

However, these are remarks raised by and not against the book. With good reason, Slucki considers this study to be a beginning. And, indeed, it does represent a huge step towards a global history of Jewish life which earnestly integrates the southern hemisphere. Slucki not only successfully abandons the “narrow geographic perspective” (p. 4) formative to the historiography of the Bund, he also calls for new ways of thinking and of writing global Jewish history, before and after the Holocaust.

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BROOKE, STEPHEN. *Sexual Politics. Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day*. Oxford University Press, Oxford [etc.] 2012. xii, 284 pp. Ills. £65.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859013000084

Studies of the British Labour Party in the twentieth century rarely dwell for long on sexual politics. One reason, as Stephen Brooke notes in his intriguing study of *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from 1880s to the Present Day* was that the highpoint of the party's success – the 1945–1951 Attlee government – coincided with a relative retreat from an interest in sexual issues. But that this neglect was overdue for treatment would have been obvious to anyone attempting to convince sceptical, but progressively minded, friends of the virtues of voting Labour at the 2010 General Election. In the face of unanswerable complaints about Labour's record on privatization, civil liberties, and military intervention, one of the strongest defences of “New” Labour in government was its record in repealing Section 28, equalizing the age of consent, and introducing civil partnerships. Brooke, it seems, has written a history for our times: one in which, what he calls “the ambiguous but rich relationship between sexuality and socialist politics” (p. 2) forms the core.

In fact, Brooke's purview is rather narrower than this quotation, and the book's subtitle, might lead potential readers to believe. For although he is prone to refer to “socialist politics” and “the British Left” his focus is resolutely upon the Labour Party (usually the national or parliamentary party) and rarely embraces the broader socialist movement around it. Brooke's justification for this is twofold. First he argues that Labour was a key player in the sexual reforms of the twentieth century, indeed that Labour was pivotal at key moments, a fact that has been undervalued in previous accounts. Second, and related, Brooke argues that the category of “class” should no longer be a “stranger at the feast” of British history, including the history of sexuality. Much of the debate about sexual reform, especially before 1967, Brooke contends, was framed in class terms and this made Labour, the focal point for class politics, also the focal point of sexual reform.

Following an introductory chapter outlining the ideas of sexual reformers of the “socialist revival”, including Edward Carpenter, Karl Pearson, and Olive Schreiner, *Sexual Politics* divides into three substantive sections. The first, and by far the most convincing,

concentrates upon birth control, abortion, and Labour politics in the 1920s and 1930s; the second and third are structured around the *annus mirabilis* of sexual reform, 1967: the year when access to legal, therapeutic abortions was secured; homosexual acts in private were decriminalized, and the NHS (Family Planning) Act made contraceptive advice available to all women, regardless of marital status and age. Part 2 explores “Roads to 1967”, while Part 3 follows the “Roads from 1967”, up to the 2010 defeat of the Blair/Brown Labour government. These “roads” around 1967, Brooke contends, were more important than the moment itself: the “permissive society” was rooted in the way links between family, gender, and sexuality worked out in the 1940s and 1950s, but only made their full impact in the 1970s and 1980s.

Brooke does not, as this summary might be taken to imply, adopt any simple linear model of sexual liberation. Among the many strengths of *Sexual Politics* is its sensitivity to the construction of successive sexual identities, such as the “male breadwinner”, “working-class mother”, and, post-Wolfenden, “respectable homosexual”, although Brooke’s clear view is that the overall tendency of sexual reform has been positive. In the interwar period, he argues, the politics of birth control and abortion were often a form of class politics, in the sense that their advocacy was framed in terms of differential access, and a “maternalist politics” centred upon the working-class mother and the failure of a male breadwinner model. From the 1950s, Brooke concedes that class was a declining force, and that although arguments for greater birth control and abortion were still often framed in class terms, this was increasingly supplemented, and eventually supplanted, by a language of individual rights, exemplified in both feminism and gay liberation politics. Hence in many ways New Labour, the apogee of individualism on the left, was the perfect vehicle for the sexual politics of the early twentieth-first century.

