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History from the top shelf: the cultural politics of sex in post-war Britain

Article

Accepted Version

Cofield, L., Mechen, B. and Worley, M. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3049-8714 (2022) History from the top shelf: the cultural politics of sex in post-war Britain. Contemporary British History, 36 (2). pp. 165-173. ISSN 1743-7997 doi: 10.1080/13619462.2022.2051485 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/105992/

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2022.2051485

Publisher: Routledge

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Introduction:

History from the Top Shelf: Cultural Politics and Sex in Post-war Britain

Laura Cofield, Ben Mechen & Matthew Worley

In a 1970 book dedicated to *The Outer Fringe of Sex*, S.G. Tuffill cast an eye over Britain's cultural body. 'Today', Tuffill observed, 'we live in a permissive society […] of comparative affluence'. More people were spending money on luxuries; they had more time for leisure and happiness. 'The mini-skirt, the topless dress, the open discussions on sex, the pill and abortion – all would have been unacceptable even fifteen years ago.' Now they seemed omnipresent, the learned doctor and fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons commented. They were an embedded part of the modern world. And yet, Tuffill pondered, could being 'too permissive' actually be as 'bad as – or conceivably worse than – coyness, repression and prudishness'? Maybe 'this morbid fascination, this preoccupation with sex, could be an unhealthy sign'?[1]

To be sure, cultural representations of sex became evermore visible over the late twentieth century, be it in the realms of the artistic or the pornographic, the filmic or the theatric, the literary or the comedic. In the commodified spaces of leisure, advertising and consumption, images of (or about) sex were used increasingly to sell products and lifestyles. Sexualised bodies, predominantly female, appeared more explicitly on billboards, television, in newspapers and glossy magazines. By the 1970s, a picture of a naked woman might even emerge from beneath the peanut packets hanging in most pub bars. At the same moment, representations of sex and sexuality became the fodder of emergent sub- and countercultures (youth, queer, feminist), for whom such 'sex scenes' reflected all that needed ripping up; but also, perhaps, the basis for starting again.[2]

As this suggests, post-war representations of sex were constructed, codified and refracted through the prism of sexual and cultural politics, paving the way for contentious debates on power and pleasure; on oppression and expression; on straightness, queerness and 'kinkiness'; on gender and sexuality. Politically, the *meaning* of sexual practice and sexual representation brokered dispute. Culturally, the aesthetics of sexuality informed individual and group identities. Once the personal became political, so too did the body and the question of who and what went where, when and why.

To date, the cultural politics of sex in post-war Britain have only been sketchily accounted for in existing histories of a period still generally regarded as one in which the heavy robes of Victorian morality were thrown off amidst varied expressions of progressive liberation. Michel Foucault, writing in the mid-1970s, identified this as the 'repressive hypothesis' powering the Sexual Revolution.[3] Since then, the notion and parameters of the permissive society have been interrogated in ways S.G. Tuffill may or may not have approved.[4] Most obviously, feminist critiques challenged the extent and nature of the sexual freedoms associated with the 1960s and 1970s, as in Audre Lorde's claim that 'the erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women', especially in the realm of the pornographic.[5] Few people today believe that free love really did permeate the 1960s by any equal or wholly liberatory measure, while questions of sexuality remain contested long into the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, broadly linear and inherently positive interpretations of the 1960s – passing through the saucy seventies on route towards the polymorphous pleasures of the naughty noughties – retain in the popular memory.

Look closer, however, and the pictures begin to blur. Disturbing revelations of sexual abuse and exploitation have stained the consciousness. If the sixties are still deemed to have swung, then the seventies are now oft-portrayed as a decade of sleazy excess, wherein the lid

came off Pandora's box and repressed demons burst free. Likewise, any Whiggish history of the law and de-censorship becomes snagged once confronted by repeated 'moral' backlashes and the enduring legal status of 'obscenity' as a check on what is fit to publish and present. Then again, more pessimistic – but equally teleological – accounts of the role played by popular and pornographic cultures in the 'sexualisation' of British society might also run up against their own problems.[6] The commodification of sex, be it through print, performance or film, developed on many levels, replete with porn barons, corrupt coppers and underground cottage industries maintained by fetishists and activists spilling over from the political and countercultural margins. Even now, in a world of virtual media, attempts to regulate the internet's seemingly endless stream of sexual imagery continue, while the rise of the sexual 'selfie', 'camming' and 'amateur pornography' suggests any reductionist splitting of the 'producer' and 'consumer' of sexual representation remains unstable. Sex is complex and its cultural representations tell us much about how perceptions, predilections and prejudices entwine over time.

