"An Introduction"

Guy R. Davidson

University of Wollongong, guy@uow.edu.au

Publication Details
Sexual Revolutions: An Introduction

by Guy Davidson

The essays brought together in this issue of Australian Humanities Review represent a selection of the papers delivered at a one-day symposium, "Sexual Revolutions," that I convened with Nicola Evans at the University of Wollongong in December 2004. The premise of the symposium was a rethinking of the connections, and also the tensions, between sexuality and liberatory politics in contemporary humanities scholarship. In organising this occasion, I also sought both to showcase, and to encourage dialogue between, young Australian scholars whose work is of emerging importance in the field of sexuality studies. There is a strong tradition of internationally influential scholarship on sexuality in the Australian humanities and social sciences -- represented, for instance, by the work of Dennis Altman, Robert Aldrich, Gary Dowsett, and Annamarie Jagose. The papers collected here represent a sample of new work that draws upon and contributes to this important tradition of Australian academic enquiry.

In my initial approach to the symposium participants, I signalled a concern in particular with the ways in which sexuality might be thought of as not simply the focus of liberatory politics but also the ways in which sexuality -- that is, the representation and the lived experience of sexuality -- might be thought of as contributing to and even helping to form such a politics. I fixed upon "Sexual Revolutions" as a catchy title that seemed to indicate the purview of the planned symposium. As the day of the symposium approached, and I mulled over the implications of my chosen title, it occurred to me that the term "sexual revolution" might also be thought of as encompassing the notion of significant shifts within humanities scholarship about the matter of sexuality which seem to be taking place, and with which I was sure the papers to be delivered would engage. This modification of the term's meaning might seem a bit of a stretch, given its potent historical associations. But in the context of the papers collected here, it is, I think, a productive modification; so I plead your indulgence as I unpack the two distinct, but I hope to show, interrelated valences of sexual revolution in these introductory remarks.

Firstly, the ways in which sexuality might be thought of as affecting politics. The term sexual revolution, as we usually employ it, refers to a wide range of social and discursive changes associated with sexual practices, attitudes towards sexuality,
formations of gender and so on, that take place in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Specific instances of the phenomena commonly collected together under the rubric of sexual revolution are diverse and might include: the rise of the gay and lesbian rights movement; the development of an unprecedented female sexual autonomy (however compromised by persisting subtle and not-so-subtle forms of patriarchal control); the mainstreaming of pornography; and so on. The term *sexual revolution* implies that changes like these have a knock-on effect on the social setting in which sexuality is located -- an effect that is ultimately liberatory for the citizens of capitalist, Western nations.

This popular understanding of sexual revolution is echoed, or rather anticipated, in more recondite terms by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) -- a book which was, of course, signally important for the 1960s counterculture with which the sexual revolution is intimately associated in the minds of many. At a key point in his argument, Marcuse writes: "We have to ask whether the sex instincts, after the elimination of all surplus-repression, can develop a 'libidinal rationality' which is not only compatible with but even promotes progress toward higher forms of civilized freedom" (182). The entrenched Foucauldianism of the study of sexuality within the humanities has rendered the arguments of Freudian radicals like Marcuse highly dubious, if not obsolete, to use one of Marcuse's own favourite terms. After Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976-84), to view sexuality as a potential matrix of revolutionary or even simply progressive politics seems naïve -- it smacks of the misguided optimism of a time not our own. And, indeed, in this connection, it's not irrelevant that the term sexual revolution was coined by a thinker much more decisively discredited than Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, in his book *The Sexual Revolution*, originally published in German in 1945.

Foucault may have presented a devastating critique of Marcusian thought (not to mention Reichian thought) on sexuality. But nevertheless, as Paul Breines has pointed out in an essay on Marcuse and Foucault, Foucault himself exhibits an attenuated utopianism at points in his work -- most notably perhaps in his famous peroration at the close of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, in which he looks speculatively beyond the modern social formation to a world of bodies and pleasures that is arguably not that different from the libidinal liberation envisaged by Marcuse (Breines). The fact that even Foucault indulges in such speculation indicates perhaps that the notion of a link between sexuality and liberation is an enduringly compelling one.

But the papers collected together in this issue do not necessarily explicitly address this link between sexuality and liberation. Although they are all informed by progressive politics, they do not necessarily concern themselves directly with the connections between erotic desire and social change. This is where my second use of the term sexual revolution becomes useful. The kind of revolution readers may encounter in engaging with these papers may be a property of the thought elaborated in them and, more generally, in the field of contemporary sexuality studies. By this, I don't mean that contemporary sexuality studies in general and these essays in particular are all engaged in overturning established scholarly understandings of sexual meaning and sexual
practice. Luckily for me, revolution has denotations other than such a radical overhaul.

