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Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History by Gilbert Herdt

Review by: Wayne R. Dynes

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2915 Connecticut Ave., NW Apt. 306
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Book Reviews

The Return of the Third Sex

Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History. Edited by Gilbert Herdt. New York: Zone Books, 1994, 614 pp. Cloth, \$32.00.

Reviewed by Wayne R. Dynes, Ph.D.,
Hunter College, Art Department,
695 Park Avenue, New York, NY
10021.

The Western mind has a recurrent fascination with the concept of the "third sex," although lately this fascination has not been seen. The "third sex" seems almost to have led a life of its own: a category in search of a referent. In our cultural discourse, the third-sex label has attached itself to a variety of meanings: eunuchs (as with the disapproving third century Roman emperor Alexander Severus, for whom they constituted a *tertium hominum genus*), adolescents (Gabriel Matzneff, reworking Rousseau), virgins (a concept René Grémaux explores in this volume), bluestockings (Théophile Gautier), physiological hermaphrodites (an idea stemming from Plato), and homosexuals (a notion popular only since the middle of the 19th cen-

tury). Only in the first and fifth categories does the identification call for any demonstrable physical abnormality.

Most papers in this book are not about biological difference, but difference of behavior and consciousness—homosexuality, in short. A paper in which he treats individuals of the 5-alpha reductase deficiency type notwithstanding, Herdt's volume contributes little to the hermaphrodite problem; one will still have to look to the writings of John Money and his associates for more information about hermaphrodites.

After Herdt's long Introduction—suggestive, but perhaps deliberately inconclusive—the book falls into two main parts. The core of the first, the historical section, comprises three contributions on early modern Europe through the 19th century, which are syntheses of available research and attempts at historical narratives (on England, the Netherlands, and Germany). Placed before these, Kathryn M. Ringrose's paper on Byzantine eunuchs stands apart—eunuchs are generally ignored by other authors—and will not be discussed here. The book's second, anthropological section consists chiefly of case studies (e. g., the hijras

of India, the Polynesian mahu, the Melanesian Sambia, and the North American berdache).

Almost a hundred years ago, scholars in Germany sought to separate the problem of hermaphroditism from that of homosexual orientation. They established conclusively that there is no necessary link in the sense that persons who exhibit same-sex attraction not only do not demonstrate any variation in anatomical or chromosomal sex, but may not even appear effeminate or mannish (as the case may be). In his Introduction, Herdt seeks to link these concerns with contemporary research interests. Although rejecting any facile parallel in his campaign against "dimorphism," Herdt seems still to discern some value in discussing the two phenomena—hermaphroditism and sexual orientation—side by side. As a form of intermediacy, hermaphroditism is, it would appear, relevant. Overall, Herdt and some of his contributors seem exercised against dualistic patterns in thinking. Many years ago the philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy had written of the "Revolt against Dualism." Popular denunciations of "either-or" thinking remain common. On a more rarefied plane,

the Deconstruction of Jacques Derrida suggests the unreality of "binarism" by showing how one pole, through the slippage of *différance*, shifts to its opposite. In contrast to some of his contributors, Herdt's antidualism even makes him uneasy about the contrast of sex (nature) and gender (culture) as yet another aspect of "binarist" thinking.

But why limit ourselves to only three sexes or genders? At one point Herdt suggests that thirdness should be understood as "emblematic" (p. 20), as shorthand for four, five, and more. Almost a century ago a similar range had been allowed in Magnus Hirschfeld's spectrum theory of *sexuelle Zwischenstufen* or sexual intermediates. To be sure, his more popular writings, such as the 1905 "tour guide" *Berlins dritte Geschlecht*, kept the more rudimentary three-sex model before the public eye.