Sexual Politics is an important book for historians of Labour and the left, as well as those of sexual reform. Brooke has buried himself deep in some neglected archives, mastered the minutiae of a whole series of organizations and committees – witness the acronyms and initials liberally scattered over each page – and emerged in the historiographic uplands with sufficient sight to make an innovative overarching argument. But it is the terms of that argument, that Labour was pivotal to twentieth-century sexual reform and that class was a key component, which will provoke most debate.

The claim that Labour was central to sexual reform in twentieth century Britain is in one sense unanswerable. Sexual reform, in Brooke’s terms, was largely a matter of legislative and administrative action, the key events of which occurred when Labour was the largest party in the House of Commons and held the relevant offices of state. But leaving aside for the moment the question of whether or not a history of sexual politics benefits from a party and parliamentary focus, a couple of caveats must be added. First, Brooke makes his case by excluding a number of subjects that one might reasonably suppose central to sexual politics: “venereal disease, sex education, and the legal reform of marriage and divorce”, we are warned, “are not dealt with in the present book, in part because of space, in part because some of these issues were not covered in detail or consistently by the Left” (p. 3). Second, while Brooke succeeds in proving that Labour was on the scene for many of the most important sexual reforms, he does less well in demonstrating that the Party was the efficient cause. Thus he finds it “hard to believe that Memorandum 153/MCW” issued in July 1930, which permitted local authority clinics to give birth control information to women, “was not, in part, a muted response to the birth control campaign” (p. 63) that had been mounted within the Labour Party in the 1920s. While when it comes to the 1967 abortion reform the reader is told that it “was based upon contingent factors such as the thalidomide tragedy. But the culture of the Labour Party also had something to do with it.” (p. 164)

A similar imprecision is apparent in *Sexual Politics*' other main contention. Despite the centrality of "class" to the book's argument, no clear idea of how historians should understand or work with this most slippery of concepts emerges. At times, especially in reference to maternalist arguments for birth control and abortion, class appears to be understood as a linguistic construction, or discursive space, but at other points Brooke seems more inclined to a "common-sense" understanding of class as a social category determined by more basic economic relations. Thus, the supplanting of class-based arguments by those of identity and individual rights is assumed to be an inevitable response to a new reality. Brooke's notion of "class" is diluted to the point of meaninglessness when we are told that Liberal MP David Steel (hardly the most obvious class warrior) highlighted "class difference" in arguing for abortion reform (p. 171), while his common-sense understanding encourages a misleading dichotomy between "class" arguments on one hand and Malthusian, eugenic, and feminist arguments (all of which were themselves shot through with class assumptions) on the other. The neglect of eugenics is particularly remiss, not only because it was a recurrent theme in birth control and abortion arguments, but also because a discussion of eugenics would have enabled Brooke to clarify his understanding of class. Instead eugenics is treated as a self-contained stain that sometimes spoils otherwise good class arguments. The Workers' Birth Control Group, apparently "moved out" of its "Malthusian and eugenicist background" (p. 64), but Dora Russell and Stella Browne were left with "hints" and a "tinge" (p. 32) of eugenics in their respective politics.

The deeper difficulty, that Brooke only partly confronts, is that the sexual reforms of the twentieth century are not easily contained in any party-based account, and the book's relentless focus on Labour – to the neglect even of other movements on the left – "the much vaunted New Left" is dismissed brusquely (p. 152) – is ultimately self-defeating. As we move through the twentieth century, it is increasingly clear that Labour, especially at a national level, was too often trailing extra-parliamentary and non-party movements in feminism and gay liberation. None of which is to deny that British politics without the Labour Party would have been a less sexually progressive place. That is a tale that needed telling and if Brooke is guilty of "bending the stick" – or, less pejoratively, neglecting some of the broader context – he has, nonetheless, done so in a manner that suggests future histories of the Labour Party will need to find more space for a consideration of sexual politics.

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"Throughout the twentieth century, domestic service had a compelling presence in British economic, social, and cultural life" (p. 1). This is the starting point of Lucy Delap's book.