

INTRODUCTION

Frank Mort and Lynda Nead

Sir Alfred Gilbert's aluminium statue of Eros stands in the centre of Piccadilly Circus in the heart of London's West End. For the Greeks, Eros was one of the fundamental causes of the creation of the cosmos. Representing the unifying power of love, he brought order and harmony to the conflicting elements of chaos. London's late-nineteenth-century rendering of this Greek god was inevitably more prosaic. From 1893 his classical presence lay at the heart of a series of urban improvement and street clearance schemes which converged on Piccadilly. Erected to commemorate the life of the philanthropist and social reformer, the Earl of Shaftesbury, the figure was designed to represent, in Gilbert's words, 'an angel of Christian charity' sending forth his missiles of kindness.¹ Today, many of the capital's major arterial routes and sites of sociability radiate from Eros's plinth. A number of these are avowedly public, administrative and official, others are zones of privacy and human intimacy. To the north and west are London's shopping streets and the hub of commerce; to the south, in Parliament Square and Buckingham Palace, are the centres of government, established religion and the monarchy. While in the more immediate vicinity of Soho, to the north east, are to be found more apocryphal and irregular versions of metropolitan life, associated with the sexual commerce of pornography and prostitution and with a remarkably vibrant homosexual culture. Piccadilly Circus itself, like all urban spaces, is a site for the uneasy convergence of multiple social relations: of bureaucracy, tourism, consumption and simply a meeting place for friends and strangers. It is at once a site of licit and illicit exchange.

Sexual Geographies explores the relationship between sexual regimes and identities and the spatial mapping of London at a number of key moments since the eighteenth century. This issue of *New Formations* is conceived as an intervention into recent debates in historiography and theory which have foregrounded the significance of space and place in framing cultural process and in particular in shaping sexuality and subjectivity. Drawing on the work of scholars from art and cultural history, sociology and human geography, each of the essays considers the ways in which sexual and moral identities have been historically formed - and transformed - through the perception, occupation and experience of urban space.

The conceptual basis underpinning the collection is the active role played by the geography of the metropolis in the representations and power relations of modern city life. Or put theoretically, space is conceived

1. Sir Alfred Gilbert, quoted in *Piccadilly Circus: From Controversy to Reconstruction*, Greater London Council, London 1980, p11.

here as a constitutive part of the cultural and social formation of metropolitan modernity. In terms of work on the histories of urban sexuality, this type of insistence is far from accepted currency and it is worth pausing for a moment to briefly situate our project. *Sexual Geographies* is conceived at the intersection of a number of distinctive traditions of research on the city and its cultures. Social and urban histories of London have tended to treat the environment as a relatively passive backdrop against which 'real' social and cultural processes are enacted. The recent spate of published histories of the metropolis do not depart substantially from an approach which understands place and setting as static features of urban society.² More curiously, this state of affairs is also mirrored in work on the history of sexuality. While recent histories of sex have richly demonstrated the complexity of sexual languages, they have continued to underestimate the spatial dimensions of these representational codes.³ Judith Walkowitz' pioneering study, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 1992, has been pathbreaking in its analysis of the inter-relationships between the politics and poetics of space and the scripts of sexuality in late-Victorian London. But as a historical study it remains the exception rather than the norm. What has tended to occur is that such concerns have been debated outside history, in the areas of cultural theory and human geography. This research has either focused on contemporary aspects of urban culture, or else it has been pitched at high levels of abstraction, drawing on Marxist and post-structuralist traditions, which extend from Henri Lefebvre through to writers such as Michel de Certeau and David Harvey.⁴ Here the primary concern has been with theoretical elucidation, in which space as well as time has been cast as a central part of the repertoire of capitalist development, modernity, postmodernity, or other similar global configurations. In contrast, the idea of a cultural history, which evaluates the spatial dimensions of culture and social processes at particular points in time and in more limited settings, remains an underdeveloped project.

How might the idea of a historical geography of sexuality be conceived? Our first insistence is that it should go beyond simple rhetorical assertions. To maintain that space is constitutive of sexuality is at once to say everything and nothing at all. Stated in this way it is only a thin abstraction. All of the authors in this collection emphasise the specific and the particular over the general; all of them also take as their starting point the dispersed and decentralised nature of modern urban sexuality and power. The aim is to explore in detail how distinctive metropolitan environments have distributed and regulated sexual subjects and populations and to identify the ways in which city space has been negotiated and lived through the practices of everyday life.

