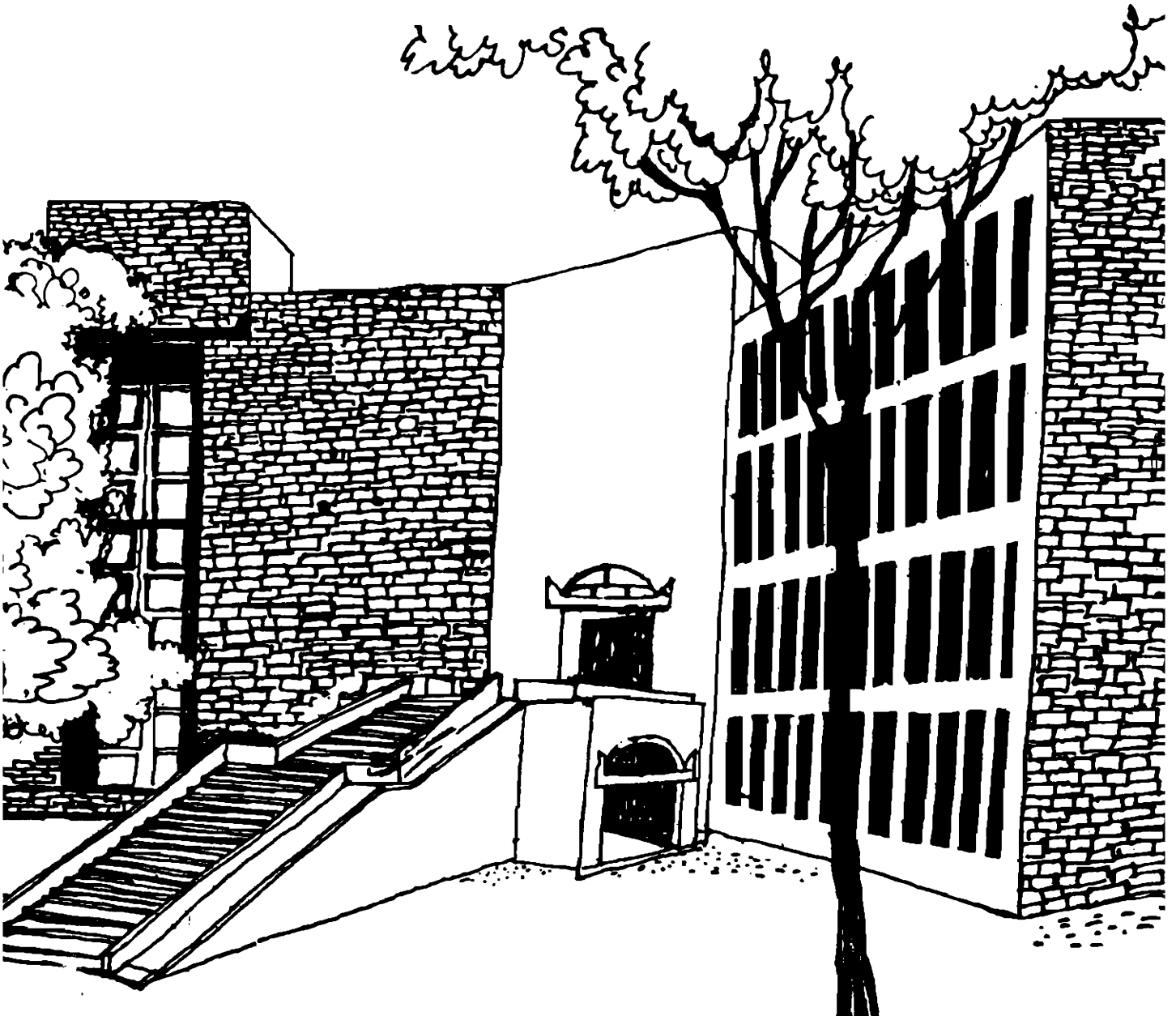




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Working Paper



**THE CONQUEST OF SELF?
INTIMACY AND THE OVERCOMING OF BOUNDARIES**

By

Ananta Giri

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THE CONQUEST OF SELF?

INTIMACY AND THE OVERCOMING OF BOUNDARIES

Ananta Giri

Sexuality and reproduction in the past structured one another... when directly bound up with reproduction, sexuality was a medium of transcendence. Sexual activity forged a tie with the finitude of the individual, and at the same time carried the promise of its irrelevance; for seen in relation to a cycle of generations the individual life was part of a more embracing symbolic order. Sexuality for us still carries an echo of the transcendent. Yet given that such is the case, it is bound to be surrounded with an aura of nostalgia and civilization. A sexually addicted civilization is one where death has become stripped of meaning; life politics at this point implies a renewal of spirituality.

