

Book Review

Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History. By Dagmar Herzog. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. viii + 230. £ 17.99.

Bringing together recent scholarship on a wide range of conceptual problems and national contexts, Dagmar Herzog sheds light on nationally and internationally converging and diverging trends within the history of sexuality in twentieth-century Europe. Adopting the now familiar approach that criticizes an earlier belief in the steady progress towards liberal and egalitarian attitudes in the West throughout the previous century, Herzog calls to further complicate the history of sexuality. Consequently, the book aims ‘to reconstruct the ways people in the past *imagined* sex and what kinds of assumptions and emotions they brought to it’ (p. 5) and explores ‘how Europeans battled over the *ethics* of sex’ (p. 5), thus providing many examples of backlash to, ambivalence about and problems inherent in liberalizing efforts. Moreover, Herzog points out that as a consequence of reliance on a framework of increasing progress towards liberalization, scholars have paid more attention to some countries and themes than others. The book does not rectify these imbalances – which should not be surprising considering it draws on existing scholarship – but it is valuable as a call to scholars to address those areas and topics that have, as yet, received less attention. The book offers an excellent overview of historical scholarship, identifying big structures and transformations, as well as the many contradictions inherent in those structures and their historical trajectories. By including events and the voices of individuals, the book has an eye for complexity and represents a fruitful attempt at integrating micro and macro approaches. Herzog skilfully explains elements that may feel counter-intuitive to us today, yet are logically embedded in Europe’s history of sexuality, such as the presentation of fascism in Nazi Germany as sexually modernizing and liberating and the reminder that for a great part of the twentieth century abortions were mainly sought by mothers who considered abortion far less immoral than mechanical or chemical contraception. She thus makes good use of history to relativize contemporary moral assumptions and values – for instance, in the telling example of how abortion was seen as merely ‘restoring a woman’s health’ (menstruation) when contraception was ‘cheating’ (heterosexual) sex of its ‘purpose’, and for the church, removing its rightful riskiness.

Herzog employs a very readable style, and quotations and examples make the book accessible to historians and non-historians alike. Yet here lies one of the book’s greatest tensions. Although references to specific historical actors and events bring the story to life, the author’s choice of examples feels somewhat crude at times. It does not become clear why certain examples were chosen, nor how meaningful or representative they are. While two of the main strands within the book – i.e. popular and legal attitudes to homosexuality and contraception – are treated thoroughly both

chronologically and geographically, other topics are given more anecdotal treatment. Thus the reader is left wanting comparison with situations elsewhere. Similarly, where the book includes countries that have been written about less, they remain mere examples, less imbedded within European history. Although the book hints at interesting evidence, it remains unclear how reliable such evidence is or where it can be found. Furthermore, one important topic that felt missing from the book is that of the emergence in the 1970s and 1980s of the prominence of the concept of paedophilia and the national traumas caused by cases of child sexual abuse and child pornography coming to public attention. Although the topic is touched upon in the book's section on clergy abuse, it receives too little attention considering the public's concern in this regard and the effect it has had on legislation. There could also have been more attention to the relationship between shifts in sexual attitudes and legislation more generally. Yet such shortcomings may be inevitable in overview work based on secondary sources and Anglophone literature and, importantly, this does not take away from the book being an excellent starting point for those interested in the history of sexuality in twentieth-century Europe. Within a growing professionalization of research into sex, Herzog's book further consolidates its importance by exemplifying how sexuality has been at the heart of cultural and political projects throughout Europe in the twentieth century. Consequently, the book serves as a powerful call for future research.

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