Chapter 26

The Sexual Geography of the City

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In the spring of 1953 London was the venue for the most extended display of official spectacle in Britain since the end of the Second World War. The Queen's coronation was the occasion for ritual display which reinforced the role of the capital not only as the focus for national celebration but also as the hub of a reformulated British Commonwealth. But coronation year also focused attention on more transgressive activities in the metropolis. In particular, it was the danger of sexuality, cut loose from its traditional moorings within marriage and the family and publicly flaunted on London's streets, which was the major anxiety. In a series of sensationalist exposés, the popular press told how the capital was in the grip of the twin vices of male homosexuality and female prostitution. These practices were flourishing in areas adjacent to the coronation route – for the center of depravity was given a specific setting. It was not London as a whole which was implicated in this geography of immorality, specific zones or quarters of the city were singled out. The most notorious of these was Soho in the heart of the capital's West End.

The moral state of London was viewed as sufficiently serious to warrant action by the Conservative government early the following year. The Home Office Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, usually known as the Wolfenden committee, after its chairman, John Wolfenden, is today best remembered as the body which recommended the partial decriminalization of male homosexuality (Hyde 1972; Weeks 1977; Jeffrey-Poulter 1991). Yet the scope of the inquiry was much more extensive. In the classic manner described by Michel Foucault, the committee sought to regulate homosexuality and prostitution by bringing these practices into greater visibility; by producing an extended discourse on the problems (Foucault 1978). As part of this strategy, central London was mapped – physically and symbolically – in terms of irregular sexualities. Much of the raw material for this process came from the police. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner submitted a document which was, in effect, a homosexual map of London. Spanning the whole of the greater West End, it ranged from Kensington Gardens, Knightsbridge and Hyde Park, through Victoria and across to Bloomsbury and the Strand. Circled in red ink were the places where police arrests for importuning and gross indecency

were most frequently made. The familiar landmarks of London's central district had been redrawn to reveal the spaces of homosexual desire (Nott-Bower 1954, Appendix D).

My purpose in opening with this historical example is to highlight a number of themes which are important for exploring the relationship between sexuality and modern city life. This narrative about the sexual mapping of London in the 1950s raises more general questions about the ways in which sexual and moral identities have been formed – and transformed – through the regulation, occupation, and experience of urban space. In the work of the Wolfenden committee the streets, parks, and the more private places of the metropolis were understood to play an active part in the complex moral economy of the city. It is this relationship, between space, setting, and the representations and power relations of urban life, which concerns me here. The connection is well understood as a result of the recent work on the city by urban sociologists and cultural geographers, but its implications are far from accepted currency in studies of sexuality. The aim is to provide some guidelines for research into the sexual geography of the city.

Sexuality and Discourse

The past two decades have seen an explosion of writing on the historical and contemporary forms of sexuality. While such work has been driven by a wide variety of different concerns, a number of clearly identifiable agendas have predominated. Feminist, gay, and lesbian studies and the continuing impact of the work of Michel Foucault have been at the center of this expansion. Taken together, what is notable about this body of research is that it has profoundly revised historical and sociological understandings about the relationship between sexuality and modern life. Foucault's own major reassessment of the history of modern sexuality opened by challenging the whole evolutionary model of moral progress, in which nineteenth-century repression gave way to twentieth-century enlightenment. Foucault persuasively demonstrated that such a chronology was part of our own contemporary mythology as "the other Victorians" (Foucault 1978). In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist, gay, and lesbian historians were assembling their own critiques of sexual modernization (Weeks 1977; D'Emilio 1983: Faderman 1985). Linked to the lifestyle politics of the new social movements, and again challenging linear and developmental accounts, this research brought into focus the troubled and profoundly unstable history of modern sexuality. Highlighting the fact that freedom for some involved coercion and regulation for many others, these new studies revealed how access to knowledge and power about sex was shot through with ideologies of sexual and gender difference.

Linked to this critique of sexual modernism was the problematization of the very meaning and status of sexuality itself. This denaturalization of the object of research was at the heart of Foucault's interrogation of all forms of disciplinary power. The central issue was not whether societies say yes or no to sex, whether they permit or prohibit, but that both of these positions were part of the way in which sex was put into discourse. What mattered in consequence was how sexuality was represented: who writes, or speaks, and from what position. Foucault's insights into the representational quality of sexuality were anticipated by the postwar, Anglo-American

traditions of labeling and role theory, with their emphasis on the constructed nature of sexual acts and values (McIntosh 1968; Gagnon and Simon 1974; Plummer 1975). But in the 1970s and 1980s Foucault's agenda was read in conjunction with the insights derived from poststructuralist linguistics in order to profoundly question the ways in which many social phenomena were understood. Together with the theories of Saussure and Derrida (Saussure 1983; Derrida 1967), Foucault's approach raised major doubts about a number of established research procedures. Above all, it was the emphasis on language and discourse which destabilized conventional methodologies. After Foucault and the other poststructuralists, the representational quality of all forms of knowledge – including that of sexuality – became a key concern.

