

Alex Comfort's Joy of Sex was Matched by His Joy of Anarchism

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a review of

Polymath: The Life and Professions of Dr. Alex Comfort, Author of 'The Joy Of Sex' by Eric Laursen. AK Press 2023

"We are the enemies of society and we must learn disobedience. Then we shall probably inherit the earth by default when the maniacs have burnt each other to a cinder. We shall be alive; they won't."

—Alex Comfort, *The Power House* (1945)

Eric Laursen's new book, *Polymath*, presents the story of Alex Comfort, a 20th century British anarchist who deserves to be better known. He was the author of the 1970s best-selling *The Joy of Sex*, but that was only a relatively small part of his life activities.

Laursen tells us early on that "His friends habitually described Comfort as a polymath, commonly defined as one whose knowledge embraces a wide range of complex subjects and...often calls on several of them at once to address complex problems." Hence, the title of the book.

Comfort was a familiar figure in the British anarchist milieu, contributing articles, books and talks, from the late 1930s until his death in 2000. He helped to develop and disseminate positions on many concerns and issues still important today, such as how to understand and fight against authoritarian domination of society, the plague of social alienation, modern difficulties of sexuality and human bonding, and how humans might be able to reconnect with other creatures and the environment.

Over the years, while pursuing a medical career, Comfort wrote many articles and more than fifty books, including novels, plays and poetry, some for the general public and some for professional scientists. He addressed topics such as physical and mental health, aging, biology, eastern religions, modern culture, art and social responsibility. He considered them all to be part of his project of understanding human beings from an anarchistic perspective.

Laursen's book is well researched and written in a clear, non-academic style, bringing together many aspects of Comfort's personal, social, political and professional lives. It also offers glimpses into how others related to him and his work during his lifetime.

Born in 1920, by the time he reached adulthood Comfort had become a resolute anti-militarist, peace activist and anarchist, collaborating with others in the London Freedom group, publishing both articles and books with them from the mid-1930s on, for the rest of his life.

In the 1930s and '40s, Comfort joined Marie-Louise Berneri, Vernon Richards and others, writing and speaking to rally support for those actively opposing dictatorial rule in Spain, Germany, France and elsewhere. He considered such struggles to be exemplary models of popular resistance to authoritarianism.

During World War II, he publicly denounced autocratic and inhumane conduct of governments on both sides, while urging strong support for those involved in underground activities opposing brutal regimes, such as the French resistance to German military occupation and the Nazi puppet Vichy government.

Even after the war, Comfort supported armed resistance to tyranny as necessary for human dignity, while rejecting elitist projects for “coercive revolution” through seizures of power by self-declared vanguards—leftist, centrist or rightist.

He recognized that such vanguards continually demonstrated their inability to create enduring bases for socially just societies. No matter how sincere and well meaning, they always ended up using the “tide of popular courage” that had carried them to power for consolidating their positions of privilege.

For Comfort and many other anarchists, resisting this vicious circle also required protesting against the increasing dominance of militarism and government regulation of daily life in Britain and other countries which claimed to be democratic and free societies.

One big question was, why did all too many people fail to resist tyranny?

Some anarchists explored the writings of Wilhelm Reich, who combined his mentor Sigmund Freud’s ideas about the subconscious and Marxist ideas about class and revolution. Reich asserted that Freud was wrong in his belief that sexual inhibitions were necessary for the stability of civilization and were an essential part of individual maturity.

For Reich it was the suppression of vital sexual energies that led to the creation of authoritarian character structures, the desire to submit to autocratic leaders and the inability to resist economic enslavement. He believed that enabling adults and children to experience free sexual expression was vital for the emergence of autonomous actors capable of fulfilling Marx’s expectations of workers’ revolutionary potential to rebel.

Based on his knowledge of medical studies and his own observations as a doctor, Comfort felt that Reich was wrong about the causes and effects of sexual suppression. For Comfort, economic enslavement and related forms of oppression were the cause, not the effect, of sexual problems.

In countries under capitalism and so-called communism alike, Comfort asserted, the centralized and bureaucratic structure of the modern state offered opportunities for people with anti-social characters to come to power and then to encourage and even glamorize their socially divisive criminal behavior.

At the same time, both individual and group resistance were becoming ever more imperative. In 1950, he brought together his ideas about the corrupt nature of modern society in *Authority and Delinquency in the Modern State: A Criminological Approach to the Problem of Power*.

From the 1940s on, Comfort was among those writing and speaking out for greater sexual freedom, better and more frank sex education, and an end to the legal persecution of sexual minorities.

Over time, he saw hopeful social trends emerging. In eastern Europe, subversion and outright rebellions challenged Communist power. In the so-called democracies, many people were excited by the defiance against established authority exhibited by the civil rights and anti-war movements, as well as an anarchistic counter-culture, combining the personal and the social, cultivating habits of individual resistance to injustice, and engaging in ongoing mutual aid.

Comfort was also experiencing significant changes in his personal life. He married Ruth Harris in 1943. The relationship seemed to have been generally peaceful, but not strongly passionate. Around 1960, he began a physically and emotionally intense relationship with Jane Henderson, a longtime friend. Comfort said later that he hadn’t had any sexual affairs before this because he was too busy with other activities that interested him. Henderson had never married, nor had much sexual experience before.

Their relationship became a sort of scientific exploration for Comfort. He and Henderson looked at classical Indian, Chinese, and Italian Renaissance manuals, and experimented with different positions and occasional fantasies, recording them in a notebook they entitled “Our ABC, by John and Jane Thomas.” They also took pictures of themselves in action.

In the early 1970s, Comfort decided to write a book for the general public based on the couple’s recorded experiences in combination with medical knowledge about sexual functioning. The resulting book, *The Joy of Sex: A Gourmet Guide to Lovemaking* was a detailed, explicitly, but not pornographically illustrated sex manual that could appeal to a respectable couple.

Medically accurate, sensible and entertaining sex advice, such as Eugene Schoenfeld’s “Dr. HIPpocrates” column, appeared in alternative papers, including the *Fifth Estate* and the *Berkeley Barb*, for several years beginning in 1967.

[Online archive versions of HIPpocrates are available at https://www.fifthestate.org/fe_author/eugene-schoenfeld/]

Some of the ideas in *The Joy of Sex* were less progressive than those expressed in counter-culture publications at the time. For example, many were definitely male centered, such as Comfort's contention that the missionary position (with the man on top) should be the fallback for any couple enjoying high-quality sex.

But, *The Joy of Sex* was marketed to audiences beyond the counter-culture, and millions of copies were sold. It had some definite limitations, many of which Laursen discusses. Nevertheless, the book helped to popularize sex-affirming attitudes of the era, even as economic and political repression shrank the numbers of alternative publications.

Comfort became unhappy that *The Joy of Sex* received much more attention than any of his other writings, which he considered much more important. But it turned out to be the book that secured him financially, so he ended up spending time promoting it and putting together other books and even films developing themes related to it.

In this short review it is not possible to adequately discuss all of the topics covered in this multifaceted book. But Laursen's biography makes it clear that there was a lot more to Alex Comfort than *The Joy of Sex*. Importantly, it encourages exploration of how anarchists can survive in the current world while holding on to a strong commitment to resisting unjust authority.

Rui Preti is a longtime friend of the Fifth Estate and a great believer in the value of continuous questioning.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/414-fall-2023/alex-comforts-joy-of-sex-was-matched-by-his-joy-o>
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