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Sex and the Citizens: Erotic Play and the New Leisure Culture

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Chapter 5 is about the contemporary politics of leisure and pleasure as they relate to sex. In the social, political and religious history of Western societies, sex and guilt have had a strong association. For previous generations sex was a dirty secret, a source of acute embarrassment and, in the teaching of some churches, to be engaged in solely for the purpose of procreation. Moreover, certain forms of sexual activity and expression were curtailed by law. As punitive philosophies have faded and legal restrictions either repealed or fallen into disuse, a new culture of sex as play and personal exploration has emerged. That culture, the consequence of a further, important area of deregulation, is analysed in this chapter.

One sustained theme in this volume has been a decline in the moral judgement of private behaviour. In particular, as Jeffrey Weeks has also remarked, there has been an erosion of traditional authority over sexual behaviour (2007: 132) and in the West sexual practices have largely become matters of personal taste and lifestyle. The increasing individualisation, recreation-alisation – and particularly, the commodification of sex – have attracted the attention of both academic and popular writers. What has come to be termed the sexualisation of mainstream culture – all the multifarious ways in which sex is now more visible in contemporary cultures – has become an object of discussion and some concern.

The new recreational sexuality provides a space for self-pleasure. Its characteristic features are ‘adventure’, ‘experiment’, ‘choice’, ‘variety’, and ‘sensation’ (Illouz, 1999: 176) and these are associated with particular kinds of sexual encounters – the affair, the one-night stand, forms of auto-eroticism constructed around the use of pornography and sex toys, forms of commercial sex, and more recently, cybersex. Sex is also increasingly presented as an occasion for self-discovery and fulfilment, and articulated in terms of a ‘therapeutic’ culture (Plummer, 1995: 124–5).

In both instances, sex has been seen as assuming a disciplinary role, presided over by a range of cultural intermediaries, ready to provide us with

'training, instruction, counsel...recipes, drugs and gadgets' (Bauman, 1999: 24). More optimistically, it has been seen as a contemporary technology of the self, the term used by Foucault (1988) to indicate the ways in which individuals draw on cultural discourses in order to construct themselves. Both views depend on a notion of sex as a form of 'autosexuality' in which individual experience, identity, and what Anthony Giddens has called 'plastic sexuality' (1992: 58), are interlinked. While intimate relationships must be worked at and 'spiced up', our primary sexual relationship is with our self. This is a new late modern sexual sensibility.

The emergence of late modern recreational sexuality is linked to – and can be seen as emblematic of – a broad range of contemporary concerns with image, lifestyle and self-exposure, which have become means of self-care, self-pleasure and self-expression. As traditional values, sexual and otherwise, have lost their authoritative grip in many societies, individual choices about lifestyle are becoming more important in determining a sense of self, a way of life, and 'a sexual lifestyle' (Weeks, 2007: 110); all increasingly available through various forms of cultural consumption. In this sense, sex increasingly overlaps with other important spheres of contemporary life, and in particular that of leisure. In this chapter I trace some of the ways in which sex is becoming marked as leisure, focusing on its entanglements with commerce and technology, and on the growing significance of sex as a form of 'play'.

Intimacy, technology and commerce: A reconfiguration of erotic life

Of course, one person's leisure is another person's work. Forms of work that are concerned with sex often excite condemnation, and commercial sex and the commercialisation of sex in contemporary life are both frequently seen in negative terms. For example, Chris Rojek has described sexual services which are provided for the recreation of others as a *mephitic* form of leisure which depends on the objectification and commodification of workers – most commonly of female workers by male customers. Sex work, he writes, essentially 'involves treating the other as...an object in which trust and respect are not a precondition of interaction' (2000: 180–1). Commercial sex occupies a similar place in Anthony Giddens' account of evolving forms of intimacy (1992), where it is associated with episodic and uncommitted sexual behaviour and related to men's avoidance of intimacy and their violence against women.

But our understanding of commercial sex as labour has suffered from a tendency to treat it 'only as a moral issue' and to focus exclusively on 'a single commercial moment when two individuals exchange sex for money' (Agustín, 2005: 618). In contrast, contemporary research on sex work indicates a much more complex phenomenon which needs to be understood in