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Abstract: This article surveys the current literature on the histories of eighteenth-century British demography, the family and affect, pornography, sexuality and gender, and argues that they are superficially contradictory. It suggests that demography and the histories of the family, affect and pornography present a liberationist narrative in which relations between men and women became more emotionally fulfilling, leading to more reproductive sex. This is juxtaposed to the literature on gender and women's history, which depicts the period as characterized by an increasingly rigid and rigidly policed series of gender stereotypes and roles. The article goes on to suggest that these apparently incompatible narratives can be understood as a part of a changing physical culture of sex that increasingly restricted sexual contact to penetrative sex, and excluded previously common forms of non-reproductive sex including mutual masturbation. The article concludes that this changing culture of sex was driven by a shift in the origins of sexual knowledge from an oral tradition which emphasized pleasure, to a print culture that encouraged a pro-natal understanding of sexual behavior.

Any attempt to create a coherent history of sexuality in England in the eighteenth century is faced with an apparently irresolvable conundrum. Many of the historiographical elements needed to create such a history directly contradict one another or, at best, define their subject in ways that apparently prevent the conclusions drawn from one sort of history from being compared with those drawn from another. This brief article is an attempt to outline how several distinct historiographical perspectives – demography, the history of affect and of the family, the history of pornography and libertinism, and women's and gender history--might be articulated to create a single narrative of historical change. It is also an attempt to suggest that what emerges from this exercise – the existence of a changing physical culture of sex -- can be both explained by reference to the rise of a new print culture and confirmed by reference to the histories of homosexuality and lesbianism.

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Of all the historical literatures related to sexuality in eighteenth-century England, the least contested is demography. The heroic technocrats of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure have demonstrated, to almost everyone's satisfaction, that a number of significant things changed over the course of the eighteenth century: that the age at first marriage dropped significantly, that bastardy rates rose threefold over the course of the century, that the number of marriages celebrated while the female partner was pregnant grew to a third of the total, and that the percentage of the population remaining unmarried (and presumably celibate) dropped precipitately.[1] Collectively these conclusions suggest that popular sexual behavior simply changed. A higher proportion of the population had children, both within marriage and outside of it, leading, in turn, to a substantial rise in population. In other words, sex, leading to pregnancy and birth – specifically penetrative, heterosexual sex -- became more common, as evidenced by an ever-growing number of children.

These conclusions are not contested by cultural historians, and there have been several attempts to explain them by reference to a broader cultural transformation.[2] The most fully developed of these can be found in the history of the family and of sentiment, and in the work of Lawrence Stone and latterly Henry Abelove and Thomas Lacqueur. Several decades ago, Stone argued that the period between 1660 and 1800 witnessed the rise of a companionate model of marriage in which love and affection became more significant, replacing the more austere puritan family of the previous century (Stone 1990; 1992). While Stone's work has now been largely superseded, it formed an important basis for a history of affect that equates demographic change to the quality of interpersonal relationships. Building on Stone's conclusions, historians such as Abelove and Laqueur have suggested a link between sentiment and desire, as it relates to sex, and a series of broader cultural and economic shifts that we might characterise as the industrial revolution (Abelove 1989; Laqueur 1993b). In other words, they have suggested that the rise of sentiment and the changing history of affect mirror the demographic narrative of more sex, leading to more babies. Abelove and Laqueur go even further than this, suggesting what amounts to an intellectual revolution in which the rise of sentiment helps explain as a single phenomenon a new emphasis on production – of both goods and babies.

