Igor Kon is a member of the Russian Academy of Education and Chief Researcher at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow. He has been a visiting scholar at Cornell University, Harvard University, Wellesley College, and the University of Southern California, and has lectured in academic institutions in many cities worldwide, inter alia, London, Paris, Rome, Tel Aviv, Prague, Beijing, Stockholm, Toronto, Berlin, Budapest, Vienna, and Las Vegas.

Professor Kon was born in 1928 in Leningrad and went on to earn three doctorates in philosophy and history. He has authored 34 books and edited 20 others, including *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today* (New York: Free Press, 1995). His books on sexology (*Introduction to Sexology*, 1988, and *Tasting the Forbidden Fruit*, 1992) have been translated into many languages.

They have sold hundreds of thousands of copies in the former Soviet Union where he has become the leading expert on sexuality and adolescent psychology, and is often invited on television and radio as an expert on these topics. His current book, written for a Russian audience, deals with homosexuality and its history.

**Peter Nardi:** In your book, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, you talk about a form of ‘repressive sexophobia’ that has existed in Russia and how the fear of sex is often used to control deviance and people through psychiatry and other policies. Maybe you can say a little bit about what ‘repressive sexophobia’ is and what is going on in Russia today.

**Igor Kon:** Today there is no longer repression, sexuality is accepted, but in my book the task was really to understand how sexophobia was possible and how it was unique in the 20th century. I was interested in how it came about socially and politically. It was part of the totalitarian control over personality and individuality. But that was not enough to explain it because the East German regime was much more repressive for the last years than
the Soviet regime, but nevertheless they had no sexophobia because it was incompatible with German sexual culture. So the task was to understand its historical roots.

Today there is a freedom, but it is a ‘freedom from’ – from control, from obligations, anything. We have a lot of pornography, but we have no sex education, and no sex research because there is no money and no qualified people. And so what I am doing now is organizing some research.

**PN:** What is your research and what are you finding about Russian sexuality today?


In 1993, my colleagues and I conducted the first professional survey ever done in Russia of adolescent sexuality with 1615 Moscow and St Petersburg teenagers. A grant from the MacArthur Foundation allowed us in 1995 to do a follow-up with 2800 teenagers, aged 16 to 19, so we can assess the changes in sexual behavior and attitudes in the 2 years.

In the 1995 survey we also asked some delicate questions that were never asked before: about homosexuality and masturbation. There was a neutral question – ‘when did you have a masturbation experience for the first time?’. Everybody in Russia knows that most of the boys have it, but only 30 percent of boys confessed that they ever had masturbatory experience. Behaviorally, it’s a lie but it shows a high degree of anxiety about masturbation. And no wonder: there is now a massive campaign in Russian mass media that masturbation leads to impotence, loss of memory, insanity, and early death. Girls are more open about their experiences. Just the same was found for homosexual experiences: the figures in this case are more or less the same as in the US. And the girls were more tolerant than the boys.

Also, we found that there are absolutely two different subcultures, the boys and the girls from normal [sic] high schools and those from technical and professional schools. The socially underprivileged kids in technical schools have much more sexual activity and this is explained by their background.

**PN:** What were some of the other major changes you found between 1993 and 1995?

**IK:** It seems that we have now a sexual revolution similar to that of the late 1960s in the west. In Russia, change is going very fast. Adolescent
sexuality is strongly related to social class and is often violent and aggressive. Unprotected early sexual activity has serious moral and epidemiological consequences. About 10 percent of teenage girls experienced their sexual initiation with some degree of force. No more than 5 to 7 percent of rape is formally registered and even these cases are often ignored.

Thanks to the efforts of medical authorities, in the last 2 years the contraceptive situation is somewhat improved. According to official figures, in 1990 women aged 15 to 49 were having 114 abortions per 1000 women; in 1992, the number was 98; and in 1995, 74. Nevertheless the abortion rate is still one of the highest in the world. Because of the general economic decline of the country, all other health indicators, including infant and mother mortality, are deteriorating. The growth of all sexually transmitted diseases reached really dangerous proportions. The number of syphilis-infected people younger than 19 has increased in the last 5 years more than 30 times and the country is on the verge of a real AIDS epidemic.

