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and is the focus for the lion’s share of research activities and funding in fields ranging from biomedical to public health and much social science research. In the next chapter, on the social construction of sexuality and sexual experience, we turn to major critiques of this dominant paradigm, particularly on the part of thinkers influenced by feminism, Marxism, and sexual liberation movements.

Chapter 5

The social construction of sexual life

While essentialist ideas have continued to dominate much thinking about sexual life, they constitute a perspective that came under increasing attack during the latter part of the twentieth century. By the mid- to late 1960s, it was becoming apparent to many that the ‘sexological paradigm’ had started to disintegrate. Whether in structuralist thought, Marxist theory, or certain streams of psychoanalysis, the 1970s and 1980s were characterized by a new willingness to call into question the ‘naturalness’ of all human experience. Since much of the power of sex seemed linked to biological being and the experience of the body, sexuality was perhaps more resistant to such interrogation than many other areas of human life, but even here, important doubts began to be raised from a number of different theoretical vantage points. The primary challenge came from social theorists and researchers working on issues related to gender and sexuality and from activists, particularly from the feminist and emerging gay and lesbian movements, who questioned key elements of the sexological paradigm that they viewed as antithetical to their most important interests (Gagnon and Parker 1995).

Changing conceptual frameworks

There were at least three distinct disciplinary approaches used in interrogating the supposedly ‘natural’ basis of gender and sexuality. In sex research itself, the work of sociologists such as John H. Gagnon, William Simon, and Kenneth Plummer, who were heavily influenced by symbolic interactionist theory, was especially important. Psychoanalytical theory has also provided key tools and insights to challenge sex essentialism as exemplified by works of continental European writers such as Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Guy Hocquenghem, and of feminists such as Juliet Mitchell, Jessica Benjamin, and Nancy Chodorow. A third, distinct set of challenges emerged in the historical analyses of Michel Foucault, Randolph Trumbach, Robert Padgug, Jeffrey Weeks, John D’Emilio, and Estelle Freedman, and in the anthropological work of
writers such as Gayle Rubin, Esther Newton, Gilbert Herdt, Peter Fry, and Carole Vance.

Having served as senior researchers at the Kinsey Institute, Gagnon and Simon were in a unique position to offer a telling critique of the naturalist or essentialist position. In work beginning as early as the mid-1960s and continuing through to the 1990s, they sought to move from the categorizing empiricism of essentialist thought to a new concern with the significance or meaning that a sexual act has for the actor (Gagnon and Simon 1973, Simon and Gagnon 1984, 1986, 1987). In so doing, they linked this subjective meaning to the wider social and cultural context in which the sexual act takes place. They argued that sexual life is subject to a ‘sociocultural molding … surpassed by few other forms of human behavior’ (Gagnon and Simon 1973, p. 26), and were thus among the foremost proponents of the notion that ‘sexual meanings’ are socially constructed or constructed.

In developing this position, Gagnon and Simon, as well as Plummer and others working within an interactionist perspective, drew on a theoretical tradition stretching back to the work of writers such as Alfred Schutz (1967 [orig. 1932]) and George Herbert Mead (1934). From this perspective, the subjective significance of sexual life is built up in the flow of social life in interaction with other social actors. It links the question of sex to that of social inequality through the analysis of sexual deviance and gender difference as social facts. Gagnon and Simon suggested that perhaps nothing in human life should be seen as intrinsically sexual, but that virtually anything can be given sexual significance within a determined social context. They also drew on the dramatistic perspective of writers such as Kenneth Burke (1945) and Erving Goffman (1959) in developing the notion that sexual behaviour is thus socially ‘scripted’ – that meaningful sexual practices are produced according to socially determined scenarios, rules, and sanctions, which make possible certain understandings of the sexual world while excluding others:

> Scripts are a metaphor for conceptualizing the production of behaviour within social life. Most of social life most of the time must operate under the guidance of an operating syntax, much as language is a precondition for speech. For behaviour to occur, something resembling scripting must occur on three distinct levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intra-psychic scripts.

(Simon and Gagnon 1999, p. 29)

Gagnon and Simon defined cultural scenarios as ‘instructional guides’ existing at the level of collective social life – systems of signs and symbols through which the requirements for the practice of specific roles are given. These scenarios, they argued, are generally too abstract to be applied in all circumstances. The possibility of a lack of congruence between the abstract scenario and the concrete situation must be resolved by the creation of interpersonal scripts – a process that transforms the social actor into a scriptwriter, adapting and shaping the materials of cultural scenarios into scripts for behaviour in specific contexts. The need to script one’s behaviour, as well as to anticipate the scripted behaviour of others, is what creates a kind of ‘internal rehearsal’ (what Simon and Gagnon described as ‘intra-psychic scripting’), the symbolic reorganization of reality in ways that allow individual desires to be linked to social meanings. Their work thus called attention to the fact that nothing is intrinsically ‘sexual’ and that anything can be ‘sexualized’ in a given social context. Lacy lingerie or black leather may indeed incite desire or become the object of fantasy in specific cultural systems, but such desires or fantasies are learned responses rather than intrinsically grounded in some kind of underlying human nature. Even solitary sexual acts and masturbatory fantasies thus become socially constructed precisely because they are typically articulated in relation to a world of images and meanings that are appropriated, through intra-psychic scripting, from the wider social universe outside the individual and his or her subjective experience.