This same relationship between sentiment, sex, and reproduction can also be found in the histories of pornography and the novel. In the work of Paul-Gabriel Boucé (1987), G.S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (1987), Peter Wagner (1988), and Lynn Hunt (1993), a similar story of change toward greater sexual activity is apparent. The libertinism of many Enlightenment figures, as well as the publication of works such as *Fanny Hill* (see Epstein 1974) and more significantly the novels of the Marquis de Sade (see Fergusson 1991), when combined with the activities of popular sex therapists such as James Graham (see Porter 1982), seem to suggest that discourses around sex in general became more widely distributed

over the course of the eighteenth century, more explicit, and more modern – that is, focused on a more thoroughly interiorized self, creating people who were able to use their imaginations to liberate sexual desire from its immediate social context. Based in what is perhaps a somewhat rosy-eyed defence of the Enlightenment, this work on pornography offers a cultural explanation for the existence of greater sexual desire, and sexual activity leading to more babies. It also creates a new taxonomy of sexual pleasure (of the "pursuit of happiness" in that most Enlightenment of phrases) that effectively places ever greater emphasis on the male orgasm.

As with the literature on sentiment and affect, that on pornography seems to suggest that it was in the pursuit of pleasure, founded on a changed ideological perspective and located in the minds of the eighteenth-century English men and women (of the elite and middling sort), that the origins of changing sexual practice might be found. That, somehow, more sexually explicit literature led to more sex and more babies. But this pattern of historiographical agreement, with its essentially whiggish sense of social and civil evolution toward a more humane system, paired with more sex and babies, is in fundamental contradiction with much of women's and gender history.

Although these fields have changed substantially in the last decade, much of women's history remains embedded in a taxonomy of economic change from domestic to factory production, and tied to a narrative suggesting that women lost relative social power as industrialization and bureaucratization grew. In contrast to the narratives of affect and pornography, women's and gender history speaks of the increasing repression of women as a new modernity swept old social negotiations aside.[3]

Other literatures, including the history of the body, also reflect what appears to be a collateral evolution toward more narrowly defined categories of behavior and existence. In the history of medicine, and in Laqueur's work in particular, following Michel Foucault,

definitions of the body and of genitalia all appear to move toward a clear differentiation of the human form into just two genders: with breasts and the female orgasm forming sites of discursive change, and narrowing conceptions of the body reflecting a more highly prescribed role for women in particular, but in any case a more defined role for everyone (Schiebinger 1987; Foucault 1976; Laqueur 1990, 1993a).

What we are left with therefore is what looks like a clear dichotomy: On the one hand there is a liberationist narrative that includes the histories of affect and of pornography, emphasizing a new understanding between the genders, which led to more babies. On the other hand, a repressive narrative of ever greater gender differentiation and policing is found in women's history and the history of the body. While the first at least appears to explain demographic change, the second seems to demand something further.

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One way of coordinating these separate traditions is to momentarily refocus our attention away from the discourses of sexuality and toward the physical cultures, the practices, of sex. The demographic literature alone implies that these practices simply changed, and that we need to think of sex not as a single set of unchanging behaviors with a consistent relationship to making babies but, instead, as a physical culture possessed of rapidly moving boundaries. One explanation for the changing patterns of reproduction recorded by demographers must lie in the changing popularity of mutual masturbation, penetrative sex, oral sex, and sodomy.

This approach to sex as a physical culture allows us to describe changing behavior as a reflection of changing beliefs, and to describe changing beliefs as a component of changing behavior. If sex is a physical culture, it is both physical and cultural, and this in turn provides a basis for an explanation of the changes in behavior described by demographers. And the physical culture that emerges is one that at the beginning of the eighteenth century was

characterized by mutual masturbation, much kissing and fondling, and long hours spent in mutual touching, but very little penal-vaginal penetration – particularly before marriage but also within marriage. For early eighteenth-century men and women, these activities marked a ragged and uncertain boundary around what they thought was sex. In other words, activities involving two people and leading to sexual pleasure were possible, and because they did not lead to reproduction, were allowable – but were nevertheless sex. If penetration did occur, coitus interruptus was practiced, and if this failed and a pregnancy resulted, there was always recourse to abortion (McLaren 1984; Hitchcock 1997, chap. 8). Together these forms of behavior explain the low birth and bastardy rates of the period around 1700. But the important point is that there was an open sexual economy that worked hard to control reproduction but did not necessarily police nonreproductive sexual behavior. This kind of sexual economy necessarily emphasized the authority of women, or at least a negotiation of behavior between men and women, and as importantly included a wide range of forms of sexual activity beyond the penetrative and heterosexual, which later generations would associate with homosexuality and lesbianism.