Probably the most well-known of these alternative denotations of revolution is repetition or return. This isn't quite the denotation I want to highlight here, of course, although these papers do return or repeat in the sense that, like all academic enquiry, they build their arguments upon the citation (but also the moderation) of established conceptual and theoretical work. The meaning of revolution I'd like to associate these papers with (admittedly a long-obsolete one) is a turn, twist, bend, or widening. The bending and twisting of preconceptions and suppositions about sexuality and its cultural associations is a key feature of the papers collected in this issue.

In this bending and twisting, these papers, as I say, participate in a rethinking of some of the basic assumptions that inform sexuality studies today. Of course, in the humanities we're always saying we're "rethinking" things -- rethinking forms the organising principle of many a conference, collected edition, or special journal issue like this one. A somewhat disenchanted view of this process points, doubtless accurately, to the ways in which such an incessant revisionist turnover of theories and concepts demonstrates the implication of academic work in commodity capitalism's rhythm of innovation and obsolescence. I'd prefer to take a less jaded view of the process in this instance, though, and suggest that the changes taking place in the theorisation of sexuality today offer significant and challenging qualifications of the established paradigms of Foucauldianism and constructivism.

Humanities scholars working on sexuality are increasingly willing to engage with discourses that would have been anathema a few years ago. There is a willingness, however tentative, to draw upon the rich conceptual resources of the sciences. There is also evident in sexuality studies today, I believe, an attempt to think through the ways in which sexuality is an active agent in the construction of the social -- rather than simply being shaped or produced by historical and cultural forces. And here I myself complete my own revolution -- back to the issue I raised at the start of these remarks about how sexuality might be thought to shape the social.

An articulation of the significance of this way of thinking about sexuality is provided by Valerie Traub in a recent essay reviewing the scholarship of the late Alan Bray, author of the pathbreaking historical studies Homosexuality in Renaissance England (1982) and The Friend (2003). In his afterword to the 1995 edition of Homosexuality in Renaissance England, Bray writes that "attitudes to homosexuality unquestionably have been symptomatic of fundamental changes in European society and in substantial part constitutive of them" (qtd. in Traub 351). Traub elaborates: "Sexual representation is not merely mimetic; it has an efficacy, an agency of its own. Such an assertion urges a greater appreciation of sexuality's ideological utility to exert pressure on practices, discourses, and institutions external to it"; a utility that Traub asserts, with specific reference to Bray's work, may help to create or to threaten social cohesion (351).

This emphasis on the capacity of sexuality to affect or even produce practices and relations generally thought of, in the current scholarly environment, as external or prior to it is also evident in Samuel Delany's Times Square Red, Times Square Blue (1999), a
remarkable book about the culture of casual sex between men in the pre-Disneyfied Times Square district of New York that, in the few years since it was published, has proved an important text for "thinking with" in innovative scholarship on sexuality. Delany presents the casual sexual culture of Times Square as a paradigm of the cross-class "contact" that he deems both the most pleasurable and the most democratic form of sociality available under the present capitalist dispensation.

Delany has been labelled a utopian, and I suspect it’s not a label he would reject -- although he’d no doubt have his own characteristically finessed take on such a term. While the essays collected in this issue may be very different in tenor from Delany's work in *Times Square Red*, they do have in common with that work a nuanced understanding of the ways in which sexuality may impinge upon a whole range of social relations. This understanding is evinced by Monique Rooney's account of the relations between ghettoisation and free-floating modalities of desire in today's complexly mediatised culture; by Robert Reynolds' exploration of the ripples and stabilities in sexual self-identification in a post-queer Western world; and by Murray Pratt's witty meditation on the social transformations, however subtle, that queer identities and practices may yet effect. While the essays collected in this issue may not all share Delany's optimism, they do, I think, share his understanding (however differently they deploy it) of how fragments of utopian or revolutionary modes of thinking may be embedded in the mundane practices and representations of sexuality.


_Guy Davidson is a lecturer in the School of English Literatures, Philosophy and Languages, University of Wollongong. He has published widely in the area of queer theory and sexuality studies, especially the study of gay male culture._

**WORKS CITED**


Also by Guy Davidson in _Australian Humanities Review_:  
- "Liberation, Commodity Culture and Community in 'the Golden Age of Promiscuity.'" _Australian Humanities Review_ 23 (2001).
In *Australian Humanities Review*, see also

- the National & Global Identities archive
- the Sexualities archive

Please feel free to **contribute** to this discourse.

©Australian Humanities Review all rights reserved.

http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/copyright.html for copyright notice.