Introduction

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The academic study of homosexuality and sexuality in general has 'taken off' in many Western nations. Today, students in many nations across the globe have an opportunity to take courses in sexuality, lesbian and gay studies, or queer theory.

Lesbian and gay studies have produced a body of research and theorizing that is already too extensive and specialized to comprehensively present. In this volume, we aim to provide readers with an overview of the field. We make no claim to have covered all the possible areas of research and theory. Our approach is frankly tilted towards sociology, though feminist, cultural studies, and queer perspectives are in strong evidence. In each chapter, authors have made an effort to present a clear overview of the state of the research in a particular field, the key debates and positions, and to suggest future directions of possible research and theorizing.

HISTORY AND THEORY

Before there developed a sociology of homosexuality, there were medical-scientific theories. These initially appeared over a century ago, but medical models of homosexuality have achieved considerable social influence. They propose various ways of understanding homosexuality, for example, as an inherited or learned identity or as a form of sexual or gender deviance. Still, almost all of these theories define the homosexual as a separate human or personality type. By the mid-twentieth century in many Anglo-American and European nations, the idea was well established that the homosexual was an abnormal or deviant and dangerous type of person.

There were some dissenters. For example, in England Edward Carpenter imagined homosexuals as a distinct and superior moral-spiritual human type. Somewhat later, the American sexologist Alfred Kinsey shocked his readers by claiming to demonstrate, on the basis of thousands of interviews, that homosexuality is common among Americans. He argued that homosexuality is less a fixed identity then a general human desire. Nevertheless, in the United States and elsewhere, a psychiatric view of the homosexual as an abnormal human type had gained considerable social influence during the post-World War II period.

The 1950s were a time of heightened discrimination and harassment of homosexuals. In response to increasing gay visibility, the state and other institutions sought to criminalize and repress homosexuality. Homosexuals responded by organizing to advocate tolerance and homosexual rights. For example, in the United States, the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society established chapters in major cities across the nation. In Britain also, organizations emerged such as the Homosexual Law Reform Society founded in 1958 and, a few years later, the London-based lesbian

organizations Kenric and Minorities Research Group, which had similar goals to the Daughters of Bilitis. Members were divided between essentially two political strategies. On the one hand, some sought to decriminalize homosexuality by arguing that, as a psychiatric disorder, homosexuals deserve treatment not punishment. On the other hand, some aimed to reverse the medical model by claiming that homosexuals were normal people like heterosexuals. At the same time, there also appeared the beginnings of a sociological approach – the homosexual was seen as a victimized social minority.

A big change in Western ideas of homosexuality came in the 1960s and 1970s. The women's and gay liberation movements proposed a view of homosexuality as a social and political identity. For example, some lesbians argued that being a lesbian is a political act that challenges both the norm of heterosexuality and men's dominance. To be a lesbian is to choose to live a life apart from men and to make women the center of one's personal and social life.

Social scientists were also beginning to develop a social approach to sexuality. Some sociologists approached homosexuality as neither normal or abnormal, but considered the way homosexuals created their own identities and subcultures in a hostile society. In the USA and England, the labeling theory of Howard Becker (1963), Edwin Schur (1965), and Ken Plummer (1975) and the 'sexual script' approach of John Gagnon and William Simon (1973) emphasized that while individuals may be born with or develop in infancy homosexual feelings, they have to learn to think of these feelings as an identity and to manage this identity in an unfriendly society.

In the mid-1970s, the writings of sociologists, along with the ideas of gays and feminists, contributed to developing a sociological perspective. The meaning and social role of homosexuality were determined by the way people respond to it. This social view became politically important, as it suggested that it was not homosexuality which was a social problem but a social response to intolerance and prejudice.

There were, however, limits to this developing social understanding of homosexuality. For the most part, sociologists and gay and women's liberationists did not question why it was that society defined people in sexual terms and why sexuality had become an identity. They assumed that there had always been homosexuals and heterosexuals; only the social response varied in different societies.

