

MICHAEL WARNER

THE TROUBLE WITH

**NORMAL**

SEX, POLITICS, AND THE  
ETHICS OF QUEER LIFE

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## PREFACE

This book rises from the abstract to the concrete. It opens with general questions of ethics and moves to very local politics. In the later chapters, when it gets down to business, so to speak, it makes arguments that many will view as extremist, if not insane. For example, I argue that marriage is unethical. At a time when the largest gay organizations are pushing for same-sex marriage, I argue that this strategy is a mistake and that it represents a widespread loss of vision in the movement. In the fourth chapter, I go so far as to offer a principled defense of pornography, sex businesses, and sex outside the home.

Partly in order to convince the reader that I am not simply unhinged, I begin the book on a rather different note. The first chapter lays out a set of ethical principles that I take to be fundamental to political disputes around sex. It sets out an ideal of sexual autonomy and tries to imagine the

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conditions under which that ideal could be met. It points to a number of ways that the politics of sexual shame makes that ideal impossible for variant sexualities. And it suggests that queer culture has long cultivated an alternative ethical culture that is almost never recognized by mainstream moralists as anything of the kind. I believe that the ethical insights of this sexual culture provide the best explanation of the political controversies that I later address in subsequent chapters: first, the increasingly popular call for gay people to see themselves as normal Americans; then, the campaign for same-sex marriage that has been the principal rallying point of the normalizing movement; followed by a chapter on the local politics of sex in New York City, where I live.

The analysis laid out in the opening of the book could also apply to many other examples. Although the work generally deals with conflicts in gay politics—not surprisingly, considering that my theme is the politics of sexual shame, and considering that local activism was the context that prompted me to write it—this subject involves a great deal more than the politics of the gay and lesbian movement, conventionally considered. Indeed, one of my contentions is that the movement has defined itself too narrowly. After the Clinton impeachment, nothing can be clearer than the degree to which a politics of sexual shame and conflicts over sex can be found across the full spectrum of contemporary life. From daily jostlings in home and workplace to the spectacular crises of national media politics, sex roils people; and the usual idea of what would be an ethical response is a moralism that roils them more. For this reason the world has much to learn from the disreputable queers who have the most experience in the politics of shame, but who for that very reason have been least likely to gain a hearing—either in the official policy cir-

cles where their interests are allegedly represented or in the theoretical and philosophical debates about morality, sex, and shame where their point of view can be most transformative.

Articulating that point of view in a way that people can hear is not always easy. I imagine everyone has had the experience of moving abruptly from one context to another and finding that a tone or an idea that worked in the first looks absurd or improper in the second. You could be gossiping in a corner and suddenly realize that everyone in the room is listening. You could be practicing a formal speech at home only to discover that it sounds pompous or corny. Finding the right thing to say can be of little use unless one can find the right register in which to say it. The gulf that this book tries to bridge is unusually wide. It explains why those who care about policy and morality should take as their point of departure the perspective of those at the bottom of the scale of respectability: queers, sluts, prostitutes, trannies, club crawlers, and other lowlifes. And it urges, for these people, a politics consistent with what I take to be their best traditions. If the result is a wavering register, a bit of growl in the falsetto, the indulgent reader will chalk it up to the nature of the problem that I have set out to address, and the peculiar kind of drag it requires.

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE ETHICS OF SEXUAL SHAME

Sooner or later, happily or unhappily, almost everyone fails to control his or her sex life. Perhaps as compensation, almost everyone sooner or later also succumbs to the temptation to control *someone else's* sex life. Most people cannot quite rid themselves of the sense that controlling the sex of others, far from being unethical, is where morality begins. Shouldn't it be possible to allow everyone sexual autonomy, in a way consistent with everyone else's sexual autonomy? As simple as this ethical principle sounds, we have not come close to putting it into practice. The culture has thousands of ways for people to govern the sex of others—and not just harmful or coercive sex, like rape, but the most personal dimensions of pleasure, identity, and practice. We do this directly, through prohibition and regulation, and indirectly, by embracing one identity or one set of tastes as though they were universally shared, or should be. Not only do we do this; we congratulate ourselves for doing it. To do

otherwise would require us to rethink much of what passes as common sense and morality.

It might as well be admitted that sex is a disgrace. We like to say nicer things about it: that it is an expression of love, or a noble endowment of the Creator, or liberatory pleasure. But the possibility of abject shame is never entirely out of the picture. If the camera doesn't cut away at the right moment, or if the door is thrown open unwontedly, or the walls turn out to be too thin, all the fine dress of piety and pride will be found tangled around one's ankles. In the fourth century B.C., the Athenian philosopher Diogenes thought that the sense of shame was hypocrisy, a denial of our appetitive nature, and he found a simple way to dramatize the problem: he masturbated in the marketplace. Many centuries of civilization have passed since then, but this example is not yet widely followed.

An ethical response to the problem of shame should not require us to pretend that shame doesn't exist. That, essentially, is what Diogenes wanted to do. Most defenders of sexual freedom still try some version of this response. They say that sexuality should be valued as pleasurable and life-affirming; or, some say, as a kind of spirituality. Still others see sex as a radical subversion of repressive power. Whatever truth may lie in these or similar ideas about why sex is good, I suspect that most people sense a certain hollowness to these anodyne views of sexuality as simply benign and pleasant. People know better, though they may not admit it. As Leo Bersani wrote in a classic essay of 1987, "There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it." Perhaps because sex is an occasion for losing control, for merging one's consciousness with the lower orders of animal desire and sensation, for raw confrontations of power and demand, it fills people with aversion and shame. Opponents of moralism, in Bersani's

view, have too often painted a sanitized, pastoral picture of sex, as though it were simply joy, light, healing, and oneness with the universe. Many of the moralists do the same when they pretend that sex is or should be only about love and intimacy. Either way, these descriptions of affirmative sex begin to sound anything but sexy. And no matter how true they might be, at least for some people, it is futile to deny the ordinary power of sexual shame.

So the difficult question is not: how do we get rid of sexual shame? The answer to that one will inevitably be: get rid of sex. The question, rather, is this: what will we do with our shame? And the usual response is: pin it on someone else. Sexual shame is not just a fact of life; it is also political. Although nearly everyone can be easily embarrassed about sex, some people stand at greater risk than others. They might be beaten, murdered, jailed, or merely humiliated. They might be stigmatized as deviants or criminals. They might even be impeached. More commonly, they might simply be rendered inarticulate, or frustrated, since shame makes some pleasures tacitly inadmissible, unthinkable. They might find themselves burdened by furtiveness, or by extraordinary needs for disclosure, or by such a fundamental need to wrench free from the obvious that the idea of an alternative is only the dim anticipation of an unformed wish. In any case, they will find it hard to distinguish their shame from its politics, their personal failings from the power of alien norms.

For most people, at least, the ethical response to sexual shame seems to be: more shame. The unethical nature of this response jumps out when we consider the moralisms of the past. The early-eighteenth-century tract *Onania*, for example, declares that masturbation is a sin "that perverts and extinguishes nature: he who is guilty of it, is laboring at the Destruction of his Kind, and in a manner strikes at the Creation



itself." Reading this tortured logic, it's easy to wonder: what were they thinking? More important: why were they so driven to control something that we now recognize as harmless, and by definition not our business? To most readers, I suspect, the irrationality of past moralisms is reassuring: we're smarter than that now. But it could just as easily alarm us, since pronouncements about what kind of sex is or isn't good for others are by no means a thing of the past. Religious groups no longer say much about God's punishment of Onan for masturbation, but they still invoke biblical authority against gay people, sadomasochists, fetishists, and other alleged sex offenders. The secular arguments persist as well: though few people still think that the preservation of the species is a law of nature that has to be executed in every orgasm, they do still think that marital hetero sex has a rationale in nature, however Darwinian, and that it is therefore normative. These alibis of sexual morality crop up everywhere, from common prejudice to academic psychology. Popularized versions of evolutionary biology are enjoying quite a vogue now because they seem to justify the status quo as an expression of natural law.