Within this framework, an understanding of the roots of sexuality, and the challenges that need to be faced in seeking to investigate sexual experience, is radically different from perspectives developed in more naturalist or essentialist approaches to sexual life. In contrast to the deep hermeneutic of Freudian psychoanalysis or the hydraulic theory of biological urges, emphasis is placed much more directly on the experience of desire, not simply as an individual reality but as part and parcel of the constitution of the individual’s social existence. As Simon and Gagnon put it, ‘Desire is not reducible to an appetite, a drive, an instinct; it does not create the self, rather it is part of the process of the creation of the self’ (Simon and Gagnon 1999, p. 30).

While Gagnon and Simon’s work on sexual scripts was pioneering and is probably the best-known example of using an interactionist approach to study sexuality, this approach has been further developed over a number of decades by a range of researchers (see Longmore 1998). Laws and Schwartz, for example, sought to apply scripting theory to explore women’s sexuality (Laws and Schwartz 1977). Plummer’s work on interactionism and sexual identity has drawn on interactionist theories of ‘deviance’ as well as Goffman’s classic work on stigma (Goffman 1963) and has used them, together with social labelling theory, to analyse the construction of sexual identities and sexual stigma (Plummer 1975). Arguing that sexuality ‘has no meaning other than that given to it in social situations’ (Plummer 1982, p. 233), Plummer and others working along similar lines have emphasized the fundamentally contingent character of sexual meanings – as well as the fact that sexual development must be
thought of as a kind of ‘life-long learning process which is historically malleable’ (Plummer 1982, p. 235). Plummer called attention to the stories that human beings tell in order to create sexual meaning and to the ways in which the invention of the sexual self has increasingly blurred the boundaries between private and public experience in contemporary social life (Plummer 1995, 2003). Drawing on ethnography as well as interactionism, this work has also sought to explore the ways in which male and female are practically accomplished through ‘doing gender’, with important consequences for social stratification along the lines of gender as played out structurally in social spaces or domains of family, work, the state, and so on (Kessler and McKenna 1978, West and Zimmerman 1991).

Although work drawing on social interactionism has created an important alternative to the positivist science of sexuality that has dominated the field, it has arguably been more effective in describing sexual diversity than in theorizing about it (Weeks 1999a, p. 129). Interactionist accounts recognize the inequalities that exist between different groups and the ways in which social stratification may impact on patterns of sexual conduct, but the interactionist framework has provided relatively little insight into the variables at work in relation to structural differentials in power and authority. Thus interactionist work has not provided a theoretical grounding for political action seeking to address inequality and power in relation to sexuality. Perhaps because of this, while interactionist work has made an important contribution to research on sexual experience, interest has also focused on a number of other approaches that might provide a more far-reaching theoretical framework for challenging sexual oppression.

Although drawing inspiration from very different sources, an equally important critique of the essentialist position emerged at about the same time – the structuralist influence most closely associated with the work of Lacan in psychoanalysis (Lacan 1968, 1977, 1981; see also Mannoni 1971, Turkle 1981). Moving away from the biological emphasis present in much early psychoanalytic writing, Lacan and his followers turned increasingly to a concern with language and its role in the constitution of both the unconscious and sexual desire. They concentrated on the entry of ‘society’ into the mind of the child; on the child’s movement from an ‘imaginary order’ that emphasizes his/her bond with the mother to a ‘symbolic order’ in which the law of the father imposes itself and gives rise to an unconscious and ultimately insatiable desire to be the other, to be the father (Lacan 1977). As Weeks has pointed out:

In Lacan’s ‘recovery’ of Freud, it is the law of the father, the castration fear and the paired entry into the symbolic order – the order of language – at the Oedipal moment which instigates desire.... It is the expression of a fundamental absence, which cannot be fulfilled, the desire to be the other, the father, which is both alienated and insatiable: alienated because the child can only express its desire by means of language which itself constitutes its submission to the father, and insatiable because it is desire for a symbolic position which is itself arbiter of the possibilities for the expression of desire. The law of the father therefore constitutes both desire and the lack on which it is predicated.

(Weeks 1999b, p. 127)

While the Lacanian formulation tended to reproduce many of the universalistic assumptions found in earlier psychoanalytic frameworks, its extension in the work of writers such as Juliet Mitchell, Jane Gallop, Elizabeth Grosz, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Guy Hocquenghem has also sought to more fully historicize the Oedipal situation by focusing on the particular contexts of patriarchal society and capitalist economy. In Psychoanalysis and Feminism (1974), for example, Mitchell drew heavily on Lacan’s reading of Freud in order to focus on the production of male dominance within the symbolic world of the unconscious:

In the briefest possible terms we could say that psychoanalysis is about the material reality of ideas both within, and of, man’s history; thus in ‘penis-envy’ we are talking not about an anatomical organ, but about the ideas of it that people hold and live by within general culture, the order of human society. It is this last factor that also prescribes the reference point of psychoanalysis. The way we live as ‘ideas’ the necessary laws of human society is not so much conscious as unconscious – the particular task of psychoanalysis is to decipher how we acquire our heritage of the ideas and laws of human society within the unconscious mind, or, to put it another way, the unconscious mind is the way in which we acquire these laws.