- Anthony Giddens,
The Transformation of Intimacy ¹

Human Society is a ceaseless growth, an unfoldment in terms of spirituality. If so, it must be based on ever increasing demand upon the restraint of the flesh... Above all a life of restraint presupposes an intense loving desire for reunion with God.

-M.K. Gandhi
Conquest of self ²

A closed government is bounded in a way that the self is supposed to be bounded and undisclosed in the individualist model of unethical freedom that permits us to victimize, appropriating and acquiring power of wealth behind our boundaries, without disclosing and assuming relational responsibility....

-Michael Ryan,
*Politics and Culture:
Working Hypotheses for a Post-Revolutionary Society* ³

I

Commenting upon the sexual revolution taking place in American Society, Pritrim Sorokin had written in 1956: "Since the 'marriage-family' school increasingly fails to graduate well-

adjusted individuals and since there seems to be no other agency which can better discharge this task, the nation and mankind at large is bound to be made up more and more of individuals less and less capable of getting along with others... Charity or love begins at home, at the cradle of the helpless baby. If there is no baby, no cradle, there can be no loving and caring parents" ⁴

Anthony Giddens' *The Transformation of Intimacy*, which comments upon the same American condition but in its later phase of development, provides us not only a different--an affirmative--answer to the nagging doubts Sorokin had raised but also a different meaning of the elementary terms of conversation such as home, family and marriage. Giddens shows in this engaging book how changes taking place in the realm of intimate relations in American society in particular and Western societies in general have broken as--under the supposed teleological unity among sexuality, marriage and reproduction. Recent developments in sexual relations, for Giddens, show that it is possible to get along with each other in companionate marriage, while fighting with each other in heterosexual marriages, and nurture each other without having the need of the opposite sex and having a child as a medium.

Basing upon the ethnographic observation of men and women, boys and girls, carried out by researchers such as Lilien Rubin and others, Giddens argues: "Hetero-sexual marriage superficially appears to retain its central position in the

social order, making the prior discussion of lesbian relationships at best rather marginal. In reality, it has been largely undermined by the rise of the pure relationship and plastic sexuality".⁵ For Giddens, "Plastic sexuality is decentered sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction... it frees sexuality from the rule of the phallus, from the overwhelming importance of male sexual experience."⁶ This is manifested in gay, lesbian as well as in heterosexual relation where sexuality is an act of intimacy in itself and is not tied to reproduction and is not servant of an imposing long-term commitment. It goes hand in hand with the rise of "pure relationships" in the realm of sexual intimacy where one enters inside a relationship as an autonomous and free individual, without any constraint. Pure relationship does not presuppose sexual purity--in fact it considers this as a liability--and is capable of accommodating multiple sexual relationships. Giddens calls this episodic sexuality. In the words of Giddens:

A pure relationship has nothing to do with sexual purity, and is a limiting concept rather than only a descriptive one. It refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another, and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it. Love used to be tied to sexuality through marriage, but now these are connected more and more via the pure relationship... The pure relationship, to repeat, is part of a generic restructuring of intimacy. It emerges in other contexts of sexuality besides heterosexual marriage, it is in some casually related ways parallel to the development of plastic sexuality.⁷

Episodic sexuality earlier was the preserve of the males. Giddens argues that recent developments in the sphere of intimate

relations show that girls have reconquered this exclusive male privilege. In fact, the significance of Giddens' present work lies in bringing to the core of the discussion the sexual experiments of the girls in the recent times. The bad/good girl distinction is not total any longer and girls feel that "they have an entitlement to engage in sexual activity, including sexual intercourse, at whatever age seems appropriate to them". Girls' now don't have "to fight to achieve sexual freedom: such freedom exists, and the problem is to make something of it in the face of male attitudes which still carry more than an echo of the past. The girls therefore emerge as the main social experimenters."⁸

But when girls pursue sexual experimentation it is no longer a reiteration of the earlier male "romantic love" but it is a pursuit of what Giddens calls "confluent love." While "in romantic love attachments, the element of sublime love tends to predominate over sexual ardor,"⁹ confluent love is contingent in which a person's sexuality... "has to be negotiated as part of a relationship."¹⁰