Foucault's approach disturbed common-sense understandings of what a history of modern sexuality could be about. It uncovered sex in the most unlikely places, as well as in more familiar areas: within sanitary schemes for urban improvement, household manuals, statistical tables, medical dossiers and census returns. Sex intruded into the circuits of urban government, in addition to signifying bodily acts, identities, and desires. Modern sexuality was a *dispersed and decentered field*, and it was organized around multiple points of reference. Within this framework Foucault identified a number of nodal points which increasingly classified and regulated sex around the principles of reproductive and biological strength and around what he termed the "perverse implantations." The significance of these particular mechanisms of power nomination have been much argued over, but Foucault's basic insistence is worth reiterating; that sexuality is plural, rather than articulated around any single point of reference. One of the most significant consequences of this emphasis for research was that it opened up the space for an extremely productive exploration of the ways in which sex is *represented*, especially from cultural historians working on the construction of sexual knowledges and identities (Nead 1987; Jordanova 1989; Bland 1995). Recent work in this tradition has also been particularly adept at identifying the highly malleable and shifting dynamics of sexual desire across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Davidoff 1995; Bailey 1998). As a result, historians now know much more about the ways in which sexual regimes were lived at the level of specific relationships, liaisons, and encounters. If one implication of Foucault's analysis has been to suggest that sex is everywhere in modern societies, the other has been to identify the very particular networks through which it is produced. Foucault's studies, together with the subsequent work they have inspired, reveal that the field of sexuality is not simply an interesting but insignificant byway in the grander histories of modern life. This domain has formed part of the social project of modernity itself.

Sexual Geographies

It is all the more curious, then, that while recent cultural and historical studies have amply demonstrated the significance of language in generating sexual meanings, they have continued to underestimate the spatial dimensions of these practices. The neglect of social and symbolic geography remains a characteristic feature of research on sexuality, where the environment is usually treated as a relatively passive backdrop against which "real" social and cultural developments are enacted. The

interrelationship between space and social processes has of course been extensively debated in the areas of cultural theory and human geography. Yet this research has either focused mainly on the contemporary features of urban space, or else it has pitched discussion at very high levels of abstraction, drawing on Marxist and poststructuralist traditions, which extend from Henri Lefebvre through to writers such as Michel de Certeau and David Harvey (de Certeau 1988; Harvey 1989; Lefebvre 1991). In accounts of this type the primary concern has been with theoretical exploration, in which space as well as time has been cast as a central part of the repertoire of capitalist development, modernity, postmodernity, or other similar global configurations. In contrast, the idea of a cultural history, which evaluates the spatial dimensions of social processes at particular points in time and in more limited settings, remains an underdeveloped project.

How might the idea of a geography of sexuality be conceived? Two recent books have pioneered studies of sexuality in the city, revealing how distinctive metropolitan environments have both regulated sexual subjects and provided the opportunities for human creativity and action. Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight*, 1992, traced the interrelationships between the politics and poetics of space and the multiple scripts of sexuality in late Victorian London. Reflecting the narrative challenges posed by the new agendas of cultural and literary history, Walkowitz explored the metropolis as a contested terrain, in which diverse groups of social actors were drawn into a series of overlapping narratives of sexual danger. One of the most significant aspects of her analysis was the insight that these sociosexual relationships were not only embedded in the physical geography of London, but were also present in a series of imaginary urban landscapes, which were shaped by the social scripts of melodrama, science, and masculine and feminine versions of cosmopolitanism (Walkowitz 1992). Walkowitz's account is a landmark study of urban culture in history, not only because of the wealth of its historical research, but also because it foregrounds the spatial relations of sexuality as a constitutive part of metropolitan modernity. George Chauncey's history of the making of the gay male world in New York in the first part of the twentieth century pioneered a different trajectory of sexuality in the city, centering on the social networks of homosociability created in the streets, private apartments, bathhouses, and saloons of Greenwich Village, Harlem, and Times Square (Chauncey 1995). Chauncey's research did not simply recover evidence about the extent of the early homosexual city, which was erased by a combination of cultural policing and political neglect, it also mapped an astonishingly diverse sexual geography at the heart of America's preeminent metropole. More often than not, this gay world existed in the same environments as African-American, Irish, and Italian immigrant neighborhoods. These were plural networks and liminal spaces, which were not structured according to the divisions between heterosexuality and homosexuality which became the dominant sexual regime within the United States during the postwar years. Chauncey's analysis points to the extremely porous nature of modern sexual identities, which are fluid and contingent partly because of their spatial proximity to other cultures and ways of life.

