

Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

A CLASSIC REPUBLISHED

Sex and Sex Worship. By O.A. Wall. London: Kegan Paul, 2006, 607 pages. Cloth, \$255.

Reviewed by Vern L. Bullough, Ph.D., D. Sci, R.N., SUNY Distinguished Professor Emeritus. 3305 Sierra Dr., Westlake Village, CA, 91362-3542; e-mail: vbullough@adelphia.net

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the publisher Kegan Paul issued a series of pioneering books dealing with sexuality. Among the 12 were ground-breaking titles such as *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*, *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome*, and the book reviewed here, *Sex and Sex Worship* (which was originally published in 1919). Although the books in the series were ground-breaking, the contents were a mixed bag. This is particularly true of Wall's book.

Sex and Sex Worship is a potpourri of stories, myths, and religious beliefs, both ancient and contemporary. Included is a historical development of sexual attitudes, a look at Darwin and evolution by natural selection, a brief history of reproduction, and an explanation of cosmogonies, women, anatomy and physiology, sexual relationships of the Gods, animal worship, phallic festivals, prostitution, and a large variety of other topics. Some of the topics are well-documented and interested readers could trace them further. Coverage of many other topics, however, simply consists of collections of notes from a variety of sources, many of which are not mentioned (although some, such as the Greek legends, can be guessed). Wall is somewhat apologetic about this. In his brief bibliography, Wall explains that it is only a partial list of books, etc., "from which information has been obtained" and illustrations gathered. He then adds that there were other works, "but these titles have escaped my memory." Many of Wall's sources are simply listed,

such as the "Bible," or the 48 volumes of *Appleton's Science Library*, Haeckle's works, Milton's *Lost Paradise*, or the *Universal Dictionary*, without page numbers or publication information.

There is a vast amount of miscellaneous information here, which is interesting and even helpful, although the index is only a partial one. The chapter headings provide some guide, but Wall often wanders off on tangents in his discussion. In short, it is a fascinating collection of data about sexuality based upon information from literature, "scientific journals," and religious doctrine, and a vast collection of notes that Wall simply reports along with the excuse that he can no longer recall the sources of his data. From my knowledge, Wall's accounts of various mythologies are reasonable, but if one is to use them, reliable sources should be tracked down.

There is a tremendous amount of information, and any reader will find some anecdotes which could be used as illustrations of almost any topic in human sexuality. Information here, however, it should be investigated further rather than assumed to be accurate. Still, it is an interesting book to sample in your spare time.

SENIOR SEX: EXPLORING THE SEX LIVES OF OLDER ADULTS

Sexuality, Sexual Health, and Ageing. By Meryn Gott. New York, NY: Open University Press, 2005, 149 pages. Paper, \$36.95.

Reviewed by Rose Hartzell, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, Program of Health Science, HPER Building 308-I, Fayetteville, AR, 72701; e-mail: rosehartzell@hotmail.com.

Increasingly, people in industrial nations are living longer, maintaining their health into ages previously

thought unattainable. Due to the rapid increase in aging in the past fifty years, relatively little research has been conducted on sexuality, health, and aging. *Sexuality, Sexual Health and Ageing* is part of the *Rethinking Ageing* series and was written to address what is known about sexuality and aging, along with the policy and practice implications.

Sexuality, Sexual Health and Ageing opens by exploring the contemporary understandings of sexuality and aging. The author, Merryn Gott, argues that both previous thoughts on aging and sexuality and creation of new myths of sexuality and aging can be equally dangerous. Gott sets out to reveal the myths of “asexual old age” and the “sexy oldie.” Perhaps the most significant contribution of this chapter was Gott’s insight into the new myth of the “sexy oldie” as a potentially hazardous and confining stereotype. Gott argues that the new “sexy oldie” myth is creating an environment in which older men and women feel pressured to pop sexual enhancement pills and maintain perfect bodies in attempts to conform to the youthful standard of sex and beauty. Depicting older adults as either asexual or sexy is restrictive; viewing the sex lives of older adults as complicated and multi-dimensional is both more accurate and more freeing. Gott’s thoughts are original and progressive compared to other researchers in this field of study.

The focus of the middle of the book is older peoples’ experiences of sexuality and aging. Gott looks to the literature to discover what we currently know about sexuality and aging across cultures. Gott does a good job highlighting previous researchers’ findings by reporting their methods and results in a concise and clear manner. “Sex” is defined widely, and the middle chapters “move away from the narrow, coital-focused understanding of sexuality in order to address issues such as sexual attractiveness and body image”(p. 61) among older adults.