For Giddens, in the transformation of intimacy underway in Europe and North America, both lesbian and gay-relationships are examples of reflexive sexuality--"Sexuality as a quality or property of the self".¹¹ But in this transformation of intimacy there has been transmutation of the biological categories of male

and female, including the transmutation of phallus into "mere penis."¹² While this transmutation has made sexuality "torn between assertive sexual dependence, including the use of violence, on the one hand, and constant anxieties about potency on the other"¹³ on the part of women it has certainly led to liberation. According to Giddens, "Women can now see men, at least on a cognitive level, as just as much a functionless appendage as the male sexual organ itself."¹⁴

II

Giddens describes for us both the limits and possibilities in the rise of such plastic sexuality. The limits are mainly the problems of compulsive sexuality and pathological co-dependency. With the public legitimation of lesbian relationships and sexual freedom the sexual addiction of girls has come to the fore. But Giddens offers a normative criticism of sexual addiction, whether it is in the male or in the female, by arguing that it is a "defensive reaction" and a "negative index of the degree to which the reflexive project of the self moves to center-stage of late modernity."¹⁵ Sexual addiction is a form of "compulsive behaviour" where the "integrity of the self as a whole is menaced"¹⁶. The same problem of "reverse reflexivity" is also at work in the rise of co-dependency in the field of emergent plastic sexuality. A codependent is someone who is dependent upon another person for his or her definition and "cannot feel self-confident without being devoted to the needs of others."¹⁷ "Lack

of self esteem," primarily because of abusive parentage, is a primary reason for co-dependency and therefore co dependent persons are advised to "heal the child within." 18 .

The promise in contemporary changes in intimate relations lies in the germs of a non-repressive society that it carries with itself. It is also a harbinger of a companionate marriage where marriage is used as a home base by both partners who have "only a slight emotional investment" with each other. 19 The rise of free and non-coercive engagement in sexuality is an index of "revolutionary processes, already underway in the infrastructure of personal life," which presses for "psychic as well as well as social change." 20 Transformation of intimacy carries with it the promise of a "democratic personal order" not only in the area of sexuality but also in those of parent child relations, and other forms of kinship and friendship. 21 According to Giddens, "the prohibition of violence" and "avoidance of emotional abuse" are continuing challenges that current transformation has to face.

Though Giddens locates the transformation in intimacy in social and cultural transformations taking place in the recent past he does not agree with the Foucauldian account of the history of modern sexuality. For Giddens, contra-Foucault, modern preoccupation with sex has not been set by the regime of power and its origins are not merely institutional, rather its origin lies in the reflexive project of the self--a project helped by

changes in reproductive technologies no doubt, but is not exhausted by these. Contra-Foucault, Giddens argues that to explain changes in sexuality "we have to move away from an overwhelming emphasis on discourse"²² For Giddens, "...sexuality has the importance for us today that it does, not because of its significance for the control systems of modernity, but because it is a point of connection between two other processes: the sequestration of experience and transformation of intimacy."²³

III

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Giddens traces the emergence of an "ethical framework for the fostering of non-destructive emotion" in individual and communal" life in the non-coercive intimate sexual relations underway in our times.²⁴ Such intimate relations provide for the "possibilities of a revitalizing of the erotic" through mutuality rather than through unequal power.²⁵ Giddens has also brought the autonomy of individual action to the center of intimacy but he leaves unanswered the question of negotiation between autonomy and mutuality. In his quick characterization of all codependent relations as pathological Giddens argues that "defining personal boundaries is regarded as fundamental for a nonaddictive relationship."²⁶ For Giddens boundaries "counter the effect of projective identification."²⁷ But without the overcoming of boundaries is real love, for that matter any love, possible? Giddens privileges personal boundaries, thus unknowingly

reiterating the vocabulary of possessive individualism which is in urgent need of transformation today.²⁸ Therefore, he can uncritically accept the current therapeutic labelling of codependency as pathological. If codependency also means being dependent on the other and giving unconditional love to a partner despite felt abuses, then why should it be viewed as pathological? If the task of sociological engagement is also to subject the dominant style of thinking to a critical scrutiny by bringing different accounts of non-institutional styles of self-reflexion then is it not important for Giddens, who is interested in reflexive mobilization of self, to explore different alternatives possible within a labelled type. After all, what is the meaning of self-confidence when one is part of a relationship? This exploration would help us raise further questions to the contemporary discourse rather than just celebrate it, such as: Is it is also not a challenge for pure relationship to erase the distinction between self and non-self?²⁹ With a view of intimacy based upon inviolable boundaries and self-confidence how do we come to terms with our centuries old wisdom that love makes us vulnerable rather than powerful?