We suggest, therefore, that the time is ripe for a rethinking of the three-way relationship between sex, culture and politics post-1945: a rethinking able to move beyond generalised accounts of liberalisation – and such notional breaks as the 1960 *Lady Chatterley* trial or advent of the Web – to probe and explore the diverse landscapes of sex and sexuality.[7] A 'special issue' on its own can never claim to do all that needs to be done. What we offer instead is a peepshow of possibilities; an attempt to lift a veil and discover how the post-war period grappled with various forms of sexual representation. Do, for example, cultural depictions of sex provide the vanguard or rear-guard of sexual expression and politics? Does pornography expose an archive for reimagining histories of sexuality, normativity/non-normativity and activism? What does it mean to reconsider the history of sexual

representation (or British history more generally) through an attentiveness to 'kinks', margins and extremities? Does the commodification of sex and sexual practice inform or reflect personal identities? To what extent have new technologies and new media – from instant cameras to home video to the internet – dissolved the boundaries between public and private sex, between work and pleasure? How transnational is this history? What happens when the hidden becomes visible; when the marginal moves towards the mainstream; when sex is filtered through processes of production and consumption?

Three scholarly developments have stimulated this special issue. Firstly, since the early 2000s, a growing body of cross-disciplinary works have sought to understand how spheres of sexual representation were reshaped by broader processes of socio-cultural change. This may relate to the emergence of mass culture or personal politics; it may concentrate on technological developments or the extension of empire. Whatever, such work has begun to consider how representations of sex can both help and hinder wider cultural transformation, moving beyond inquiries into the history of sexuality towards the 'sexuality of history'.[8] To this end, representations of sex have been viewed in multiple ways: as constitutively modern or postmodern; analogue or digital; heteronormative or queer; patriarchal or liberated; or – more often – as some uneven and uneasy combination of these categories. Lisa Sigel, Sarah Bull, Colette Colligan, Jamie Stoops, Matt Cook and Harry Cocks' work on the makers, sellers and readers of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century pornography provide salutary examples of such research.[9] So, too, does Stephen Brooke's study of Bill Brandt's psychodramatic nudes of the 1940s or Philippa Levine's work on photography and the 'erotics of colonial power', not to mention Frank Mort and Oliver Carter's histories of sexual commerce in 'swinging London' and Callum Brown, Roger Davidson and Gayle Davis' analyses of formal and informal regimes of obscenity regulation in Britain. Marcus Collins, Leon Hunt, Paul

Deslandes and Helen Wickstead have even perused men's top-shelf and back-room magazines and sexploitation films from the 1960s and 1970s to find insight beneath the fleshly image.[10] Indeed, many of these engagements with the cultural politics of sexual representation should themselves be seen as part of a broader turn towards the visual in the historiography of modern Britain. Moving beyond the use of images as simply illustrative figures, this work has instead articulated that, in Tina Campt's phrase, the 'image matters' – not as a document of the past *es eigentlich gewesen ist*, but as a guide to historical ways of seeing and, importantly, ways of trying to be seen.[11]

Secondly, in media and cultural studies, interventions in the developing field of 'porn studies' have endeavoured to circumnavigate the impasse of the 1980s 'porn wars' by thinking more rigorously about pornography's consolidation as a dominant but protean cultural form. A form, moreover, with its own political, social and commercial structures; its own opportunities for agency; its own norms of performance.[12] Perhaps the key insight of this work – across disciplines – has been a need to move past any simplistic understanding of sexual representation as a one-handed history of 'solitary sex'.[13] In Jennifer Nash's formulation, pornography must instead be thought of as a 'representational site' characterised by 'social, historical and technological specificity' – but also, *always*, 'multiplicity'.[14] Porn studies has thus framed its task not as criticism (or, oppositely, celebration) of pornography but rather as a critique, mapping out its connections 'to other media genres, forms and aesthetics', 'to producer and consumer groups and communities', 'to broader frameworks of cultural regulation and value.'[15]

Thirdly, and in similar fashion, recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in the history of British activist networks and subcultures. Amidst such research are questions of sexual politics and the significance of sexual representation and sexual subjectivity.[16] At stake

here has been the recovery of previously hidden histories, followed by the questioning and deconstruction of (sexual) normativity through historicisation. Thus, we may point to the work of Lucy Delap and Amy Tobin on feminism and anti-sexism; to Ruby Ray Daily and Julia Pine's focus on fetish and BDSM subcultures; to Jamie Hakim's studies of gay men's social networks before and after the internet.[17] It is a preoccupation of all the articles in this special issue to examine the ways in which sex and the social have, across the last seventy-five years, been thought (and visualised) through each other.

