

Sex, State, and Society in the Early Modern World

Mellon Seminar Description Lisa Jane Graham, Haverford College

The English translation of the first volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in 1976 identified a new field of humanistic inquiry by insisting that sex and sexuality constitute topics for historical research. Foucault identified human sexuality as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” and therefore central to modern ideas about subjectivity, freedom, and discipline. In the decades that followed Foucault's initial call, scholars across the disciplines searched for evidence and developed arguments that tested the model. The time has come, however, to take stock of this scholarship and assess the field it has created. How has attention to gender and sexuality altered the methods and practices of different disciplines? How has this work changed the questions we ask about the past and the present? Where do we go from here in terms of topics, methods, and assumptions? These questions will guide the proposed seminar and the selected readings for the year.

We often locate the emergence of the contemporary sex/gender system in the long eighteenth century thereby linking it to familiar narratives of modernity including subjectivity, capitalism, industrialization, and democracy. We need to pause and ask ourselves whether the idea of a coherent sex/gender system is a useful tool for understanding how states and societies have defined the boundaries of sex over time. In addition, we need to put pressure on the chronology and especially the notion of a pre-modern field of “play” where identities were fluid and fun. The seminar seeks to move beyond the binary categories (sex/gender; licit/illicit; normal/abnormal; acts/identities)

that continue to structure debates in order to map the range of possibilities and privileges available to men and women.

The readings will focus on the early modern era or pre-sex era, roughly 1500-1850, when modern assumptions about gender and sexuality took shape. The gradual emancipation of human desire from the Christian theology of sin and the rise of biology and medicine moved the policing of sex from the church to secular authorities. These shifts relied on concepts of the individual and civil society grounded in the material world. Sex acquired a privileged place in the definition of the modern self as an autonomous agent whose pursuit of pleasure was a cause for celebration and anxiety. What institutions and arguments secured collective life in a world without God and kings? In order to answer this question, we need to reconstruct the sexual culture of different groups that emerged in key sites such as law, literature, medicine, morality, political economy and government.

In the first semester, we will begin with the work of Foucault, both the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality* and *Abnormal*. We will continue by examining related theories such as Pierre Bourdieu (*Masculine Domination*), Judith Butler (*The Psychic Life of Power*), Norbert Elias (*The Civilizing Process*), Carole Pateman (*The Sexual Contract*). From there, we might survey some early theorists of sex and pleasure such as Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Augustine. In the second semester, we will consider historical and literary studies of England, France, and Italy. Readings might include works by Alan Bray, Valerie Finucci, Laura Gowing, David Halperin, Victoria Kahn, Thomas Laqueur, Niklaus Largier, Michael McKeon, Robert Muchembled, Michael Roche, Walter Stephens, and Dror Wahrman. We will pair these readings with relevant

authors such as Mary Astell, Poulain de la Barre, Jeremy Bentham, Denis Diderot, Robert Filmer, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Part of our goal is to determine how one writes about gender and sexuality in terms of evidence (texts, archives, visual, musical) and arguments. How should these categories be integrated into existing disciplinary training and research? Topics to be discussed include (but are not limited to) hermaphrodites; marriage; sub-cultures; homosexuality and lesbianism; friendship and love; crime and policing; intimacy and pleasure; authority and affection. The structure of the seminar in the second semester will remain flexible to accommodate individual interests. Participants will be encouraged to share some work in progress that relates to the broad topic of the seminar.