

Twentieth-Century Social Theory

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Edited by

Steven Seidman

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“I Can’t Even Think Straight”: “Queer” Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology

Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer

There’s nowt so queer as folk

Old Lancashire Saying

Writing in 1985, Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne provided a useful critique of the “missing feminist revolution” in sociology. Feminists, they charged, had made important contributions to sociology, but had not been successful in “transforming the basic conceptual frameworks of the field” (Stacey and Thorne 1985: 301). In fact, feminist sociologists had been less successful than their counterparts in anthropology, history, and literature in effecting a “paradigm shift.”

We believe that much the same could be said for the state of lesbian and gay sociology today. Even though a few sociologists have been studying lesbian/gay life for at least 25 years (at least since the publication of Mary McIntosh’s 1968 seminal article), these concerns continue to inhabit the margins of the discipline.¹

Studies of lesbian/gay life occur almost exclusively within the areas of deviance, gender, or sexuality, and have barely made their mark on the discipline as a whole. Many sociologists tend to labor under the assumption that lesbian and gay concerns are particularistic, and have little relevance to them, even though the lesbian/gay movement is among the most vibrant and well-organized social movements in the United States and Europe today. Clearly, there is a story here that we are missing; not only does its absence further marginalize “sexual minorities,” but it also weakens sociological explanations as a whole.

There may be a glimmer of hope in an intellectual movement which is currently taking place in the humanities, called “queer theory.” It is

less and less possible today to take a course in anthropology, literature, film studies, or cultural history in the United States (and, to a much lesser extent, in Britain) without encountering the writings of so-called queer theorists. These scholars are succeeding in placing sexual difference at the center of intellectual inquiry in many fields – a “sexual revolution” which has been, for the most part, absent in sociology. Their success is particularly striking and even ironic in view of the fact that they are using social constructionism as if it were a new discovery, when it was sociologists who first generated this perspective.

How can sociologists redress this imbalance, and build upon the work that has already been done, to rethink sexual (and gender) nonconformity in ways that do not reproduce marginality? Toward this goal, we will briefly review the legacy of the sociology of homosexuality, consider what queer theory is, examine why it has been relatively successful in de-ghettoizing lesbian/gay studies, and ask what, if anything, we might learn from those efforts.

The Legacy of the Sociology of Homosexuality

Although conducted on the margins, the sociology of homosexuality falls into two broad camps. The first is primarily empirical; the second tends to be more theoretically oriented. The first tends to accept sexual categories; the second often problematizes these categories.²

The first strand of homosexual studies, the empirical, has quite a long history. Emerging out of the nineteenth century, it seeks to describe and classify etiologies of homosexuality. Much of the earliest work was focused on “the homosexual” as an object of sociological survey, but increasingly, from the 1960s onwards, it has turned to the investigation of every nook and cranny of lesbian and gay life: bars, communities, identities, tearooms, and the like. It still continues, for example, in sociological accounts of identity stages (Troiden 1988).

Useful as they can be, empirical studies have tended to be unreflective about the nature of sexuality as a social category.³ Such studies tend to replicate social divisions, implicitly reasserting the exotica of difference. At times, one is left with the sense that lesbian and gay individuals inhabit communities that are completely set off from the rest of society, that they are members of an altogether different culture and even a different species, if one follows the long-standing obsession with isolating the “cause” of homosexuality.⁴

The second strand of sociological studies problematizes the category “homosexual.” It was present in some early writings, including those

of Freud and Kinsey, but it was brought to the fore in the heyday of deviancy theory, the 1960s. The first generation of constructionist studies of sociology was conducted by American labeling theorists and UK “new deviancy theorists,” young radical scholars who rejected the orthodoxies of criminology and traditional deviance study. Instead they challenged the very categories of deviance, locating “deviance” – not deviants – within frameworks of power.⁵

At this time a few key papers helped refocus the questions. McIntosh’s (1968) highly influential contribution asked questions about the functions of the homosexual role, and shifted attention away from the homosexual “condition.” Gagnon and Simon’s (1967) reformulation brought matters of meaning, gender, and social organization to the fore. Kitsuse (1962) highlighted the powerful role of societal reaction and labeling. By the 1970s, a more theoretically informed study had commenced, and some research explicitly linked theorization with empirical work (Warren 1974).

