

**Author's copy** for *Sexualities* forthcoming

**Where are the Boundaries of Sexuality? Hovering in a Zone of Uncertainty between  
Sexualities and Non-sexualities**

*Jeff Hearn*

## **Where are the Boundaries of Sexuality? Hovering in a Zone of Uncertainty between Sexualities and Non-sexualities**

It is a privilege to write for the journal's twentieth anniversary, and many congratulations to all concerned in making it such a success! For the tenth anniversary, I highlighted six interconnecting dialectics for sexualities in the future, relating to: LGBTIQ+ movements, persistence of (sexual) violence, population ageing, environmental change, problematization of sex and biology, and ICTs and virtualization – that together are likely to produce significant changes for sexualities, and what sexuality *is* (Hearn, 2008). The prospects still seem not so different, perhaps even more dramatic, and so I would not want to disclaim any of these tendencies.

But now what I'm drawn to a related but slightly different discussion, namely, the blurred boundary between what has to be called sexualities, with all the desire, orientation, arousal, fantasy, and practices involved, and what I will call 'non-sexualities'. To put this another way, what are the boundaries around sexuality? As so often, that boundary – and the word 'boundary' isn't quite right, so I shall refer to this as a zone of uncertainty – applies, albeit with different languages, dynamics and implications, in personal practice, sexuality politics and policy, and theorizing on sexualities.

So let's start here: have you ever had an acquaintanceship, perhaps a friendship, that is impossible to categorize, as not sexual and not non-sexual? Having talked to various people about this, I gather this is not such a rare occurrence. Many years ago, I started trying to 'conceptualize' this; categories that came to mind included: 'friends that don't fit'; 'soulmates without sex', 'lovers without lust', 'cool companions', 'intimate acquaintances', 'couples that are not' ... you can make up your own terms, in both senses. This might sound similar to what Lilian Faderman (1981) and others have called 'romantic friendship' or 'passionate friendship' (see Deitcher, 2001), but I think

that may be fixing it too much as about romance and friendship. It is of course tempting to say that this is all about sublimated, repressed or latent sexuality (how to avoid Freud?), and it might be in some instances, but that seems too reductive and simply inaccurate. There is a zone of uncertainty that is usually unnamed. But now of course we have the internet; apparently, Tumblr lists some 90 different sexualities (<https://ageofshitlords.com/complete-list-of-all-tumblr-sexualities-so-far>), including “alterous” which “can best be described as desiring emotional closeness with someone; is neither platonic nor romantic but rather somewhere in between the two”.

This conundrum of the boundary of sexuality and non-sexuality also seems present in public, collective politics and policy on sexualities, perhaps increasingly so. Struggles for sexual justice, sexual equality, and sexual self-determination have long been in conflict with patriarchal, heteronormative, criminalizing and downright murderous forces. Countering that, many social movement organizations have been vital in pushing for sexual rights, even with their uneven impacts across the globe – as, for example, in the World Association for Sexual Health’s 1999 Universal Declaration of Sexual Rights, revised 2014; the 2007 Yogyakarta Principles for a global charter for LGBTI+ rights; and the 2015 Joint Statement on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Status from 417 NGOs from 105 countries. This is all good, and sexual rights are an essential base, but seeing sexuality political struggles as primarily or only about the pursuit of sexual rights is not unproblematic, especially from the perspective of some queer-influenced, anti-statist politics. Sexual rights approaches can suffer limitations of human rights approaches, and may feed into state reformism, as in some same-sex marriage debates. Assessing this, Sofia Aboim, Tamara Shefer and I (Hearn et al., 2018) concluded: “a narrow, instrumental and non-contextualized focus on sexual justice can itself bring dangers of reproducing the very power relations that many seeking sexual justice set out to challenge.” The restrictions of

a sexual rights politics, rather than a wider framing in (non-sexuality) politics, that is not easily separable, may become apparent.