(Mitchell 1974, p. xiv)

In Mitchell’s reading of psychoanalysis, then, the phallus becomes the central signifier, in Lacan’s sense, as a cluster of words, images, and ideas: ‘the very mark of human desire’ (Mitchell 1974, p. 395). But this is clearly located socially in relation to patriarchy:

‘Patriarchy’ is a vague term; in anthropology we are used to the greater precisions of ‘patrilineal’, ‘patrilateral’, ‘patrilocal’, but these omit to tell us about power and a general law. I have taken patriarchy to be the law of the father – and it is the operation of this law within the life of the individual boy and girl that Freud’s work can help us to understand... the operations of a patriarchal system that must by definition oppress women.

(Mitchell 1974, pp. xiv–xv)
This focus on the production and reproduction of patriarchal domination through the symbolic order, which can be captured by psychoanalytic interpretation, was an important step beyond Lacan and a key feminist contribution to the analysis of sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s. In the work of Mitchell and similar feminist thinkers, however, it still remained an essentially universalistic formulation linked to the overarching structures of patriarchal domination. The writings of Deleuze and Guattari sought to move beyond psychoanalysis by focusing on the symbolic order of the unconscious, not in relation to patriarchy but rather in relation to capitalism.

For Deleuze and Guattari, as for Lacan, the forms of desire are produced not by nature but by social relations - but they none the less rejected psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic notion of the Oedipus complex as a necessary stage in human development. They criticized Lacan for working within the Freudian psychoanalytic framework, arguing that this framework is trapped within the capitalist social and economic order. In their major work, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Deleuze and Guattari 1977 [orig. 1972]), they sought to move beyond both Marxism and psychoanalysis arguing that capitalist society trains us to believe that desire equals lack and therefore the only way to satisfy desire is to consume. Rejecting both psychoanalysis and the capitalist system that produced it, they argued, on the contrary, that rather than being produced by a 'fundamental absence', as the psychoanalytic formulation would have it, desire is in fact a productive force - that human beings should be understood as 'desiring machines' and that every person's machine parts can plug into and unplug from the machine parts of other people in an almost infinite variety of relationships. From their perspective, the psychoanalytic notion of the 'self' is an illusion - there is no single or unified self, but rather a fundamental fragmentation. Because capitalist society cannot live with the infinite variety of desires, interconnections, and relationships, it imposes constraints aimed at regulating and channelling desire, such as the social norms that concentrate reproduction in the nuclear family. By focusing its attention on the Oedipal relationship between parent and child, psychoanalytic theory - as much in its Freudian articulation as in Lacan's reinvention - thus reproduces the forms of domination present in capitalist society and offers no real hope, in Deleuze and Guattari's reading, of a radical critique capable of overcoming such domination.

In focusing on desire as a productive force and grounding their analysis historically in relation to capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari's approach provided an alternative not only to psychoanalysis, but also to previous work on the social dimensions of sexuality. Their work placed new emphasis on links between sex, language, and power not in terms of the linguistic structures that establish the authority of the father and the subservience of the mother within contexts of patriarchal domination, but rather in regard to the channelling and control of sexual desire under capitalist systems of production. This emphasis on the social production of sexuality would, in turn, prove to be an important influence on a new wave of historical and anthropological work focusing on gender and sexuality over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. The work carried out along these lines by Foucault and the writers who have followed him, in seeking to examine the 'history of sexuality' in Western civilization, has been particularly important and influential. Eschewing both the interactionist and the psychoanalytic traditions, Foucault was able to step outside the central arguments that typified the examination of sex in Western societies to relativize the very terms of the debate and to analyse the naturalist understanding of sexuality as itself a cultural system:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge gradually tries to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.

(Foucault 1978, pp. 105–106)

Foucault thus focused not so much on the question of sex per se as on the question of discourse and on its relation to knowledge and power, suggesting that it is precisely through discourse, through the structures of language and ideology, that our most fundamental relation to reality is organized. With this in mind, he argued that 'sexuality' must therefore be understood not as a natural given but as an historical construct that is quite literally constituted by the discourses we have devised to talk about it (Foucault 1978).

In examining this historical construct, Foucault - along with writers such as Donzelot and Weeks - turned to the 'discursive strategies' that, since at least the mid-nineteenth century, have delineated sex as a privileged object of knowledge in Western culture (Donzelot 1978, Foucault 1978, Weeks 1981). This focus on sex as an object of knowledge was correlated, in turn, to a new way of understanding power that is not simply linked to the state:

By power, I do not mean 'power' as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. By power, I do not mean, either, a mode of subjugation, which,
in contrast to violence, has the form of the rule. Finally, I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another … these are only the terminal forms power takes. It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations, immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disfunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.

(Foucault 1978, pp. 92–93)

In Foucault’s interpretation, the articulation of sexuality as an object of knowledge has made possible the emergence and deployment of a fundamentally new form of power in Western society – what Foucault has described as ‘biopower’ (Foucault 1978) – which seems to function not so much through traditional sanctions, such as the threat of violence or even death, as through the highly modern and rationalized regulation of life: ‘The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life’ (Foucault 1978, pp. 139–140). Indeed, it is precisely through the various forms of knowledge elaborated around questions linked to sexuality and reproduction – in disciplines such as sexology and demography, and in the social policies, services, and sectors they have given rise to in practice – that, in Foucault’s view, the operations of this new form of power were most evident.

