and Lefty in *Middlesex* — when men (like women) *had* to get married in order to live, men’s sexual affairs with men (more or less hidden) had not made much difference to their standing or place in the community — status ascribed through *kin* connections

but once “homosexuality” became an *alternative* to marriage — in the sense of being a way to live — then it also became an “alternative” in the sense of the meanings marriage had by then acquired [gay marriage wasn’t on the table until quite recently, remember]

If, as Rayna Rapp suggested, marriage was one point at which a man and a woman’s place in society was established [marrying up or down], and determined “who” they “were,”

then homosexuality — as an *alternative to marriage* — also became a statement, a symbol, of what a man “was” — who he was in terms of his place in the social and moral world — an independent figure who would not be tied down to marriage, free of obligations (and status) to heirs

these were *gradual* developments: Katz notes that the 1901 edition of the OED did not include entries for either “heterosexuality” or “homosexuality”

the words were first used by psychiatrists to categorize sexual development and desires — “heterosexuality” was at one point used to refer *not* to opposite-sex attraction but, logically, to “psychical hermaphroditism” — multiple attractions; might today be called “bi-sexual”

By the turn of the century, the “norm” still lacked a name

eventually (1910), Freud posited what we’ve come to call heterosexuality not only as “natural,” but as mark of “*maturity*” — “homosexual” attraction for Freud indicated “arrested development”

Only in 1930 did the word “heterosexual” first appear in *New York Times*  
Katz writes: “The heterosexual category provided the basis for a move from a production-oriented, procreative imperative to a consumerist pleasure principle—an institutionalized pursuit of happiness”

now heterosexuals could still be procreative — and enjoy sex too — and be normal!!

Katz: the heterosexual idea was not only created, but “created as ahistorical and taken-for-granted”

it was, in other words, *naturalized* — first through science (began as scientific term) and *then* through religion — when religious persons today talk about heterosexuality being ancient, they’re simply wrong; sex between men and women, yes — but also homosex — as acts

what about **women loving women** in this history? well, Queen Victoria famously dismissed the very idea as absurd, unthinkable — what would they *do*? (sex = procreative vaginal penetration). **HOWEVER**, there is a history of women marriage resisters and of sexual relations among women

in US this has been more common in *working-class* communities (including African-American communities; Ma Rainey and blues singers) and also *upper class* communities (world-traveling great aunt with her “companion”).

Why? middle-class women (white) have been most dependent on marriage, men’s incomes

But then, just as heterosexual/homosexual dualisms becoming established mode of thinking about human sexuality [with male sexuality as unmarked norm], **WWII** breaks out and social patterns are rearranged.

What does Allan Berube argue about the significance of WWII to this history?

saw mass **movement** of men and women — particularly of independent women from small towns to cities to fill manufacturing positions [Rosie the Riveter] — gave women the opportunity to break out of domesticated gender-defined roles as daughter/wife/mother and get to know themselves and other women on their own terms.

there were also women in the military, in the Women’s Army Corps (WACS) and in the military lesbian relationships were tolerated — good for morale, sense that without men it wasn’t surprising or distressing for women to hook up — in eyes of officers, didn’t necessarily make the women “homosexual” as such, which was then defined in terms of “addiction”

note that act and identity here are differentiated

WWII also contributed to the **medicalization of sexual identities** — medical/psychiatric interviews to “screen” for homosexuals — first time most of these young people had thought about their lives in terms of sexual identity

ultimately, Berube argues that WWII did for lesbian communities what capitalist urbanization did for gay male communities at end of 19<sup>th</sup> C — only this time there was a vocabulary to name same-sex relationships.

1940s, emergence of bars that catered to lesbians — even in such unhip cities as Buffalo, NY

BUT then, as Katz and Berube write, the end of the War brought the re-domestication of women — a “cult of domesticity” and the baby-boom births.

1950s return of a PROCREATIVE ETHIC to replenish national population; not only redomestication of women, but reimposition of heterosexual normativity for *both* men and women

and for men, resurgence of “breadwinning” expectations of marital manhood

1950s were difficult times for gay men and lesbians  
after war ended, military “witch-hunts” against lesbians and gay men, leading to thousands of courts martial and dishonorable discharges

in popular discourse, homosexuality pitied as being “sterile” — to be homosexual was to reject the procreative ethic in favor of a pleasure ethic

[again, remember that at turn of the century men with desire for men *were* married

and often with children — and still today in many parts of the world]

heterosexual men and women also began to feel oppressed by expectations of early marriage and responsibility to family

[Smith College graduate and housewife Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*]

But then, during the 1950s, a new ideology of masculinity emerged to challenge the idea that men must marry and support a family to be a “real” man — new ideology of masculinity most available to, and directed at, middle class white men

Most clearly articulated by latest edition to the industry of commoditized sexuality in 1950s — PLAYBOY

How do we read *Playboy* magazine in this context?

What kind of man was *Playboy* initially intended for?

1<sup>st</sup> issue of *Playboy*<sup>TM</sup> hit the stands in December 1953. 1<sup>st</sup> centerfold — famous nude calendar shot of Marilyn Monroe — is legendary. What’s less well remembered is the first feature article — “Miss Gold-Digger of 1953” —it was an attack on money-hungry women who tried to trap men into working to support them; it was also a diatribe against alimony

*Playboy*<sup>TM</sup> loves women, but hates wives — seems to be the message

OVERHEAD: Hugh Hefner’s opening editorial/manifesto from first edition

vision was to offer men new ways of consuming status:

not the family station wagon but the racy sports car

So, why the air-brushed photos of untouchable women-as-objects?

consuming these photos to reinforce (for himself and others) *heterosexuality*

for the male *marriage resister* who doesn't want to risk being labeled homosexual

also consumed by married men who aspire to the bachelor image  
escape from the ball-and-chain wife you have to support

**you can be a single man, interested in sex, and not be gay**  
this was the real message of Playboy

And what about women?

for women in mid-century, being unmarried didn't first and foremost stigmatize them as lesbian; rather, "Old Maids" (assumption: *can't* catch a man, not that didn't *want* to)

women's sexual desire still deemed secondary to their sexual appeal to men;  
women's sexuality, in other words, perceived in terms of **men's** implicitly hetero-  
sexuality

SO, how did real wives deal with porn-consuming husbands?

what's Maxine Davis' advice in *The Sexual Responsibility of Women* (1956)?

"healthy" sex life is now one of women's marital responsibilities — very 20th C

women advised to bring romance and sex-as-entertainment into the home

What we're also seeing here is more enduring *compulsory heterosexuality* for women than for men— and until more recently, *compulsory marriage*

this phrase from ADRIENNE RICH, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980)

Adrienne Rich came of age in this era (50s); married and had 3 sons, which she found to be an alienating experience

argued that compulsory heterosexuality has been felt more strongly by women than men b/c women have been economically dependent on men, led to believe no alternative to marriage

[note the white middle-class bias here, argument based in part on her own experience]

MORE RECENTLY,  
homosexuality — at least domesticated version — becoming mainstream  
*NY Times* lists same-sex commitment ceremonies in Sunday Styles section, renamed  
“Weddings and Celebrations”

and WOMEN’S SEXUALITY more analogous to men’s  
women can be single *and* lesbian *or* straight; not “Old Maids”

women’s sexual desire, pleasure, organism, generally viewed as important

nevertheless, does the pleasure ethic of sex still have a gender double-standard?