The Drive for Sexual Equality

The great enigmatic change, according to me, is the transformation from theories and practices of sexual desire that stress the absolute necessity of inequality to those that reject such ideas and put an emphasis on egalitarian, even pure erotic relations. For most of human history, sexual bonds were inherently unequal. Those between men and women depended on a gender difference in power, men being superior and women inferior and both genders taking the bodily positions that belonged to their social status. There existed rare exceptions but the situation was, and remains so in large parts of the contemporary world, that men set the sexual agenda and women have to concede to their desires. In many western countries, part of the marriage vow was that the wife had to pledge obedience to her husband. Laws did not forbid rape in marriage because it was the right of the man to have sex with his wife.

Even gay and lesbian relations that could have been expected to be equal, were, to the contrary, most often based in social inequalities. In the past, almost all homosexual bonds were age- or gender-structured, meaning that there existed a difference in age between partners that would be seen as pedophile in modern times, or in gender attribution – so a masculine man or woman had sex with a feminine person of the same sex (trade and queen, macho and maricone in Spanish, or butch and femme; see Greenberg, 1988; Herdt, 1997; Hekma, 2000). Especially the age-structured relations were common in many cultures and historical periods, well-known examples being the pederasty of Ancient Greece (Verstraete and Provencal, 2005), the male initiations of many Melanesian tribes (Herdt, 1984) and the boy love of the Arabs in classical and contemporary times (El-Rouayheb, 2005; Baldauf, 1988; Serhane, 2000). Female examples are, to the contrary, rare, and often concerned girls of a more advanced age than the boys and male adolescents who were the sexual ideal of men. With the gender-structured homosexual relations, female
examples are more common. Butch–femme relations exist under various names in different cultures of the world (Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999). At the male side exists an abundance of names and meanings: Indian hijra’s, Indonesian waria’s, American double-spirited, Brazilian travesti, Omani xanith to give some examples (Herdt, 1994). Most times, partners with the inferior status (the boy, the feminine person) took the passive role while the ‘real’ man and butch lesbian occupied the active position. Sexual role reversal was rare. Even the first theories of homosexual desires of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in the 1860s were based in ideas of social inequality, his uranians with their female souls in male bodies lusting after ‘normal’ men with male souls and bodies or, more rarely, pederasts after boys (Sigusch, 2000). The few examples of equality between homoerotic partners, as in the classical case of Achilles and Patroklos, often made the observers discuss what could be their social difference. Michel de Montaigne could only describe his egalitarian love for Émile de La Boétie as friendship because the existing terminology of sodomy and pederasty implied an inequality that was unacceptable to him (Schachter, 2001).

Between love and sex existed a gap, because love, like friendship, was most often based in some equality and belonged to the higher, spiritual realms, while sex was inherently unequal and belonged to the lower, more animal urges of humans. Sexuality with the aim of reproduction was central to the traditional ideal of marriage as an economic arrangement between families while love was at most an incidental consequence. Intimacy was rather to be found in homosocial worlds, between friends, colleagues, students (Bray, 2002). Most premodern erotic ideals excluded sexual practices as in courtly, spiritual or Platonic loves. In this constellation, marriage and sex belonged together and more egalitarian intimate relations mainly existed in other arrangements.

Since Romanticism, an ideology of sexual equality has come into play. It started with ideals of a still asexual romantic love and continued with comradely relations in marriage or in free love. Relations should be based on love as a precondition for sexual practices. Marriage and sex became closely bound to love. Friedrich Engels suggested that after women also men would become monogamous (Hekma, 1995: 112). Such ideals have come close to realization a century later. The combined forces of democratization and feminism since the 1960s have created a strong push towards equal sexual relations – not meaning of equal value in their variety, but all similar, rejecting social difference in erotic preferences. The inequality that was the norm in the recent past was replaced by a new norm of erotic egalitarianism. In homosexual worlds, the ‘normal’ messenger boys, sailors, soldiers and working-class young men of the past changed from objects of desire to homophobic queer bashers. Gay men
now started to prefer equal relations with each other while exchanging sexual roles. Lipstick lesbians have taken the place of butches and femmes. Pedophilia, prostitution and bestiality get always more demonized and are now generally seen as exploitative and abusive practices because of their inherent inequality. The drive towards equality favors gay and lesbian relations because they are more equal than heterosexual ones can ever become. So it is not surprising that same-sex marriages get accepted so broadly and quickly. Heterosexuals face a problem because equality is pursued even into the bedroom where the bodily differences between men and women impede its full completion (Braun et al., 2003). The new homogeneity suggests narcissism, as the beloved has to become a mirror image of the lover. This drive for erotic equality is a major revolution that receives little critical attention. The few authors who discuss this radical transformation, generally and uncritically applaud it (feminist Badinter and Blairite Giddens, who speaks of ‘pure relations’). Equality in sexual relations also implies the problematic liberal concept of consent. This makes the sex act an object of negotiations that often hinder the excitement. Badinter (1986) recognizes this development but does not regret the loss of lust; Giddens (1992) does not care because his ethics have precedence over pleasure.