Yet if the relations of power that quite literally constitute the sexual field appear, at one level, as a kind of seamless web or network enveloping everything in its path within determined historical junctures, this all-encompassing system of power also implies multiple points of resistance. Indeed, as Foucault stressed in his interviews and lectures as well as in his published works, ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ (Foucault 1978, p. 95). Yet his view of resistance was complex and unromanticized, insisting that we all always operate ‘inside’ power – that we participate in its ‘deployment’ even as we confront it – and that in this sense we simultaneously shape power even as we resist it.

This view of power and resistance, each implicated in the other, made Foucault highly sceptical of any claim concerning ‘liberation’ – at least to the extent that the idea of liberation would imply the existence of some kind of space outside of or apart from existing structures of power. Yet he saw the important possibilities for sexual rights movements understood in his terms as ‘movements of affirmation’:

I believe that the movements labelled ‘sexual liberation’ ought to be understood as movements of affirmation starting with sexuality. Which means two things: they are movements that start with sexuality, with the apparatus of sexuality in the midst of which we’re caught, and which make it function to the limit; but, at the same time, they are in motion relative to it, disengaging themselves and surmounting it.

(Foucault 1977a, p. 155)

This formulation was clearly very different from the self-understanding of many sectors of the feminist or gay and lesbian movements that had emerged in many parts of the world during the 1960s and 1970s, but it provided an important linkage between the intellectual project of analysis aimed at deconstructing the conceptual architecture of sexuality as a discursive field and the possibilities for taking meaningful political action within this field. As in the comparable work of interactionists and psychoanalysts, sex was again linked to questions of language and power – understood to be constituted through discourse as the key point of convergence for the innumerable strategies that regulate both the life of the body and the life of the population in contemporary Western societies. In the case of Foucault and his followers, however, the lines of intersection between these phenomena were altered or transformed; rather than being subject to an externally imposed oppression or repression functioning through language and the laws which it constitutes, sexuality seems to have been positively produced not merely by discourse but by power itself as a suitable object for regulation and intervention in the modern world. Resistance became a necessary corollary to power precisely because the functioning of power necessarily implies resistance as part of its very definition.

This insight about the interconnections between power and resistance proved to be a potent source of inspiration for an ongoing examination of the relations between power and knowledge in the construction of the edifice of ‘sexuality’ in Western history, and thus provided perhaps the most far-reaching critique of the search for a science of sexuality. In addition to focusing attention on the role of science and sexology in constituting the sexual field as part of a broader project of Western modernity, his analysis of ‘biopower’ may also be applied to the role of demography in creating ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ – in Adrienne Rich’s (2007) words – in the discourse on human development. While the familiar figures of Foucault’s history (the Malthusian couple, the masturbating child, the perverse homosexual, and so on) were all fixed in Western discourse long before the emergence and development of demography as a distinct disciplinary
frame, demography has none the less been crucial to the importation of these figures into the discursive tropes of contemporary development discourse. Such tropes include the fertile (or infertile) couples of population-based surveys, the unwanted pregnancies of sexually active teenagers, the epidemiological risk groups of HIV-positive homosexuals, the transmission vectors of sex workers, and so on. To the extent that demography has traditionally constructed itself as simultaneously both objective and utilitarian – as a scientific toolkit capable of providing the basis for practical interventions in the field of population – it has played a profound role in crystallizing many of the key symbolic structures and social representations employed in the service not only of gender oppression, but also of diverse forms of sexual exploitation and discrimination (see Corrêa and Parker 2004).8

**Gender, sexuality, and the politics of difference**

Foucault's work is probably best understood as analytic rather than historical, or what he himself might describe as 'the history of the present' rather than the history of the past. None the less, it exerted great influence in opening up the intellectual space for a rapidly expanding body of work in both social history and cultural anthropology. This work sought to relativize the presumed normality (or hegemony) of sexuality in contemporary Western societies, confronting these patterns with a wide array of alternative arrangements identified across both time and space. In the historical work of a growing range of researchers, the contemporary organization of sexual relations and sexual experience was juxtaposed with the very different constructions found in ancient Greece or Rome, in pre-industrial societies, in the Western world of the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, or even in the immediate post-Second World War era in the West.9 In much the same way, a growing number of social and cultural anthropologists began to explore the significant differences between the construction of sexuality in Western societies and the systems found in the diverse countries and cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere in the so-called developing world.10

While the disciplinary roots of both historical and anthropological research on sexuality could clearly be found in a certain elaboration of the 'scientific/sexological' project described above in Chapter 4 – empirically documenting the range of human sexual expressions and including them in the scientific record of human diversity – the primary motivation for much of the earliest work on the social and historical construction of diverse sexualities was largely political rather than academic. The research and analysis of almost all the earliest social historians and anthropologists, who in the 1970s and early 1980s began to describe the variations of gender and sexuality historically and cross-culturally, came as much from the leftist political commitments of many of the pioneering writers as from the margins of the academy. Indeed, many of the most important early researchers worked independently or as part of progressive political collectives rather than inside universities or research institutes (see D'Emilio 1983, 1992, Katz 1976). Much of the most important historical and anthropological work carried out during this period was thus a response not only to the intellectual challenges posed by writers such as Foucault, but also to the emerging problematics of gender power and sexual diversity articulated first by the feminist movement and then increasingly by the gay and lesbian liberation movement.