In his account of transformations of intimacy Giddens himself points out the contradictions in pure relationship. He shows us the tension existing even in lesbian relationship because of promiscuity and the use of violence in such relationships. Therefore on the part of women lesbian sexuality

can at best be looked upon as a step towards more democratic sex but it can not be treated as an end in itself. Giddens himself speaks of the "return of the phallus" in some of the sexual activities lesbians are engaged in such as hair pulling and beating. Here along with the challenge of overcoming of boundaries the real challenge is also one of overcoming one's ego. Children, females, males--all have egos, and the distortions ego can bring to the work of a "pure relationship" are enormous. Though modern feminist scholarship has looked at the problem of gender at the conjunction of race and class it has also by and large left the problem of ego untouched.³⁰ But in my view, whether we speak of intimacy or democracy or intimacy as democracy, the next battles are to be fought vis-a-vis the problem of ego. Overcoming one's egoistic boundaries can certainly constitute an arena of "life politics," which is concerned with generativity rather than distributive power, in Giddens' sense.³¹

Giddens looks at the transformation of intimacy as an instance of both institutional reflexivity and self-reflexivity. But though Giddens is very good in showing the reflexivity of the self vis-a-vis modern institutions he does not provide the account of reflexivity of the self vis-a-vis itself. What is the nature of the self and what place intimacy and sexuality have got in its total scheme of things--its scheme of being and becoming? How does a sexual engagement relate to the seeking of meaning of

the self in other engagements? At what point sexuality itself becomes an addiction to be distanced from in the meditation of the self? The meditation of self, according to Charles Taylor, involves discovering and realizing a "set of qualitative distinctions."³² Recently even political scientists have begun speaking of higher desire and lower desire--the "inner conflict between what the individuals themselves experience as their more desirable and less desirable desires."³³ I am not presupposing that sexual engagement is an instance of lower desire but does a reflexive mobilization of self come to term with such questions at all at any point? Writing of sexual over-indulgence Sorokin had argued: " .. over-indulgence of sex urge tends to undermine the physical and mental health and vitality of the individual, destroys his sense of morality, diminishes his creative energy?"³⁴ One can certainly disagree with Sorokin's assertion but does a reflexive self at all confront such questions in its sojourn? Does a reflexive self totally discount what Sorokin calls "the possibility of transmuting an unsatisfied sexual drive into a form of creative achievement"³⁵ These questions inevitably bring us to the issue of nature of the self--its sources, and its manifold aspirations. Though Giddens had told us in his *Constitution of Society*³⁶ that he is more interested in questions of ontology than epistemology he really doesn't probe deeply into ontological questions such as the nature of self and culture.³⁷ Without a deeper reflection on the nature of the self it is no wonder that Giddens can only work with the visible

boundaries of the self.

Of many contradictions in pure relationship that Giddens talks of what is conspicuous by its absence is the question of purity of action and intention in a relationship. Giddens says that pure relationship can accommodate multiple episodic sexual encounters. But Giddens himself says that such multiple sexual encounters bring tensions to a relationship. A processual analysis of resolution of such tensions would have made Giddens grapple with the question of purity of action and intention of actors rather than dismiss it as a non-issue. Giddens says that confluent love can revive the "aesthetic qualities" of actors as participants of sexual activity.³⁸ But does this aesthetic experience not have at least the potential to make actors reflexive about "eroticism as cultivation of feeling, expressed through bodily sensation"³⁹ and use it as basis for a transcendent spiritual realization? In other words does not sexual pleasure, beginning with the denudation of body, in its aesthetic turn end with its cultural and spiritual adornment?⁴⁰ Do these moments of aesthetic realization not initiate a process of reflection within actors to purify their instruments of pleasure? If the kind of changes that Giddens is describing is at best a step to future then the issue of purification of intention and action cannot be dismissed totally. By speaking of purification here I am not asserting the value of sexual chastity but I am raising the reflexive question of purity of purpose,

commitment, and attention to a relationship of intimacy. I have also in mind the kind of issues Sri Aurobindo raises when he writes "...we must suppose that there is a divine desire other than the vital craving, a God-desire of which this other and lower phenomenon is an obscure shadow and into which this has to be transfigured" ⁴¹