Perhaps we should call it moralism, rather than morality, when some sexual tastes or practices (or rather an idealized version of them) are mandated for everyone. [All too commonly, people think not only that their own way of living is right, but that it should be everyone else's moral standard as well.] They don't imagine that sexual variance can be consistent with morality. And they think that anyone who disagrees with their version of morality must be a fuzzy relativist. Their suspicion of sexual variance is pseudo-morality, the opposite of an ethical respect for the autonomy of others. To say this is not to reject all morality, as some conservatives would have us believe; it is itself a moral argument. After all, it would be

hard to constrain violence toward women, sissies, and variant sexualities if we thought that all morality were merely a version of the same coercion. Some shame may be well deserved.

The difficulty is that moralism is so easily mistaken for morality. Some kinds of sexual relations seem as though they ought to be universal. They seem innocently moral, consistent with nature and health. But what if they are not universal in fact, or if other people demonstrate a different understanding of nature and health? It would take an extraordinary effort to consider the views of these sexual dissidents with anything like openness, because the first instinct will be to think of them as immoral, criminal, or pathological. And of course they might be. But anytime it seems necessary to explain away other people's sex in these ways, the premises of one's morality could just be flawed. [What looks like crime might be harmless difference. What looks like immorality might be a rival morality. What looks like pathology might be a rival form of health, or a higher tolerance of stress.]

It would be nice if the burden of proof, in such questions of sexual morality, lay on those who want to impose their standard on someone else. Then the goal of sexual ethics would be to constrain coercion rather than shut down sexual variance. But things usually work the other way around. We do not begin with what the sports-minded like to call a level playing field. We live with sexual norms that survive from the Stone Age, including prohibitions against autoeroticism, sodomy, extramarital sex, and (for those who still take the Vatican seriously) birth control. This is a problem with any essentially conservative or traditionalist stance on sexual morality: what we have to conserve is barbaric. What we inherit from the past, in the realm of sex, is the morality of patriarchs and clansmen, souped up with Christian hostility to the flesh ("our vile body," Saint Paul called it), medieval

chastity cults, virgin/whore complexes, and other detritus of ancient repression. Given these legacies of unequal moralism, nearly every civilized aspect of sexual morality has initially looked deviant, decadent, or sinful, including voluntary marriage, divorce, and nonreproductive sex.

For many people, the antiquity of sexual norms is a reason to obey them. In *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), for example, the Supreme Court invoked the "ancient roots" of the prohibition against sodomy. Chief Justice Warren Burger noted that "decisions of individuals relating to homosexual conduct have been subject to state intervention throughout the history of Western civilization." One might have thought that such a hoary pedigree of barbarism was all the more reason for skepticism, but of course that wasn't Burger's conclusion.

\* When a given sexual norm has such deep layers of sediment, or blankets enough territory to seem universal, the effort of wriggling out from under it can be enormous. The burden becomes even heavier when one must first overcome shame, or break with the tacit force of a sexual morality that other people take to be obvious. We might even say that when sexual norms are of very great antiquity or generality, as the prohibition against sodomy has been until recently and still is for many people, they are hardly intended as coercion. No one has to try to dominate others through them. They are just taken for granted, scarcely entering consciousness at all. The world was homophobic, for example, before it identified any homosexuals for it to be phobic about. The unthinkability of sodomy may just be cultural landfill, rather than an insidious plan concocted by some genius of heterosexual world domination. Yet the effect is the same: heterosexual world domination. In fact, the effect is worse, because anyone who might have an interest in sodomy won't simply have to fight a known enemy, or overturn the prohibitions of the judges. He

(or she, in some states) will first have to struggle with the unthinkability of his or her own desire. When battles have no enemies in this way, victories are rare.

The politics of shame, in other words, includes vastly more than the overt and deliberate shaming produced by moralists. It also involves silent inequalities, unintended effects of isolation, and the lack of public access. So sexual autonomy requires more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them. Having an ethics of sex, therefore, does not mean having a theory about what people's desires are or should be. If the goal is sexual autonomy, consistent with everyone else's sexual autonomy, then it will be impossible to say in advance what form that will take. Even bondage can be a means of autonomy—or not. Moralism cannot; it can only produce complacent satisfaction in others' shame. The taken-for-grantedness of dominant sexuality has the same effect, as does the privatization or isolation of sexual experience.

For some gay men and lesbians, the alternative to the cramping effects of shame in our culture is to "celebrate diversity." I must confess that whenever I see this slogan I think: why? It sounds like a slogan for a shopping mall. Diversity might or might not be a good thing, depending on context. Culture requires common references and norms, as the slogan itself reveals by telling us all to celebrate the same thing. But in the case of sexual norms, it makes sense. Individuals do not go shopping for sexual identity, but they do have a stake in a culture that enables sexual variance and circulates knowledge about it, because they have no other way of knowing what they might or might not want, or what they might become, or with whom they might find a common lot.

Edith Wharton tells a story of asking her mother, just before her marriage, what to expect on her wedding night. She was told not to ask such a stupid question. "You've seen statues," her mother said. We call this Victorian repression, but what it repressed was something that Wharton only came to desire much later. The term "repression" is often applied retrospectively in this way. There is a catch-22 of sexual shame: you don't think of yourself as repressed until after you've made a break with repression. We forget that even very standard sexualities—in this case, matrimonial heterosexuality—require not just free choice but the public accessibility of sexual knowledge, ideally in a more useful form than statues.

Women and gay people have been especially vulnerable to the shaming effects of isolation. Almost all children grow up in families that think of themselves and all their members as heterosexual, and for some children this produces a profound and nameless estrangement, a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame. No amount of adult "acceptance" or progress in civil rights is likely to eliminate this experience of queerness for many children and adolescents. Later in life, they will be told that they are "closeted," as though they have been telling lies. They bear a special burden of disclosure. No wonder so much of gay culture seems marked by a primal encounter with shame, from the dramas of sadomasochism to the rhetoric of gay pride, or the newer "queer" politics. Ironically, plenty of moralists will then point to this theme of shame in gay life as though it were proof of something pathological in gay people. It seldom occurs to anyone that the dominant culture and its family environment should be held accountable for creating the inequalities of access and recognition that produce this sense of shame in the first place.

Most people, I hope, have had the experience of discovering deep pleasure in something they would not have said pre-

viously that they wanted. Yet the prevalent wisdom, oddly enough, seems to be that variant desires are legitimate only if they can be shown to be immutable, natural, and innate. If that were true, then statues would be enough. People wouldn't need an accessible culture of sex to tell them anything they deserved to know. Then again, it would be hard to justify *any* kind of sexuality on these grounds. It would be hard, for example, to justify the morality of marriage by finding a gene for it; it is a conventional legal relation. Because moralism so often targets not just sex but knowledge about sex, people come to believe, nonsensically, that moral or legitimate sex must be unlearned, prereflective, present before history, isolated from the public circulation of culture.

This is one reason why so many gay people are now desperately hoping that a gay gene can be found. They think they would be more justified if they could show that they had no choice, that neither they nor gay culture in general played any role in shaping their desires. Some conservatives, meanwhile, trivialize gay experience as "lifestyle," as though that warrants interfering with it. Both sides seem to agree on an insane assumption: that only immutable and genetic sexualities could be legitimate, that if being gay could be shown to be learned, chosen, or partly chosen, then it could be reasonably forbidden.