In work carried out during the 1970s and 1980s, therefore, there was an important shift of emphasis as researchers sought to empirically document the social arrangements and cultural forms through which sexuality and sexual practices are differentially organized at specific points in time and space. They sought to move beyond gendered and sexualized differences, in and of themselves, to also examine the ways in which systems of hierarchy and inequality operate through both gender and sexuality in different cultural and historical contexts (Ortner and Whitehead 1981, Ross and Rapp 1983). Early work documenting the general question of inequality between the sexes sought, largely through cross-cultural comparison, to identify the social and cultural mechanisms that constitute and maintain hierarchical ideologies of gender (see, e.g., MacCormack and Strathern 1980, Reitter 1975, Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). This led, over time, to an increasingly sophisticated analysis of concrete case studies focusing on issues of gender and reproductive relations and of the diverse organization of same-sex relations.11 These issues, in turn, were key in the development of a more widespread recognition of what Rubin described as 'sex/gender systems': a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied (Rubin 1975, p. 159).

Human beings may have an innate biological capacity and need for sex but this fact in and of itself tells us nothing about the actual workings of sexuality. On the contrary, the focus for investigation, in Rubin's view, must be the way in which sexuality is historically produced: 'Sex as we know it – gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood – is itself a social product. We need to understand the relations of its production' (Rubin 1975, p. 166). Thus, within this formulation, the structures of sexual inequality, and even the psychological construction of desire, emerge not as a natural or biological phenomenon, but as a social product articulated within specific political and economic frameworks. The challenge for research on sexuality becomes that of developing what may be described as a 'political economy' of the sexual order – or, perhaps more broadly, a 'political economy of the body' (see, e.g., Lancaster 1993, Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997, Parker and Aggleton 1999; see also Chapter 6).
The development of work on sex/gender systems has been significantly advanced in recent decades through the application of a range of theoretical insights and methodological tools drawn from the wider field of cultural analysis and interpretive theory. Research on gender and sexuality has increasingly developed into a more all-encompassing examination of what Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead described in the early 1980s as ‘sexual meanings’; an analysis of the intersubjective symbolic forms and the associated structures of social organization that constitute the sexual realm in particular social and cultural contexts and invest it with subjective meaning for the concrete social actors who pass through it and live out their lives on its terms (see Ortner and Whitehead 1981).

From this point of view, the sexual universe emerges as simultaneously material and ideological – a construct that can only be fully understood when situated in relation to other social, cultural, political, and economic domains (e.g., religion, kinship, work). It is through this emphasis on sexual meanings that the whole question of sexuality is articulated with issues related to gender and reproduction, on the one hand, and the dynamics of desire, understandings of sexual pleasure, and sociocultural organization of sexual practices, on the other. Here, in the emphasis placed upon the social and cultural constitution of such meanings, the anthropological tradition, elaborated largely with reference to non-Western societies, most clearly intersects with the developments described above that have taken place in the sociological, psychological, and historical examination of sexual life in the West – the interactionism of thinkers such as Gagnon and Simon or Plummer, the psychoanalysis of Lacan and others influenced by him, such as Mitchell or Deleuze and Guattari, and the historical analyses of Foucault or Weeks. Taken together, these perspectives offered the possibility for a radically new understanding of the full range of human sexual experience – an understanding focused less on the scientific search for universal truths than on the awareness of diversity; based less on the definition of an assumed essence than on the detailed interpretation of difference.

Particularly over the course of the 1980s, this increasing emphasis on sexual meanings and on sexual diversity and difference was, in turn, linked to an important analytic distinction between gender and sexuality as key axes for the workings of power within the sexual field. Most clearly laid out by Rubin in another pioneering essay, ‘Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality’ (Rubin 1984), in which she defended a clear analytical distinction between gender and sexuality rather than their unification in the notion of sex/gender systems:

I am now arguing that it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their separate social existence.

This goes against the grain of much contemporary feminist thought, which treats sexuality as a derivation of gender.

(Rubin 1984, p. 308)

Rubin recognized that an intimate link exists between these two systems, but she argued that it is important to recognize that they are not the same:

Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice.

(Rubin 1984, p. 308)

As Rubin continued to focus attention on the workings of gender power and gender oppression, she began outlining the characteristics of what she described as a ‘sex hierarchy’ that operates, at least in contemporary Western societies, as distinct from the ‘gender hierarchy’. This sex hierarchy maps out the range of possible sexual practices on a kind of continuum. At one end of this continuum we find a ‘good’, ‘natural’, or ‘normal’ sexuality that is reproductive, monogamous, marital, non-commercial, and heterosexual and recognized as acceptable by medical, religious, and political power centres, while at the other end, at the bottom of the sex hierarchy, lie other sexual practices defined as ‘evil’, ‘unnatural’, or ‘abnormal’ sexual practices:

According to this system, sexuality that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’, or ‘unnatural’. Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in ‘public’, or at least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles.... [A]n imaginary line ... distinguishes these from all other erotic behaviours, which are understood to be the work of the devil, dangerous, psychopathological, infantile, or politically reprehensible.... The line appears to stand between sexual order and chaos. It expresses the fear that if anything is permitted to cross this erotic DMZ [Demilitarized Zone], the barrier against scary sex will crumble and something unspeakable will skitter across.