The delinking of sexuality from reproduction is probably the most important feature of the transformation of intimacy that Giddens talks about. Giddens makes a reference to contraception and other reproductive technologies in this regard. Giddens looks at this delinking in the context of technological changes as well as of shifting mentalities. But Giddens takes for granted the non-contentious articulation of this delinking as offered by the dominant discourse. In the American heartland itself a serious ideological battle has been going on around the issue of abortion where the participants are not only those pleasure-seeking women who celebrate the freedom of sexuality from reproduction. Women in pro-life movements, for instance, have consistently questioned the delinking of sexuality from reproduction. In fact, they have offered a cultural critique of such delinking. Faye Ginsburg's engaging ethnography of the abortion debate presents the voices of some such critics of contemporary culture of sexuality. ⁴² Ginsburg writes about the vision that animates pro-life women in the American community that she studied.

Pro-life activist, on the other hand, [compared to the pro-

choice activists accept differences, but not necessarily hierarchy, in the social and biological roles of men and women. Their reform efforts are directed toward creating and promoting a social and political context that they feel will protect and enhance one essential condition that, in general, distinguishes men from women pregnancy and motherhood. In their view, social changes that could be interpreted as casting reproduction and childbearing are anti-woman. Abortion is thus a condensed symbol for the devaluation of motherhood and the central attribute assigned to it in this culture—the self-sacrificing nurturance of dependents.⁴³

Ginsburg also tells us how, in their fight against abortion, pro-life activists are fighting against the forces of "materialism and narcissism" that are "displacing the nurturant ties of kin and community" and to "reform the more dehumanizing aspects of contemporary capitalist culture."⁴⁴ They strive to control destructive male sexuality and transform "raw masculinity" into a nurturant power. They associate abortion with the profit making motive and liken abortion clinics to "7-11" convenience stores⁴⁵. In their attacks against abortion, they are not only concerned with women and womanliness, gender and sexuality but also with the "self-production of society,"⁴⁶ and the reproduction of American culture as a whole. In the right to life view, abortion comes to signify "not only a withdrawal of unconditional, self-sacrificing nurturance, but the devaluation of culture itself."⁴⁷

The above account of Ginsburg shows that there are still many women in American culture who value motherhood and would like to take responsibility for the fetus that is born of sexual relation.⁴⁸ In his earlier work on modernity and self-identity

Giddens had told us that reflexive mobilization of the self, which is not an extension of the control systems of modernity, takes place primarily, though not exclusively, in the field of contemporary social and cultural movements. If Giddens had brought some related social movements such as the pro-life movement into the orbit of discussion he would have encountered a more differentiated ideological landscape, where his uncritically accepted thesis of the delinking of sexuality from reproduction is itself subject to intense ideological criticism.

It is of course true that the predominant role of a woman in American Western culture is wife. Therefore man-woman relationship is thought of predominately through the model of husband-wife or through some model of sexual partnership. Though such cultural alternatives as conceptualization of another woman as mother and sister don't exist seriously in American culture, in comparison to a culture such as Indian, what about other alternative conceptualizations of a woman such as that of a friend? Are all friends sexually engaged? Can one be intimate without being sexually related? Even if sexually related, then does touch from sexual intercourse carry the same meaning for the actors and interpreters?

These are some of the questions that are missing in Giddens account. In another context Giddens had written: "All social research presumes ethnography."⁴⁹ In his study Giddens has based upon the so-called ethnographies of others but now it is high

time that Giddens, the sociologist, becomes a critical and cross-culturally sensitive ethnographer for tackling the questions such as the above ones which logically emerge from his own account.

Of course the genius of Giddens lies in elevating sociological analysis to a level of normative criticism, which is evident from his critique of sexual addiction. I am sure Giddens would be open to the possibility of taking such normative criticism to still greater heights and state along with Robert Bellah and his colleagues: "Attending means to concern ourselves with larger meaning of things in the longer run, rather than with short-term pay offs. The pursuit of immediate pleasure, or the promise of immediate pleasure, is the essence of distraction. A good society is one in which attention takes precedence over distraction."⁵⁰ Bellah et al. state unambiguously that they use "attention normatively in the sense of 'mindfulness', as the Buddhists put it, or openness to the leadings of God, as the Quakers say"⁵¹ Thus religion and spirituality are important horizons here. In his own account Giddens many times refers to the manifold relationship between religion and the emergent plastic sexuality. In fact one of the concluding lines in his book speak of "renewal of spirituality" Therefore to ask such questions as can sexuality be a source and field of "renewal of spirituality" would not be unfair to Giddens. But to come to terms with these Giddens would have to meditate on the frontiers of spirituality at the present juncture. From *The Class Structure*