Two different projects emerge out of this research. Firstly, a concern with regulative space and with the spaces of regulation develops further Foucault's project of discipline and sexuality. Official maps of immorality have repeatedly worked to

impose strategic order on the city, viewing urban sexuality as a major site of cultural disturbance. This bureaucratic and administrative geography has been pivotal in all forms of social policing. It was the impetus behind the police map of the city submitted to the Wolfenden committee, and it would be instantly recognizable to the magistrate and the sanitary engineer, as well as to the cartographer. Operating from on high, it mobilizes a panoptic vision of the city and its subjects, who are viewed as part of a landscape and an esthetics of discipline. The panoramic eye which maps the city in this way invariably offers the viewer mastery of its spaces through sight. The point of vision is invariably exterior to the practices it seeks to classify through processes of inclusion and exclusion. The weakness of this version of the urban landscape is that it refuses any invitation to come "down below" to the level of the street and its pedestrians. In that sense it remains a history of the city from above.

In contrast, the project advanced by the cultural geographer de Certeau has been one of antidiscipline (de Certeau 1985, 1988). In de Certeau's version of urban society, individuals and social groups in space resist the functionalist rationality of the city's grid-plan, drawn up by bureaucrats and administrators. His aim is not to illuminate the techniques of social regulation, but rather to bring to light the ways in which "the weak make use of the strong" (de Certeau 1988: xvii). That is to say, the terms on which resistances to discipline are part of the practices of everyday life. Here we are introduced to different types of spatial practices: the pedestrian rhetorics, the local networks and the wandering activities which produce a subtle logic of place as the site for individual and collective endeavors. This emphasis on what we might term "an ethnography of space" has proved extremely productive for identifying many of the manifestations of sexuality in the city. The prostitute's transactions with her clients, the wanderings of the gay *flâneur* and the machinations of other sexual bohemians are all conducted in specific environments and settings. De Certeau is not unique in defining space as part of the resistant practices of everyday life. In many respects his approach parallels the recent work of Anglo-American cultural studies, which has sought to rescue the urban cultures of subaltern groups from their banal and degraded status. Like some of that writing, de Certeau's efforts to define space as resistance at times traps him in a sentimental utopianism, whereby local cultures and small acts by their very definition constitute places of defiance to official geographies (Ross 1996; Rigby 1991). What is undoubtedly important about de Certeau's project is his emphasis on tracking subjects *in motion* as they move through the urban landscape.

Taken together, these insights provide an expanded vocabulary for analyzing the spectacle, performance, and regulation of sexuality in the city. Yet the emphasis should not be on urban sexualities in general, but on particular metropolitan environments, otherwise the specific relationships between culture and city space are lost. To return to the milieu with which we began – London. London's own distinctive moral geography has contributed to particular regimes of sexuality. In this and many other respects, London is decidedly not Paris, Berlin, or New York. The Danish architect and humanist Steen Eiler Rasmussen celebrated the cultural diversity of the English metropolis, as against the continental, planned city, in his influential history, *London, the Unique City* (Rasmussen 1937). The capital's characteristic administrative ad hocery, which has been visible repeatedly in its

approaches to public health, hygiene, and sanitation, generated its own recognizable sexual atmosphere. The capital never experienced a *police des moeurs*, or moral police, on the Parisian or Prussian models, nor were its zones of respectable and disreputable behavior as strategically zoned as in some other European or American cities. Yet since the eighteenth century London has been shaped by a series of ongoing reforming initiatives, in which fears over disorder and disease have been linked to the moral state of its recalcitrant populations (Stedman Jones 1984; Mort 1987). Moreover, the capital's importance as the center of empire, and latterly of postcolonial migration, has thrown up a series of extraordinarily complex cultures of sexual otherness, which have repeatedly hybridized the city's existing populations. And unlike many Western metropoles in the twentieth century, London has continued in its traditional role as the site of royalty, the court, and aristocratic society, with their own elaborate displays of sexual ritual. The project for a spatial history of sexuality needs to address the making of these diverse sexual cultures as part of the fabric of modern metropolitan life (Mort and Nead 1999).