The importance of sex to older people is highlighted by referencing Gott’s own qualitative interview/focus group study. The quotes from these older adult respondents add a personal dimension to the text, making this section perhaps the most interesting part of the book. Here the reader can put aside the sociological jargon used throughout the rest of the book and observe more directly older adults’ opinions regarding their sexuality and the sexuality of their peers.

There is a section of the book devoted to diversity in later life, including diversity based on gender, sexual orientation, partnership status, socioeconomic status, living circumstances, ethnicity, age, and cohort. Although several types of diversity are discussed, this section feels unfinished and deficient. The reader is left wanting more information.

The book closes with consideration of sexual health, sexual problems, and aging. Gott examines sexual risk-taking and sexually transmitted infections in later life and health professionals’ views on later-life sexuality and sexual health. Encouragement, interventions, and advice are offered to health educators regarding how to inform older adults about STIs/HIV and how particular behaviors may put elders at risk for these ailments.

Gott also spends considerable space questioning the concept of sexual “dysfunction” as associated with aging. She questions what “normal” sexual functions are in older adults. Furthermore, she asks, if the individual doesn’t perceive a change in his or her sex life (due to aging) to be a problem, is it really a dysfunction?

There were only two major weaknesses to the book. Although it is a relatively short book, parts were repetitive and poorly organized. Also, it was unclear for whom Gott wrote. The book was written above the “average” reader from the general public, yet it was not as rigorous as most academic volumes. Still, overall the book was perceptive and provided solid information on the sociological issues associated with sexuality and aging. I recommend this book to sociologists or sex researchers/educators interested in sexuality and aging.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF EROTOPHOBIA

The Politics of Lust. By John Ince. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005, 335 pages. Paper, \$16.00.

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In a casual and easy-to-understand tone, *The Politics of Lust* provides a thought-provoking account of erotophobia at the macro- and meso-sociocultural level as well as the microsocial psychological one. This book is suitable for a wide range of educational and lay audiences who are interested in gaining valuable insight into the inner workings of the politics of sexuality.

In this fascinating book, John Ince examines the socio-cultural ambivalences and contradictions surrounding human sexuality and our micro-erotophobic conditioning toward the free expression and experiencing of our sexual inclinations. Ince delves into an adventurous exploration of erotophobic conditioning, its impact on our lives and culture, and the complex political system that brings it to fruition.

The overall organization of Ince’s book revolves around the causes of erotophobia, especially their link to a group of behaviors he labels as *antisexualism*. The author defines antisexualism as the social construction of an intolerant, phobic, and anxiety-laden sexual environment, which consists of stereotypical attitudes, prejudicial beliefs, and discriminatory behaviors aimed at discouraging individuals from aspiring toward a more liberal, naturalistic, and expressive erotic and sexual ethos. As he states, “Antisexualism has much in common with intolerant behavior aimed at racial or religious minorities. In the same way that racism promotes racial prejudice, antisexualism breeds erotophobia” (p. 11).

The first 13 chapters of the book provide a detailed examination of the variants of antisexualism (the first cause of erotophobia), such as live nudity, nude images, premari-

tal sex, contraception, masturbation, oral and anal sex, childhood sexuality, sex education, sexual fantasy, extramarital sex, sexual discourse, pornography, prostitution, and homosexuality. Chapter 14 deals with the second cause of erotophobia, having to do primarily with harmful sexual acts, which the author labels as *nasty sex*, such as rape, violent pornography, unhappy and unwanted sexual initiation, and sexual behavior leading to the contraction of a sexually transmitted infection or to an unwanted pregnancy.

Chapter 15 explores the third cause of erotophobia, that having to do with its link to personality traits. As Ince explains, certain individuals are genetically predisposed to developing sexual rigidity, which, when coupled with a supporting lifestyle, leads them to develop chronic physical tension, personal insecurity, and an overall inability to initiate and enjoy playful, spontaneous sexual acts for their own sake. The author explains that rigid personality traits lead to sexual phobia, whereby the rigid individual comes to perceive the experiencing of sexual desire as an uncomfortable or an emotionally threatening feeling that needs to be avoided or controlled.

As the author rightly points out, most parents tend to experience considerable anxiety, ambivalence, and discomfort when it comes to providing basic sex education to their children. Similarly, although socioculturally-generated sex education programs focus on the avoidance of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy, they completely avoid topics regarding sexual desire and pleasure within the bounds of intrapersonal and interpersonal intimacy and well-being.