People of all ages complain about inadequate sexual knowledge. Intergenerational taboos on sexual information exchange in Russian families are very strong. Parents are shy to discuss these matters with their kids. Only 13 percent have ever talked with their children about sexual matters. But there is a lot of soft porn and cheap erotica, but no scientific educational programs.

**PN: What is being done about this?**

**IK:** The main issue is sex education. It was included in the president’s program of planned parenthood and done by the Russian Planned Parenthood Association (RPPA). Yet most important would be to do something in the schools. In all national public opinion polls since 1989, the majority of adults – from 60 to 90 percent – strongly support the idea of systematic school sex education. But there is also a strong conservative and clerical reaction. Clericalism is the most dangerous political threat to Russian democracy.

In early 1997, the global attack on sexual culture – including the issues of women’s reproductive rights, sexual erotic culture, and sexual education – is undertaken by the communists, extreme nationalists, Russian Orthodox church, and very vocal members of pro-life associations. They have considerable ideological and financial support from the extreme right US organizations who initiated this new campaign. Their main argument is that sex education, birth control, contraception, planned parenthood, and homosexuality are exclusively western, non-orthodox, anti-Russian subversive phenomena, deliberately aimed to degrade historical Russian culture and physically exterminate the nation by reducing its birth rate.

All this is supported by wild imagination and lies. Russian Planned
Parenthood Association is denounced by priests as a satanic institution, propagating abortion and depopulation. The official slogan of RPPA, ‘the birth of the healthy and wanted children, responsible parenthood’ was misrepresented in the newspapers as ‘one child in a family’. A booklet called Your Friend the Condom for young adults and teens is described as if it was addressed to the first-grade children.

Another target is school sex education. There is not and never has been any such thing in Russia. At the demand of the Russian Ministry of Education, the United Nations Population Fund in collaboration with UNESCO gave a grant for a 3-year experimental work in 16 selected schools, to develop workable curricula and textbooks ‘for classes 7, 8 and 9, so that young people should be able to make informed and responsible decisions before reaching the age of potentially starting sexual activities’. There was no cultural imperialism or any attempt to invent something uniform and compulsory for the whole country. In the introduction to the project it is emphasized that ‘to ensure cultural acceptability, all curricula and textbooks will be developed by Russian experts, making use of knowledge and experience from several countries, and with the input of technical assistance from foreign experts’.

The project was initiated in October 1996. Its first step was a sociological monitoring trying to assess sexual values and attitudes of children, parents, and teachers of a few pilot schools, on a strictly voluntary basis. Similar control was planned also for the next stages of the experiment. Unfortunately, Ministry of Education officials, without consulting the experts, made a fatal mistake: they started such a delicate work without adequate political and psychological preparation. Even worse, the ministry sent to 30,000 schools a package of five self-made, negligently edited, never approved in the classrooms and unrealistic – some of them require more than 300 class hours – alternative sex education programs. These programs had nothing in common with the UNESCO project but they are perceived as a part of it.

So before it was even born, the project came under heavy attacks in the mass media as a western ideological subversion against Russian children. In some small towns people have been asked in the streets: ‘Do you want children to be taught in school how to make sex? If not, please, sign the petition to ban this devilish project’. Priests and activists tell their audiences that all bad things in western life are rooted in sex education, that western governments are trying now to ban or eliminate it, and only a corrupt Russian Government, at the instigation of the world sexological-industrial complex, is acting against the best interests of the country. This ‘subversive activity’ was discussed in two parliamentary committees and so on.

Some prominent members of the Russian Academy of Education also attacked western spirit: ‘we don’t need the Netherlands’ experience, we
have our own traditional wisdom’. And although the president of the Academy, Dr Arthur Petrovsky, strongly dissociated himself from this nationalist position, a decision was that instead of a special sexual education, the country should improve adolescents’ moral education with some elements of sex education – this formula was used in 1962.

