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When Sex was Destiny: The Hidden History of Heterosexuality

The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800-1975. Hera Cook. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. xiv + 412 pp.

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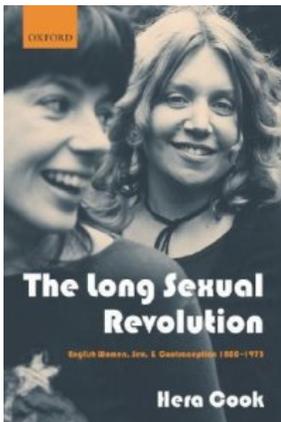
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<1>*The Long Sexual Revolution* is an ambitious book that traces the momentous changes in the practices of sexuality and reproduction since the 1800s. The central argument is that before the availability of reliable and female-controlled techniques of birth limitation, penile-vaginal intercourse entailed “an uncontrollable and incalculable risk” (12) that inevitably was borne most heavily by women. Women who had sex outside of marriage faced the possibility of desertion and the perils of lone motherhood, and while married couples had to share the cost of large families, it was women’s bodies that laboured under the burden of repeated pregnancies, deliveries and breast-feeding. The consequences of reproduction had profound implications, therefore, for female desire: “Often women could not afford to enjoy sex. The risk made it too expensive a pleasure” (12). But many women, contends Cook, were not resigned passively to their reproductive fate. If women in the 1970s affected a sexual revolution by seizing the opportunity for risk-free intercourse afforded by oral contraception, earlier generations also transformed sexual mores but, on the whole, by urging restraint or abstinence rather than pursuing sexual expression and experimentation. The advent of the pill, consequently, is read as the final chapter of a “long sexual revolution” in which women had struggled for two centuries to regulate heterosexual behaviour.

<2>Cook’s story makes a ground-breaking intervention in the history of sexuality. Following Michel Foucault, recent studies in this field have focused overwhelmingly on the discursive formation of sexuality and the role of institutions such as medicine and the law in codifying and disciplining normative and deviant sexuality. While this rich and influential scholarship has reconstructed sites of resistance to disciplinary regimes and explored the proliferation of dissident sexual cultures, it has paid surprisingly little attention to the day-to-day experience of heterosexuality and the ways in which heterosexual desire throughout most of human history has been shaped by the physical realities of reproduction.

<3>The history of fertility regulation, argues Cook, cannot be explained by the Foucauldian model of discipline for before the twentieth century the production and popularization of birth-control knowledge was undertaken outside the field of established medicine and was prohibited and prosecuted by the state. Even in the twentieth century, eugenicists and population specialists made only limited impact on state policy which was influenced more by pressure from a loose and ideologically diverse range of voluntary bodies, professionals and campaigners. From the 1870s onwards, decades before the elaboration of an official discourse on population limitation, couples appear to have endeavoured to manage the size of their families, thereby contributing to a decline in the birth rate. Far from knowledge percolating down the social scale from the middle classes, Cook suggests, “It is more probable that birth control information percolated *outwards* from radical groups and from purveyors of erotic literature and condoms” (77) and, well into the twentieth century, was “almost entirely a matter of self-help” (4).

<4>One of the most refreshing and illuminating aspects of *The Long Sexual Revolution* is Cook’s use of quantitative and qualitative evidence to explain the long decline in fertility that demographers have suggestively labelled “the quiet revolution.” While most historians of women have been sceptical of the gender bias in statistical evidence, Cook points out that demographic data “reveal changes over decades and centuries, creating a picture of women’s lives that is available through no other source” (14). However, while census information can identify important shifts in behaviour, it does not illuminate the cultural meanings attached to such behaviour. While the attempt to demonstrate women’s agency in the sphere of reproduction is laudable, much of the qualitative evidence, particularly relating to the nineteenth century, is slight



and occasional references to autobiographical or diary sources can bear only speculative interpretation, not Cook's resoundingly emphatic claims. We actually learn much more from this book about the propagators of birth control, than the women whose history Cook seeks to recover.

<5>While the propagators of birth-control knowledge in the nineteenth century were predominantly men, Cook argues that it was above all women's desire to control their fertility that shaped its use and even delayed the uptake of contraceptive technology. One of the challenges facing would-be birth-controllers was persuading potential users that control was compatible with pleasure. Such emphasis unfortunately led to some poor advice, as in partial withdrawal. But for women, sexual radicalism and experimentation held limited appeal. With urbanization and the breakdown of traditional communal sanctions against desertion, combined with the post-New Poor Law era bastardy regulations, which made mothers entirely responsible for illegitimate children, working-class women depended more heavily on the security afforded by formal marriage. The deterioration of women's economic position across the social classes made marriage a trade of sorts which women were increasingly reluctant to jeopardize through extra-marital sex. In this context, mothers were more likely to police the sexual conduct of their daughters, inaugurating "a broad shift towards a more prudish and female respectable working-class culture in the nineteenth century" (67). With the rise of homosocial environments, men and women across the classes increasingly occupied different sexual cultures where they gained little practical knowledge of sex. By the end of the century most women and considerable numbers of men were virgins upon marriage and had very limited experience or knowledge of sexual pleasure.