The 1980s were an important period in gay life. In the USA, the UK, Denmark, Holland, France, Australia, and elsewhere, social movements were creating public lesbian and gay communities. In virtually every major city, gays were creating institutions, organizations, clubs, support groups, and beginning to gain political clout. Despite a great deal of opposition, the gay movement was making great strides towards gaining rights and respect. This period of social and political advancement also witnessed the rise of 'social constructionist' perspectives in lesbian and gay studies.

Although constructionists learned from earlier social approaches by sociologists, feminists and others, a new wave of thinkers and researchers sought to deepen a social view of homosexuality. Constructionists argued that sex was fundamentally social; the modern categories of sexuality, most importantly, heterosexuality and homosexuality, but also the whole system of modern sexual types and notions of normal and abnormal sexualities, were understood as social and historical facts.

In particular, constructionist perspectives challenged the notion that homosexuals have always existed. This idea was popular in the gay movement. If homosexuals have always existed, then it would seem that homosexuality is natural and homosexuals should be accepted. By contrast, constructionists proposed that while homosexual feelings or desires may have always existed, 'homosexuals', viewed as a distinct identity, have appeared only in some societies. The French social thinker, Michel Foucault

(1980) provided a powerful statement of this perspective.

> As defined by ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, a life form … Nothing that went into total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions … because it was a secret that always gave itself away.

Scholars such as Jeffrey Weeks (1977), Jonathan Katz (1976), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1985) and Randolph Trumbach (1977) similarly proposed the thesis of the social construction of 'the homosexual'.

Armed with this new approach to sexuality, constructionists have sought to explain the origin, social meaning, and changing forms of the modern homosexual (e.g., D'Emilio, 1983; Faderman, 1981). Scholars have debated when the notion of 'the homosexual' initially appeared, what social factors account for this development and the different historical emergence of the category 'lesbian', what kinds of subcultures or networks have sustained a homosexual identity, and how societies have responded to these developments.

The 1990s witnessed huge changes in the social and political status of lesbians and gay men in many Western nations. Unprecedented social integration occurred, including the right to marry in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and most recently Holland. But these changes did not amount to a steady line of progress. There was a powerful anti-gay backlash. In the USA, gay rights laws were overturned, a Christian Right made anti-gay politics into the center of its social activism, and anti-gay violence spread. This backlash, along with the AIDS crisis, prompted a renewal of radical activism. In addition, deep internal conflicts within both feminist and gay movements surfaced, proving at once divisive and productive. In particular, women, people of color, bisexuals, and transgendered peoples criticized the movement for promoting an agenda that was too male-oriented, white, middle-class and too narrowly focused on rights and social acceptance.

In a social environment where gays were embroiled in battles within and outside the gay and feminist movements, there appeared a new intellectual and political current: queer theory. Queer theory challenged a key idea of gay thinking and politics: the notion that all homosexuals share a common core of experience, interests, and way of life. By contrast, queer theorists argue that there are many ways of being gay. Specifically, sexual identity cannot be separated from other identities such as race, class, nationality, gender, or age. Any specific definition of homosexual identity is restrictive. For example, to claim that homosexuals are the same as heterosexuals or are promiscuous, gender playful, or campy, applies to some individuals but not to others. Moreover, when a particular idea of being gay becomes dominant or an ideal, it devalues or excludes those who deviate. For example, if we read many Western publications we might think that most gay men aspire to an ideal of beauty that includes being muscular, hairless, slim, short-haired, abled, and white. This ideal devalues and marginalizes gay men who do not exhibit these features.

Approaching identities as multiple and regulatory may suggest to critics the undermining of gay theory and politics, but, for queer thinkers and activists, it presents new and productive possibilities. Queers do not wish to abandon identity but to recognize and value the multiplicity of meanings that are attached to being gay or lesbian. This encourages a culture and movement where many voices and interests are heard and shape gay life and politics. While it might make gay politics messy, it will bring more people into the movement and make possible varied political strategies.