The fight continues. In October 1997 the Russian Government formally confirmed its support for family planning. In several TV debates, the priests and their supporters have been defeated. The public, especially young people, are against them. But the case of school sex education is seriously damaged and still under a heavy attack. Some newspapers are campaigning against the use of condoms, saying that condoms are useless against HIV. In the state Duma there is a draft law on bioethics which wants to prohibit most of genetic research, all sexual ads in the newspapers, sexual education in schools, late abortions, and many other things. I’m sure it will not pass but the situation is tense.

**PN:** Will you have any role in this experimental program?
**IK:** Since the program accepted by the Academy of Education is absolutely conservative, I refused to participate in it. In my forthcoming books, I explain why this strategy is wrong. And almost every week I’m interviewed by the media on these issues.

**PN:** At the same time, it sounds as if people are becoming more receptive to talk about homosexuality. Since 1993, it's been decriminalized. What can you tell us about the attitudes today specifically toward homosexuality?
**IK:** Yes, there are considerable changes. In Russia, like everywhere else, the attitudes toward homosexuality are important not only because homosexuals are a considerable social minority but because these attitudes are a good indicator of a general tolerance. As in other countries, surveys in Russia show that tolerance depends most on age: younger people are more tolerant than older, and girls more tolerant than boys. Second, it depends on the level of education; third is the urban/rural difference. People are most tolerant in Moscow and St Petersburg, least tolerant in Siberia and other rural areas.

**PN:** When you say sexual attitudes are an indicator of a trend toward tolerance, what do you mean?
**IK:** It’s an indicator of a general social tolerance and that sexuality is accepted as a part of culture. The problem in Russia is that public discourse about sexuality is primitive. Under Soviet regime, we officially had no sex, only romantic love. Now mass media talk about sexuality as if it were purely a technical and physiologized matter: where to put what. All this is extremely vulgar and sexist. And there is a big generation gap.
PN: What else do sexual attitudes indicate? If people become more accepting of sexual diversity of any kind, is it related to changes in the political and economic arena, as some theorists argue?

IK: Oh, it’s related to general acceptance of a market economy and democracy and of pluralism. And, by the way, just as everywhere, more sexually tolerant people in Russia are generally more tolerant about other things. But in Russia there was a general intolerance of any difference – everybody should be the same. When this was so, there also was a high level of sexual anxiety, homophobia, sexism, and a high level of sexual ignorance. Sexophobia is related to the totalitarian control over individuality.

PN: I found it interesting that the tolerance level in surveys for homosexuality in Russia and in America is about the same, but yet there are different political and economic systems.

IK: Yes, I believe that’s understandable because Russian traditional culture was more indifferent to sexuality and much less homophobic. I have the feeling – you see I am a historian by education – that in all questions of sexuality, cultural factors and historical factors are much more important than social structure.

American fundamentalism is very militant. In the American situation, you have to take into account general Anglo-Saxon tradition and the influence of Puritans in the 17th century. Because of superficial and inefficient Christianization of Russia in the early centuries of Russian history and peasant culture, all kinds of sexuality were possible. In Russia, it was always known that you can’t live according to the rule, you can’t live according to the morals, so you can do what you can. Russians are less moralistic people than Americans. This also has a bad side because there is no Protestant ethic and, because of that, it is difficult to build a capitalist mentality and society based on law and order. There was also the lack of implementation of laws: the negligence by officials made things ungovernable and unpredictable and limited to the arbitrariness of authorities.

PN: One of the things that’s a very western concept is the idea of sexual identity. How would you characterize the emergence of a gay identity in Russia?

IK: I think that in Russia everything is in the very beginnings. On the other hand, I would say that this strong emphasis on gay identity, like every identity, is largely a specifically American phenomenon. It is much less important and practical even for western Europe, to say nothing about Russia. In the United States, the country was always based on the principle of different communities, a nation of immigrants, and when people come to the US, they have to arrange their special community, otherwise it is difficult to survive. Also it was possible to have separate districts and neighborhoods and so on.
In the Soviet cities, there were specific ethnic and cultural groups but they were not self-sufficient and territorially bound communities. First – because of political repression – the Government was suspicious of anything. For example, to have a Georgian community or an Armenian community in Moscow would be difficult because the authorities were suspicious of nationalism and what the people will do. Now there isn’t this problem. Yet apart from the political and administrative repressions, there’s a difference in the housing and living conditions. In western countries and especially in the US, you have the choice where to live and so you can organize a group of friends. In Russia that was impossible. You were given your apartment in a certain district and to exchange to another one was difficult. Now you can buy whatever you want, but it’s terribly expensive and who can afford it?

