

# Sexualization, sex and manners

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Sexualities

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According to this account by Cas Wouters, sexualization is part of a broader process of informalization which has been gaining pace in western societies since the late 19th century, one in which social relations between men and women and between adults and children have become more egalitarian and open, and in which a new kind of personality, less subject to external behavioural constraints and more dependent on internal regulation, has emerged. Academic work on sexualization focuses too narrowly on commerce and the media, Wouters argues, missing these deeper and broader shifts in human interaction and relationship. Focusing on manners literature, Wouters' work also traces the range of 'laments' – about the decline of innocence, courtesy, and romance – triggered by these processes as manners shifted, and in particular, as women increasingly participated in public debates about sex and in experiments with sexual relationships and practices. The tensions inherent in these experiments continue to drive debates about sexual matters of all kinds, and underpin the recent protests against sexualization.

The interest in sexualization in policy and political debate<sup>1</sup> as well as popular literature<sup>2</sup>, and the ill-informed way in which these have so far incorporated academic research, presents us with a challenge; to show how scholarly work that focuses on the increased visibility and shifting significance of sex and sexuality in the late modern period can be used to illuminate discussion in this area. Wouters' own work (2004, 2007) is interesting in this respect, tracing many of the same shifts in social thought and practice as Michel Foucault's writings on the development of regulatory forms, 'techniques of the self', and contemporary discourses of sexuality (1990 [1976], 1988), and Anthony Giddens' work on the emergence of forms of intimacy (1992) that recombine love and lust within 'episodic' and hedonistic practices and 'pure' relationships, and that aim to incorporate both desire and companionship. Many more scholars have written in this broad area, mostly not employing the term 'sexualization' which is of comparatively recent usage in this context, but in ways that are enormously useful for debates about it.

Amongst these are academics writing about media, culture and commerce; a focus that for Wouters is misplaced, but I do not think this charge is justified. Public debates about sexualization have fastened rather obsessively on symbolic objects and representations, often at the expense of sexual encounters between

people, displaying a set of preoccupations that cry out for an analysis that is informed by specialist knowledge of these areas. It is also often work that places media, commerce and culture centre stage that has been most attentive to what is distinctive about the contemporary period, and most successful in illuminating shifts in the way we conceptualize gender and sexuality, public and private, intimacy and self-expression. Indeed Wouters' own work, focused as it is on manners literature, demonstrates how social life has become increasingly mediated by experts, how private affairs have become matters of public concern, and how cultural forms have become central to our understanding of what sex is. The study of manners and mediation are not mutually exclusive. Of particular interest in his account is what it adds to our understanding of the way that informal relationships are increasingly managed through the detailed encodings and decodings of our selves and others, using cultural signs, objects and tastes to signal our identity and our intentions to each other. This focus might usefully open up some of the current confluences of issues around appearance and sexual behaviour that are so prominent in debates about sexualization and which are clearly linked as sites of mediation. Wouters' insistence on acknowledging cultural variation and historical specificity is also useful in directing our attention beyond the laments of anti-sexualization writers, as a range of other academics, including those who focus primarily on cultural and media forms (for example, McNair, 2002; Paasonen et al., 2007) have successfully done.

How do we explain the current movement against sexualization, and its depiction as a social problem? Wouters' account is useful in highlighting how anti-sexualization movements are part of a broader renegotiation of the ideal of monogamy – a response that represents the difficulties and frustrations and scarinesses of trying to balance love and lust in our own lives. But even a cursory glance at the burgeoning popular literature on sexualization suggests that this is not the full story. Indeed, anti-sexualization texts seem to rework the 'laments' that have become part of the way public debate is conducted, not only around sex and sexuality, but around the behaviour of young people, the status of women, representation, and technology. These laments bemoan the decline of religion; the expansion and diversification of sex as work and commerce; sex and porn addiction; the 'dumbing down' of society; violence in relationships; the commercialization of childhood; trashy culture; the replacement of 'healthy' sex with an obsessiveness about appearance and performance; confusion about 'the real'; poor body image; sexual abuse; eating disorders; cosmetic surgery; celebrity culture; unsafe sex; sex outside marriage, sex outside committed relationships, sex under the age of consent; bullying; the power of media; the existence of the internet; 'deviant' sexualities; 'objectification'; unladylike behaviour; 'extreme' images of all kinds; the breakdown of parental authority; the apparent inability of states to regulate; and narcissism. Much of this appears to be fuelled by a profound distrust of young people, popular culture, 'feminine' practices, 'the media' and new technologies, laid on top of a familiar view of sex as inherently dangerous. In a discussion of the

ways that these kinds of debate have emerged around a related term – ‘pornographication’, Clarissa Smith (2010) has shown how they are frequently ‘saturated in the languages of concern and regulation’, often linking things in ways which serve to obscure that the only real link between them is the anxious response they produce.

It is one of the more bizarre features of anti-sexualization laments, that while they multiply examples of where and how sexualization is occurring, presenting it as an omnipresent force, they simultaneously imagine it as a ‘thing’ that can be easily isolated and combated (the Papadopoulos, 2010, report recommends moving lads’ mags to the top shelves of newsagents and marking each airbrushed media image with a sticker). The value of accounts like Wouters’, set against this kind of magical thinking is clear in showing how the landscape of sexual relation and representation has changed in the past 200 years, in reminding us that sex is part of a set of manners by which our intimate and other relationships are governed; and in arguing that sexualization is a complex process requiring serious academic investigation.

## Notes

1. For example the US APA report (2007), the Australian Senate report (Committee of Australia, 2008) and the Papadopoulos report for the UK Home Office (2010).
2. This includes books that focus on young people (Levin and Kilbourne, 2008), couples and families (Paul, 2005), American culture (Sarracino and Scott, 2008), technology (Delmonico et al., 2001), and sexual behaviour (Sessions Stepp, 2007), amongst other things.

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## Comment on Wouters

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Cas Wouters' article in this issue, 'Have sexualization processes changed direction?' is an exciting and provocative article. Let me begin by saying I agree with what I think are most of the main conclusions: sexuality has changed a lot; the greater openness on matters sexual is, on the whole, a good thing, despite some tawdriness and exploitation around the edges; there is something odd about aspects of the American response which calls out for comparative analysis. It's good to have all this stated as vigorously as Cas Wouters does.

I would fuss a bit about the comparative approach, though this involves tweaking, not fundamental recasting. The effort to introduce dating and women's power in dating is really very interesting, though ideally we need to know a bit more about what European counterparts were doing instead, which would help prepare a different response. I would do a lot more with American religiosity and the religious surge from the 1980s onward. Men are actively involved with the expressions of sexual concern; it's not all feminists and frustrated former daters. I would do more also with birth control issues (and this runs through the entire article, which might easily be read without remembering that sexual activity can be procreative). American conservatives have the country