Queer perspectives also aim to shift the focus of analysis and politics away from thinking of gays as a separate group or a minority. Instead, queers focus on a system of sexuality that constructs the self as sexual, that assigns a master sexual identity

as heterosexual or homosexual to all citizens, and regulates everyone's sexuality in terms of a norm of sexual normality. Queers aim, then, to broaden sexual theory into a general critical study of sexualities and to expand politics beyond identity politics to a focus on the norms and regulations that control everyone's sexuality. Queer politics is less about legitimating minority sexual identities than widening the sphere of sexual and intimate life freed from state and institutional control.

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

For much of this century, homosexuality was seen as a natural, biologically based condition. People were said to be born heterosexual or homosexual. Homosexuals were assumed to have existed throughout history, although societies responded differently, some mildly tolerating, others aggressively hostile.

This perspective was first challenged by the British sociologist, Mary McIntosh (1968). She approached homosexuality as a social role. She asked, why have some societies developed the idea that homosexuality is an identity? McIntosh suggested that some societies establish a homosexual role in order to create boundaries between acceptable and nonacceptable behaviors. By defining the homosexual as an unnatural or stigmatized identity, heterosexuality is made into the norm and ideal. Good, respectable citizens are then expected to be heterosexual.

McIntosh held that while many societies are intolerant of homosexuality, only some societies create a homosexual identity. She did not, however, research where, when, and how such homosexual identities were created. It was her colleague, among others, Jeffrey Weeks (1977) who proposed that it was in late nineteenth-century Europe that the idea of a distinct homosexual identity first developed. Weeks emphasized the role of medical and scientific ideas in creating the notion of a homosexual type of person. The medical view of the homosexual as an abnormal psychological type gained wide popularity through public scandals or court trials such as that of Oscar Wilde in England.

While the two British sociologists offered broad social and historical approaches to homosexual identity, other sociologists were researching the microsocial dynamics of identity formation. In particular, the labeling approach understood sexual identity as learned through processes of social interaction. For example, Plummer (1975) argued that individuals are not born homosexual, but become homosexual. They have to learn to define their desires as signs of a homosexual identity and they often rely on the support of other homosexuals to accept this identity and to come out. Moreover, while some homosexuals stay isolated, others respond to stereotypes by coming out. Some individuals become part of subcultures and social movements that provide a positive sense of identity, a sense of social belonging, and a social basis to mobilize for rights and respect.

The sociology of sexual identity has developed in two directions from the 1980s to the present. On the one hand, there has been an emphasis on the multiple types of homosexual identities. Sociologists and others point out that individuals are not just heterosexual or homosexual but these sexual identities are shaped by factors such as gender, class, race, and nationality. Individuals never experience being gay in a general way, but only in specific and varied ways, for example, as a white, middle-class lesbian or a disabled, Korean gay man. Thus, feminists have argued that men and women experience being gay differently because, while men are socially dominant, women are, in most societies, socially subordinate. Accordingly, being a lesbian means not only desiring women but also (usually) living independently of men. Being a lesbian, then, challenges a male dominant social order in a way that is not true for gay men. This perspective suggests a sociology of homosexual identities that views gay lives as enmeshed in social dynamics of class, race, gender, nationality, and so on.

On the other hand, queer approaches to identity emphasize the fluid, performative character of identities. Identities are not learned and then fixed. Rather, identities are produced through behaviors that project a particular identity. The key point here is that actions produce the notion of sexual identity, rather than understanding behavior as an expression of a core psychological identity. For example, lesbians may signal that they are gay by the things they say, the way they look at women, by wearing certain clothes, or using certain words that are socially recognized as indicating a lesbian identity. Although many of us might think that these practices express a core identity, queers argue that they project an identity that is then taken as a psychological core.

Homosexual identities are then a product of the social environment. Individuals are not born homosexuals, nor do they naturally grow up becoming aware that this is who they are. Instead, they must learn to think of themselves as homosexual. Whether they do and how they do depend on the social environment.