The main long-term development is the continuing spread of egalitarian relations. It is amazing to witness the radical change of a theory and practice of desire that is founded in social inequalities of gender, age and class to a new ideology in which love mainly arises between equal partners. This development continues with always growing force, parallel to a transformation from a homosocial to a heterosocial organization of society. Don Kulick (2005) described the ‘good sexuality’ of the country where this new system is most developed, Sweden, as monogamous and largely heterosexual with strict sex laws and no prostitution, promiscuity or public sex while children continue to remain ‘innocent’.

This new perspective is limiting and normalizing as was the old ideology, also because it excludes all sexual interests that are based in power differences. It is nice and ethically fine to strive for relations with equalized partners, but how to deal with social difference and sexual variation? Alan Sinfield (2004) has argued that most sexual relations are based in some inequality, be it class, race, gender or age, and that such inequalities contribute to the experience of sexual pleasure. The utopian socialist Charles Fourier would have argued that such relations between persons of different backgrounds could only contribute to social cohesion because it brings people out of their own social group (Schérer, 2004). But such perspectives are on the way out.

This new ideology is based in an unrealistic expectation that relations, love and lust can and should be combined. But lust and love are different
things. They also have different dynamics in the sense that lust depends on novelty and the moment while love is about confidence and the long term. Love is general as it is about sharing a life together while sexual desire is more specific and fetishist. The obligation to combine sex and intimacy forces people to divorce when sexual desire has gone – as happens in most enduring love relations after some years. Monogamy makes the beloved into a jealously guarded possession instead of a precious gift. The drive for equality also is a remarkable development and an unrealistic expectation because in a society that is always creating more options in different fields, relationships, sex and love follow the same model, while they should be long term and include the education of children. For good reasons Patrick Moore (2004) has suggested that it is better to revive the lively gay sexual culture of the 1970s, separating the various emotions of love, friendship, passion and sex. This would be good for love, lust, relations and social cohesion. He adds the arts, as Fourier would have done, because culture is closely bound to the dynamics of sexual expression (and not to repression or sublimation).

What does this development mean for research? The most surprising part of this revolution is its radicalism. We often think that historical changes in sexual practices and ideas are slow, as with women’s and gay and lesbian emancipation, but here is a major example of a sexual revolution that is rather quick and radical, quite remarkable but unperceived except for its spectacular elements like the demonization of pedophilia. This transformation leads to a set of cultural-historical questions, and also to questions on the nature of desire that apparently is not so essential. More research could be done on recent history and the socio-sexual changes that took place around the 1960s and the so-called sexual revolution: in erotic practices, in relational models, in debates on love and lust. From a sociological viewpoint it would be interesting to study how people now manage the combination, or separation, of loves, lusts and relations. A specific focus could be on the developments in those erotic preferences that are based in some social or power difference such as age, gender, class, ethnicity, including straight couples and sadomasochism. Another topic is an analysis of discourses on pedophilia, child sexuality, prostitution, sex tourism and bestiality, or at the other, winning hand, same-sex marriage to see how ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex get subdivided. The spectacular growth of people incarcerated for sex crimes could be discussed in terms of the many people who have not been able to internalize the new rules and laws that have come with the demand for equality. As scholars and humans we are witnessing a major shift in sexual perspectives. We should grab the chance to understand what is happening to us and in our societies.
References