One reason for the enduring popularity of the three-sex scheme appears to be linguistic usage. The term *gender* is, after all, borrowed from grammar. Historically, the great family of Indo-European languages assigned three genders to nouns and adjectives (a scheme retained in modern German). This tendency to tripartition is the basis for Georges Dumézil's admittedly controversial theory of Indo-European institutions. During the formative modern period of Central European sex research, the study of classical languages remained the basis of elite education. Alongside masculine and feminine genders, Latin and Greek recognized a coequal neuter category. Neuter, as the word suggests, is neither male nor female; the rarer term *epicene* is both. Thus, a third (sexual) gender could be seen as both distinct from male and female (neuter) and partaking of the qualities of both (epicene). However it is conceptualized, this pull toward tripartition may explain why it is so uncommon for Western Europeans to recognize a fourth gender.

A number of the authors subscribe to the current fashion for distinguishing sex (nature) and gender (culture). This permits a certain adventurousness in conceptualization. Hence Randolph Trumbach claims to detect two sexes and four genders in 18th century England, but Herdt three sexes and two genders (in Sambia). In an important article, however, Linda Nicholson (1994) shows that the sex/gender contrast, which seemed useful in the 1970s, is now breaking down, with the collapse of the category sex into that of gender. Hence the label *third gender*, which for some is distinct and contrastive with *third sex*, now tends simply to displace the older expression: The two map onto one another almost perfectly. In view of this development, the problems inherent in the old third-sex concept are in no way abolished by the new third-gender formula.

The authors show a recurrent tendency to accept uncritically the claims of Thomas Laqueur (1990) that down to the 18th century only *one* sex was recognized, as the female was considered a variant of the male. Unfortunately, Laqueur's assertion reposes on a selective presentation of evidence: he concentrates on only one of several prevalent medical theories, and he altogether omits nonmedical and popular conceptions. If one does accept Laqueur, though, the following improbable scheme appears for Western culture: for millennia the one-sex concept prevailed; then the two-sex and three-sex models appeared almost simultaneously. Two-sex won out in our crude 20th century. It is time now, the contributors to this book seem to suggest, to allow the more progressive third- (or more) sex theory out of the closet.

Readers familiar with recent discussions of these questions will not be surprised to find Randolph Trumbach continuing his quixotic effort to fix a major break in the conceptualization of sexual orientation in England about 1700. (Others, following

Michel Foucault, insist that the rupture occurred only about 1870; yet others, most sensibly, hold that the development was gradual, with no sharp breaks.) Trumbach's earlier work had mainly addressed the putative emergence of the "modern (male) homosexual." He now claims that 18th century England had already established a structure of four genders (adding a problematic proto-lesbian one). By contrast, in the following paper Theo van der Meer isolates many Dutch folk models to explain sodomy (for example, as an import from Italy, Catholic, whoredom, a compulsion, aversion toward women). His essay, reflecting years of research, ranks as the best summary of this hard-to-access Dutch material. He strongly suggests that the consolidation of the "modern homosexual" was a gradual, rather than sudden affair.

Among the volume's anthropological case studies, Will Roscoe's is stalwart, perhaps doctrinaire in proposing a four-gender scheme for his native Americans. Yet in a sophisticated account of Polynesia, combining study of earlier sources with new field work, Niko Besnier disavows any need for more than two sexes/genders, preferring an approach derived from Victor Turner's concept of liminality. Gender liminality posits that the individual is at the edge of, or perhaps just beyond, a stable existing category—here male or female—rather than actually seceding to form an autonomous new one. The writer holds that "while gender liminality is a particularly striking illustration of the permeability and permutability of gender categories in Polynesia, there is no compelling evidence that Polynesian cultures accord it a separate gender status." If it possessed such status, why does it not figure in kinship concepts and terminology, which are constructed on a model of simple male-female duality? Besnier attributes the projection of third-sex concepts onto these societies to a romantic tendency on

the part of gender- and gay-studies theorists who wish to see the "Other" as radically different from a reified "Western" view of sex and gender. (Besnier's conclusions seem to undercut the book's central thesis. It is to Herdt's credit that he nonetheless included this paper.)

