CHAPTER 1

Imperialism and Inversion

As we have seen, human beings organised their sexual lives for millennia, and as recently as the mid-nineteenth century, without distinguishing between ‘heterosexuals’ and ‘homosexuals’. This hetero/homo binary took clear shape only in a specific regime of capitalist accumulation, classical imperialism, towards the end of the nineteenth century. This was an indirect result of major changes in capitalism, which over time led to a shift to a very different same-sex formation, following and in interaction with a long recessive wave in capitalist development. Systemic responses to the long depression included imperial expansion, the rise of pseudo-scientific racism, the invention of a working-class family wage, the celebration of heterosexual romance, the first wave of feminism, and the medicalisation of sexuality. Even once homosexuals emerged as a distinct category of people, they were often perceived in a way that defined them as gender and sexual ‘inverts’, as much like present-day transgendered people as like present-day lesbians and gays. The same-sex regime of this period can thus be characterised as ‘invert-dominant’.

The invert-dominant regime also took hold in regions of Latin America and Asia that were incorporated into global capitalism but not directly colonised. Intensifying European colonialism involved the suppression of many indigenous same-sex forms in Africa and Asia, while European sex tourism helped spread the new European forms of homosexuality. But the combined and uneven social construction of sexuality produced different same-sex patterns in different areas of the global sexual order. South African mining areas and the colonised Arab region developed distinctive patterns (‘outliers’) less subject to the emerging hetero/homo binary. Growing European repression of homosexuality provided the impetus for the first homosexual rights movements, allied in Germany with the socialist movement and reflected in the pioneering sexual reforms of the Russian Revolution. The rise of Nazism and Stalinism led to sexual reaction, however, which was mirrored even in imperialist democracies through the 1950s. Some elements of the invert-dominant regime, particularly its enmeshment with rising inequality, racism and empire, prefigured today’s gay normality; other elements were vastly different.

As the new regime took shape in Europe and North America in the later decades of the nineteenth century, the scope for romantic friendships between men and between women that had existed in the mid-nineteenth century narrowed. A phenomenon like the earlier eroticisation of Native American men by
white men in the US West became almost inconceivable. Growing repression and stigmatisation became central to the sexual order of classical imperialism.

Crisis and Restructuring

The two decades following 1873, like the years after 2008, were a time of prolonged economic slump around the capitalist world. This did not mean then, any more than it does now, that there was no economic expansion anywhere. Rather, as economist Alfred Marshall put it in 1888, there was a prolonged ‘depression of prices, a depression of interest, and a depression of profits’.¹ A depression of profits posed a threat to the entire mechanism of capital accumulation, which is vital to the functioning of the system as a whole. Overcoming this challenge required a drastic restructuring of the world economy. When profitability and more rapid accumulation were restored in the 1890s, it was on the basis of a different economic regime. To this economic regime corresponded, eventually, a new sexual regime, one whose organising concepts were for the first time (though in a somewhat different sense from today) ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality’.

The restructuring of capitalism involved, among other things, a concentration and centralisation of capital that restricted the scope of competition: a process widely confirmed by economists otherwise critical of Marx.² Large corporations ‘owned by shareholders, employing hired managers and executives, began to replace real persons and their families owning and managing their own enterprises’. These corporations combined further into trusts and cartels, often put together by financiers based in banks and brokerages, meant to bridle competition and maintain profit margins. At the workplace level, Taylorism or ‘scientific management’ was increasingly used to extract higher production from fewer workers in less time, increasing the direct control of capital and decreasing the autonomy of labour.³ Capital relied less on families to discipline its workforce, and more on an emerging managerial layer and the repressive and organising power of the expanding state.

At the global level, pressure from capital was instrumental in this period in spurring Western European states and the US to colonial expansion. Notably from the 1870s to 1915, almost all of Africa, the entire Pacific region and the remaining Spanish possessions were gobbled up or re-divided among the

¹ Hobsbawm 1987, p. 36.
² Hobsbawm 1994, p. 103.