Initially, the notion of a homosexual identity was created by medical, scientific ideas. As we saw, the homosexual was defined as an inferior, abnormal human type. Gradually, these ideas were accepted by other social institutions such as the criminal justice system and the government. Homosexuals have not, however, simply accepted these stigmatized identities. They have resisted by challenging a medical model, for example, by affirming their identity as normal, natural, or good. Gays have sought to change their legal and social status, and sometimes to change society.

Sociologists make the point that in order for individuals to challenge a stigmatized identity, they need social support. Although lesbian and gay individuals have often been isolated, they have also formed social networks or communities.

In the early part of the twentieth century, lesbians and gay men relied mostly on informal friendship networks. However, even before the movements in the 1970s, there were bars, baths, house parties, clubs, balls, and cruising areas where individuals formed relationships and developed feelings of community. In many cases, these places mixed straight and gay people. For example, Chauncey (1994) documents a gay world in New York City in the early 1900s where straight and gays or in his terms 'normal' men and 'fairies' mixed regularly – in restaurants, speakeasies and bars. In Harlem, rent parties provided occasions for gay people to meet and party. These social networks made it possible for individuals to fashion positive identities and to find partners and social support.

In the post-war period, these loosely formed social networks became solidly institutionalized. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, in most European and Anglo-American nations, there were social organizations and institutions such as bars or clubs that were frequented by gay people. For example, historians have documented the development of a public working-class lesbian culture in many American cities that was organized around butch–fem roles. Of course, it was precisely this publicness that made lesbians and gay men easy targets of harassment and sometimes arrest.

The major breakthrough in the evolution of gay communities accompanied the take-off of a lesbian and gay movement in the 1970s and 1980s. A national movement for gay rights and liberation stimulated a remarkable period of community building. In small and large towns and cities across nations such as the USA, England, Australia, Holland, Denmark, and France, lesbian and gay community centers, bars, social clubs, and political organizations become commonplace. The institutionalization of gay subcultures made being gay into a profoundly social identity – indicating not only an individual desire but also membership of a complex, dense social world of institutions, organizations, and social and political events.

Gay institutions were initially formed as safe havens from a hostile world. They provided a positive sense of identity and

community. They were often to be found exclusively in major urban centers. Participation in gay subcultures often meant feeling a strong sense of isolation from the social mainstream.

The role of the gay community has changed somewhat. As gays have gained rights and achieved considerable social integration, two developments are noteworthy.

First, more and more individuals today *choose* to participate in these gay subcultures less for reasons of escaping social disapproval or hostility than because they affirm one's identity and provide a desired way of life. In major urban areas such as London, Amsterdam, New York, San Francisco, Sydney, or Copenhagen, all highly tolerant and sexually integrated social spaces, it is possible for individuals to organize a rich individual and social life around being gay.

Second, it is no longer credible to think of the urban gay community as the heart and soul or the model of gay community life. Gay networks and institutions are to be found in virtually every city, small or large, and many suburbs. Furthermore, there are now a multiplicity of types of communities, from politically oriented ones to social clubs organized around a specific interest such as religion, art, sexual preference, or age, to fairly dense social networks that are sustained by friendships and social events.

INSTITUTIONS

In contemporary western societies sexuality is commonly understood as being a personal and private matter, linked to the body, the individual and concepts of nature. Indeed, sex is often talked about as if it had a certain mysterious quality, encompassing desires, feelings and motives that we cannot easily explain, an area of our lives somehow set apart from the public world and the workings of society. There are, of course, many different theoretical approaches to sexuality along the essentialist–constructionist

continuum (Fuss, 1990). A common view, however, and one which developed through the late nineteenth century and was profoundly influential during the twentieth century, is that sex is determined by biology and not by society.