The latter half of the period then witnessed an increasingly phallocentric definition of sex that excluded nonpenetrative activities from what was considered normal sex and placed greater emphasis on putting a penis in a vagina as the only acceptable definition of sexual behavior – with all other forms of sex becoming literally foreplay. In the process, the penis became the all-significant organ in the creation of babies, and hence patriarchal legitimacy. In part, this is simply to argue that the eighteenth century saw the development of an obsession with the penis, and of an assumption that there was only one thing to do with it (Rousseau 1987).

This transition in the physical culture of sex fits well with the literatures discussed above. Redefining or changing the nature of sex toward penetration would have the effect of

increasing the bastardy rate, and indeed the rate of population growth overall, both within and outside marriage. It would also ensure that the proportion of the population that never married would fall. Pregnancy was a significant cue for marriage, and forms of courting that involved penetrative sex leading to pregnancy were more likely to result in marriage than nonpenetrative forms of courtship sexual activity (Gillis 1985). This understanding fits with the evolution of pornography – with its essentially male and phallocentric perspective. It also fits with the broad narrative of women's and gender history. Through the development of a new emphasis on the male orgasm and the denial of its female equivalent, this change in the physical culture of sex undermined the need for intergender negotiation and effectively encouraged the oppressive policing of female public behavior as a means of protecting female bodies from newly uncontrollable male urges – underpinning the story of the creation of at least a prescriptive language of separate spheres (Davidoff and Hall 2002).

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As an answer to an essentially historiographical conundrum, the concentration on a physical culture of sex helps to link a variety of literatures that are at least nominally contradictory, and at the same time it creates a small bridge between the text-based and essentially relativistic work of cultural studies and the purportedly empirical understandings wrought by demographers and their social-historical fellow travellers. But this approach does not in itself explain the changes evidenced by demographers – it simply brings a range of different types of evidence onto a single canvas. Not enough people in the eighteenth century read pornography to be affected by it, nor did they read novels or the elite medical tracts used to evidence the rise of the two-body model. For a demographic effect to be explained, the behavior of a significant proportion of the whole population must be accounted for. This, in turn, suggests the need for a broader context for the evolution of sexual behavior, one located within a wider print revolution.

In the late seventeenth century most sexual knowledge, and the physical culture it informed, was transmitted through word of mouth (Porter and Hall 1995). As a result, individual working people (both men and women) effectively policed for themselves the nature of the sexual knowledge transmitted generation by generation. As most working people wanted (at least in the first instance) to avoid pregnancy rather than encourage it, this acted to reenforce the transmission of antinatal sexual practices. But, as popular printed literature around sexual behaviors became more widespread, it fundamentally altered this relationship. In print and in the eye of an elite public sphere, pronatal discourses that encouraged penetrative, procreative sexuality were almost inevitably dominant. And from the first half of the eighteenth century these pronatal proscriptions came to inform a new literature on sex aimed at a newly wide and popular audience.

There are two forms of literature that are important here -- the widely read antimasturbation literature, in particular *Onania* and Samuel Tissot's *Onanism*, and the equally popular sex manuals *Aristotle*'s *Masterpiece* and Venette's *Mysteries of Conjugal Love Reveal'd*. Up until the beginning of the eighteenth century, the sin of Onan was generally associated with coitus interruptus. Masturbation, when it was mentioned at all, was considered a lesser sin, and while it was expected to have some ill effects, it was one sin among many others. But as the century progressed there was increasing and vociferous concern about the masturbatory habits of both men and women, and by the end of the eighteenth century male masturbation in particular had been transformed for both elite and popular audiences into a serious medical and social concern, on which many of the social problems of the day could be heaped (Porter and Hall 1995; Laqueur 2003).

