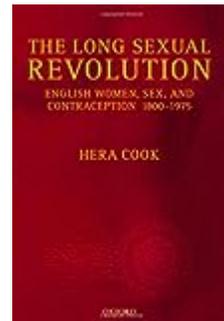




Hera Cook. *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 412 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925239-8.



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No Sex Please, We're British!

Until quite recently, the history of nineteenth-century sexuality was one of total repression. As the excesses of the aristocracy gave way to the domination of the bourgeoisie, women, it was argued, became cloistered and corseted, while men—when they were not whoring after the double standard—were stuffy, inflexible patriarchs. Very few people had sex outside marriage, and those that did usually came to a sticky end. Women, it was assumed, knew little of their bodies, and even what they did know they found rather distasteful. Even worse, the Victorians bequeathed this stultifying state of affairs to their children and grandchildren, who only managed to throw off their oppressive yoke by participating in the sexual revolution of the 1960s. This story, first put about by modernist intellectuals in the 1920s and 30s, lasted pretty well until it was inverted by Michel Foucault. For him it is us who are the “other Victorians.” It is we, not our forebears, who have developed the most widespread and pervasive regulatory discourses governing sexuality. Most historians of any note have followed his line since the 1980s, suggesting that vaunted ideals of sexual liberation have actually enmeshed us further and more deeply in systems of knowledge that ultimately seek to govern

our subjectivity. We seek pleasure, Foucault says, but find only the ready-made rules of “normality,” or the demanding strictures of consumerism. The Victorian bourgeoisie may not have actually had that much sex, but were they not happier with all that longing?

Hera Cook’s book argues that there was a lot more in the original story than has been conceded. First of all, she takes issue with Foucault’s interpreters. Foucault said that at the level of institutions and domains, the Victorians were voluble about sex, but he said little about actual behavior. The result of this has been, Cook suggests, that historians of sexuality have tended to bracket behavior and to talk primarily about the rules that sought to govern conduct. Cook seeks to find out what can be known of actual heterosexual behavior. To do this, she uses the demographic technique of determining coital frequency in marriage from the rate of total marital fertility, a method employed most fruitfully hitherto by Simon Szreter. If there are no safe or effective methods of contraception, then the rate of total fertility within marriage (the average number of children to women of childbearing age) will generally reflect the rate of marital sex. If

fertility is declining, which it was from about 1870, then either rates of marriage were changing to produce this (which they were not) or coital frequency was lower and hence there were fewer children.

Martial fertility rates that declined until the post-1945 baby boom, Cook argues, were indicative of the fact that most women repressed their sexuality in order to avoid childbirth. Safe methods of contraception, such as withdrawal, were largely ineffective and moreover reduced the amount of sexual pleasure for both parties. All things being equal, women would want to reduce the quantity of reproductive labor that they perform, Cook argues. Therefore, in order to avoid this onerous duty, which Cook compares to the physical rigors of coal mining (p. 30), women developed an understandable distaste for sexual intercourse. As a result, a culture of particularly British sexual repression emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. By this time, Cook argues, “many, if not most, women repudiated physical sexual desire,” and “took little pleasure in genital sexual activity” (p. 62). At that point, the rate of marital coitus in Britain could have been about once a week.

Cook suggests that other kinds of sex, such as petting, and oral or anal intercourse, were not used to replace vaginal sex, if anecdotal evidence is to be trusted. In any case, most people, especially the working class, lived in a culture that attached enormous shame to their genitals and anuses. This sense of shame and distaste was reinforced, Cook suggests, by the rigid toilet training regimes of interwar Britain. As a result, even washing the genitals might be regarded as slightly suspect. The consequence of this, Cook asserts, was that female children “would have little or no experience that would provide them with any pleasurable, or even neutral, sensations to refute the construction of their genitals as dirty, ugly and fear inducing” (p. 151). Furthermore, these parts of the body could not be kept very clean in any case, Cook argues. The lack of domestic bidets—which were purposely built for washing the nether regions—was not necessarily the result of poverty or inadequate plumbing, but reflected the fact that such things were regarded as evidence of libidinous “French” sensuality. Not only was sex a matter of distaste, then, most people were actually disgusted by their own bodies.

Against this dismal background, the arrival of the contraceptive pill was a godsend. The advent of the pill in the late 1960s, Cook argues, freed women from their centuries-old reproductive labor, enabled them to experi-

ence proper sexual pleasure without the fear and anxiety of pregnancy and also helped them to contribute more fully to society. Cook rejects the critiques of the pill by Jeffrey Weeks and Elizabeth Wilson, both of whom saw it as a qualified gain for women, and instead sees it as the culmination of women’s historic attempts to control their own fertility. The possibility of controlling fertility therefore represents the true sexual revolution of modern history. However, women were not only liberated sexually. They were also able to involve themselves more fully in medical decisions about their own bodies, and to fuel second-wave feminism with this new confidence. Overall, Cook concludes, the pill resulted in “a huge increase in women’s autonomy.” It has been a story of “progress towards the light” (p. 317). Women’s (sex) lives are now “without historical precedent” (p. 337).

The book is sex-positive. Coitus is here the motor of historical change. When heterosexual vaginal intercourse becomes more possible and frequent, all sorts of other mostly beneficial changes accrue. It is the changing rate of heterosexual coitus that has created a new confidence in women and encouraged the increasing participation of women in healthcare. However, for all its apparent feminist radicalism, Cook concedes the conservative point that the pill has also disrupted the family, made women more promiscuous as well as adulterous, and led to the abolition of the double standard, just as its critics predicted. As a result, women’s sexual behavior is more like men’s than ever before in human history.

This book is trying bravely to give us some account of the sexual behavior of the majority in British life. However, this work shares a difficulty with other similar books, in that it is much easier to speak on this matter about the late twentieth century than any earlier period. One prominent question remains about the nineteenth century: how can you tell if past individuals thought that they were “repressing” their sexuality rather than directing it in appropriate ways? The problem lies in making *a priori* decisions about “normal” rates of coitus based on present notions of what that is. The past appears “repressed” to us perhaps, but for those in the past, how much sex was enough, or too much? Would this question even make sense in 1850? The book is strongest when it gives us an account of twentieth-century sex manuals and the politics of the pill. In its attempts to dislodge Foucault and his followers, an effort which will find many adherents, it is a qualified success, but that is mainly because of the nature of the evidence.

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