Theories that seek to establish 'natural' or 'biological' explanations for our sexual practices, relationships and identities, generally referred to as essentialist, contain within them the assumption that sexuality is fundamentally pre-social. Sex is understood in terms of a powerful instinct or drive, usually assumed to be stronger in men than women, which is a product of our biological make-up as human beings. Sexuality, in this model, is regarded as separate to society and 'the social'.

In accepting this sex/society split, many theorists have assumed sex to be not only *pre*social, but also *anti*social. Sex is defined as a natural energy or force that is outside of *and* opposed to society, which needs to be held in check in order to maintain social order. This 'repressive hypothesis' assumes that modern societies depend upon a high level of sexual repression. Social institutions are here associated with constraint and control over people's sexual lives and, importantly, are seen to depend upon sexual repression for their continued existence. Indeed, the release of sexual energy from such constraints would, it is hypothesized, threaten or destroy modern 'civilization' and the social institutions upon which it is founded. For this reason some writers believed that sexuality had the power to transform society. Liberationist writers such as Marcuse (1970) and Reich (1962), for example, drawing on Marxism and the work of Freudian psychoanalysis, argued for the need for greater sexual freedom and expression as a prerequisite to radical social reform.

These traditional assumptions about sexuality, which have their roots in sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and past medical investigations of sex, help us to begin to understand how we think about sexuality in relation to social institutions. How

and in what ways are sexual lives 'controlled' and 'regulated'? What are the social institutions that are key to shaping sexualities in contemporary societies?

There has been a good deal of work in lesbian and gay studies on the social regulation of sexuality and how this varies with the changing role of the state, the significance of religion and the law, education, health and welfare policies, and so on. Moreover, the idea that society controls sexuality through repression has been superseded by the Foucauldian view that sexuality is regulated not through prohibition, but is socially produced through definition and categorization. One of the key themes to emerge from such work is the changing nature of state and institutional control. As Foucault (1980), Weeks (1990) and others have documented, since the nineteenth century there have been a number of major shifts in the impact that various social institutions have on people's sexual lives. The declining significance of religion as the authoritative voice on sexuality as medicine and scientific views on sexuality became the dominant discourse, coupled with the increasing secularization of society, has been reflected in a move away from moral regulation of sexuality through organized religion to social control being increasingly exercised through medicine, education, and social policy.

In addition to analyses that have focused on the role of social institutions in the social regulation and production of sexualities, some lesbian and gay studies have asked the question in reverse. How do assumptions about sexuality inform and constitute social institutions and our notions of the 'social world'? This represents a significant development. Although lesbian and gay studies continue to develop existing notions of sexuality and gender, and to document lesbian and gay lives and political struggles, there is an increasing focus on the broader implications of such interventions. For example, a shift from simply asking how the state treats lesbians and gays, to asking how concepts of the state are themselves grounded in

assumptions about sexuality. The main project, according to writers such as Warner (1993), is the queering of existing theory rather the production of theory about queers. This is the point Eve Sedgwick makes in proposing that:

> many of the major modes of thought and knowledge in twentieth century western culture as a whole are structured by a chronic now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition … an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern western culture must be not merely incomplete but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition. (1990: 1)

This new wave of lesbian and gay studies overlaps with earlier feminist work on the construction of heterosexuality as naturalized and normalized (Richardson, 1996, 2000a). In their ground-breaking work writers like Adrienne Rich (1980) and Monique Wittig (1979) analysed heterosexuality as a social institution, as distinct from identity or practice. Marriage, with its specific understanding of distinct roles for women and men, is the institutionalized model of 'acceptable' sexuality necessary for social cohesion and stability, and for social inclusion as individuals with full citizenship rights.

Although the parallels and interconnections between feminist and queer theory are not always sufficiently acknowledged, in both cases sexuality, specifically the hetero/homosexual binary, is conceptualized as something that is encoded in a wide range of social institutions and practices. The emphasis is on the relationship between sexuality and social theory; on rethinking the social, on asking what happens to conceptual frameworks if heteronormative assumptions are challenged. How might these kinds of lesbian and gay, feminist and queer, studies inform our understanding of, for example, health, education, organized religion, the law, labour market analysis, or political economy? How might they contest the meanings of 'family', 'the state', 'rights', 'public and private', 'citizenship', and 'the social'?

