

## ***Policing Sexuality: Sex, Society and the State***

Jullian C. H. Lee. London: Zed Books, 2011.

*Reviewed by Paul Reynolds*

Julian Lee's *Policing Sexuality* is a distinctive text, and it raises the issue of the interconnection or separation of distinct types of writing exercise as intellectual engagements or as political expositions. This distinction might seem relatively artificial. Sexuality scholarship has supported and informed activism and many of those who have produced it are activists in fighting for identity and queer positions. Yet there is a distinction to be drawn between sexuality scholarship deeply embedded within critiques of intellectual scholarship and focused on philosophical, theoretical and subject-centred questions of identity and practice, which undoubtedly have a political character, and texts that more directly seek to inform those engaged in day to day struggle for whom the more conceptually dense academic tome is unfamiliar. As politically important as Judith Butler's work can be, much of her written oeuvre does not easily translate into activist discourse and protest.

Whilst Lee's text undoubtedly has scholarly value, he is clear in the introduction that this text is meant to be clear and accessible to non-academic audiences, and specifically to provide activists with a usable introduction to questioning how sexuality is stigmatised in different countries and cultures, and what the role of the state is in regulating sexuality. Hence the structure of the text, which provides a conceptual introduction, explores the relationship between societies and states in the way sexuality is regulated in short readable chapters and then explores and compares five case studies before concluding on the terrain of sexuality rights in contemporary societies.

Sexuality studies has grown and developed since the 1960's, when the naturalism of assumptions about sexuality (and gender) in much of academic discourse began to be systematically challenged by academics and activists pushing for rights and recognition. This is not to devalue the researchers who focused on sexuality before the 1960's, but it is from the 1960's that you get the beginning of a systematic and developing body of literature and loose association of researchers who developed social critiques of hetero-patriarchy. By the end of the 1990's sexuality studies had become recognised as a distinctive trans-disciplinary field across a range of disciplines, notably history, geography, philosophy and the social sciences. This recognition within academic contexts broadly echoed advances in legal recognition and rights claims in Europe, Australia and North America (selectively in the United States), suggesting

a common frame of progressive change. Yet the ebb and flow of sexual politics in the last two decades, with fault lines over adoption, equality and marriage in those countries that are deemed progressive and the relative absence of change in much of the rest of the world has contrasted with the deepening and developing of sexuality within sexuality studies and intersecting with traditional disciplines. Whilst the cliché of an easy divide between academic and activist is crude, much of the form of contemporary discourse in sexuality studies might be regarded as being removed from day to day activists and their concerns.

In this respect, Lee's book makes a welcome contribution, capturing some of the central conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of sexuality critiques within a readable narrative with a focus on its application. His starting point is to navigate a path between easy simplification and over complication, with the political always at the fore. So the intersection of gender and sexuality is treated as not easily disaggregated, but the dangers of collapsing sexual rights and politics into LGBTQI 'alphabet soup' politics is avoided. Cultural specificities as to the conceptualisation of sex and sexuality and how they might be socially conceived and political regulated are acknowledged. The initial chapters establish first a rationale for the social regulation of sexuality with a broad sense of the role of social structures and social change as drivers of changes in how sex and sexuality are conceived, and then how and why states regulate sexuality to provide a political analysis. Case studies of India, The United States, Malaysia, Turkey and Britain provide five case studies for comparison, before a concluding chapter draws out key issues in the struggle for sexual rights.

The power of this text is in its clarity of exposition, its constant use of global contexts to contrast the experience of people's in countries of differing social, technological, religious and political structures, its (too brief) political analysis of the shortcomings of democracy in creating a limited politics of tolerance and its mapping of the way in which changes in how sexuality and sex are perceived and regulated reflects patterns of progress, reversal and new settlement (again, briefly). The book does what it sets out to do in giving the reader a sense of how sexual politics works in a range of different cultural contexts, with lessons to be learned that are not culturally distinct in pressing for rights claims.

It is not, however, without some weaknesses, and in these it would be inappropriate to include the necessarily sketchy theoretical underpinnings, which are an explicit trade off for the range and breadth of political analysis. The first weakness, ironically, is political. By separating chapters that sketch social structures – kinship systems, marriage, world-views and the social drivers of change – and their influence on how sex and sexuality are conceived and reflected, and state regulation, Lee creates a tension between the material and social base and the political. Hence the political appears dislocated or sitting atop deeper underlying social processes, and issues of power, fractional, elite (or class) interest are underdeveloped. the politics of sexuality, clearly not natural, is also not simply social in its

At the same time, the breadth of analysis tends to mean the text takes a particular, gendered orientation to looking at the production of inequality, regulation and oppression. Whilst very much warranted, it does mean that sexual issues are often gendered issues, and the specificity of sexuality and sexual diversity is diluted. In addition, and more a product of Lee's own experience, there is a particular concern

with Muslim examples and the role of religion. Again, much warranted, and now as much as any time frame. However, the price of trying to cover such a broad ground is balancing how different facets of sexuality and sexual politics are covered. Even accepting the limitations Lee acknowledges for the text, the balance means that the study does not represent the breadth of struggles. Whilst the global oppression of women, the issues of marriage, patriarchy and traditional religious forms and HIV are all critical, other issues of citizenship rights, recognition of diversity and terms of legal intervention of civil freedoms are equally so and less evidently dealt with.

The case studies provide stimulating vignettes, but perhaps a closer thematisation of representative issues should have been distributed across them to give the text scope. The British chapter begins with Wolfenden, shifts back to colonialism and then forward to Oscar Wilde, which seems an interesting path but lacks contemporary understanding and relevance at what might be useful to consider in the way of exploring sexual politics – the scope and limits to legal change, charter challenges, contrasting insider and outsider political strategies, the crudities and subtleties of state regulation and the power of media representations. With a text that wants to directly inform activism, this seems somewhat unfortunate.

This issue of balance becomes evident in the concluding chapters, where the emphasis in contrast is on religion, marriage and the construction of the other, and the exploration of sexual rights is curiously truncated and unsupported by what comes before. In that respect, the political analysis is all too brief and the trans-cultural problems of homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormative power are not adequately recognised, if patriarchy is.

These criticisms should not detract from an interesting text that provides an impressionistic but nevertheless valuable exposition of global sexual issues and politics. That said, perhaps a more explicit sense of what Lee regards as key issues should have foregrounded, with due attention to those he recognises but does not substantially cover, rebalancing the text. More to the point, as a source of information and provocation to think, the book has activist value, but ironically, its impressionistic character means there is no clear and systematic analysis of policing sexuality and the role of the state, or how it can be remedied or resisted. That text has still to be written.