Through labeling theory, the whole categorization process of homosexuality became problematized in what was later to be called “constructionism” and “deconstructionism.” (The term *social constructionism* was rarely used in this literature, even though Berger and Luckman [1967] first popularized the phrase. It was widely used in other fields, and antedates Michel Foucault [1978] by more than a decade.) Through symbolic interactionism, the notions of meaning, process, “invented identities,” and the cultural construction of communities became central – long before their current popularity in cultural studies. A lesser strand focused on “the stranger,” “marginality,” and “outsiders,” describing homosexuality as a form of liberating consciousness.⁶ Borrowing some ideas from US sociology, it was seen as radically critical and challenging of the status quo, although with hindsight the ideas may not now seem so challenging.⁷

The sociology of homosexuality has also been influenced by feminism, which has conceptualized sexuality as a terrain of power. Lesbian feminists provided a powerful critique of compulsory homosexuality and what Rubin (1975) called the “sex/gender system.” Adrienne Rich’s ([1980] 1983) conception of a “lesbian continuum” was highly influential in reexamining the relationship between gender and sexuality. This literature broadened the definition of lesbianism, emphasizing the relational aspects of lesbian sexuality and universalizing the possibility of lesbianism. Challenging medicalized conceptions that focused upon gender inversion and masculinized sexual desire, these theories blurred the boundaries between gay and straight women, and hardened the boundaries separating lesbians and gay men.

Although enormously valuable, feminist sociology has an unfortunate tendency to conflate gender and sexuality, erasing the specificity of lesbian and gay existence. As Rubin remarked:

Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice. . . . Lesbian feminist ideology has mostly analyzed the oppression of lesbians in terms of the oppression of women. However, lesbians are also oppressed as queers and pervers by the operation of sexual, not gender, stratifications. (1984: 33)

This conflation of gender and sexuality continues to occur in feminist work. For example, a recent book on "never married women" barely mentions that many women in that category are lesbians (Simon 1987). A book on cross-gender occupations – women in the military and male nurses – mentions homosexuality only in passing, understanding the prevalence of lesbians and gay men in non-normative occupations (Williams 1989).

Collectively, the sociology of homosexuality, particularly the more theoretically oriented variety, may be seen as a kind of "standpoint theorizing" (McIntosh 1992). It assumes that studying and theorizing from the perspective of those who have been systematically denied access to power will inform our knowledge of the center. Yet in terms of the concerns of sociologists, the center has hardly budged. When studies of lesbian/gay life appear today, they are almost exclusively within the areas of deviance, gender, or sexuality, and have barely made their mark on the discipline as a whole. Though a few male theorists – but only a few – have made some nodding gestures towards feminist theory, there are virtually none who take lesbian and gay concerns seriously. Sometimes this is due to overt antagonisms and homophobia. Often it is due to theoretical blind spots.

Yet the "radical" theories of this period anticipated a number of ideas which would emerge again in the new queer theory, albeit somewhat more boldly, and even more resolutely committed to problematizing sexual categories.

From Constructionism to Queer Theory

Queer theory, an academic movement – indeed, an elite academic movement centered at least initially in the most prestigious US institu-

tions – is indirectly related to the emergence of an increasingly visible queer politics, a confrontational form of grass-roots activism embodied in ACT UP, Queer Nation, and other direct-action groups during the last decade. Queer theory emerged in the late 1980s, publicized through a series of academic conferences held at Yale and other Ivy League universities, in which scholars, primarily from history and the humanities, presented their work on lesbian/gay subjects (Fuss 1991).

Queer theory became a rallying cry for new ways of thinking and theorizing. For many, the term *lesbian and gay studies* did not seem inclusive enough; it did not encapsulate the ambivalence toward sexual categorization which many lesbian/gay scholars felt, and the difficulties they faced in fitting sexuality into the "ethnicity model" which provided the template for such fields as African-American and women's studies, and indeed for identity politics in general. Gay men and (to a lesser extent) lesbians had organized themselves along the lines of an ethnic group at least since the early 1970s, following the example of the black civil-rights movement. Sexuality, however, defines a political interest constituency unlike those of gender and race. Membership in the group is fluctuating and largely invisible; identity as a lesbian or a gay man is, as Warner describes it,

ambiguously given and chosen, in some ways ascribed and in other ways the product of the performative act of coming out. . . . In many respects, queer people are a kind of social group fundamentally unlike others, a status groups only insofar as they are not a class. (1991: 15)

Against attempts to define the lesbian and gay population and to organize a politics around it, queer theory, at least ideally, embraces the indeterminacy of the gay category and suggests "the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics" (Warner 1991: 16).