Lesbian and gay studies have, then, contributed to our understanding of the social

regulation and subjective meanings of sexuality produced through social institutions and cultural practices such as, for example, the law and religion, media, and education. More recently, they have also ventured into areas not normally thought of as connected with sexuality in an attempt to rethink 'the social'. Part of the problem in doing such work is the tendency to assume that we know what concepts such as 'social' and 'sexual' mean. As we have pointed out, traditionally, these have been theorized as separate if related spheres. This is hardly surprising. After all, laws, social policy, the economy – these are all constituted as belonging to the public arena, whereas sexuality has tradition-ally been associated with the private. And despite critiques from feminist writers in par-ticular, the public and the private continue to be thought of as if they were dichotomous. It is this articulation of new ways of thinking about sexuality and the interrelationship with social institutions and practices that is one of the exciting areas for the future development of lesbian and gay studies.

POLITICS

Over the last half century lesbians and gay men have formed groups and organizations that either implicitly or explicitly have been a basis for political action and engagement. After World War II in Europe and the USA a number of 'homophile' organizations were formed in urban centres such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and London. These organizations were, on the whole, conserva-tive in their demands and moderate in their outlook, embracing the political strategies of a minority group seeking tolerance from the heterosexual majority. By the late 1960s, however, all this was to change. Liberal acceptance by mainstream society, and the social and legal reforms sought by most lesbian and gay activists a decade earlier, were replaced by a more militant and radical lesbian and gay voice that was highly critical of society in general and the way it treated

lesbians and gays in particular. And the language it spoke was that of liberation, of revolution, of political organizing, of mobilization.

In the 1990s a new queer perspective on sexuality and sexual politics emerged which echoed many of the concerns of lesbian/ feminists and gay liberationists before it. Queer politics aims to be transgressive of social norms, of heteronormativity. It is not about seeking social inclusion, but nor does it want to remain on the margins. What queers seek to do is contest the ways in which the hetero/homo binary serves to define heterosexuality at 'the center', with homosexuality positioned as the marginal-ized 'other', by claiming this space. In so doing, the notion of sexual 'difference' is disrupted, for with no center who or what can one be defined as different to?

Interestingly, alongside the development of queer there has been a turn to reformist politics and agendas, and the rise of what some have referred to as 'gay conservatism' in both the USA and the UK. Books like Bruce Bawer's (1993) *A Place at the Table* and Andrew Sullivan's (1996) *Virtually Normal,* for example, articulated a gay (predominantly male) agenda that aims to deradicalize political perspectives on homo-sexuality, arguing for assimilation in to mainstream society with the enduring centrality of marriage and 'family values'. The demands are for acceptance of sexual diversity, rather than a more fundamental questioning of the social conditions that produce gendered and sexual divisions.

The concept of citizenship, along with questions of social exclusion and member-ship, also (re-)emerged during the 1990s as one of the key areas of debate within both political discourse and the social sciences. This focus on citizenship has been reflected in the political language and goals of social movements concerned with sexuality. This has been most obvious in the USA, where 'equal rights' approaches have come to dominate lesbian and gay politics, and is increasingly the 'main story' in the UK and elsewhere in Europe.

By the 1990s notions of equality had expanded to encompass not just the rights of individuals (identity and conduct-related rights), but those of family units and intimate relationship-based claims such as partnership recognition, marriage, parenting rights including access to adoption, fostering and custody rights. Although, despite this shift, it is important to recognize that demands for individual rights have not disappeared, campaigns for, for example, unequal age of consent, employment rights, gays in the military, and hate crime, continue to reflect a concern with conduct and identity issues (Richardson, 2000b).