In their conflation of "hermaphroditism" (usually induced by mutilation) and homosexuality, the hijras of India would appear to be continuing a Western concept introduced into the subcontinent during Victorian times. The hijras thus reflect the consolidation of an earlier acculturation under the sign of imperialism, for their self-designation as a "third sex" does not seem to be rooted in any native Indic tradition. This is the dilemma of the modern Western scholar, even one so sympathetic and insightful as Serena Nanda, the author of the hijra paper. In seeking to peer into the exotic mirror of the "Other" we may see only the altered image of ourselves at an earlier stage.

Why then is the third-sex (and third-gender) approach enjoying a revival? Evidently, postmodernism, with its claim to "explode the categories," has something to do with it. Not surprisingly, however, new categories (which are in fact old categories) step in as replacements, with their own rigidities. Another element of attraction is what might be called the "plus-one" gambit, as seen in the popular concept of a "sixth sense," the Swedish economy as the "third way," and the acceptance of a "Fifth Gospel" (usually the gnostic text attributed to Thomas).

In my approach to contemporary gay and lesbian scholarship, I am often critical of a refusal to exploit the storehouse of earlier concepts and findings. In this instance, however, a little knowledge turns out to be a dangerous thing. The contributors, or some of them at least, are seeking to update a hoary old theory by clothing it in a new postmodern and "gender studies" garb. This big book offers an extensive display of

the recycled wares, yet their value appears to be quite limited.

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Peers and Passion

Peer Marriage: How Love Between Equals Really Works. By Pepper Schwartz. New York: Free Press, 1994, 205 pages. Cloth, \$19.95.

Reviewed by Kathryn N. Black, Ph.D., Purdue University, Department of Psychological Sciences, West Lafayette, IN 47907.

My first exposure to the information that Pepper Schwartz discusses in *Peer Marriage* was a summary article published in *Psychology Today*. This brief introduction made me especially eager to read the book. Schwartz argues that there is an emerging couple relationship in which gender and marital roles are being reconstructed in a genuinely equitable fashion.

This peer relationship includes the following characteristics. The partners have at least a 60/40 division of labor with respect to household duties and child rearing. Each person's work is given equal weight in the couple's life plans. Both partners have equal control of the family economy and reasonably equal access to discretionary funds. Both partners believe the other has equal influence over important decisions. Each person gives primacy to the partnership over work and other relationships. However, there are costs in terms of career and interactions with friends and family, and passion in the relationship may be diminished.

Schwartz suggests that with time and effort the costs may diminish and the rewards are great. For example, perhaps as a result of the choice and the time commitment required,

peer marriage partners are more psychologically intimate and more committed to the relationship. In individual chapters, Schwartz examines what is meant by "deep friendship," how one has a "shared child," as well as the issues in "eliminating the provider role." One of the more interesting chapters considers "passion in a sexual democracy" and the unique problems particularly associated with egalitarianism.

This is primarily a consideration of heterosexual peer marriages in which there are children—clearly not a requirement for egalitarian relationships, but perhaps a test—as she deliberately avoids discussing childless couples. We are not told how many couples are childless, nor in fact are we told exactly how many couples were interviewed. Those interested in peer relationships may especially feel that lack of consideration of homosexual couples because of the suggestion in other literature that traditional roles are found less often in gay relationships. Perhaps in a subculture with more non-traditional experience the problem with passion would be less likely to occur.

Unfortunately, Schwartz fails to answer some other major questions. For example, she does not provide even minimal information as to her procedure. How many couples were seen? How long was the interview, and was there a protocol? Were the interviews taped? Are the quotations verbatim or paraphrased? Perhaps she expects that professionals will be acquainted with her prior and well-known work with Blumstein (1983) on marriages. However, Blumstein and Schwartz's (1983) book was published some time ago, and the present work may well appeal to those who are not familiar with the prior work. My preference would have been that Schwartz had followed the example of Gottmann, who published two books dealing with the same set of observations. *What Predicts Divorce?* (1994) is designed for use by professionals