Moreover, strategies for ongoing political change in sexuality tend to shift in form and direction as non-normative sexualities become more legitimated, especially through state reforms, perhaps through alliance politics, and such legitimation is materialized more fully. It may then become more difficult to separate sexuality politics and policy from non-sexuality politics and policy, in terms of, say, housing rights, pay and pensions. I've just come back from Örebro (Sweden) Pride, advertized and 'designed' for ALL: an exceedingly calm mix of state (city, region, police, prison and probation service, army, etc.), business (Burger King cardboard crowns everywhere) young sexpol groups, and families, in roughly equal measure, 8,000 people in a city of 115,000 – all very different from the previous I went to, Khayelitsha (Cape Town, South Africa) Pride. Questions arise: should the struggles for non-normative sexualities necessarily prioritize sexuality or even gender? Why assume that sexual dissidents primarily, even only, interested in sexuality?

At the same time, arguably the extent of the zone of uncertainty between sexuality and non-sexuality appears to grow in social-sexual practice. On one hand, there is a range of evidence of decline or redirection in sexual activity from various surveys, along with somewhat greater prominence of asexualities (Carrigan et al., 2013). In some formulations, LGBTI becomes LGBTIA. Reduction in (with-other, in-the-flesh [ITF]) sexual activity has been reported from many parts of the world, including Finland (Kontula, 2009), Japan (Haworth, 2013) and USA (Twenge et al., 2017). Such reports on sexual activity amongst young people, married couples, and older people have been framed variously as lowering of sexual desire, sex drive, sperm count and testosterone (perhaps the result not cause of reduced sexual activity [Hsu et al., 2015]), and flights from intimacy or shifts to serial monogamy. US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data

indicates significant decreases in teenage sexual activity since 1988, with reported rates 22 percent higher among males and 14 percent higher among females (Leonard, 2015). According to the Japan Family Planning Association, ‘45% of women aged 16-24 “were not interested in or despised sexual contact”. More than a quarter of men felt the same way.’ (Haworth, 2013). In many parts of the world, increased time seems to be spent on looks, “looking good” and self-grooming, especially by girls and young women, but also boys and young men, ... and older people too. There is also growing debate on whether younger people are experiencing more depression and lower social skills, which might link with such possible changes in sexual desire and activity.

On the other hand, simultaneously as possible moves towards desexualization and asexualities, there are profuse extensions of sexualizations, most obviously in pornographization and anti-feminism of much media, culture and public space, but also in many wider spheres of life, in, for example, sport-sexuality, music-sexuality, economy-sexuality, politics-sexuality. Together, these two counter trends represent in quasi-marxist terms the growing contradiction of the means and relations of sexuality (production).

Some of such contradictions of sexual decline or redirection and greater sexualization would seem to follow from the impacts of technologization, ICTs and virtualization, even without assuming any fixed determinism. Proliferating information and communication technologies facilitate new and diverse virtual/ITF sexual practices. Grindr, Tinder (and their many derivatives), sexting and the rest are normalized; talk of machinic sex robots is almost mainstream. Writing on Japan, Abigail Haworth (2013) stressed the prevalence of “easy or instant gratification, in the form of casual sex, short-term trysts and the usual technological suspects: online porn, virtual-reality "girlfriends", anime cartoons. Or else they're [young people] opting out altogether and replacing love and sex with other urban pastimes”, suggesting that future Japanese relationships will be

largely technology-driven; likewise, humans doing “robot-style dating” may themselves become metaphorical “sex robots” (Kilberd, 2017). Close intersections of sexuality, non-sexuality and ICTs likely expand further the zone of uncertainty between sexuality and non-sexuality.

There is currently much analysis of the impact of artificial intelligence, augmented reality, robotics and related technologies on labour markets and distributions of political power. In part following the Moravec paradox (contrary to some assumptions, high-level reasoning requires very little computation, but low-level sensorimotor skills require large computational resources), many middle class jobs needing rational calculation may be replaced by algorithms (Frey and Osborne, 2013; Davis, 2016; Elliott, 2017; PwC, 2017). Meanwhile, the masses left with limited resources may provide low paid labour (individually, but not so easily generically, replaceable), based on perception, mobility and contact. What might this mean for sexuality? Will there be an entrenchment of the elite, and the sexuality elite? Will the (sexuality) elite employ a stratum of high-tech sexuality technocrats, controlling (all?) (online) sexuality, sexual data/images and their consumption? Will there be an uberization of mobile, proximate sexuality? Or what if, to take the theme of *The Untamed*, there are technological possibilities of total sexual immersion that made anything else seem “bland and banal”? How would that change everything?