Key to advances along these strands has been a willingness to think beyond historically specific mythologies of sex centred on stock characters, folk devils and rehearsed ideas: Victorian tropes of the 'fallen woman', perhaps, or the 'Chelsea girls' and 'Tomorrow's Men' of swinging London.[18] Instead, recent studies – and those here – approach the *work* of sexual representation in the widest sense, decoding not only what they meant but also how they were made, who by, and under what conditions. Explicit and implicit in the work discussed are questions as to how sexual images were circulated and changed in form and interpretation through time and space. How did they become the basis for claims to political or social recognition? How, if at all, did sexual imagery and performance reshape understandings of the self and subjectivity? How has pornography entered into (or been excluded from) the historical archive? Together, these strands of academic enquiry have marked not so much a turn away from the cultural (or discursive) but towards – and *in addition* to – the social, the material, the technological, the political, the subjective, the emotional and the historiographical. In this, the contribution of queer theory in broadening the terrain of 'the sexual' and destabilising lineages through attention to operations of power and rules of sexual difference should not be underestimated.[19]

As may be discerned, this special issue stemmed from a conversation between the

three editors as to whether representations of sex and sexuality informed or were informed by broader processes of social, cultural and political change. Could sexual representations, including those of pornography, tell us something other than the superficially obvious? Were they just the past laid bare and exposed, yet signifying nothing? Or were they portals into moods, sensations, relations and structures of feeling? What was there to see – and what did people in the past see – in such 'twilight moments'?[20] In each of our individual research projects, we had been struck by the ways in which 'obscene' or 'pornographic' texts – and the contexts in which they were read, used, defined and disseminated – raised new historical questions about how sex had been lived and thought of in the past.[21] Equally, they seemed to raise sometimes awkward questions about how and where to read primary material that, however 'mainstream' or 'popular' in practice, remained moored on the 'outer fringe'. That is, in Gayle Rubin's words, beyond the 'charmed circle' of everything deemed 'good, normal, natural [and] blessed', located instead on the periphery of accepted historical practice and interest; on the edge of established social, legal and political frameworks; kept hidden at the back of the archive (or under the bed).[22]

This last positioning was especially pertinent. Over fifty years since the journalist and historian Peter Fryer declared the prudish existence of the British Library's 'Private Case' – its collection of 'dirty' books, kept under lock and key, viewable only by application to the Head Librarian – a Victorian hangover and 'public scandal', the archive of sexual representation in Britain remains for the most part disparate, dispersed, uncatalogued and unloved.[23] More recently, however, historicist impulses in queer studies – and, alternatively, vagabond adventures in 'queer time' – have led to a 'feeling backward' enabling archival construction and salvage. Low culture and 'low theory' have come into view, while reading well-trodden archives 'against the grain' has resulted in new considerations of the 'porn archive' as a

productive site. Thanks to pornography's long record of naming, showing or implying queer sex, the writing of queer histories and the imagination of queer futures has sidestepped the politics of respectability.[24] In the United States, this has resulted in a rich seam of work on the gay liberation and women's movements, as well as on popular culture and the politics of the New Right.[25] It has further seeded necessary reflections on how the 'optics of desire' inherent in representations of sex from the past implicate not only the historical subjects we seek to study, but also ourselves. To draw upon the conceptual language of the media theorist Susanna Paasonen, 'carnal' images may be felt to resonate not just synchronically but diachronically too.[26]

As historians of contemporary Britain, we have been prompted to ask: what constitutes the archive of sexual representation for the period since 1945 and what new histories might be made tellable through it? Phrased another way, and to put the title of one pornographer's memoir to new purposes, what might we gain from understanding these years as Britain's 'Blue Period'?[27] The articles here are testament to the fact that while familiar archives can be mined for un(der)-used material (albeit, as at the British Library, viewed on tables reserved for 'restricted' items), answering this question sometimes forces novel research strategies in unconventional places. Our first editorial meeting was held at a pub on the Holloway Road after a visit together to the second-hand emporium RAM Books and Mags, the only shop in London that will – according to the website *Islington Now* – 'buy your dead uncle's porn collection'. There, among racks of carefully sorted and cellophaned copies of *Fiesta* and expensive cine reels, the proprietor regaled us with stories – intriguing, unverifiable – of a lost Soho. Other materials explored in the articles that follow were found on eBay and online discussion forums used by collectors and enthusiasts, including some who had passed through the 1970s 'pornography of participation' detailed here by Ben Mechen.

Today, perhaps prompted by surging public interest in sexual politics and histories, there are signs that institutional archives are catching up. The mission of the Bishopsgate Institute Archive to further the study of everyday life and social movements has enabled a significant expansion of its holdings relating to queer sex and the history of 'kink'. And even at the British Library, the Private Case (finally opened to readers in the 1990s) was reborn in 2019, though now in the form of a fully searchable (if also paywalled) digital archive, allowing historians around the world to examine not only its contents, but also the way such documents were once drawn together as dangerous and obscene.[28] This institutional shift will possibly make investigations like those developed in this special issue much easier in the future, and will certainly safeguard many important documents of the sexual past from destruction and loss. At the same time, it is undoubtedly the case that one of the main lessons learned in the process of compiling this special issue was about the radical affordances for new historical work offered by what we might describe as the archive beyond 'the archive'.