The biological, cultural, and individual factors in sexuality seem to be far too tightly woven for either side's reductive hopes. One of the genetic studies inadvertently illustrated this point. The study tracked the sexual preferences of identical twins reared apart, hoping to see whether genetic and individual factors could be distinguished. The researchers found a very striking case of male twins, separated from early childhood, both of whom shared the same sexual preference: masturbating over photos of construction workers. I don't imagine

anyone is ready to argue that there is a gene for the sexual orientation of masturbator-over-photos-of-construction-workers. Whatever the genetic determinant might be, it isn't that. Nor does it seem that the desire was simply chosen, as though we could ever just choose any of our desires. Undeniably, many of its components are features of cultural history, like the medium of photography or the idea of "construction worker." How could one begin to sort the "immutable" traits of such a sexuality from the mutable ones? More important, why would one need to do so? Is it only genetically determined desire that deserves respect and legal protection? Could sexual autonomy be limited to choices or desires that have been with us for all time? On some accounts that would pretty much limit things to men raping women, since little else can be shown to be natural and transhistorical.

The best historians of sexuality argue that almost everything about sex, including the idea of sexuality itself, depends on historical conditions, though perhaps at deep levels of consciousness that change slowly. "Heterosexual" and "homosexual" might be more similar to "masturbator-over-photos-of-construction-workers" than most people think. As ways of classifying people's sex, these apparently neutral terms are of relatively recent vintage, and only make sense against a certain cultural background. So however much they might involve genetic or biological factors, they also involve changes in consciousness and culture. The idea drives the moralists crazy, but it shouldn't: any sexual ethics ought to allow for change.

New fields of sexual autonomy come about through new technologies: soap, razors, the pill, condoms, diaphragms, Viagra, lubricants, implants, steroids, videotape, vibrators, nipple clamps, violet wands, hormones, sex assignment surgeries, and others we can't yet predict. Some anatomical possi-

bilities that were always there, such as anal pleasure and female ejaculation, are learned by many only when the knowledge begins to circulate openly and publicly. The psychic dimensions of sex change as people develop new repertoires of fantasy and new social relations, like "white" or "construction worker," not to mention new styles of gender and shifting balances of power between men and women. Through long processes of change, some desires too stigmatized to be thought about gradually gain legitimacy, such as the desire for a homosexual lover. Others lose. Even desires now thought to be natural and normative, such as equal romantic love, only came into being relatively late in human history; they depend just as much on politics and cultural change as do the stigmatized ones.

\* Sex, in short, changes. As it does, the need for sexual autonomy changes. Some of the most familiar models of sexual liberation have not been very good at recognizing this. Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, speculated that the progress of civilization entailed ever higher levels of repression; for many of the leaders of the sexual liberation and gay liberation movements in the 1960s and '70s, the consequence seemed to be that freedom lay in reversing that trend, recovering kinds of sexual freedom that they associated with simpler times, or reclaiming the kind of polymorphously perverse sexuality that Freud associated with children. I do not dismiss this kind of thinking, since it led to many powerful analyses, and many liberation theorists, such as Herbert Marcuse, remain underappreciated. I am suggesting something different. Sex does not need to be primordial in order to be legitimate. Civilization doesn't just repress our original sexuality; it makes new kinds of sexuality. And new sexualities, including learned ones, might have as much validity as ancient ones, if not more.



What would it take to make sexual autonomy possible? The answer is not simply to roll back repression, loosen all constraints, purge ourselves from all civilized shame, return to an earlier state of development, run wild through the streets. (Anyone who wants to run wild down my street has my blessing.) Sexual autonomy has grown, not just by regressing to infantile pleasure (however important that might be), but by making room for new freedoms, new experiences, new pleasures, new identities, new bodies—even if many of us turn out to live in the old ones without complaining. Variation in this way is a precondition of autonomy—as much as it is also the outcome of autonomy. Pleasures once imaginable only with disgust, if at all, become the material out of which individuals and groups elaborate themselves.

Inequalities of shame act as a drag on this process. They inhibit variation and restrict knowledge about the variations that do exist. Moralities that insist on the permanence of sexual norms have an especially stunting effect on people who lack resources of knowledge or of experiment. As Wharton's story illustrates, there is a fine line between coercion through shame and constraint through ignorance. The more people are isolated or privatized, the more vulnerable they are to the unequal effects of shame. Conditions that prevent variation, or prevent the knowledge of such possibilities from circulating, undermine sexual autonomy. And the moralists work very hard to make sure that this happens.

The United States Supreme Court went so far in this effort as to exempt sexual materials from First Amendment protections. In *Roth v. the United States* (1957), it allowed states and the federal government to restrict anything defined as "obscene"—a word designed to shame dissenters into silence. The Court later defined obscenity as anything having "prurient" interest in sex and "offensive" by community standards.

Since community standards set the definition of obscene, the law in this area—unlike the rest of First Amendment law—allows the majority to impose its will without Constitutional check. Defenders of the law say that it imposes discretion and restraint on everyone. In fact it enlists the government in the politics of shame, making sure that nothing challenging to the tastes of the majority will be allowed to circulate.

The legal and political systems routinely produce shame simply in the pompous and corny way they force people to talk. Like many other states, for example, the state of Virginia has a law, enacted in 1950, that makes it a crime for any persons "to lewdly and lasciviously associate and cohabit together." This just means that sex outside of marriage, or merely living together, is illegal. The law is seldom enforced, and most people regard it as harmless anachronism. But it has real effects: people are denied child custody because it makes them criminal; gay men and lesbians have been fired from their jobs in some states on the same grounds; and defendants on other charges are often given tougher sentences by means of such statutes. (Sodomy laws are especially popular with prosecutors for this purpose.) Archaic legal language also has an effect simply by staying on the books and helping to create the air of unreality in which medieval moral judgments are given authority. Massachusetts law still refers to the "abominable and detestable crime against nature." Florida criminalizes "any unnatural and lascivious act." In the Wonderland of America's legal codes, the sex laws are like a version of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," with a vengeance: "Tis brillig, and the slithy toves did lewdly and lasciviously gyre and gimble in the wabe. All prurient were the borogoves, and the mome raths did fornicate." When the law talks this way, ordinary sexual knowledge goes on vacation, and the moralist's battle is more than half won.

Political debates have their own way of creating freakish weather conditions in which things that would have been too banal for Oprah suddenly attract lightning blasts from the heavens. In November of 1997, the State University of New York at New Paltz sponsored a conference titled "Revoltin' Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom." Among the twenty-one panels were a workshop on female sexuality and a discussion of S/M. Sensing an opportunity to acquire political capital through shame, conservatives went into motion. Candace de Russey, a Republican appointee to the SUNY board of trustees, seemed to have attended the conference in order to denounce it, calling for the dismissal of New Paltz president Roger Bowen as soon as the conference ended. Roger Kimball wrote an essay for the *Wall Street Journal* calling the conference "a syllabus for sickos." Governor George Pataki, falling into line, denounced the conference and threatened to withhold state funding. SUNY chancellor John Ryan, calling the workshops "offensive," reprimanded Bowen for allowing them. None of this was really about improving education. It was a way to tap the vast power of sexual shame, disgust, and moralism for partisan ends. It failed in its stated goal of removing Bowen, but it succeeded in its real goal of mobilizing public scandal against sexual dissent. The chilling effect extended to my own school, Rutgers, where a feminist administrator nixed a graduate-student conference on women's sexuality for fear of replaying the controversy.