Therefore, to arrange a sort of territorial community based on sexual orientation is difficult in the big cities and practically impossible in small towns. The notion of gay identity is also not so popular among Russians. Russian gays and lesbians don’t want to be persecuted; they want to have certain freedoms and to live where and how they want to. But they are not politically active.

I believe that the idea of same-sex marriages is much more important for them. There is still a bureaucratic regulation which makes it legally impossible for gay couples to have a joint apartment because they are nobody to each other according to the law. This question has been discussed at two mainstream international conferences in 1994 and 1997, and there was not a single objection against the legal domestic partnership. But so far it is not taken seriously by any politicians.

**PN:** Is there a gay organization or movement in Russia? Even if it’s not based on identity, is there a political movement that has pushed for changes, such as the law decriminalizing homosexuality in 1993?

**IK:** There are several small gay and lesbian organizations which are largely not on speaking terms with one another and exist on small grants from ILGA [International Lesbian and Gay Association] and western charity foundations. I wouldn’t call it a movement. They have no real political influence.

The decriminalization was done not because of internal pressure but for external political reasons, because Russia wanted to join the European Council. In order to please western countries, legislation was changed. But police and other law-enforcement agencies are still strongly homophobic and there are all kinds of anti-gay discrimination, especially in the provinces. The current anti-sexual campaign is also openly homophobic.
PN: So the gay culture in some ways emerged after the legal changes, whereas in many western cultures gay people organized first and effected political change.

IK: No, there were parallel processes. The discussions of the decriminalization began in legal and medical literature long before perestroika, but nobody wanted to do anything. Ultimately the discussions were begun in the late 1980s with perestroika at the point of democratization. The difficulty of the current gay culture is its commercialization. In the big cities there are quite a few gay discos, clubs, magazines, and so on. These issues can be openly discussed on TV, and some classical gay movies are shown. Unfortunately, all this is often interpreted, even by some really outstanding writers and artists, as the signs of the homosexualization of Russian culture. But younger intellectuals are generally much more understanding.

PN: Earlier you mentioned that sexuality is ‘physiologized’. Is the dominant discourse and attitude toward sexuality in Russia almost exclusively biological? You seem to suggest that people conceptualize sexuality or sex education in very biological terms, using more essentialist than constructionist ideas. 

IK: Yes, absolutely. The country is still at the stage of ‘medicalization’ and ‘pedagogization’ of sexuality, and even the professional knowledge of the medical people is, to put it mildly, inadequate. There is no sex research and no money for it, and in almost every audience I have to explain that to name sexual behavior reproductive is wrong and misleading.

PN: Where do you position yourself in this biological versus social constructionist debate on sexuality? What do you think about the current theories on sexuality, such as post-modern theories, queer theory? 

IK: Well, I’m in the middle. As a sociologist, I like social constructivism, especially the sexual script theory by John Gagnon and William Simon. And the history of sexuality is absolutely impossible without Foucault. But I think that general philosophical ideas should be taken cum grano salis. Empirical history and anthropology of sexuality are impossible without certain essentialist assumptions. Social representations and images are not the only kinds of social reality. I accept that gender is a social construction and not something biologically given. But it is nevertheless related to the biological sex dimorphism.

My interests are multidisciplinary and I see behind social and cultural diversity some cross-cultural and even cross-species constants. From my Soviet social experience, I’m rather suspicious about what I call ‘sexual bolshevism’ – the attitude that everything can be constructed and reconstructed at will, if you only have politically correct ideas. I greatly admire contemporary cultural studies, say about changing images of masculinity, but sometimes I ask myself would a professional historian accept this particular periodization or the choice of texts?
One of my former fields of interest being philosophy of history, I know everything about the fallacy of hard facts. But I still do believe that some facts are harder than others. The category of a feminized man did exist and was considered essential everywhere. I do agree with the idea that without some sort of elements of essentialism, you can’t make history. If there is nothing definite, then it seems that every society and every period of history constructs different realities. But if you formulate it in the terms of sexual scripts, there are more possibilities.