<6>Contrary to Foucault, therefore, Cook asserts that a repressive sexual code was very much in operation in the second half of the nineteenth century, but far from being imposed from above, was generated from within—the product of every day discourse—in which women played a key role (91). Sex, she claims, was increasingly seen as a treacherous activity for women, as indicated by the intensity of the campaigns against prostitution and domestic and sexual violence which animated the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century women's movements. Cook's argument that sexual restraint within marriage and even abstinence were women's preferred means of protecting their own bodies from the strains of repeated childbirth is compelling and confirmed, for example, by the *Maternity Letters* (1915) of the Women's Co-operative Guild, a text that is surprisingly overlooked by this book. Less convincing is Cook's contention that the culture of restraint led to a decline in sexual pleasure: "By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there is a wealth of evidence regarding a wide range of women, which reveals that the trajectory from the mid- to late nineteenth-century was in the direction of increasing anxiety and diminishing sexual pleasure. . . in all classes there was a shift toward a higher proportion of women who did not enjoy physical sexual activity" (106-7).

<7>The substantive research for *The Long Sexual Revolution* is based on an analysis of sex manuals published between Marie Stopes's *Married Love* (1918) and Alex Comfort's *Joy of Sex* (1972). Such analysis is used to reconstruct the sexual behavior of the majority. According to Cook, people who lack practical knowledge about sexual practice are less likely to enjoy sexual activity. This is a big claim – and one supported by the manuals which agreed that sex for the vast majority of couples was brief and infrequent and centred on penetration – yet Cook simply assumes that these polemical guides are representative of the population at large. Is sexual pleasure necessarily dependent on practical knowledge or does it depend as much on shared expectations – about love, companionship, tenderness and so on – that could be gleaned from less explicitly didactic material and learned on the job, so to speak? There is no discussion of how sexual expectations and knowledge were raised, deflated, or confused by other cultural media such as the music hall, romantic fiction, or cinema.

<8>Yet the sex manuals do provide an illuminating insight into the gradual creation of a more permissive sexual culture, one that women had to be coaxed into, and that did not always work to their advantage. Such guides have often been read as productive of a conservative, patriarchal gender ideology and yet, as texts written by authors with a range of professional and lay expertise as well as diverse religious and political affiliations, they show marked differences in attitudes towards sexuality and gender relations. The earlier guides tended to follow Stopes in claiming that sexual desire was healthy and pleasurable for both sexes within the context of an emotionally intimate marriage, advising men to pay attention to their wives, especially by delaying orgasm. Under the influence of Freud, some writers in the 1930s accepted women's sexual passion as natural but only in the context of male-dominated sexual practice yet, significantly, the highest selling manuals – including *Married Love* and Eustace Chesser's *Loving without Fear* (1940) –

continued to be those which offered readers “a positive view of sexuality as joyous and loving” (221).

<9>Cook’s examination of surveys and manuals indicates that before the 1970s women were more cautious than men in experimenting with sexual practices or contraceptive techniques. The growing availability of fairly reliable contraceptive devices did not lead to a marked liberalization in women’s attitudes towards sex, evident in the comparatively low use of female-controlled forms of barrier protection. In fact, the relaxation of sexual codes in the 1950s increased the pressure on women to have sex and led to a brief rise in the birth rate. The critical factor in the sexual revolution therefore, was not changing cultural attitudes towards sex, contends Cook, but rather the introduction of the pill that promised risk-free sex under female control, though surely the rapid mass take-up of the pill was facilitated by women’s existing political and social expectations. It was mainly women, after all, points out Cook, who pushed for the pill to become available to all, regardless of marital status. Their demand was readily conceded by the Labour government and, therefore, Cook breezily dismisses the pessimistic conclusion of Jeffrey Weeks that the pill failed to liberate women and strengthened a conservative, male-dominated sexual culture by pressuring women to be sexually available. So for Cook, the sexual revolution finally “came with a bang”: henceforth sex was no longer tied to either marriage or reproduction. State provision of free contraception marked “an unprecedented retreat from government and community attempts to control women’s behaviour and an erosion of female deference” (297). With sex no longer their destiny, most women have been able to combine greater educational and employment opportunities with the pursuit of sexual pleasure, while family forms and gender roles have diversified.

<10>*The Long Revolution* demonstrates the need for much more research on the changing experiences and meanings of heterosexual sexual practices and desire, which as Cook acknowledges, continue to be differentiated by distinctive class, regional, occupational, religious and ethnic cultures. This provocative survey will be an essential point of reference for such work. Cook’s claim that women, and particularly working-class women (so often positioned as the objects of disciplinary regimes), can be viewed as “rational actors” reminds us that agency does not always manifest itself in emancipatory strategies of resistance but can also take defensive and conservative forms. But few people behave as rational actors all the time. Certainly, contraceptive technologies have allowed women and men to manage more effectively than ever before their reproductive lives. Yet, as rates of abortion and sexually transmitted disease may indicate, desire does not always fit easily with self-discipline and many of us continue to take our chances, crossing our fingers, trusting to fate. Sexuality continues to be a risky and irrational as well as regulated business.