Speaking to Each Other

Yet the diversity of urban life is not only a matter for social analysis, it poses a profound question for civic politics – for how we live together in the city. Proliferating cultures of difference have weakened the bonds of civic participation; more often than not individuals and social groups are strangers to the destinies of each other – difference is frequently indifference. Richard Sennett, addressing the difficulties of the contemporary divided city, has suggested that it is the image of the body in pain which has the power to reach out and bridge these uncompassionate scenarios (Sennett 1994). Sexual bodies within city space present ambiguous and

Figure 26.1 Sydney gay and lesbian Mardi Gras parade (© Steve Pile)

contradictory cultural values, which in many ways epitomize both the difficulties and the possibilities of the present-day metropolis. The sexual body is at once marked by all of those forms of hyperindividualization – through dress and personal adornment, stylized forms of movement, display, and visual spectacle – which lie at the heart of urban self-presentation. While at the same time aficionados of the city's proliferating sexual cultures rely heavily on the marked and decorated body to recognize members of the same tribe. These localized collectivities are frequently lived as exclusive and exclusionary.

How in the contemporary city can individuals talk to those who are other than themselves? Forty years ago, in the Wolfenden committee's account of London, it was not necessary to discuss this; the center was still relatively secure as those who were cast as marginals were fixed as subordinate. Now the question is imperative. It haunts contemporary social policy and shadows the efforts of progressive politicians to put together a new language of social inclusion. The difficulty of balancing competing ways of living with a commitment to collective action is particularly pressing in all versions of the contemporary urban question. In other words, in all of those spheres of urban life where different ways of inhabiting the self have produced diverse value systems, rather than single certainties. The competing cultures of the postcolonial city, the divisions around differential access to and uses of space, sound, and movement are all manifestations of this problem. Sexuality features as part of this agenda, because sex has been cast both as an integral part of contemporary urban lifestyles and a core component of who we are as individuals.

By no means is all of this new. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that anxieties over social fragmentation and exclusion, together with the difficulties of reconciling the needs of individual self-determination to those of collective action, have been a marked feature of successive moments of urban modernity (Green 1990; Rifkin 1993). What is specific to our own time is that the political and social discourses which have been used to frame working solutions to these problems look increasingly bankrupt. If there is no consensus about endpoints, then there is a general acknowledgment that the present situation demands a resolution to the self–society equation which is different from those which dominated in the recent past.

Faced with the multiplication of urban problems, and with the clamor of voices who shout in the city, one response has been to recuperate traditions of civic communitarianism. Such an approach promotes the rebuilding of traditional forms of social solidarity as an antidote to disintegration (Etzione 1993). It is becoming the solution to the difficulties of living together in the city which is favored by politicians championing the "third way" in both Britain and the United States. What is problematic about this option is not simply its mild moral conservatism; it seeks to reinvent a language of communal values while ignoring the fact that large sections of the city's population no longer comprehend this discourse.

A different starting point is one which begins by acknowledging diversity and difference and the contingent nature of social and sexual value systems. The concept of radical pluralist democracy is differently nuanced according to differences of political interpretation, but all the advocates of this position return to reexamine the classic terrain of democratic liberalism (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Rorty 1989; Sennett 1994; Weeks 1995). From this perspective the search is for flexible forms of collective association which can meet the late twentieth-century demand for

individual self-determination. Such a project by its very nature cannot simply be pitched at the level of formal politics, it needs to recognize the cultural and personal dimensions of democratic communities. This is precisely the current terrain of many sexual cultures in the city. The Italian sociologist, Alberto Melucci, analyzing the phenomenon of contemporary social movements, has noted how these groupings consist of loose associations which are integral to the functioning of everyday life (Melucci 1989). These networks are notable for their stress on both individual needs and collective identities. Though membership is usually part-time, they constitute the laboratories in which new social experiences are invented and explored. Melucci insists that a necessary condition of contemporary democracy is the recognition of spaces of this kind, which are independent of government and political representation. They project forms of decision making in which "the signifying practices developed in everyday life can be heard independently from . . . political institutions" (Melucci 1989: 173). Many contemporary cultures of sexuality in the city project precisely these types of informal cultural initiative. Without lapsing into romanticism, we can characterize their operation as laboratory experiments in everyday living, where individual and collective needs jostle together for space. For the researcher the task remains both to map and to listen to these networks. This calls for an interdisciplinary project: for history, for ethnography, for cultural geography, and for all of those other genres which make meaning out of the landscapes of the city.

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