The concern with regulative space and with the spaces of regulation develops Michel Foucault's project of discipline and sexuality - a field which was, arguably, his least overtly spatial. A recurrent theme running

2. See for example: Steve Humphries and John Taylor, *The Making of Modern London 1945-1985*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London 1986; Roy Porter, *London, A Social History*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1994.

3. This spatial absence is evident in works as far apart as: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Allen Lane, London 1979; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*, Longman, London 1981; Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994.

4. Among the classic texts in this tradition are: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1991; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley 1988; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1989.

across a number of the articles is the ways in which sexuality in the city figures as a major site of cultural disturbance. Official geographies of immorality and obscenity have repeatedly been a focus for the attempted imposition of strategic order. Miles Ogborn's opening account of one of the milestones in the legislative history of marriage, Lord Harwicke's Marriage Act of 1753, is a story of the state's efforts to define a new moral geography of legitimate and illegitimate relationships within the City of London. Ogborn's particular focus on the clandestine marriage market around the Fleet prison reveals how extremely localised sites within the early modern metropolis acted as symbolic pressure points in a more general, national, strategy of sexual and moral redefinition. In a related sense, Lynda Nead's study of the purveyors of pornographic literature in the alleys and courts of the mid-Victorian city makes visible a spatial economy linking the centres of legal and executive power with a topography of the obscene. Though these characteristically nineteenth-century dualisms generated their own habitus they were not entirely separate environments; bureaucracy and the law were deeply implicated in the very practices and sites of sexuality they ostensibly sought to destroy. Frank Mort uncovers a more recent version of this double consciousness in the sexual geography of the Wolfenden report in the 1950s. The maps of London circulated by the doyens of Sir John Wolfenden's inquiry into homosexuality and prostitution provided the most detailed close-ups of the capital's sexual 'low life'. Despite the best efforts of Whitehall mandarins to define these immoral worlds as apocryphal and irregular, men from the metropolitan elite continued to be personally and sexually dependent upon marginal spaces such as these. In all three cases, what is apparent is that the social geography of marginality frequently demonstrates a symbolic centrality. Transgression makes the norm meaningful.⁵

What we might term a Foucaudian topography of the metropolis has been pivotal in all historical forms of strategic mapping. It would be instantly recognisable to the police commissioner, the magistrate or the sanitary engineer. Operating from on high, it mobilises a panoptic vision of the city and its subjects, who are viewed as part of a landscape and an aesthetics of discipline. Its weakness, of course, is that it refuses to come 'down below' to the level of the street and its pedestrians. In that sense it remains quite literally a history of the city 'from above'. In contrast, de Certeau's urban geography is a project of anti-discipline. His aim is not to illuminate the spaces of regulation, but to bring to light the ways in which resistances to discipline are part of the practices of everyday life in the city.⁶ In de Certeau's version of urban society, individuals and social groups *in space* resist the functionalist rationality of the city's grid-plan drawn up by bureaucrats and administrators. Here we are introduced to different types of spatial practices: to the pedestrian rhetorics, the local networks and the wandering activities which produce a subtle logic of

5. See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Methuen, London 1986.

6. De Certeau, 1988, *op.cit.*

place as the site for human creativity and action. De Certeau is not, of course, unique in defining space as part of the resistant practices of everyday life. In many respects his approach parallels the recent work of social history and cultural studies, which has sought to rescue the urban cultures of subaltern groups from their banal and degraded status. Like some of that culturalist writing, de Certeau's efforts to define spatiality as resistance at times trap him in a sentimental utopianism, whereby local environments and small acts by their very definition constitute places of defiance to official geographies. What is undoubtedly important in de Certeau's project is his emphasis on tracking city dwellers *in motion* as they move through the urban landscape.

Christopher Breward and Mica Nava address the localised rhetorics of place in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century London. It is no accident that both of their studies are concerned in different ways with consumption and commerce, at a moment when London's imperial status was matched by its spectacular expansion as a commercial entrepôt. The capital's mass consumer culture not only provided the social resources for new sexual styles, especially for men and women from subaltern groups, it was also a crucial mechanism for drawing the people of the suburbs into the orbit of metropolitanism. West End shopping in Oxford Street and on more ordinary suburban high streets produced its own characteristic landscape of desire, which was sharply differentiated from London as it was conceived by the planners and municipalists. In Nava's inter-war study, American-led consumerism also began to project more expansive horizons. The impact of Hollywood and of American genres of popular music introduced young female consumers in the London of the 1930s to an imaginative repertoire of sexual otherness which included a version of black America.