Unfortunately, the defenders of the conference fell back on weak arguments. Bowen justified it in the name of academic freedom and free speech, a line echoed by a *New York Times* editorial. Bowen argued that speech, "no matter how odious," cannot be restricted. He did not challenge the judgment that a workshop on sexuality is odious, like denying the

Holocaust. In fact, he went out of his way to say that he "personally found several of their planned panel topics offensive." He also did not respond to de Russy's substantive charge that the conference "had absolutely nothing to do with the college's undergraduate mission."

It isn't hard to understand Bowen's response. He had been put on the defensive by the conservative media machinery. Nothing in the education of college presidents prepares them to deal with the politics of sexual shame. It is hard to refute the sense that the subject is scandalous, since for so many people the demand for more shame simply feels like morality. Candace de Russy has a way of intoning the word "lesbianism" on camera with so much high-minded scorn that many people simply forget that the word might actually bring a lot of pleasure to others, or that others' pleasure costs them nothing, even if they do not share in it. And anyone who really believes in the university ideal of open discussion is likely to be unprepared for the silencing effect of sexual shame, especially when the media have jumped into the picture, amplifying ordinary shame into public scandal. The ideal of free speech probably seemed like the best defense he could imagine. It was a dodge.

A stronger and more honest response would have defended in substance the conference's goal of circulating knowledge and reflection about sexuality. Bowen might have pointed out, for example, that the study of sex need not be, as Roger Kimball claimed, "profoundly dehumanizing," a way of looking "at the sex organs as essentially a complicated piece of plumbing." Of course, complicated plumbing would be a perfectly legitimate thing to study, and the conservatives never complain about engineering conferences. Nor do they complain about biology seminars, which are much more likely to treat sex organs as plumbing than any panel of les-

bians is likely to do. So why the fuss? And why "dehumanizing"? From Plato's *Symposium* to contemporary queer theory, the study of sex has generally involved such fundamental questions as the relation of ethics to pleasure, the nature of consent, and the definition of freedom. What could be better questions for humanists to ask? If Kimball associates sexual knowledge with dehumanization, then that association in itself might be important to study. [If we were not sexual, would we be more human, or less?] Why would ignorance be better? Who is dehumanizing whom? Minority sexualities often raise such questions in especially powerful ways.

Bowen might also have pointed out that the study of sexuality, if it were asking such questions, could hardly avoid the shame and offensiveness that so many associate with the subject. In fact, the conservative clamor about the conference could be taken as evidence of the way shame and opprobrium can be much more than just natural responses of instinctual revulsion, and much more than a desire for privacy.

They are political resources that some people use to silence or isolate others. As long as this is true, or even might be true, then talk about stigmatized sex is much more than indulgent shamelessness, or lack of respect for privacy. It is a necessary means to identify the political element of shame, to see how disgust and embarrassment are used by some to restrict the sexual autonomy of others. Circulating knowledge about sex, especially knowledge not already pleasing to "community standards," is a way to make that autonomy available in a less distorted way.

As sexual culture changes, it creates new needs for resisting shame. Ever since the idea of autonomy was first coupled with sex during the Enlightenment, one wave of unexpected resistance has followed another, from the women's movement to psychoanalysis to the lesbian and gay movement. Each has

had to resist not just violence but the more normal kinds of sexual unfreedom: moralism, law, stigma, shame, and isolation. All of these constraints on people's autonomy might be in play anytime human beings seek to dominate one another. But in the realm of sex, more than in any other area of human life, shame rules.

### SEXUAL MCCARTHYISM AND THE POLITICS OF MORAL PANIC

If anyone doubts the power of sexual shame, one has to look no further for evidence than the Clinton impeachment. Of course, the issues in the Lewinsky affair were not likely to be confused with, say, the politics of lesbians and gay men. Bill Clinton, after all, was pilloried for the most stereotypically straight male sex, the kind of tacky, shameless, cigar-chomping erotics of power that is celebrated from the locker room to the boardroom. Yet to anyone who has experience in the politics of sexual stigma, and especially to gay men and lesbians, the crisis offered familiar ironies. Until Monicathon, it was always difficult to convince anyone in the public policy arena of the intensity of passions around sex, or of the destructive power of sexual stigma. Then Kenneth Starr's decision to focus on sex took the political system by surprise, leading to near meltdown.

There was nothing new about the stigmas he set in motion. They were the ordinary embarrassments of sex, amplified by the publicity of national politics and mass media. In this sex-phobic and sex-obsessed culture, sex has long been seen as intrinsically demeaning. For anyone to call attention to Bill Clinton's sex life—and above all, for a prosecutor to do so—was, inevitably, to humiliate him, far beyond anything that might be explained as merely moral or aesthetic

disapproval of his sexual choices. This potent effect of indignity must have felt, for many gay men and lesbians, all too familiar.

So did the irrationality of the political system, suddenly driven home to everyone who had to watch the government self-destruct over thongs and semen stains. Postures of piety that would sound ridiculous in any other context seem to be the norm in the national media and official politics. Policy publics seem to have no way of recognizing sex as ordinary or as diverse. It is scandal or nothing. Not so in other contexts, of course. People know more about the messiness and variety of sex than they allow themselves to admit in public. This knowledge tends to remain inarticulate and often contradicts moral judgments to which people otherwise remain loyal: During the Clinton impeachment the knowledge of sex expressed itself as disgust with the politics of righteousness. The usual gap between official scandal and everyday sexual frankness widened, becoming a schizophrenic crisis that even the media managers of the corporate state could no longer control. The District of Columbia seemed to have gone drifting into a virtual world, beaming down broadcasts to a nation that no longer cared—at least in the way that it was told to care. The popular failure to be scandalized sent William Bennett into a hand-wringing, finger-wagging frenzy over “the death of outrage.” This failure might not have expressed the amoral cynicism of the nation, as Bennett and other moralists thought; it might have expressed a realism about sex, and a recognition of the way shame works as a means to power. Suddenly everyone in politics looked phony, corny, and hypocritical. By seeing things this way, people were not demonstrating a lack of sexual ethics. They were, on the contrary, demonstrating an ethical insight into the politics of sexual shame.

Writing in the middle of the impeachment crisis, Alan Dershowitz called it "sexual McCarthyism." This was robust rhetoric, to be sure, and the antithesis of Bennett's "death of outrage." But it had an undeniably valid point: that the alignment of prudery, prosecution, and publicity was creating a moral panic that even the policy and media elites could no longer control. Some prosecutors gamely pretended that the sexual scandal was merely the occasion of a legal inquiry. Whatever the validity of the perjury and obstruction charges, that claim was disingenuous. Sexual shame is such that exposing it taints a person, no matter how moral or immoral the sex might otherwise be. The publicity given to sex was itself punitive. How could Clinton or Lewinsky challenge that humiliation? They didn't even try. To gay men and lesbians, this, too, might seem familiar.

Dershowitz thought the analogy between Clinton's experience and that of lesbians and gay men was more than a vague resemblance. Starr's prosecution followed directly in the footsteps of McCarthy's. McCarthyism the first time around, he claimed, took the form of queer hunting because that was the popular prejudice back then. (He seems to think this is no longer true.) Nowadays, the story goes, McCarthyism still targets sex, but it has moved on to presidential indiscretions. This story allows Dershowitz to score an important polemical point, but it blurs some important differences. The shame that Starr used to amplify his legal charges was not, after all, a way of stigmatizing identity. It would be hard to organize a movement (the Philandering Presidents' Liberation Front?) to fight against it. And the lesbian and gay organizations did not see this as their fight, for obvious reasons. Moreover, to tell the story the way Dershowitz tells it is to suggest that homophobia as a political force is a thing of the past, the form that an earlier moral panic happened to take, an aberration of the times.