According to Ince, socioculturally-generated erotophobia also results in the “pornification” of pleasure-oriented sexual imagery and desire, thereby relegating both as unnatural and deviant. This “pornification,” or “dirty” way of viewing our natural human sexual capacities and potentialities, gives rise to the establishment of a profit-seeking and inhumane sex industry, which oftentimes perpetuates an environment of victimization for both its workers and its consumers. The author explains how widespread aversion to autoeroticism/masturbation robs individuals of a healthy and risk-free sexual outlet. In addition, he points that internalized sexual ambivalence, anxiety, and fear tend to have a negative effect on the sex lives of many individuals by preventing them from attaining their full sexual potential. As he comments,

Most of us have a very narrow erotic repertoire, a short sequence of erotic acts that varies minimally from day to day, partner to partner. We fear any form of sexual experimentalism or originality. While we seek out the new in movies, books, food, travel, fashion, computers, and so on, our sexual expression remains bland and repetitive. (p. 9)

The author rightly contends that sexual fear is far more prevalent than most people think, and it is difficult to detect due to being well-camouflaged in our everyday lives. For example, even though most individuals are erotophobic, it remains a rarity to come across an individual who admits to being negatively affected by such a condi-

tion. Therefore, since most of us refrain from even acknowledging erotophobia, how are any of us ever going to admit to our sexual shortcomings and embrace the path to sexual liberation? As Ince explains, the processual determinants of erotophobia are highly unconscious, and many irrational sexual ideas, beliefs, and values remain deeply entrenched in our surrounding historico-sociocultural environment that they are difficult, if not impossible, to expose as invalid and untrue. Various institutions, such as education, religion, economy, media, and jurisprudence, are invisibly engaging in everyday “brainwashing” and propaganda, imprinting irrational sexual fears and anxieties in billions of minds while remaining relatively unaware of it.

Concerning the driving forces of erotophobic mechanisms, Ince makes an interesting point that they are largely due to the existence of powerful political forces enacted by stakeholders with vested moral, power, and economic interests. The patriarchal affordance of male privilege in all areas of public and private life have led to the rise of stakeholders who “seek to influence what we do when we are alone with our sexual partners, as well as to influence which partners we choose” (Gagnon & Parker, 1995, p. 15). Such stakeholders tend to (a) embed sexuality in the various intra- and inter-structural dynamic interplays that take place within large-scale patriarchal institutional systems, (b) define and redefine sexuality in the context of everyday sociocultural relations, and (c) sift the whole spectrum of sexual experiences, beliefs, and practices, legitimizing only those that perpetuate male advantage while downplaying or denigrating others that promote egalitarianism and take away the power component of human sexual relations. Therefore, sexual relations are not *a priori* being created out of the immutability of human sexual biology but, instead, are recursively “wired” within societal institutions in a systemic manner (Philaretou, 2004). As Baber and Murray (2001) suggest,

Rather than seeing sexuality as a purely natural phenomenon characterized by fixed, inherent drives that are essentially different for men and women, sexuality is seen to be constructed in relation to, and in interaction with, historically and culturally variable social practices [that is, institutional structures] like religion, education, and medicine (J. Harding, 1998). Conceptualizations of sexuality are believed to reflect social relations regarding gender, ethnicity, and class and to be culturally managed through the ways we talk, think, and practice. (p. 24)

According to Ince, overcoming erotophobia is an important step to promoting true democracy and social equality, and this can be brought about by eliminating or reducing sexual fear. He insists on creating an awareness concerning the rights of sexual minorities (such as nudists and sexual entertainers) and fervently supports the sexual freedom of consenting adults, believing that sexual education “ultimately serve[s] a much bigger agenda, making our society more rational and humane and the relationships between all people more healthy” (p. 14).

Schnarch (1991) introduces the idea of the sexual cru-

cible as a way to reduce sexual anxiety, fear, and erotophobia, promoting instead relational intimacy and individual fulfillment. The individual partners' sexual behaviors—including the style and content included and excluded in their repertoire—become a window into their inner psycho-emotional workings and state of being of their relationship. Various personal and relational issues that partners are unable or unwilling to acknowledge and bring to the forefront for resolution are inevitably manifested as deficiencies and weaknesses in sexual style.

Since many individuals seem to lack in the area of interpersonal intimacy and in the area of articulation of their feeling states, the concept of the sexual crucible would be particularly helpful as a way to facilitate greater interconnectedness and emotional, psychological, and sexual satisfaction. Bringing a man and a woman to react together sexually in one sexual crucible lays the foundations for the initiation of intense intimacy during sex, thereby rendering

it a physically fulfilling as well as a spiritually liberating experience. The sexual crucible becomes a crucible for bringing together the partners' intimacy constituents in a single chemical reaction, thereby moving them away from the inhibiting sociocultural elements of erotophobia (Philaretou, 2004).

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