Clues as to what queer theory looks like can be glimpsed through some of its (emerging) canonical works, which come mainly from philosophy, literature, and cultural studies. Judith Butler (1990) describes the "unwritten and written codes of heterosexualized gender systems." Drawing upon the queer practices of drag, cross-dressing, and butch-femme, she develops a conception of gender as performance, and of gender parodies as subversive acts. Through readings of modern literature, Eve Sedgwick (1990) describes new ways of knowing and not knowing based on secrecy and outings, arguing that such knowledges constitute a medium of domination that is not reducible to other forms of domination, and that finds its paradigmatic case in the

homosexual and the closet. Andrew Parker (1991) rereads Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, calling our attention to the homosocial dynamics of the collaboration between Marx and Engels and arguing that we need a "sex-inflected analysis of class formations," an understanding of how sexuality is constitutive of class categories.

In texts like these we start to see the following hallmarks of queer theory: (1) a conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides; (2) the problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general. Identities are always on uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and knowing; (3) a rejection of civil-rights strategies in favor of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics; (4) a willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality, and to conduct queer "readings" of ostensibly heterosexual or non-sexualized texts.

At its widest, tallest, and Wilde(st), queer theory is a plea for massive transgression of all conventional categorizations and analyses – a Sadean/Nietzschean breaking of boundaries around gender/the erotic/the interpersonal, and a plea for dissidence. More narrowly, it is a political play on the word *queer*, long identified with "homosexuality," and the newest in a series of "reverse affirmations" in which the categories constructed through medicalization are turned against themselves. Often there is overlap between the more narrow (i.e., lesbian and gay) focus and the wider focus on transgression: they are far from separate.

Queer theorists claim that existing gay strategies, and minority-group strategies in general, have tended to rely on conceptual dualisms (male/female gender models, natural/artificial ontological systems, or essentialist/constructionist intellectual frameworks) that reinforce the notion of minority as "other" and create binary oppositions which leave the "center" intact. As Teresa de Lauretis has written:

Homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined . . . it is no longer to be seen as transgressive or deviant vis-à-vis a proper, natural sexuality (i.e. institutionalized reproductive sexuality) according to the older, pathological model, or as just another, optional "lifestyle," according to the model of contemporary North American pluralism. (1991: iii)

Not content to study the "lesbian community" or the "gay community" as the exclusive site of sexual difference, queer theorists interrogate aspects of social life – the family, intimate relationships – but also look at places not typically thought of as sexualized – the economy, for example.

The homo/hetero divide so artfully assembled in the nineteenth century comes to be a strategy for deconstructing and rereading texts previously assembled through heterosexuality. "The sexual order overlaps with a wide range of institutions and social ideologies," writes Michael Warner (1991: 5), so that "to challenge the sexual order is sooner or later to encounter those institutions as problems." Much as feminists began treating gender as a primary lens for understanding problems that did not initially look gender-specific, for queer theorists the personal life is sexualized – and heterosexualized – and so are politics and economics, and just about everything else under the sun.

Queer theorists turn their deconstructive zeal against heterosexuality with a particular vengeance. When lesbian/gay theorists analyzed normative heterosexuality in the past, they envisioned it as a sex/gender system which was largely monolithic. Gayle Rubin (1975), in her classic article "The Traffic in Women," located heterosexuality as central to the reproduction of gender and sexual inequality. Queer theorists, on the other hand, locate within the institution of heterosexuality the seeds of its own demise. As Butler has suggested,

That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it "knows" its own possibility of being undone. (1991: 23)

Heterosexuality, in this vision, is a highly unstable system, subject to various slippages, reliant upon carefully constructed individual performances of identity, and dependent upon the exclusion of homosexuality for its very identity. One could say that queer theory normalizes homosexuality by making heterosexuality deviant. Homosexuality ceases to be the exclusive site of sexual difference.