**PN:** So maybe the problem has been in the constructionist literature because it depends too much on the concept of identity in culture and community. By looking to the past to see if there was a gay culture or community, they were asking the wrong question?

**IK:** I suppose the question was legitimate, but it was nothing new. Because your historical situation gives you the issue, then you are immediately interested in how this question was answered in a previous period. So in the 1960s, 1970s and later, the issue of gay identity became very important for liberation and social changes. Then the question was addressed to the past and the same problems were discussed earlier but in different terms.

Personally, I’ve liberated myself from a sexological perspective. Sexology is something that’s influenced by medical and biological research which is much stricter in its procedures. So when I was interested in sexuality, I had to please medical professionals or otherwise it would have been impossible to do. I was influenced by this medical sexological literature, so my whole ideas in this field were influenced by medical/biological essentialism. For me, learning the perspectives of a script theory and about Foucault was very important and very liberating.

**PN:** Is one of the risks of doing this kind of research, though, that much of the research might be guided by a political agenda. political correctness, as you said earlier? What is your opinion about the state of the research on sexuality?

**IK:** As far as political correctness is concerned, I have the feeling that the US academic situation is very similar to that of the former Soviet Union – a politically dangerous question is better not to be asked. Sure, in the US you shall not be fired and imprisoned and if you are unhappy with leftist ideology you can find support among right-wing people. But nevertheless ideological reasons are very strong.

**PN:** What are your thoughts about the research on gays and lesbians?

**IK:** In the process of depathologization of homosexuality – I certainly do share this attitude – some fundamental old issues have been lost. We don’t have enough information about sexual behavior. Such phenomena like masturbation and narcissism should be reinterpreted in the light of contemporary philosophy and psychology of individuation. It is firmly
established by all surveys that, for gay men, masturbation is the number one sexual outlet and it doesn’t even depend on the fear of AIDS or the availability of a permanent partner. Yet in the new textbook *Homosexuality and Mental Health*, edited by Robert Cabaj and Terry Stein and published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1996, there is no discussion of masturbation. It’s only mentioned in a chapter on lesbianism. On the psychological specificity of same-sex love, I found much more information and insights in the novels by Ives Navarre, Yukio Mishima, and others, and in autobiographies, then in research literature.

I think we badly need a theoretical typology of gay masculine and feminine erotic preferences and criteria of beauty – some empirical research has been done by Martin Dannecker and Reimut Reiche in 1974 and most recently by Michael Bailey. I have the feeling that literature about lesbians is dominated with butch images. They were the first who came out and that was the first model, so most generalizations are based on that type. And with gay men, most generalizations are based on the feminine type. Where are the others?

We need to see longitudinal research on the different masculine and feminine types and how they evolve. I suspect that it is a necessity for gay men to invent and reinvent themselves because there are no ready-made models for them. This is not limited to adolescence. There may be even a developmental task of a certain sexual re-socialization, including different sexual partners and different sexual techniques, which doesn’t exist in the straight world, where the male, figuratively speaking, is always on top. Generally, developmental aspects seem to me very important and under-researched.

I also have the feeling, and maybe I’m wrong, but I feel that the differences are not as big as they are supposed between gay and straight people and any of the differences are really differences because of discrimination. That is another reason why identity may also be problematic because all of us – gay or straight – have multiple identities and the most important identity is the one that is most vulnerable, whether it be my skin, my religion, or sexual orientation. It is important for political action to mobilize people, to construct identity so that we are all together. But it depends on your well being and financial situation – which may be more important than sexual orientation.

**PN:** Do you have any final thoughts on the issue of sexuality?

**IK:** I have the feeling that in general with both biology and social structure that objective conditions come first. It is important not to forget economic situations, biology, and so on. For me, the most important perspective in sexuality is the life course perspective. It’s a convergence of history and anthropology, sociology, psychology, biology. This is the type of work that needs to be done in the study of human sexuality.