At the same time, Dershowitz's narrative strikes a chord. It is true that modern history is littered with moral panics about sex, even more than he notes. Puritans under Elizabeth I thought that England was a new Sodom and that divine retribution was at hand, largely on account of sex. Many fled the English Sodom for America, where they worried about a New English Sodom and wrote legal codes explicitly modeled on Leviticus and Deuteronomy, including capital punishment for adultery. Panics about the sexual morality of cities, theaters, and courts were common from the Restoration of Charles II to the French Revolution, which was brought to a crisis in large part by a pornographic panic about Marie Antoinette's sex life. (The Clinton affair involved uncanny echoes of this episode.) The early nineteenth century saw a wave of antionanism campaigns and prostitution scares in America. From midcentury onward, miscegenation anxieties roiled whites into lynch mobs. The infamous Comstock law of 1873 criminalized obscenity and mandated censorship in the name of reform. White slave hysteria flowered at the turn of the century, and the twentieth century saw recurrent fits of queer hunting, especially in the American military. The Nazis built a program for sexual purification that fueled anti-Semitism and homophobia alike. In each case, and many others like them, sex deviance was blamed for dangers to the body politic. In each case, sexual coercion and violence were justified in the name of national health. McCarthy, in short, was the least of it.

Although moral panics tend to fall on a wide range of sexualities and sexual cultures, and not just on philandering presidents or homosexuals, I'm sure that to many gay men and lesbians the politics of sexual shame in the Clinton crisis made it seem as though one of the most familiar tales in their long history were suddenly being encountered by the rest of the nation for the first time. Clinton, certainly, was not the

first to discover how hard it is in this culture to assert any dignity when you stand exposed as a sexual being. The Clinton impeachment may have been an extraordinary crisis, but perhaps less extraordinary than we would surmise from the chorus of commentators whose expressions of baffled astonishment radiated nightly from screen to shining screen.

Anglo-American culture has always been more prone to embarrassment about sex than most other cultures. Even to a casual observer, American culture presents a paradox. Of all nations, it is the most obsessed with sex, and of all nations it is the most easily scandalized. The United States is the land of sexual shame. This is often described as a Puritan streak in the culture. But after the Clinton presidency it would be hard to claim that America's weird mix of prurience and shame was simply a relic of ancient prejudice, doomed to wither in the course of history. Conflicts over sex in public are growing more common, not less. And nothing marks the obsessiveness of sex in this culture as much as the omnipresence of therapy, which is supposed to have eliminated old phobias. Everyone knows, supposedly, about the liberating effect of sexual candor. "Puritanical" is, with us, a bad word. Sexual taboos are a thing of the past, like girdles, or vacuum tubes, or Brylcreem. And yet people still fear and despise those whom they identify with sex. How can we explain this paradox?

Theodor Adorno, the great German philosopher who spent many years in America after fleeing Nazi Germany, was able to say as early as 1962 that attempts to reform the regulation of sex had "something venerably suffragette-like about them." But, he went on, people fool themselves about progress. Sexual taboos have not fallen away at all. "Whereas sexuality has been integrated, that which cannot be integrated, the actual spiciness of sex, continues to be detested by

society." In fact, Adorno thought that this was true not despite the new premium on sexual expression, but because of it. In the American talk about a *healthy sex life* (and Adorno, writing in German, used the English phrase, which doubtless amused him), he saw the purest form of "a desexualization of sexuality itself." "Sexuality is disarmed as sex," he wrote, "as though it were a kind of sport, and whatever is different about it still causes allergic reactions."

Adorno showed his usual prescience in these comments. In 1962, of course, the gay rights movement was still small, without a well-developed theory of itself, without much public profile, and without an established social world. But Adorno embraced its cause. He saw that queers, like prostitutes, were going to bear the burden of the new paradox, as a culture that increasingly built itself around an entertainment industry of sex also found it increasingly necessary to insist that sex be hygienic and uplifting, that however "wild" it had to be to funnel optimism into the pseudo-individuality of consumer culture, it also had to be, at all times, healthy and normal.

It can seem at times that Americans think and talk about nothing but sex. Surely, many people say, after the Clinton trial we need less talk about sex rather than more, a sharper moral judgment rather than more skepticism. To them, the crisis represented the excess of sexual liberty, not the excess of sexual moralism. They think the end of the impeachment ordeal should mark the beginning of a new reserve, a revived sense of privacy and responsibility. This response can seem reasonable enough, partly because of the false sense of liberation that Adorno identified in consumer culture. Given the celebration of sport sex as a way of selling commodities, or distracting people from the banality of their mediatized and administered lives, it may be hard for many people to recog-

nize any kind of variant sex as having ethical value. Then, too, coverage of the impeachment affair reeked of both fascinated pleasure and moralistic aversion—the combination that created the sense of scandal in the first place. Either way, the obsessiveness of our public media with sex does indeed feel salacious, fraudulent, and demeaning.

Yet moralism can hardly offer an adequate response. It only intensifies the oscillation of aversion and fascination that created the scandal. The obsession with sex in the great Monicathon of 1998 felt demeaning because it was never real recognition or acknowledgment; it never was really freed from the assumption that sex itself is demeaning, or “dehumanizing,” as Roger Kimball put it. The fascinated inquisitiveness of national culture was driven not by a celebration of sexual pleasure and autonomy, but by erotophobia. The Clinton impeachment should show us, if nothing else, that erotophobia can take many forms besides silence, censorship, and repression. It can coexist with and even feed on commercialized titillation, desperate fascination, therapeutic celebration, and punitive prurience. So although sex is public in this mass-mediatised culture to a degree that is probably without parallel in world history, it is also true that anyone who is associated with actual sex can be spectacularly demonized.

This goes for anyone—straight, gay, or presidential. But some people are more exposed in their sexuality than others. Straight people can see a certain version of their straightness reflected back everywhere, from toothpaste ads to epic poems, and although they often rebel against the resulting banality of their sexual lives, they also profit from the way they seem no more sexually noticeable than anyone else. The ones who pay are the ones who stand out in some way. They become a lightning rod not only for the hatred of difference, of the abnormal, but also for the more general loathing for sex.

X | It is their sex, especially, that seems dehumanizing. What shocked many people about the Clinton scandal was the way he became a target for the kind of punitive attention usually reserved for sluts, queers, and trannies. Normally, straight male power sex is covered by a kind of tacit immunity agreement. Starr revoked it.

Dershowitz, in short, identified a much bigger problem than he realized when he spoke of sexual McCarthyism. Conflicts over sex have been fundamental to modern culture for at least as long as people have been speaking of democracy and autonomy. And although modern culture has learned to use public talk about sex as a stimulant to art and commerce alike, in the process some kinds of sexual shame have only intensified and become more political.

#### HIERARCHIES OF SHAME

What can we learn here about the politics of sexual shame? What exactly are the connections among the garden-variety embarrassments of sex, the spectacular crises of sexual McCarthyism, and the stigmatized identities of the gay movement? This question requires more thoughtful consideration than the blanket label "sexual McCarthyism" might suggest. But the connections, however complex, are real. Failing to recognize that there is a politics of sexual shame, I believe, leads to mistakes in each context: it confuses individuals, cowing them out of their sexual dignity; it leaves national politics pious and disingenuous about sex; and it reduces the gay movement to a desexualized identity politics.

In later chapters, we will see how the politics of shame distorts everything, from marriage law to public health policy, censorship, and even urban zoning. I also argue that the official gay movement—by which I mean its major national or-

ganizations, its national media, its most visible spokespersons—has lost sight of that politics, becoming more and more enthralled by respectability. Instead of broadening its campaign against sexual stigma beyond sexual orientation, as I think it should, it has increasingly narrowed its scope to those issues of sexual orientation that have least to do with sex. Repudiating its best histories of insight and activism, it has turned into an instrument for normalizing gay men and lesbians.