The figure whose influence looms large in this literature is Michel Foucault. His sweeping *History of Sexuality* (1978) details the construction of sexuality through institutional discourses, which come to constitute "regimes of truth." As the result of the Victorian era's "discursive explosion," Foucault argues, sexuality became a mainstay of identity, heterosexual monogamy came to function as a norm, and sexual deviants began to see themselves as distinct persons, possessing particular "natures." Foucault problematizes the belief in a continuous

history of homosexuality, arguing that the differences between the homosexuality we know today and previous arrangements of same-sex relations may be so profound as to call into question a defining "essence" of homosexuality. Much the same could be said of sexuality in general. Modern sexuality is a product of modern discourses of sexuality. Knowledge about sexuality can scarcely be a transparent window onto a separate realm of sexuality; rather, it constitutes that sexuality itself.

It has been argued that Foucault's intellectual influence, and certainly the fact that he himself was gay, may be largely responsible for the recent movement of queer theory out of the ghetto (Duggan 1992). It might be argued that lesbians and gay men have long been cultural innovators, but with the influence of Foucault and the rise of postmodernism they emerge, more visibly than ever before, as intellectual innovators and social theorists.⁸

Certainly an affinity between queer culture and postmodernism, which today is perhaps the dominant theoretical approach in the humanities, is clear. Some observers have suggested that the typical postmodernist artifact is playful, self-ironizing, and even schizoid. In much the same way, lesbian/gay culture has often made use of camp, drag, and other cultural strategies to celebrate alienation, distance, and incongruity (Ross 1989). If the goal of the modernist project was to rationally organize social life, postmodernists see rationality as a lie – something which many lesbians and gay men have been saying all along.

Toward a More Queer Sociology

What does the seemingly anti-rational project of queer theory have to do with sociology, and how could it possibly inform the sociology of homosexuality? As we saw, the idea that sexuality is socially constructed was promoted by interpretive sociologists and feminist theorists at least two decades before queer theory emerged on the intellectual scene. Even if they lacked the elaborate theories of postmodernism, one could say that symbolic-interactionist approaches, along with some strains of lesbian feminism, were protodeconstructionist. Problematizing taken-for-granted linguistic codes and categories, they had an "elective affinity" with some versions of postmodernism (Denzin 1989).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the terrain of identities has been further problematized. The feminist sex debates, the critique of the false

universalism of feminism lodged primarily by women of color, and scholarly work on masculinity (Brittan 1989; Connell 1987) have questioned the tendency among many feminists to subsume sexuality (and race) under gender. At the same time, partly through the experience of the AIDS crisis, many activists and scholars have come to believe that lesbians and gay men, in Sedgwick's words, "may share important though contested aspects of one another's histories, cultures, identities, politics, and destinies" (1990: 255).

Before these intellectual and political challenges emerged, the solution to cultural exclusion seemed to be the construction of social groups whose taken-for-granted identities simply needed to be made visible. Today, things appear to be a great deal more complicated. The existence of groups as essential entities is no longer taken for granted (Bourdieu 1985; Stein 1992). Rather than simply devising a politics which privileges one identity over others, it has become more apparent that different oppressions are differently structured and intersecting. It is impossible to separate one's sexuality from one's class, one's gender, and so forth. There has been a growing acknowledgment of the multiple, shifting character of sexual identities.

Sociology suffers from endless domain assumptions of the time and place in which it is written. Its own "sociology of knowledge" claims should make it sensitive to this, but it often fails to be sensitive in this way. Reading the sociology of the past often reveals how it is lodged in its own time warp, capturing specific times and places in the hidden assumptions it harbors.⁹ Sociology can benefit from a more focused analysis of its assumptions. It can also benefit from the challenges of queer theory. In turn, it can contribute to forming a conception of lesbian/gay life, and of all its interconnections with social life more generally; that is deeper and more grounded than the approach of "queer theory."

First, we can take the question of "culture" much more seriously than we do now, but without ceding experience to the play of "texts." Symbolic interactionists rightly claimed that sexuality was constructed situationally, though they may have understated the extent to which individual agency is constrained by the power of institutionalized discourses such as medicine, and by the proliferation of the mass media.