(Rubin 1984, pp. 280–282)
In shifting emphasis from gender to sexuality and exploring the ways in which frameworks for thinking about, investigating, and regulating sexuality have been used for purposes of oppression and domination of sexual minorities, Rubin thus played a key role in linking the analysis of sexuality, knowledge, and power developed by Foucault and his followers to a much clearer agenda for political mobilization and social change than has typically been articulated from a Foucaultian perspective. Her work suggests some of the ways in which historical and anthropological analysis might be used strategically as a point of departure not just for thinking about and knowing about sex, but for engaging in projects aimed at social and political change.  

**Normatization, subversion, and the possibilities of queer theory**

By the mid- to late 1980s, a series of seismic shocks had begun to shake the social context in which thinking on sexuality and sexual politics was developing. In countries such as the USA and the UK a conservative backlash had begun to be felt, as much in social mores as in politics, and reactionary political leaders and platforms had swept into power. Without yet having been named, or even clearly articulated, patterns of economic restructuring and processes of social, cultural, and economic integration had begun to take shape across almost all regions of the world as part of what would later come to be defined as a significant intensification of neoliberal globalization. Linked to these changes, in ways that would only begin to be fully understood over time, the HIV epidemic had emerged both North and South of the equator, creating an extended crisis within many of the sexual communities at the forefront of progressive sexual thinking and sexual politics during the 1970s and the early 1980s. The impact of HIV and AIDS, in particular, will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 6, but it is none the less important to highlight here the ways in which these interrelated changes in the broader social, cultural, political, and economic context both destabilized and provided new challenges to the important work being carried out on historical and cross-cultural differences in the construction of genders and sexualities and on the politics of sexuality.

This unsettling turmoil is especially vivid in Gayle Rubin’s ethnographic and historical work during this period. For example, what began in the late 1970s as a kind of celebration of sexual rebellion and transgression on the part of the gay male S-and-M subculture in the South of Market district in San Francisco (see Rubin 1982, 1991, 2000) became by the late 1980s what Rubin described as an ‘elegy’ for a community that had been devastated by the HIV epidemic (Rubin 1997). Indeed, over the course of the 1980s many of the key figures in the first wave of social constructionist thought on sexuality, including Michel Foucault, died of AIDS, while many others whose work was informed in important ways by social constructionist concerns came to concentrate much of their intellectual energy on research and activism in relation to the epidemic. Some of the most insightful critical work on the social and cultural politics of HIV and AIDS – developed by writers such as Crimp (1988), Patton (1990), Treichler (1999), and Watney (1987) – has been informed by social constructionist insights and perspectives and has offered an important counter-current to the remedicalization of sexuality research and analysis that would emerge in the wake of the epidemic (see Chapter 6).

Within an increasingly polarized political climate – particularly in the USA, where what were often described as ‘the culture wars’ (Hunter 1992) emerged as especially intense – a new focus on the cultural articulation of both normativity and subversion in relation to gender and sexuality gave rise over the course of the 1990s to a new wave of research and analysis sometimes described as ‘queer theory’ (de Lauretis 1991). While this relatively imprecise label is probably inadequate for truly capturing the wide range of work to which it has been applied, it was initially a useful way to gloss an overarching concern with the ways in which gendered and sexualized identities are constituted as a function of social and cultural representations. Precisely because representation pre-exists and therefore precedes identity formation, disruptions of normative representations can play a key role in seeking to transform existing relations and power structures. This insight has been a central motivation for a large body of work carried out in the 1990s and early 2000s that aimed at unsettling accepted notions of gender and sexuality – and perhaps in particular at analysing the structures of perception, knowledge, and thought that have shaped understandings of homosexuality and other forms of sexual dissidence, particularly in Western societies.

While this literature is now quite extensive, with influential contributions such as Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Warner’s edited volume, *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), perhaps no one working along these lines has had as much influence as Judith Butler, an American philosopher and political theorist whose writings on gender and the body have extended social constructionist critiques in important ways. Butler has drawn heavily on Foucault’s work, along with structuralist and post-structuralist psychoanalysis and literary criticism, in ways that have opened up important new insights in relation to gender and sexuality. While Rubin emphasized material relations and historical practices, Butler has placed greater emphasis on the role of language and discourse in understanding the cultural construction of gendered and sexualized identities. In her first influential work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler 1990a), Butler argued against the ontological coherence of categories such as sex, gender, and sexuality. She challenged
the notion of binary sexes as a biological or natural phenomenon, arguing that the sexed body is itself culturally constructed within 'regulative discourses' and 'disciplinary techniques' that guide subjects into performing stylized acts that in fact produce gender and sexuality rather than the other way around. It is in this sense that Butler has described gender, as well as sex and sexuality, as 'performatively': 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1990a, p. 25).

Precisely because of this, the very notion of gender as an essential category disintegrates in the performances from which both the sexes and sexualities are produced:

> Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis.