The focus of the collection, then, is not metropolitan culture in general, but the particular geographies of London. This too is a strategic decision. London occupies a specific position in histories of European modernity and urban life. As the Danish architect and humanist Steen Eiler Rasmussen insisted in his influential history of the capital, *London, the Unique City*, 1937, London is decidedly *not* Paris, Berlin or Vienna.⁷ In comparison with those continental models of urban development, London's formation has frequently been judged as piecemeal and disparate, lacking both a unified 'plan' and a coherent administrative rationality. The issue for all of the authors here is not to evoke other metropolitan sites as the template for their research, it is rather to identify what is distinctive about London's moral geography and how a particular organisation of space in the city has contributed to specific regimes of sexuality. London's own characteristic ad hocery, for example, has generated its own recognisable sexual geography. The capital never experienced a *police des mœurs*, or moral police, on the Parisian model, nor have its zones of respectable and disreputable behaviour been as

7. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *London, the Unique City*, Jonathan Cape, London 1937.

strategically zoned as in some other European or American cities. Yet since the eighteenth century London has been shaped by a series of large-scale sanitary initiatives, in which fears over immorality, health and disease have been linked to the sexual practices of its diverse and recalcitrant populations. Moreover, the capital's importance as the centre of empire, and latterly of post-colonial migration, has thrown up a series of extraordinarily complex spaces and cultures of sexual otherness, which have hybridised the city's existing populations time and again. And unlike many western metropolis, London continues in its traditional role as the site of royalty, the court and aristocratic society, with their own elaborate displays of sexual ritual.

All of the articles confront these competing versions of the metropolis across a wide variety of registers, from the formal declarations of legal and medical officers, through the rhetorics of commercial and tourist guides, to the devices of popular culture. Marcia Pointon, in the final piece, demonstrates the importance of these forms of intertextuality in understanding the significance of the funeral journey of the Princess of Wales in 1997. During that remarkable event, official and public maps of the metropolis were laid alongside more affective signifiers of the dead princess, in the interests of negotiating collective desire. And while many of these devices for emotional and sexual management were resolutely contemporary, Pointon points out how other aspects of Diana's last journey through London were framed by the historical traces of past royal funeral rites. Such occasions underline the power of the representational forms of the city, and an important emphasis running throughout the volume is the role played by visual culture in this process. Visual depictions are not treated simply as more or less accurate reflections of a city which is already there. They are seen to perform active work in the moral ordering of the metropolis and in making tangible the erotic and aesthetic components of urban life. Insights of this kind problematise static topographies of the city. They also call into question a number of the taken-for-granted spatial divisions of urban society: between the public and the private, between masculine and feminine settings, between high and low cultures. What is apparent from all of these studies is not only the shifting and historically contingent nature of such geographical distinctions, but also the liminal spaces which have been produced at the interstices of divisions of this kind and the social actors who have generated more plural forms of spatiality.

The ghosted map over which Eros presides on our cover is an appropriate visualisation of the multiple relationships between space, history and sexuality which are explored in this collection. The major streets and thoroughfares are highlighted to mark a specific event - the route of the royal procession celebrating the coronation of George VI in May 1937. But symbolically many other more unofficial versions of London are contained uneasily within this ceremonial map: the gendered

and racialised identities promoted in the marketing strategies of department stores like Selfridges in Oxford Street, the West End playground of the man-about-town, the clandestine acts of homosexuals and police in London's parks and finally, ritual space as it was reworked by the funeral of the Princess of Wales, focusing a reassessment of emotional and affective life at the very end of the twentieth century. Richard Sennett, addressing the civic problems of the contemporary divided city, has suggested that it is the image of the body in pain which has the power to reach out and bridge the proliferating urban cultures of difference.⁸ On the evidence of the histories which are narrated here we might equally claim that the sexual body, in all of its socially variable manifestations, has a similar capacity to communicate across the divisions of otherness. *Sexual Geographies* is an exploration of some of these spatial networks in the city.

8. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, Faber and Faber, London and Boston 1994