in *Advanced Societies*⁵² to *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Giddens' career has been a quest of remarkable creativity and continuous transgression of boundaries. The next thing we can expect from this remarkable interpreter of our times is a work on spirituality, which is in fact long overdue given his preoccupation with what he himself calls the "transformative capacity of the actors."⁵³ But for this Giddens would have to be not only an ethnographer but a spiritual seeker questioning not only the "post-metaphysical thinking"⁵⁴ of the time but also going beyond the rational foundation of modern European philosophy.

Notes:

1. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p.203.
2. M.K. Gandhi, *Conquest of Self* (Bombay: Thacker & Co., 1946), p.23, p.21.
3. Michael Ryan, *Politics and Culture: Working Hypotheses for a Post-Revolutionary Society*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p.225
4. Priritim A. Sorokin, *The American Sex Revolution* (Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1956), p.11,p.12.
5. Giddens (op. cit., 1992), p. 154.
6. Ibid., p.2
7. Ibid, p.58.
8. Ibid., p.10
9. Ibid., p.51
10. Ibid., p.40

11. Ibid., p.63
12. Ibid., p.14
13. Ibid., p.118
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p.153
16. Ibid., p.76
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p.89
19. Ibid., p.99
20. Ibid., p.155
21. Ibid., p.182
22. Ibid., p.188
23. Ibid., p.25
24. Ibid., p.180
25. Ibid., p.202
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p.94
28. Please see, Robert N. Bellah et al, *The Good Society* (NY:Alfred A. Knof, 1991); Fred Dallmayr, *The Twilight of Subjectivity: Contributions Towards a Post-Individualist Theory of Politics* (Amherst, 1981); Roberto M. Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (Cambridge, 1987); and Michael R.Wood & Louis R Zurcher, *The Development of a Postmodern Self* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1988).
29. Please see, G.C. Pande, *The Meaning and Process of Culture as Philosophy of History*, Allahabad, 1989
30. For an interesting critique of feminism which suggests a similar line of inquiry please see, Mira Marody, "Why I Not a Feminist," *Social Research* 60(4):853-864, 1994

31. See, Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Polity Press, 1991.
32. Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989)
33. Clause Offe and Ulrich K. Preuss, "Democratic Institutions and Moral Resources," in David Held, (ed.), *Political Theory Today* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 143-171, p. 170.
34. Sorokin (op. cit, 1956), p.56
35. Ibid, p.72
36. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge, 1984)
37. For such an ontological inquiry, see G.C. Pande, "The Nature of Social Categories," in Ravinder Kumar, (ed.), *Philosophical Theory and Social Reality*. Delhi: Allied Publishers.
38. Giddens (op. cit, 1992), p.202.
39. Ibid
40. I owe this thought to my reading of Chitta Ranjan Das's interpretative essay on the aesthetic theory of Sri Aurobindo. Please see, Chitta Ranjan Das, "Nandanatattya Baratiya Bidyan: Sri Aurobindo," in Labanya Nayak et al. (eds). *Nandana Tattwa* (Cuttack: Institute of Oriya Studies, 1985), pp.86-92.
41. Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1950), p. 632.
42. Faye D. Gundburg, *Contested Lives: Abortion Debate in an American Community* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).
43. Ibid, P.7.
44. Ibid, p. 9.
45. Ibid, p. 5.
46. Ananta Giri, "Narratives of Creative Transformation: Constituting critical movements in contemporary American culture," *Dialectical Anthropology* 14:331-343, 1989.

47. Ginsburg (op.cit., 1989), p.109.
48. Here we also cannot forget the practice of surrogate motherhood and its implication for the narrative of plastic sexuality that Gidden speaks of.
49. Anthony Giddens, "Structuration Theory: Past, Present and Future," in C G A Bryant and D Jarry, (eds.), *Giddens' Theory of Structuration: A Critical Appreciation* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.219.
50. Robert N. Bellah et al. (op. cit., 1991), p. 273.
51. Ibid, p.256
52. Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of Advanced Societies* (NY: Harper & row, 1975).
53. Anthony Giddens, (op. cit., 1984).
54. Jurgen Habermas, *Post Metaphysical Thinking*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993)

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