(Butler 1990b, p. 271)

Based on this formulation, Butler has argued that traditional feminist analyses of gender have in fact unwittingly reproduced gender hierarchies by assuming that masculinity and femininity are inevitably constituted on the basis of male and female bodies – reinforcing a binary view of gender as divided into the two clearly distinct groups of men and women. Through the repeated acts of culturally constituted performance, male and female sex is thus seen to cause masculine and feminine gender. The binary nature of gender, in turn, is constitutive of heteronormative desire: the desire of one gender for the other.15

Butler's work has been important in destabilizing the supposed normality of heterosexuality. Because heterosexuality – like all other forms of sexuality – must be constantly produced and reproduced through the reiteration of its performance, its tenuous and precarious character is unmasked: 'That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it "knows" its own possibility of being undone' (Butler 1991, p. 23).

This idea of identity (and desire) – not as an essence anchored in bodily reality, but rather as performative and therefore free from the constraints of the body and open to multiple permutations and transformations – is perhaps more forcefully articulated in a sustained theoretical argument by Butler than by any other writer. In her 1993 work, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex', Butler continued to raise important questions of both an epistemological and ethical nature. First, she complicated the very notion of materiality, positing that the material body is not an irreducible subtext or tabula rasa that gets inscribed by culture but rather always exists in a relationship of dynamic interaction with social meaning and power: 'It is clear from the start that matter has a history (indeed, more than one) and that the history of matter is in part determined by the negotiation of sexual difference' (Butler 1993, p. 29). This perspective challenged the familiar nature–culture or body–mind dualism taken for granted by many social constructionist theories, including long-standing feminist distinctions between 'sex' (the biologically sexed body as fixed, innate) and 'gender' (the social meanings attached, variously and arbitrarily, to biological, sexed bodies). In Butler's view, as in that of feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, bodies are socially and culturally embedded from the start and compelling evidence (for example, about intersex infants or the tremendous range of sexual and reproductive possibilities, or bodily strength and agility) attests to the continual and complex interactions between bodies and their environments, especially the 'regulatory norms' that prescribe which bodies matter and how they matter (Butler 1993, p. 2, Fausto-Sterling 2000, pp. 22–23).

This epistemological understanding sets up the empirical ground for a radical rethinking of the ethics of sexual normativity and sexual exclusions. In Bodies that Matter, Butler argued that the 'excluded sites' of sexual and gender subjectivity 'come to bound the "human" as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and re-articulation'. She announced her task 'to understand how what has been foreclosed or banished from the proper domain of "sex" – where that domain is secured through a heterosexualizing imperative – might at once be produced as a troubling return ... as an enabling disruption' (Butler 1993, pp. 8, 23). Thus it becomes possible to see the subversive potential of drag (as represented by the East Harlem transvestites in the Jennie Livingston film, Paris is Burning) in its disclosure that 'all gender ... is drag'. Drag queens and kings (and presumably all instances of transgender life) expose the imitative, performative impulse 'at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binaries'; heterosexuality and gender dualism are themselves always an approximation of an impossible ideal (Butler 1993, p. 125).

In her more recent work – particularly the books Precarious Life (2004a) and Undoing Gender (2004b) – Butler explores the ethical and political implications of these epistemological insights in greater depth. She poses fundamental questions: How do we define the terms of what it means to be human? Who counts as belonging to the universe of 'humanness' and is thus entitled to respect and human rights? What are the conditions of a 'livable' or a 'grievable' – or 'life'? (Butler 2004a, pp. 31–33, 2004b, p. 17). Since these questions are always and everywhere bound up with sites of power, the power of recognition (or its denial), they are also profoundly political. Recognition necessarily involves regulatory practices – the production of norms (normativization) and the conferring of names,
categories, diagnoses, and intelligibility on subjects. Such processes too often bring forms of exclusion or even dehumanization (such as in the medicalization and mutilation of intersex infants and the treatment of prisoners in Guantánamo).

Paradoxically, however, they also produce the very subjects they seek to define and thus, because of what Butler earlier called 'the slippage between a discursive command and its appropriated effect' (Butler 1993, p. 122), the possibility of resisting reality as it is currently constituted. Fantasy itself, in this understanding, 'is not the opposite of reality' but 'what reality forecloses'; it establishes the possible in excess of the real' (Butler 2004b, p. 29). In this way, fantasy and its embodiment in sexually diverse subjects have political and strategic importance:

One of the central tasks of lesbian and gay [and transgender] international rights is to assert in clear and public terms the reality of homosexuality [and 'drag, femme, transgender, transsexual persons'], not as an inner truth, not as a sexual practice, but as one of the defining features of the social world in its very intelligibility.

(Butler 2005, p. 29)

We will come back to the implications of this ethical theory for human rights in Chapter 9. For now, it is most important to emphasize that Butler’s work (and that of other thinkers such as Fausto-Sterling) has been especially important in moving beyond the often overly self-referential boundaries of some queer theory work in the academy to reach out to a broader audience.