The mistake, in each of these cases, is a fundamental failure to understand the politics of sexual shame. In an influential 1984 essay called "Thinking Sex," Gayle Rubin suggested that the whole gamut of conflicts over sex—of the kind that crop up in every context, from office gossip and school board disputes to the highest levels of national and international policy—demonstrates a common dynamic. Sex has a politics of its own. Hierarchies of sex sometimes serve no real purpose except to prevent sexual variance. They create victimless crimes, imaginary threats, and moralities of cruelty. Rubin notes: "The criminalization of innocuous behaviors such as homosexuality, prostitution, obscenity, or recreational drug use is rationalized by portraying them as menaces to health and safety, women and children, national security, the family, or civilization itself." These rationalizations obscure the intent to shut down sexual variance.

Reviewing a wide range of sexual stigmas and regulations, Rubin contended that people sort good sex from bad by a series of hierarchies:

<u>Good, Normal, Natural</u>	<u>Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural</u>
Heterosexual	Homosexual
Married	Unmarried
Monogamous	Promiscuous

Procreative	Nonprocreative
Noncommercial	Commercial
In pairs	Alone or in groups
In a relationship	Casual
Same generation	Cross-generational
In private	In public
No pornography	Pornography
Bodies only	With manufactured objects
Vanilla	Sadomasochistic

These distinctions between good sex and bad do not necessarily come as whole packages; most people tend to mix traits from each column. The main thing the different distinctions have in common is the simple fact that each is a hierarchy, and if you are on the wrong side of the hierarchy you will be stigmatized in a way that could entail real damage.

Bill Clinton got on the wrong side of several of these: he had sex outside marriage, did so promiscuously, and in public (the Oval Office!). Actually, Clinton and Lewinsky were lucky; if that blow job had taken place just across the Potomac River in Virginia, it would have been a felony, and even in the District of Columbia it was illegal until 1992. But the scandal had less to do with legal technicalities than with the taboos behind the law. And although there were doubtless many other grounds for thinking him unethical—his betrayal of private trust, his self-satisfied enjoyment of power—there can be no doubt that the sense of scandal came from the common categories of deviance. When Republicans blew so hard in trumpeting their moral outrage, they were not moved by their concern for Hillary. They did not express a nuanced sense of Clinton's private ethical relation to Monica. They were moved by a more abstract sense of violated propriety, a crime not against any individual, but against the imaginary

rules of sex. So Clinton might at least theoretically see himself as having something in common with people in all the other categories on the "wrong" side of the list. (I doubt that he has yet drawn this conclusion.)

Rubin would say that his transgressions do not necessarily mean that he scores worse on the sexual dignity scale than, say, someone whose only deviation was to be a transvestite. That is because these distinctions tend to be ranked in an ever-shifting continuum of more or less serious deviation, with a constant battle over "where to draw the line." As Rubin points out, some kinds of deviation have become more respectable over time. Others remain beyond the pale for all but the most radical or the most libertarian. Thus people who stray into the wrong category on one score or another may well reject with disdain any suggestion that they belong in alliance with the perverts who stand below them on the scale of disgust. The people who drift into the right-hand column do not make common cause. If they did, the left-hand column wouldn't stand a chance of survival. Those who inhabit only the left-hand column are probably a tiny minority. And yet their scheme of value dominates. *Vocal minority*

One reason why people do not unite against shame is that there are some real differences among them. Here perhaps we should make an elementary distinction between stigma of the kind that gay people endure and shame of the kind that dogs Clinton. Rubin presents these as a continuum, but they differ in kind rather than degree, and the difference will turn out to be crucial to all of the examples studied in this book.

Stigma, like its etymological kin *stigmata*, refers to a mark on the body, like a brand or a tattoo or a severed ear, identifying a person permanently with his or her disgrace. Among the Greeks, it may have been punishment for a deed such as treason or running away from a master. It marked the person,



Stigma

not the deed, as tainted. This is what the modern metaphor of stigma singles out. It is a kind of "spoiled identity," as Erving Goffman calls it in his classic study. Ordinary shame, by contrast, passes. One might do a perverse thing and bring scorn or loathing on oneself, only to sober up and make excuses, move to a new town and start over, stay and outlive the memory, or redeem oneself by fine deeds. This kind of shame affects one's biographical identity. The shame of a true pervert—stigma—is less delible; it is a social identity that befalls one like fate. Like the related stigmas of racial identity or disabilities, it may have nothing to do with acts one has committed. It attaches not to doing, but to being; not to conduct, but to status.

Some of the dilemmas of the gay movement become clearer when we remember that it has had to combat both shame and stigma, and that they are often confused in practice. Sexual deviance once was more a matter of shame than of stigma. Sodomy was a sin like fornication, not the sign of an identity. Anyone could do it. In the modern world that shame has deepened into stigma. It affects certain people, regardless of what they do. As moralists began concentrating not simply on deeds but on kinds of persons, mere sex became sexuality. The act of sodomy came to be only one sign of homosexual identity among many. It became possible to suffer stigma as a homosexual quite apart from any sexual acts. Shame about sexual acts and the stigma on homosexual identity can be utterly distinct in some cases. But each has a tendency to blur into the other.

At first the distinction was the invention of medical experts, and worked only to the detriment of gay people. It was a way of saying that homosexuals were pathological in their very being, whether they ever committed an immoral act or not, simply by the nature of their desires. This pseudo-med-

ical thinking raised perversion to a social identity. It fastened loathing and discrimination onto people in a way that had only a theoretical relation to any sex they might or might not have. Later, the same distinction became crucial to the gay resistance. The concept of perversion, as distinct from perverse acts, led to the concept of sexual identity (or its close kin, sexual orientation). Each distinguishes between identity and sex, between the person and the act, status and conduct. The doctors had inadvertently made it possible for their former patients to claim that being gay is not necessarily about sex. Homosexuals could argue that any judgment about their worth as persons, irrespective of their actions, was irrational prejudice. In so doing, they could challenge the stigma of identity, without in the least challenging the shame of sexual acts. To this day, a similar logic governs much of gay politics. That is why lawyers who challenge military antigay policy or discrimination by the Boy Scouts usually take pains to find test cases in which the victim is a model victim because he or she has never done anything wrong—that is, had sex.

When Clinton set out to reform the military antigay policy after his election in 1992, he made a point of saying that the military should be allowed to punish people for their acts, but not for their identities; the focus should be on “conduct, not status.” He was invoking the most central premise of lesbian and gay politics as a politics of identity: that sexual orientation is fundamental to one’s personality and is not mere sexual behavior. In making this argument, he was appealing to the same kind of distinction between doing and being that emerged a century before, when it first became common to think of some people as homosexual persons, whatever their sexual acts in fact were.

But this distinction proved difficult to observe. For one thing, the Supreme Court had blurred it in *Bowers v. Hard-*

Problem of  
identity

wick. Although the Georgia sodomy statute that was the subject of that case applied to oral and anal sex for heterosexual partners as well as homosexual ones, the Court decided to regard the issue only as one of "homosexual sodomy" and the rights of homosexuals. The act—a kind of sex that gay or straight or bi or other people could equally perform—became an identity. In a dizzying series of logical moves, the Court ruled that Georgia could ban the sexual practice because of its connection to a despised identity, even though the law banned the practice for everybody. At the same time, the Court held that the identity could be (and in subsequent lower court decisions has been) regarded as fairly subject to discrimination because the sex, which "defines the class," was criminal. Gotcha: the sex has no privacy protection because homos are immoral; homos are immoral because they commit, or want to commit, criminal sex acts. As Janet Halley has shown, lawyers for the Department of Defense introduced the same circular equivocations to the revisions of military policy, and apparently Clinton never noticed that the one moral distinction he had laid down was now useless. The result is the notorious "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which punishes both act and identity, status and conduct—and under which military discharges for homosexuality have skyrocketed.

