

Sexuality – The Very Short Introductions Podcast – Ep 59

Rebecca Parker 00:07

Welcome back to the Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matter to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

Véronique Mottier 00:27

My name is Véronique Mottier. I am a fellow in Sociology at Jesus College, Cambridge, and a professor in the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Lausanne. I'm here to talk about my Very Short Introduction to sexuality. What first got me interested in this topic is that as a sociologist, I focused on the study of social change. When I took my first baby steps in academia as a young graduate researcher in the 1990s, it struck me that sexuality, understood as the way in which people experienced their bodies, their pleasures, and their desires, was an arena of rapid and deep social change at a time. And yet these important changes in the ways individuals but also society as a whole was making sense of sexuality, for example, through legal frameworks around sexual rights or through activist movements, were still surprisingly little studied at a time, that has completely changed since, I'm glad to say. So that's what first got me interested in this topic.

Véronique Mottier 01:29

And I ended up writing and editing a dozen books in French, English, and German on the history of sexual classifications, on gender and sexuality, and feminist theories and activism on this topic, and on state intervention on reproductive sexuality. Throughout my work, my main focus is not on people's sexual practices; I'm not really interested in what they do. I focus instead on the social and political aspects of sexuality. In my Very Short Introduction, I make in particular, three key points that stand out.

Véronique Mottier 02:04

The first point is that sexuality is not biology. People often think of sexuality as something that's natural, something that's the result of biological instincts and desires, and that we are born with our sexual identities such as lesbian, gay, or heterosexual. The sexual categories, these sexual identities, are, in reality, relatively recent in human history. They date mostly from the late 19th century. I show in the book that sexuality is therefore not natural. It is shaped by history, it is shaped by culture, it is shaped by scientific ideas about healthy and non healthy sexuality. It is shaped by religious ideas about moral and immoral behaviors. And the ways in which people make sense of their erotic experiences and desires has varied enormously across different time periods and across different cultures, and there are many examples in the book where I showed it.

Véronique Mottier 03:02

Now, the second key point of the book is that sexuality is about power. Ideas about sexuality, which spread in modern times, did not emerge in a power vacuum. I showed that if we want to analyze modern sexual norms, for example, we need to look sideways, we need to ask how they were

intertwined with relations of power, around gender, around social class, around race, and around disability, in particular. To take one example, many late 19th century Western theories of sexuality argued that male sexuality is naturally aggressive. They argued that it's motivated by sexual pleasure, and that female sexuality is naturally more passive, and focus on the instinct of children. The same thing is also often thought that non Western people were less civilized, closer to nature, and, therefore, more sexual than Westerners, whether men or women. These ideas still resonate later. They were used in the colonial era to justify the sexual exploitation of colonized women by colonial soldiers, for example, with ideas about aggressive, male sexual to be unnatural, are sometimes used even today to justify sexual violence to justify rape.

Véronique Mottier 04:22

And that brings me to my third point, and that is that sexuality is ultimately about politics. In my book, I show how the state has tried to regulate citizens' sexualities. For example, the colonial state in the examples I've mentioned before, but also through other examples, such as the eugenic policies of forced sterilization, which a number of Western and non western countries have put into place during the first half of the 20th century, and which aimed to create a racially pure society, or to decide which citizens were worthy or unworthy of reproducing. If we look at European countries such as Switzerland or Germany or the Scandinavian countries, these countries argued or the governments of these countries argued during the period, during the decades in which these eugenic policies were into place, which is roughly from the end of the 1920s, beginning of the 1930s, to either the Second World War for Nazi Germany, or until well into the 1960s for countries like Switzerland or the Scandinavian countries. In the context of these eugenic policies, citizens who were disabled, citizens who were part of what was seen as the underclasses, were seen as unworthy of being part of the future nation, and therefore they could be proposed for, for sterilization. These are examples of the ways in which the state has directly intervened on our bodies. And these are not just historic questions, they remain important today.

Véronique Mottier 05:51

For example, with respect to current debates around reproductive rights, abortion rights, attempts to ban abortion, or arguments in favor of leaving the choice to individual citizens, state concerns with higher levels of reproduction from what is depicted as undesirable categories of citizens have not disappeared in the post war era, by the way. For example, deep concerns were publicly articulated by far right politicians in countries such as France since the 1990s, where politicians from the far right argue that Muslim immigrants, for example, have more children than the so called native French and that they, therefore, are at risk of out crowding the natives. These are old arguments, which are revived in modern times. They're, the echoed is older worries about fertility levels in northern Western countries, such as India and China, which drove a lot of the earlier European eugenics in the pre Second World War era. And one could note in all of these examples that female reproductive sexuality continues to be usually a particular policy concern of the state.

Véronique Mottier 07:00

So to take an example of the United States in the early 1970s, there are an estimated 100 to 250,000 women on low incomes were sterilized annually on the federally funded programs, frequently on the discretion of withdrawal of welfare benefits. And these were often women from Puerto Rican origins, or from American Indian origins. So these civilizations which were often carried out without the consent of

these women, or without a full understanding of the consequences were justified or arguments, which were both based on cost, because they were depicted as categories of the population who were taking advantage of state benefits. But they were also reviving earlier notions of racial inferiority and to end racial defectiveness. So that's to show that these are not just historical questions. And to conclude, it's important to also point out that the three points that I highlight in the book that is that sexuality is not biological, it's not natural, it's cultural, it's political, and, therefore, we need to approach it through a critical angle on power relations and on politics. Of course, these three points are closely interlinked.

Véronique Mottier 08:14

To take one final example, which shows how they're interlinked with it think of the rise of biological explanations of sexuality in late 19th century which explained sexual identities as being the outcome of natural instincts and which saw, in particular, non heterosexual categories, so, for example, the gays and lesbians as deviating from the biological norms. Well, these these kinds of discourses are still with us today, of course, but they have been used politically in very many different ways in, with opposite effects. So for example, this scientific claim, this late 19th century scientific claim that homosexuality is somehow inborn but defective, somehow abnormal, has been used both by pro rights activist, so both by pro sexual rights activist who argued that if they aren't inborn, for example, in the recent versions of this argument, which argue that sexual orientation is caused by genetic differences, activists have used that argument to say, "well, that is great, if they are caused by genetic differences, then we shouldn't be discriminated against." So the use in the context of the pro rights discourse. But they've also been used on the other side, so to speak, to say that "well, it's great if we can show that sexual orientation is caused by genetic differences, because that means there's hope to eradicate homosexuality." So we find the exact same claims about biological origins of homosexuality used with totally different political effects and with totally different political intentions. And that's a very important point to be aware of, and also to keep scrutinizing with critical attention, not just for researchers, but also for us as citizens more generally.

Véronique Mottier 10:00

All of these questions about power and politics are still very much with us today and this is why sexuality is such an important topic, and why there's so much to say about it, in fact, much more than I was able to do in this small volume of the Very Short Introduction, but I hope that this has given you curiosity to read more about it. Many thanks for listening.

Rebecca Parker 10:21

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