

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Corvino, ed. *Same Sex: Debating the Ethics, Science, and Culture of Homosexuality*. Lanham, Md. and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. xxvii + 394 pp. \$31.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8482-3.

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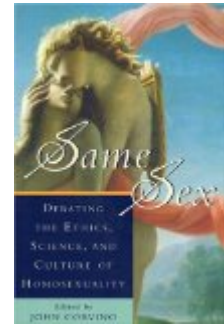
This collection of essays edited by John Corvino brings together contemporary debates surrounding same-sex sexuality. As Corvino cannily observes, “the love that dare not speak its name has become the love that won’t shut up” (p. xv), and, at first glance, it appears that his book simply replicates (sixteen of twenty-five of these essays have been published elsewhere) the work of others in the increasingly glutted, often repetitious, always political, and occasionally polemical field of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender studies.[1] However, as an aspiring historian of sexuality adding her own potentially redundant contributions to this mushrooming and sometimes exasperating fray, I was intrigued nonetheless by the table of contents of the book and ultimately found myself engrossed in the essays.

The contributors to *Same Sex* address homosexuality under four broad categories: morality and religion, science, history, and public policy; each of these sections builds on and addresses a main organizing question. In Part 1, “Morality and Religion,” the authors grapple with the question “what are the consequences, personal or societal, of homosexuality?” As Corvino points out, most debates about the moral status of homosexuality focus on three main issues: nature, harm, and religion (p. xviii). Anti-gay arguments posit that same-sex identity or behavior (or both) are “unnatural” (i.e., non-procreative or “against” the male/female body’s “natural” use), potentially harmful (through the spread of AIDS or molestation of young children), or contrary to religious strictures. Corvino refutes all three of these basic arguments in the collection’s leading essay, exposing fallacies in affable yet convincing prose. Those that follow him in the section take similarly pragmatic positions on either side of the debate, using ethical, biblical, and philosophical

reasoning.

Although Part 4, “Public Policy,” is the last section of the book, it is more closely related to Part 1 than Parts 2 or 3. Corvino emphasizes that although the distinctions made between Left and Right, liberal and conservative, are far more complex than dichotomous stereotypes lead us to believe, “there does seem to be some connection between morality and politics in the gay rights debate. Those who oppose gay rights often do so because they believe that homosexuality is immoral; those who support gay rights typically do not believe that homosexuality is immoral” (p. xxv). As a result, the essays in this section tend to line up on either side of the predictable Right/Left divide when addressing the question “how should society treat lesbians, gays, and bisexuals?” First, authors discuss the well-worn subject of gays in the military. John Luddy argues, for example, that saving lives is far more important than gay rights and that the disruptive presence of gays in the service potentially jeopardizes military cohesion necessary for effective combat. Paul Siegel’s response to Luddy asserts that, in the same way that those in the military once opposed the presence of African Americans, discrimination against gays reveals military officials’ “second-hand prejudice” (p. 274). “Outing” is the second subject of Part 4, with predictable arguments both for and against. Finally, the section concludes with three timely pieces about the benefits and shortcomings of same-sex marriage.

Part 2, “Science and Identity,” revolves around the question “why are people homosexual?” and presents some of the recent theories about the etiology and mutability of sexual orientation. Hotly debated and extensively researched (there have been to date over one thou-



sand scientific studies about sexuality), both etiology and mutability, which are often erroneously conflated, have proven to be keystones of both pro-gay and anti-gay arguments. On the one hand, some gay rights activists argue that if same-sex sexuality is biological (like gender, race, or disability), then lesbians and gays deserve the same protection from discrimination as women, blacks, and people with disabilities. On the other hand, others have argued that proof of a biological basis for sexuality in the hands of conservative politicians and a society hysterical over the AIDS scare might lead to extensive discriminatory measures such as sterilization or incarceration—or, many fear, a Nazi-like “elimination” of “undesirables.” With such high stakes in the debates surrounding homosexuality, many have placed their faith in the supposed infallibility of science to determine the true “nature” of sexuality and hence the creation of “good” public policy. But, as Corvino rightly observes, “proving that sexual orientation is ‘biological’ is not the same as proving that it is permanent, and proving that it is learned is not the same as proving that it can be unlearned.” Additionally, “sexual activity still involves an element of choice” (p. xx). There are complex and inextricable relationships between biology and experience that have yet to be explained sufficiently—and perhaps never will be.

The authors in Part 2 examine recent theories and models of sexuality’s biological or psychological bases from a number of different perspectives. William Byne and Mitchell Lasco argue that biology and behavior or identity can never be extricated totally from one another. To them, the “question is not, ‘Is homosexuality biological?’ but rather ‘How do biological and environmental factors interact to influence sexual orientation?’” Other authors explore how environmental factors affect feelings of “difference” among people with same- or opposite-sex orientation, the relevance (or lack thereof) of sexual orientation research to gay and lesbian rights movements, and whether or not sexuality (whatever its object) is monolithic or multifaceted.