Just as the Supreme Court could utterly confuse status and conduct for legal purposes, so also lesbians and gay men often find in practice that the stigma on identity and the shame of sexual activity are hard to separate. That is not just because of the slipperiness of the Court's thinking. The prevailing ideas of sexual identity being what they are, when you come out as gay or lesbian the implication is that you have the same sexuality as all the others, including those compulsives crawling from orgasm to orgasm in the parks and gutters. The queer stigma covers us all, at least in some contexts.

As a consequence, people try to protect their identities by repudiating mere sex.

This confusion results from a basic paradox in the notion of sexual identity. Identity, like stigma, tars us all with the same brush, but it also allows us to distance ourselves from any actual manifestation of queerness. We only share the identity and its stigma, in fact, *because* identity has been distinguished from sexual acts and their shame. Pride or stigma belongs to us as a class, a recognizable kind of person, regardless of our deeds as individuals. Thus there always seem to be some gay people who are shocked, *shocked* to find that others are having deviant sex. They will have you know that their dignity is founded on being gay, which in their view has nothing to do with sex. If others are having sex—or too much sex or sex that is too deviant—then those people have every reason to be ashamed. Of course only the playwright Larry Kramer and a few other ranting moralists put it in these extreme terms, admittedly a caricature. And the distinction between stigma and shame, identity and act, is undeniable in some contexts. But to have a politics of one without the other is to doom oneself to incoherence and weakness. It is to challenge the stigma on identity, but only by reinforcing the shame of sex. And unfortunately, this has been the choice not only of individuals, but of much of the official gay movement. In too many ways, it has chosen to articulate the politics of identity rather than to become a broader movement targeting the politics of sexual shame.

The core dilemma is ethical as well as political. Erving Goffman captures its essence nicely, in a brilliant paragraph about what he calls ambivalence:

Whether closely allied with his own kind or not, the stigmatized individual may exhibit identity am-

bivalence when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way, flamboyantly or pitifully acting out the negative attributes imputed to them. The sight may repel him, since after all he supports the norms of the wider society, but his social and psychological identification with these offenders holds him to what repels him, transforming repulsion into shame, and then transforming ashamedness itself into something of which he is ashamed. In brief, he can neither embrace his group nor let it go.

On top of having ordinary sexual shame, and on top of having shame for being gay, the dignified homosexual also feels ashamed of every queer who flaunts his sex and his faggotry, making the dignified homosexual's stigma all the more justifiable in the eyes of straights. On top of that he feels shame about his own shame, the fatedness of which he is powerless to redress. What's a poor homosexual to do?

Pin it on the fuckers who deserve it: sex addicts, body-builders in Chelsea or West Hollywood, circuit boys, flaming queens, dildo dykes, people with HIV, anyone who magnetizes the stigma you can't shake. The irony is that in this culture, such a response will always pass as sexual ethics. Larry Kramer and other gay moralists have made careers out of it, specializing in what Goffman calls "in-group purification": "the efforts of stigmatized persons not only to 'normify' their own conduct but also to clean up the conduct of others in the group."

The dilemma of "identity ambivalence" has been an unmistakable force in the lesbian and gay movement from its inception. For individuals, it is a profound ethical challenge. This is true for people with any stigmatized identity, such as Jews or African Americans. But the dilemma is more tempting

and more complicated for lesbians and gay men, or any other stigmatized sexuality. The distinction between stigma and shame makes it seem as though an easy way to resolve the ambivalence of belonging to a stigmatized group is to embrace the identity but disavow the act. As Kramer puts it, "The only response, the only way gays can assume our political responsibility and obtain our democratic due, is to fight for our rights *as* gays. To be taught about, to be studied, to be written about, not as cocks and cunts, but as *gays*." Kramer's distinction is not entirely mistaken. There is a real and consequential difference. But being lesbian or gay necessarily involves both stigma and shame. Kramer wants to fight one, but not the other. He can't even say it without spewing contempt for "cocks and cunts." He wants us to be more ashamed about sex, to see cocks and cunts as meriting even more scorn than we already have for them. And he wants us to direct this scorn toward other people who are more visibly identified with cocks and cunts than he wants to be. This is no way to escape the ambivalence of shame. Dignity on these terms is bound to remain inauthentic. (Perhaps that is why moralists of this variety seem permanently enraged.)

### THE ETHICS OF QUEER LIFE

Defensiveness about sex and sexual variance is most common in public or official contexts. In many other circles, the idea of a gay man or lesbian posing as too mature or too respectable for mere sex is held to be ridiculous. For all the variety of queer culture—and all its limitations—it is possible to find, running through its development over the past century, and especially in its least organized and least "respectable" circles, an ethical vision much more at home with sex and with the indignities associated with sex. Nowhere, af-

ter all, are people more aware of the absurdity and tenacity of shame than in queer culture. That's why the official gay organizations' pious idea of a respectable, dignified gay community seems so out of keeping with the world those organizations claim to represent.

In the common gossip of friends catching up on girlfriends, in the magazines and videos that are sold and traded around and pored over, in the bars where hair of all kinds gets let down, in personal ads that declare tastes hitherto unknown to man, in scenes where some mad drag queen is likely to find the one thing most embarrassing to everyone and scream it at the top of her lungs, in Radical Faeries gatherings and S/M workshops—in these and other scenes of queer culture it may seem that life has been freed from any attempt at respectability or dignity. Everyone's a bottom, everyone's a slut, anyone who denies it is sure to meet justice at the hands of a bitter, shady queen, and if it's possible to be more exposed and abject then it's sure to be only a matter of time before someone gets there, probably on stage and with style. The fine gradations of nerviness that run through this culture measure out people's willingness to test the limits of shame. In these scenes people try to imagine living without the sacrifices that dignity by "community standards" commonly entails. Across town, where the black-tie fund-raiser is going on, *that's* where to find talk of dignity, if you have a taste for that sort of thing.

No wonder this sexual culture, which has often been underground and remains foreign to many gay men and lesbians, has seldom been regarded as a place to go for ethical insight into dignity, sex, and shame—neither by philosophers in general nor even by leaders of the gay movement. It seems to be an anarchic gutter zone more remarkable for the absence of ethics than for any tradition of insight. So, at least, it

would be easy to think. I think this is a mistake. I am not the first to think so; Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, erected an elaborate edifice of moral thought on the basis of Jean Genet's queer writing in his *Saint Genet*—a book that the moralists would do well to revisit. But Sartre was concerned to illustrate problems of freedom and autonomy, and he left aside the public questions of sexual culture.

In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn't pretend to be *above* the indignity of sex. And although this usually isn't announced as an ethical vision, that's what it perversely is. In queer circles, you are likely to be teased and abused until you grasp the idea. Sex is understood to be as various as the people who have it. It is not required to be tidy, normal, uniform, or authorized by the government. This kind of culture is often denounced as relativist, self-indulgent, or merely libertine. In fact, it has its own norms, its own way of keeping people in line. I call its way of life an ethic not only because it is understood as a better kind of self-relation, but because it is the premise of the special kind of sociability that holds queer culture together. A relation to others, in these contexts, begins in an acknowledgment of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself. Shame is bedrock. Queers can be abusive, insulting, and vile toward one another, but because abjection is understood to be the shared condition, they also know how to communicate through such camaraderie a moving and unexpected form of generosity. No one is beneath its reach, not because it prides itself on generosity, but because it prides itself on nothing. The rule is: Get over yourself. Put a wig on before you judge. And the corollary is that you stand to learn most from the people you think are beneath you. At its best, this ethic cuts against every form of hierarchy you could bring into the room. Queer scenes are the true salons



*des refusés*, where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy by their common experience of being despised and rejected in a world of norms that they now recognize as false morality.