While the influence of queer theory has been most significant in literary criticism and cultural studies and much more limited in social and political theory, it has none the less provided inspiration for work that has increasingly understood sexuality in relation to power that is embedded in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides. It has thus led to an important problematization of previously taken-for-granted sexual and gender categories, and of identities more generally (see Stein and Plummer 1994). Although largely based in relatively elite academic settings in the USA, and to a lesser extent in the UK and other Western European countries, the emergence of queer theory and queer studies has none the less offered important new insights that have been useful in rethinking over-simplistic oppositions between masculinity and femininity and homosexuality and heterosexuality, as well as in breaking down monolithic (typically white and middle-class) notions of ‘gay and lesbian community’ especially in the Anglo-European world (Parker 1999). In particular, it has called our attention to questions of internal differences in gender power, race and ethnicity, and related social distinctions, and over time has gradually expanded beyond its elite Western roots, opening up new understandings of sexual diversity and difference in a range of non-Western settings as well (see, e.g., Boelstorff 2003, Parker 1999, Rofel 2007).

Both building on and, in important ways, expanding the work of Butler and queer theorists, other writers during the decade of the mid-1990s to the present have explored what Currah has called ‘the transgender imaginary’ (Currah 2003). Transgender writers and activists such as Currah, Bornstein (1994), Stryker (1994), Feinberg (1996), Halberstam (1998), and Minter (2006) have clearly built upon Rubin’s rethinking of a conceptual and lived distinction between sexuality and gender and on Butler’s radical critique of binaries and exclusions in both realms. They have expanded upon queer theory’s rejection of the privileging of ‘gay and lesbian’ in gendered sexual politics by developing the concept of the ‘transgender umbrella’ (see Introduction). In contrast to queer theorists, however, transgender writers and advocates have moved the recognition of the (racialized, class-based) power relations challenging the boundaries of both sex and gender to a more pragmatic and policy-oriented space. Concerned with forming communities and a social movement that confronts political and medical authorities around issues as basic to a ‘liveable life’ as identification on birth certificates and drivers’ licenses, access to public bathrooms as well as medical services, and recognition of trans-persons as full human beings with rights, they have taken the critical study of sexuality and gender outside the academy and into the arena of political strategy and social change (see Cabral and Viturro 2006, Currah 2003, Currah et al. 2006, Spade 2006, Thomas 2006).

In this sense, queer theory and transgender theory represent an important extension of earlier work in history, anthropology, and sociology that focused on the social dimensions of gender and sexuality. There are many important differences that distinguish these diverse strands of what came to be known, perhaps too generically, as social constructionist theory in sexuality research. None the less, the work carried out from this perspective converged on a number of crucially important issues and changed not only the epistemological framing but the empirical research agendas for the investigation of sexuality and sexual conduct during the 1990s and the early 2000s. In opposition to the essentialist assumptions that have dominated more mainstream research on sexuality and sexual behaviour, work on the social construction of sexuality has challenged both the universalistic conceptualization of sexuality and sexual practices, on the one hand, and the privileged status of perceived objective scientific inquiry, on the other. It has clearly rejected the analysis of sex as an autonomous phenomenon – as a force of nature that the social order must somehow seek to stifle or control (Gagnon and Parker 1995).

Social construction theory developed the alternative view that sexual conduct was based not on universal, internal biological, or psychological
drives but rather that it was constituted and elicited in specific contexts and circumstances, seeing the sexual realm as a highly particular product of specific social, cultural, and historical processes (Vance 1989). Although in different ways, all of the approaches that have focused on the social construction of sexuality have sought to situate the question of sex within a wider analytic framework – to focus on its relation to the structures of gender, kinship, and family life, to conceptualize it within historical transformations of economy and society, and to link it to an examination of the politics of culture itself. Ultimately, when taken together, these various currents of social constructionist thought have thus opened up an intellectual space for the analysis not so much of sex itself – understood as a discrete phenomenon or a distinct object of knowledge – but of the various processes through which the sexual realm is socially and culturally defined, delineated, and invested with meaning, together with the ways in which it is politically and economically shaped and integrated into broader systems of power and domination. It is in its understanding of sexuality as positioned at a kind of intersection of culture and power that much of its analytic force has been most clearly realized.

Chapter 6

After AIDS

Just as the early development of sexology sought to liberate sexuality from the influence of religious doctrine and religious authority, the social constructionist approach as it emerged during the 1970s and 1980s was an equally conscious attempt to resist the medicalization of sexuality that had become so deeply rooted in the early twentieth century. With the emergence of the HIV epidemic in the early 1980s, however, a rapid remedicalization of approaches to sexuality began to take place within research and as part of the broader social response to the epidemic.

Among the most immediate consequences of the growing epidemic was a massive increase in sexual behaviour research. It quickly became apparent that due to the long-term neglect of investment in research (and research infrastructure) within this field, an exceptionally limited knowledge base existed with regard to many of the key sources of information needed in order to respond to an inevitably fatal disease transmitted primarily through sexual contact. This provided a major stimulus for the investment of significant new resources, particularly in relation to HIV and AIDS, as well as other issues of relevance to sexuality and health.

Epidemiology, epistemology, and ‘health behaviours’

During the early years of the HIV epidemic in the USA, one of the most frequently repeated laments of public health officials and activists alike was the lack of available data on sexual behaviour and the need to rely on findings from the initial Kinsey studies, now nearly 50 years out of date. At its most absurd, findings from the Kinsey studies, or from more recent research in the USA, were even used to speculate about behavioural frequencies in completely unrelated settings such as the countries and cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, where the epidemic was quickly perceived to be especially widespread (see Chouinard and Albert 1990, Turner et al. 1989, pp. 73–74). The urgent need to respond to the epidemic with more contemporary and more meaningful research thus