Struggles in sexuality politics also seem to be being sharpened by contemporary, polarizing socio-politics, often under the gloss of neoliberal globalization. While the clash of civilizations thesis (Huntingdon, 1996) is widely discredited, polarizations in sexuality politics persist, even with occasional crossovers. Sexuality politics are in long-term, ongoing struggle with hyperpatriarchal, sometimes fundamentalist, neo-nazi, fascist or far right politics. In these globalizing politics, separation of sexuality and non-sexuality politics is difficult to make. This may eventually lead at

some point to some reconciliation or bloody confrontation, a global elite-masses 'macro-Stonewall' showdown in and beyond the sexuality–non-sexuality zone of uncertainty.

These various zones of uncertainty around sexualities/non-sexualities bear on sexuality studies itself. With the pervasiveness of sexuality, yet possible desexualizing processes, a zone of uncertainty recurs around how sexualities are to be identified, analyzed and circumscribed, empirically and theoretically. How separate can sexualities be from non-sexualities in analysis? How separate can sexuality studies as a critical field be from other academic fields, especially with sexualities being so theoretically inspiring? Should sexualities be studied as a specialism or integrated and mainstreamed? I see no better time than now to both distinguish and deepen sexuality studies, even with these paradoxes. Such questions underlie the very project of studying sexualities, including the construction of the journal. So, many congratulations to all, again!

## References

Carrigan M, Gupta K and Morrison TG (2013) Asexuality special theme issue editorial.

*Psychology & Sexuality* 4(2): 111–120.

Davis GF (2016) What might replace the modern corporation? Uberization and the web page enterprise. *Seattle University Law Review* 39(2): 501–515.

Deitcher D (2001) *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840-1918*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Elliott L (2017) Middle class? Machines are after you. *The Guardian*, 21 August, 20.

Faderman L (1981) *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: Morrow.

Frey CB and Osborne MA (2013) *The Future of Employment: How Susceptible are Jobs to Computerisation?* Working Paper. Oxford: Oxford Martin School.

Haworth A (2013) Why have young people in Japan stopped having sex? *The Observer*, 20 October.

Hearn J (2008) Sexualities future, present, past ... Towards transectionalities. *Sexualities: Studies in Culture and Society* 11(1): 37–46.

Hearn J, Aboim S and Shefer T (2018) Sexualities, social justice and sexual justice. In: Craig G (ed.) *The Global Handbook on Social Justice*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Hsu B et al. (2015) The longitudinal relationship of sexual function and androgen status in older men. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* 100(4): 1350–1358.

Huntingdon SP (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Kilberd R (2017) Tinder Gold takes us nearer the app's grim endpoint: Robot-style dating. *The Guardian*, 7 September.

Kontula O (2009) *Between Sexuality and Desire: The Evolution of Sex in Finland*. Helsinki: Family Federation of Finland.

Leonard. K. (2015) Teens today have less sex than their parents did.

[www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2015/07/22/cdc-report-shows-declines-in-teen-sexual-activity-pregnancies](http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2015/07/22/cdc-report-shows-declines-in-teen-sexual-activity-pregnancies)

PwC (2017) *Consumer Spending Prospects and the Impact of Automation on Jobs: UK Economic Outlook*. <http://www.pwc.co.uk/services/economics-policy/insights/uk-economic-outlook.html>



Twenge JM, Sherman RA and Wells BE (2017) Declines in sexual frequency among American adults, 1989–2014. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* DOI: [doi.org/10.1007/s10508-017-0953-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-017-0953-1)

*The Untamed* (2016) Director, Amat Escalante.