These moves towards a politics of citizenship, both in terms of demands for civic rights and rights as consumers, represent a significant shift in the meaning and focus of sexual politics. It reflects a political agenda that is a far cry from both the queer politics of the 1990s and the women's and gay movements that flourished in the late 1960s, and 1970s, with their demands for radical social change. The political goal of such movements was not to assimilate into, or even to seek to reform the existing sexual/social order, but to challenge and transform it.

John D'Emilio (2000), reflecting on these changes in lesbian and gay movements over the past fifty years, characterizes this shift as a move from an outlook captured by the phrase 'here we are', towards activism about family, school, and work which puts forward a different demand: 'we want in'. From this perspective, equality entails 'equalizing up' within a multicultural model of sexual difference. According to D'Emilio, this process.

> will not be best served by primary emphasis on coming out and building community. Access to and equity within the key structures of American life will instead require that winning allies becomes a priority … As for community building, it can in serious ways work counter to achieving success in other areas. Community building easily becomes insular and separatist. It can unwittingly foster an isolation and marginalization that runs counter to the imperative of political engagement, particularly of the sort that

involves winning support from outside one's community. (2000: 50)

The AIDS epidemic has been significant in this shift in gay politics, bringing into sharp relief the lack of legal recognition for non-heterosexual relationships, with consequences for access to pensions, housing, inheritance and other rights, as well as the need for health and social care services that are accepting of, and appropriate to, lesbian and gay relationships. Other specific concerns have also fuelled this re-thinking of lesbian and gay struggles such as, for example, Section 28 which Weeks (1991) argues, mobilized and politicized many non-heterosexual communities, especially in its attempts to exclude lesbians and gay men from what is thought to constitute 'a family'.

On the one hand, it is understandable why 'family' and 'marriage rights' are important to lesbians and gay men in their pursuit of full citizenship, in so far as it has a number of material consequences such as access to housing, health care, parenting rights, tax and inheritance rights, etc. However, this raises a much broader question, in terms of the wider implications of such trends, particularly for lesbian/feminist theory and politics which have developed powerful critiques of heterosexuality, marriage and the family. (Though it is the case that feminists have drawn on the language of citizenship, employing rights language in demands for sexual and reproductive self-determination for instance.) In effect, we are witnessing a normalization process; a gentrification process, if you like, of sexual 'others'. What better way to normalize lesbian and gay men than by marriage and family life? The move is towards making lesbian and gay sexualities respectable, rather than making being anti-gay immoral or unrespectable.

In this 'new deal' where demands are centered upon public recognition of lesbian and gay relationships as well as identities, what, we might ask, are the kind of obligations that are concomitant on the recognition of such rights by states or supra-states? What is the 'deal' based upon in modern, liberal, states? Martha Nussbaum, writing

on the theme of sex and social justice, provides some illumination:

> The denial of marriage rights to same-sex couples has socially undesirable consequences … if gays cannot legally get married, their efforts to live in stable committed partnerships are discouraged, and a life of rootless or even promiscuous non-commitment is positively encouraged. Thus a form of discrimination that has its roots in a stereotype may cause the stereotype to become, in some measure, true. But this state of affairs is irrational: Society has strong reasons to encourage the formation of stable domestic units by both heterosexual and homosexual couples. (1999: 202)

One might say that there is a convergence happening between gay politics and state practice in relation to attempts to maintain and stabilize sexuality as an organizing principle of social life. Yet there remains a tension in western liberal societies, which are becoming evermore plural and diverse and place great emphasis on individualism, between accepting 'difference' and the rights of individuals and, at the same time, upholding heterosexuality as the institutionalized model of sexual relations. This is a tension that has been clear in both the Clinton administration in the USA and in Blair's government in the UK. In the latter case, for example, we have witnessed this 'balancing act' played out in the New Labour government's willingness to push forward on the equalizing of the age of consent at the same time as it has backed down on its promise to remove the infamous Section 28 from the statute books.[1]

As part of this process of gaining access to new forms of citizenship status we also need to acknowledge that we are constituting certain types of sexual citizen as 'good' and 'bad' citizens. Who is the good sexual citizen? 'Good relationships' are defined here in terms of an emphasis on monogamy, commitment, and coupledom. Rights continue to be linked to being in such a relationship. What, then, are the implications for those who are critical of the gendered heterosexual norms underpinning citizenship?