For this reason, paradoxically, the ethic of queer life is actually truer to the core of the modern notion of dignity than the usual use of the word is. Dignity has at least two radically different meanings in our culture. One is ancient, closely related to honor, and fundamentally an ethic of rank. It is historically a value of nobility. It requires soap. (Real estate doesn't hurt, either.) The other is modern and democratic. Dignity in the latter sense is not pomp and distinction; it is inherent in the human. You can't, in a way, not have it. At worst, others can simply fail to recognize your dignity. These two notions of dignity have opposite implications for sex. The most common judgments about sex assign dignity to some kinds (married, heterosexual, private, loving), as long as they are out of sight, while all other kinds of sex are no more dignified than defecating in public, and possibly less so. That kind of dignity we might as well call bourgeois propriety. In what I am calling queer culture, however, there is no truck with bourgeois propriety. If sex is a kind of indignity, then we're all in it together. And the paradoxical result is that only when this indignity of sex is spread around the room, leaving no one out, and in fact binding people together, that it begins to resemble the dignity of the human. In order to be consistent, we would have to talk about dignity in shame.

That, I think, is a premise of queer culture, and one reason why people in it are willing to call themselves queer—a word that, as Eve Sedgwick notes, emblazons its connection to shame in a way that still roils the moralists. But I'm speaking now of sluts and drag queens and trannies and trolls and women who have seen a lot of life—not of the media spokesmen and respectable leaders of the gay community.

The lesbian and gay movement at its best has always been rooted in a queer ethic of dignity in shame. This is what Stonewall stands for. A political movement based in this kind of dignity, however, should extend far beyond questions of sex or sexual identity. The stigma that we call homophobia, after all, can descend on people for a lot of different reasons, and many of them are not exactly the same as being gay or homosexual. People whose gender identity differs from the norm are despised, often violently, whether they desire those of their own sex or not. Nelly boys and butch girls can be fag-bashed or taunted, and being heterosexual will not protect them very much. In the same contexts, homosexuals whose gender conforms more to the norm can often be silently accepted. And people whose gender identity and object choice both pass as normal can nonetheless find themselves despised as queer because of their sexual practice. Prostitutes are the most visible examples, as are people in leather culture. Even fairly conventional heterosexual married couples often find that they enjoy anal play, sex toys, sex in public places, sadomasochism, etcetera, and these practices expose them to shame, moralism, and even prosecution in some cases. (Sex toys remain illegal in Texas and Alabama; anal and oral sex in many more states.) It's even true that people of very unremarkable gender identity, object choice, and sexual practice might still passionately identify with and associate with queer people. Subjectively, they feel nothing of the normalcy that might be attributed to them.

Stigma is messy and often incoherent. The received wisdom, in straight culture, is that all of its different norms line up, that one is synonymous with the others. If you are born with male genitalia, the logic goes, you will behave in masculine ways, desire women, desire feminine women, desire them exclusively, have sex in what are thought to be normally active and insertive ways and within officially sanctioned

contexts, think of yourself as heterosexual, identify with other heterosexuals, trust in the superiority of heterosexuality no matter how tolerant you might wish to be, and never change any part of this package from childhood to senescence. Heterosexuality is often a name for this entire package, even though attachment to the other sex is only one element. If you deviate at any point from this program, you do so at your own cost. And one of the things straight culture hates most is any sign that the different parts of the package might be recombined in an infinite number of ways. But experience shows that this is just what tends to happen. If heterosexuality requires the entire sequence, then it is very fragile. No wonder it needs so much terror to induce compliance.

There is no way of predicting how many people might in this way have a stake in a political movement against the effects of sexual stigma and shame. Queer culture tends to expand the possibilities. Strap-on dildos, for example, are no longer a lesbian-only item; they are increasingly used for role-reversal by opposite-sex couples. When activist Carol Queen produced a videotape called *Bend Over Boyfriend*, it became the fastest-selling video ever at San Francisco's principal sex-toy store, Good Vibrations. It will never be everyone's taste, but it might be anyone's.

\* The term "queer" is used in a deliberately capacious way in this book, as it is in much queer theory, in order to suggest how many ways people can find themselves at odds with straight culture. "Homophobia" is a misleading term for what they equally resist, because it suggests that the stigma and oppression directed against this entire range of people can be explained simply as a phobic reaction to same-sex love. In fact, sexual stigmas are more shifty than we think. Gay men and lesbians have been a principal target, but a political movement that defines its constituency solely as "gay men

and lesbians" blinds itself both to the subtlety of the oppressive culture and to the breadth of the possible resistances. Already, the movement has been forced to add "bisexual" and, occasionally, "transgendered" to its self-description. These gestures are often rightly perceived, especially by bisexuals and transgendered people, as afterthoughts, half-hearted gestures at being politically correct.

Even at its most serious, this new, expanded list of "lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgendered" does not go far enough in naming what's at stake in queer politics. Like "gay and lesbian," it names identities that may or may not have anything to do with actual sex. But it is also true that sex can be stigmatized, or become a target for phobic reaction, in ways that are not focused on these kinds of identity. More typically, sex and identity can simply be confused with each other. So even an expanded catalog of identities can remain blind to the ways people suffer, often indiscriminately, from gender norms, object-orientation norms, norms of sexual practice, and norms of subjective identification. This sounds abstract, but in practice it is often instinctively understood in many contexts, from street scenes to drag performance clubs to some service organizations and AIDS groups. In these places, it is possible to have a concrete sense of being in the same boat with people who may not share your sexual tastes at all—people who have had to survive the penalties of dissent from the norms of straight culture, for reasons that may be as various as the people themselves

The organized gay movement, as we will see in the following chapters, has in many ways lost that vision. The point of a movement is to bring about a time when the loathing for queer sex, or gender variance, will no longer distort people's lives. In the meantime, we (or some of us, acting in the name of homosexuals) try to clean ourselves up as legitimate play-

ers in politics and the media. As a movement we resort to a temporary pretense: "We're gay," we say, "but that has nothing to do with sex." And then, too often, this stopgap pretense is mistaken for the desired utopia. No more sex! Free at last!

These contradictions haunt us, both as individuals and as a movement. The movement in too many ways has chosen to become a politics of sexual identity, not sex. But it can never really escape its reliance on a sex public, nor the loathing that continues to be attached to any explicit or publicly recognized sex. Scandal hangs over our head even when we are in our Sunday finest—especially then. And although this tension is felt across the entire movement (in a way that is unique to queer politics), it also creates a tendency to sort people by greater or lesser degrees of privilege. A hierarchy emerges. Some people pay a higher price for the loathing of queer sexuality (or gender variance) than others. In the right social quarters, if you behave yourself, you can have a decent life as a normal homo—at least, up to a point. Those with the biggest fig leaves stand, always, at the top of the hierarchy. The only price they pay is the price of contradiction. They must claim that, though defined by sexuality, they are beyond it.

The American gay movement repeats within itself, in exaggerated form, the contradictions that Adorno already identified with America on the basis of his experience in California. And if conflicts over sex have become so much more prominent in the national culture, it is not surprising that similar stresses should appear in queer politics, which brings them to such a pitch of intensity. The sad truth is that the movement has never been able to resolve its sense that dignity and sex are incompatible. Some ways of relieving this tension are worse than others, and, as we shall see in the next chapter, at the moment those are the ones that are winning.