Five articles are included, all of which hone in on the 1970s as a moment when the visibility and discussion around sexual representation was noticeably acute: Ben Mechen views the erotics of ordinariness through the complex lenses of 'readers' wives' features; Laura Cofield strips back the politics of pornography and pubic hair; Gil Engelstein journeys through the contentious politics of John Stamford's gay publications; Lucy Delap follows the men of the anti-sexist Men's Movement as they try to navigate feminist critiques of sexual violence; Matthew Worley evokes the howl of de Sade through punk and post-punk. Taken altogether, they are intended as foreplay to a dialogue, locating representations of sex, sexual performance and sexual identity in their historical context. They hope, in the process, to provide new exposés of British post-war history by reaching for the top shelf and rooting under the counter to uncover the bodies of sexual subculture and practice.

Notes

1. Tuffill, 'Introduction', 15.
2. Schaefer (ed.), *Sex Scene*.
3. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1.
4. Mort, *Capital Affairs*; Brooke, *Sexual Politics*; Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*; Collins (ed.), *The Permissive Society and its Enemies*; Weeks, *The World We Have Won*; Cook, 'AIDS, Mass Observation, and the Fate of the Permissive Turn'; Houlbrook, *Queer London*; Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*; Charnock, 'Teenage Girls, Female Friendship and the Making of the Sexual Revolution in England, 1950–1980'.
5. Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', 54.
6. Duschinsky, 'The Emergence of Sexualization as a Social Problem', 137–56.
7. For a more nuanced take on the significance of the Chatterley trial, see Hilliard, '"Is It a Book That You Would Even Wish Your Wife or Your Servants to Read?"', 653–78.
8. Lanser, *The Sexuality of History*. In this spirit, see also Lynn Hunt's foundational edited collection, *The Invention of Pornography*.
9. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*; Bull, 'A Purveyor of Garbage?'; Colligan, *A Publisher's Paradise*; Stoops, *The Thorny Path*; Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality*; Cocks, 'Saucy Stories'.
10. Brooke, 'War and the Nude'; Levine, 'Naked Truths'; Mort, 'Striptease'; Carter, 'Original Climax Films'; Brown, *The Battle for Christian Britain*; Davidson and Davis, *The Sexual State*; Collins, 'The Pornography of Permissiveness'; Hunt, *British Low Culture*; Deslandes, 'The Cultural Politics of Gay Pornography in 1970s Britain'; Wickstead, 'Soho Typescripts'.

11. Campt, *Image Matters*; Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke*; Hornsey, *The Spiv and the Architect*; Connell, 'Race, Prostitution and the New Left'.
12. Williams, *Hard Core*; idem (ed.), *Porn Studies*; Smith and Attwood, 'Anti/Pro/Critical Porn Studies'; Sullivan and McKee, *Pornography*.
13. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*.
14. Nash, 'Strange Bedfellows', 62-3.
15. Smith and Attwood, 'Anti/Pro/Critical Porn Studies', 11.
16. Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain*.
17. Delap, 'Feminism, Masculinities and Emotional Politics in Late Twentieth Century Britain'; Tobin, 'Moving Pictures'; Ray Daily, 'Sex and Violence in Greater Britain'; Pine, 'In *Bizarre* Fashion'; Hakim, *Work That Body*.
18. Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*; Collins, 'The Pornography of Permissiveness'.
19. Doan, *Disturbing Practices*; Houlbrook and Waters, 'The Heart in Exile: Detachment'.
20. Clark, 'Twilight Moments'.
21. In an important article – 'Reading Obscene Texts and Their Histories' – Harry Cocks argues that the history of reading cultures through which obscene texts moved is usually more interesting than the texts themselves (285).
22. Rubin, 'Thinking Sex', 281.
23. Fryer, *Private Case, Public Scandal*.
24. Dean, Ruszczycky and Squires (eds.). *Porn Archives*; Alilunas, 'Far Away, So Close'; Strub, 'Sanitizing the Seventies'; Preciado, *Pornotopia*; Sigal, Tortorici and Whitehead (eds), *Ethnopornography*.
25. Bronstein and Strub (eds), *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars*; Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*; Escoffier, 'Sex in the Seventies'; Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies*. The Rialto

Report and Porno Cultures podcasts have also been influential.

26. Evans, 'Seeing Subjectivity'; Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*.
27. Whittaker, *Blue Period*.
28. *Archives of Sexuality and Gender, Part III: Sex and Sexuality, Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries*. Gale Primary Sources, 2019.

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