Part 3, “Identity and History,” which addresses the question “were there gays in the past?” is perhaps the most questionable of all the sections of this collection if only because of its redundancy. Every essay in this section has been reprinted (with the exception of Plato’s, “Aristophanes’ speech from the *Symposium*” which simply has been retranslated here); the authors and their arguments will be comfortably (or uncomfortably) familiar to any conscientious historian well-versed in their historiography or aware of the by-now cliché postmodern

“essentialist vs. social constructionist” (affectionately or otherwise known as “Is there a ‘Truth’ in history?”) debates. Here, one finds classic essays by John Boswell, David M. Halperin, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, and George Chauncey, all grappling with whether or not historians can “find” representative “gays” or “lesbians” in history, the extent to which sexual behavior or identity can be historicized, and the influence of modern conceptions of sexuality on those attempting to describe and understand the past. Tacked on to the end of this section, Carol Queen’s essay on bisexuality in the gay rights movement seems oddly out of place—most obviously because it is not historical.

In all fairness, Corvino’s inclusion of these essential (no pun intended) pieces of historiography rounds out the book in terms of a pedagogical tool. There is no doubt that these essays successfully represent the most fundamental debates among historians of sexuality (and among historians in general). However, the inclusion of some more recent historical theories would have helped point to the more complex directions in which the field seems to be moving.[2] In addition, the sections on science and history might have been more closely related to show how what is known as science (and what people have accepted as scientific authority) has changed over time and directly influenced and been influenced by specific acts and their social, political, and religious context. By separating out “science” from “history” and without giving examples of the historical specificity of scientific “knowledge” and the researchers and studies that produced it, this book implicitly argues that modern science is somehow more “real” or “concrete,” and that scientists today are less affected by their contemporary context than those in the past.[3] While I do not believe that this was Corvino’s intent when organizing the essays (despite his disclaimer that “one recognizes the subtle influence of politics and culture on science” [p. xxi]), I think he seriously underestimates the “subtle influence” that scientific “authority” has on the minds of many people for whom “science” often takes on the aura of divine revelation. Given the elevated place that mass media gives scientific studies such an underestimation at best ignores the fact that science is conceptualized, funded, and produced by humans and by its “nature” biased and fallible and at worst has potentially dire consequences for those whom scientists choose to study. One final criticism of an otherwise commendable collection of essays: *Same Sex* contains very little discussion of lesbians and very few essays written by women scholars (exactly four essays out of twenty-six, not including Leah Himmelhoch’s brief

introductory notes on Plato). As a result, this book falls prey to the tired assumption that legal, political, ethical, economic, or religious debates surrounding male sexuality, whether it be heterosexual, homosexual, or other, always apply to women. It seems simplistic to assert that sometimes the issues apply to both sexes and sometimes they don't (this is the case in any debate), but this collection, with a few notable exceptions, fails to convey this point.

Although readers may vehemently disagree with many of the selections in *Same Sex*, none fail to stimulate thought and debate. This collection is, in fact, distinctive because it is the first to present radically opposed viewpoints under the same covers. Corvino's intent when he set out on this project was to render the discussion of same-sex sexuality "more rational, more civil, and more productive" (p. xxvi). In this I think he succeeds. What is most fascinating about this collection of essays is the theoretical give and take that takes place among its contributors. I give them all credit for engaging one another in a polite and productive manner, and to Corvino for bringing it all together in one volume.

#### Notes

[1]. The "classic" works that compiled essays about the debates surrounding homosexuality and sexuality in general are Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1976); Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, eds., *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983); Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989); Kathy Lee Peiss, Christina Simmons, and Robert A. Padgug., eds., *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); and David M. Halperin, *One*

*Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990). More recently, a spate of similar compilations have expanded, with varying degrees of originality and overlap, the debates in much the same ways as Corvino's. See especially Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla, eds., *Deviant Bodies* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995); William N. Eskridge, Jr. and Nan D. Hunter, *Sexuality, Gender, and the Law* (Westbury, N.Y.: Foundation Press, Inc., 1997); Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo, eds., *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); and Vernon Rosario, ed., *Science and Homosexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[2]. Jonathan Ned Katz's *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995) immediately comes to mind; he argues that in order to understand the complex meanings of the term "homosexuality" we must understand that the term "heterosexuality"—a term that many posit today as an indicator of "normality"—originally and ironically denoted *abnormal* sexual behavior. For an example of new conceptual frameworks that insist that historians must "bring the body back in," see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

[3]. For examples of how social, religious, and political context directly impact scientific studies of sexuality and their social valence and authority, see Terry and Urla, *Deviant Bodies*; and Vernon Rosario, *Science and Homosexualities*. An older example is Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). A brand-new and fascinating foray into society, science, and sexuality is Alice Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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