The earliest condemnatory pamphlet was Josiah Woodward's *Rebuke of the Sin of Uncleanness*, published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1704 (see Hitchcock 1997, 54). But the popular breakthrough for antimasturbatory literature came with

the publication of the enormously successful, *Onania, Or the Heinous Sin of Self- Pollution, and All Its Frightful Consequences in Both Sexes, Considered*... in approximately 1708. *Onania* went through some nineteen editions, sold almost forty thousand copies, and in the process helped to create what has been described as a "general neurosis" (Neuman 1975, 2). This was followed in 1758 by Tissot's *Onanism: Or a Treatise upon the Disorders Produced by Masturbation*.... It remained in print until 1905 and formed the basis for a respectable medical theory of the debilitating consequences of masturbation (Neuman 1975; Laqueur 2003). By denigrating the single most common nonpenetrative sexual practice, this literature valorized a crude, phallocentric emphasis on penetration over all else.

A similar role in the regulation of popular sexual activity can also ascribed to the popular sex manuals of the eighteenth century. The most common was *Aristotle*'s *Masterpiece:Or, the Secrets of Generation Displayed in All the Parts Thereof.* First published 1684, the anonymous *Masterpiece* went through at least forty-three editions by 1800 and was an almost mandatory present for any newly wed couple. It was still in print in the 1950s. The *Masterpiece* and its many imitators were guides to having babies rather than to enjoying sex. Roy Porter argues that these books were predicated on the assumption that having babies was a good thing and that the boundaries these works created were those between reproductive and sterile forms of sex (Porter 1984; Porter and Hall 1995). Hence, the sexual positions recommended by the *Masterpiece* and similar works were those thought to produce conception (Fissel 1992; Crawford 1994; Porter and Hall 1995). From the first half of the eighteenth century, penetrative heterosexual sex was being actively promoted in a series of literatures demonstrably being read by a significant proportion of the English population.

Both of these literatures, in their different ways, speak to the same concern -- the creation of a body of sexual knowledge in which the point of sex was penetration and

impregnation. In the process, they equally emphasize the penis as the all-important organ of generation, and at least superficially seem to explain a significant shift in sexual practice.

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Supporting evidence for this explanation and conclusion can also be derived from two further, related literatures: the histories of lesbianism and male homosexuality. If the physical culture of sex changed, as suggested, then this transition should also have affected the physical cultures of both homosexual men and lesbians.

In the case of lesbianism, the historiography depicts a culture that was itself changing from one dominated by cross-dressing to one in which notions of romantic friendship became more prominent. This appears to coincide with a decline in the enactment of relationships characterized by a femme/butch dichotomy, and with the rise of a pattern of equal and apparently undifferentiated partners. This, in turn, appears to work in dialogue with an increasingly exclusive heterosexuality that proscribed forms of sexual behavior beyond penetration and helped to define lesbianism as something fundamentally different.[4]

Similarly, the rise in the emphasis on effeminate behavior within the male homosexual molly culture exposed by raids on gay drinking establishments in London from the 1720s – along with the rise of popular homophobia – reflects, again, an engagement with a changing and narrowing heterosexuality. As the point of sex became both more phallocentric and more fully concerned with reproduction, sodomy and effeminacy became increasingly and uniquely threatening (Trumbach 1998; Bray 2003; Norton 2006).

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This change in the physical culture of sex, in the behaviors and assumptions that determined how people interacted with each other, amounted to a sexual revolution that was

characterized by a new emphasis on penetrative sex, and a new set of gender relations structured by new popular understandings of the purpose of sex itself.

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[1] See Laslett, Oosterveen, and Smith (1980), Wrigley and Schofield (1981), Wrigley (1983), Weir (1984), and Schofield (1985).

[2] For a notable exception to this chorus of agreement, see Hill (1989a).

[3] See Amussen (1988), Hill (1989b), Fildes (1990), Laurence (1994), Clark (1995), and Davidoff and Hall (2002).

[4] See Garber (1992), Donaghue (1993), Castle (1993), and Dekker and van de Pol (1997).