These debates over claims over citizenship represent struggles over the meaning of sexuality. It is not simply a case of whether we are able to reach agreement on particular rights claims or not, though such debates can be just as contentious, but whether the models of citizenship operating, and the theoretical arguments put forward for them, are compatible with the kind of frameworks that have been used by lesbians and gays/feminists/and queers in developing a politics of gender and sexuality. To further illustrate this point, we might consider the recent shift towards a focus on relationship-based rights claims by lesbian and gay movements and campaigning groups, both in the USA and Europe. As a number of feminist writers such as, for example, Christine Delphy (1996) have argued this kind of model of citizenship reinforces both the desirability and necessity of sexual coupledom, privileged over other forms of relationships, as a basis for many kinds of rights entitlements. Moreover, it represents the integration of lesbian and gay men into a couple-based system of rights originally founded on heterosexual and gendered norms.

The process of organizing around identities such as lesbian and gay has also prompted a great deal debate about identity as a basis for political action. In stressing the importance of 'coming out', for example, lesbian and gay liberation movements in the 1970s ran the risk of seemingly accepting understandings of sexuality as an 'essential' aspect of self and the idea of a shared common identity. In the 1980s similar debates raged within feminism over the possibility of some kind of collective use of the term 'woman' for political purposes. The question in this case is whether the category 'woman' can be used as a unifying, if not unified, concept.

Although both feminist and gay and lesbian politics have critiqued essentialism, some gay interventions into politics use essentialist ideas strategically, with lesbians and gays conceptualized as a legitimate minority group having an ethnic status and identity (Epstein, 1992). This is a strategy that has been deployed in the USA, where the parallels that have been made with

race-based political aims and strategies have been extremely controversial, and it is also being used in the UK in a variety of campaigns. Some critics argue that such tactical use of essentialism will only 'undermine the overall aim of achieving social equality for lesbians and gays' (Rahman, 2000: 122). What is required instead, it is claimed, is to deploy political identities as necessary signifiers of political subjects, a location from which to articulate social and material concerns, rather than an expression of essential sexual selves that define lesbians and gays as an 'ethnic' group. More recently, discussion over whether lesbian and gay identities are re-essentialized through political struggles has been given new impetus by postmodern understandings of identity, where the emphasis is on fluidity and performativity (Butler, 1990, 1997).

Rights do not exist in nature; they are products of social relations and of changing historical circumstances. In the present social climate, we are witnessing more and more rights-based arguments concerned with sexual practices, identities, and relationships. As we struggle to keep up with a rapidly evolving and broadening concept of 'sexual rights', we must also respond by extending and developing our frameworks for understanding the sexual rights discourse. We also need to recognize the wider social implications of such changes. Although it is a contested concept with various meanings (Lister, 1997), citizenship is often associated with membership of the nation state. Clearly, the political strategies used and the rights demands made by lesbian and gay movements are shaped by both local and national contexts. However, with the social and political changes which have led to 'globalization', comes the claim that we are experiencing a globalizing of gay identity and politics that has led to the export of western definitions of sexual identities and practices, as well as gay rights agendas, around the world. The implications of this globalized sexual citizenship, which some critics argue is a form of cultural and sexual imperialism, is a key theme for lesbian and gay studies in the future. As writers such as, for example, Dennis Altman (1996 and in this volume) and Carl Stychin (1998) have noted, we must consider how far lesbian and gay/queer politics developed in the USA can be deployed successfully elsewhere.

NOTE

1. Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988), which outlaws the 'promotion' of homosexuality in state-funded schools and defines lesbian and gay families as 'pretended family relationships', was overturned by the Scottish Parliament in 2000, however, at the time of writing it continues to be the law in England.

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