Queer theorists, on the other hand, appreciate the extent to which the texts of literature and mass culture shape sexuality, but their weakness is that they rarely, if ever, move beyond the text. There is a dangerous tendency for the new queer theorists to ignore "real" queer life as it is materially experienced across the world, while they play

with the free-floating signifiers of texts. What can the rereading of a nineteenth-century novel really tell us about the pains of gay Chicanos or West Indian lesbians now, for example? Indeed, such postmodern readings may well tell us more about the lives of middle-class radical intellectuals than about anything else! Sociology's key concerns – inequality, modernity, institutional analysis – can bring a clearer focus to queer theory.¹⁰

Although sexuality is constructed through various discourses, individuals are not simply passive recipients of these cultural constructions. They use them creatively, accepting parts of them, rejecting others, to actively construct their lives. Queer theorists have attuned us to the importance of looking at texts, but as sociologists we need to look at how identities are constituted in the cultural practices of everyday life, though mediated by texts. We are, as McRobbie reminds us, “more than just audiences for texts” (1992: 730). We would agree with her that what is required is a new paradigm for conceptualizing “identity-in-culture,” developing an understanding of how sexuality, along with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and generation, is articulated and experienced within a terrain of social practices.¹¹

The second thing we can learn from queer theory is how important it is to study the center and not just the margins. The “theoretical universalism” of the sociological approach smacks of a lingering functionalism in which all deviations from the norm must be explained. Homosexuality becomes the marked category; heterosexuality recedes into the background, normalized and naturalized. Queer theory's universalization of “queerness,” and its willingness to look at the social construction of heterosexuality as well as homosexuality, reconceptualize sexuality in ways which could be taken up fruitfully by sociologists, though it may be a bit premature to reject the conception of deviance altogether.

As sociologists we should incorporate the best insights of the queer theory project – its attention to the terrain of culture, and its willingness to venture into areas typically not considered “homosexual” or even sexual – into our own work, and into sociological theorizing more generally. At the same time, we could deepen its insights by providing a more grounded, more accessible approach. We offer some initial suggestions for doing this.

Reconsidering the issues

How can sociology seriously purport to understand the social stratification system, for example, while ignoring quite profound social pro-

cesses connected to heterosexism, homophobia, erotic hierarchies, and so forth (Rubin [1984] 1993)? Sexuality does not operate simply in the family, or through gender dynamics. Moreover, lesbians and gay men are not simply persons with sexual identities; they also are raced classed, and situated in a wide array of different life contexts.

Many questions arise from this. What, for example, happens to stratification theory if gay and lesbian concerns are recognized? What are the mobility patterns of lesbians? How do these patterns intersect with race, age, region, and other factors? What happens to market structure analysis if gays are placed into it? To consumption studies? To education? To social gerontology? We need to reconsider whole fields of inquiry with differences of sexuality in mind. The narrowness of so much sociology has to leave us aghast!

Rereading the classics

What happens to Giddens' structuration theory if hetero/homo issues are brought into the foreground? How might *Street Corner Society* or *Learning to Labor* look if homo/hetero issues were placed at center stage? How would the work of a Smelser, a Habermas, or an Alexander look if they lost their heterosexual and heterosexist assumptions and placed “queer” concerns in their frame of analysis?

An initial way of approaching this could be by reading sociological classics. As we “bring the lesbians and gays back in,” however, we should also be problematizing the heterosexual center. The goal, as Michael Warner puts it, is “to make theory queer, and not just to have a theory about queers” (1991: 18). We need to challenge the assumption that sexuality is necessarily organized around a binary division between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Rethinking pedagogy

Enter the queer student, and his or her not-so-queer classmates. In addition to revising the notion of who is the subject of a sociology of homosexuality, reflecting upon and rethinking pedagogical practice is in order. Mary Bryson (1992) designed a course at the University of British Columbia which incorporates what she calls “queer pedagogy,” a way of teaching against the grain. She starts from the assumption that classrooms are always heterosexualized, but rather than simply organizing the course on lesbian and gay topics narrowly defined, she purposely never defines “lesbian” or “sexual orientation”

so as to avoid ghettoizing lesbian and gay concerns and reifying the categories. Other approaches may be relevant as well, depending on the teaching context (Giroux 1992; Lather 1992). The point here is that we need to reflect upon how classrooms, like all other social spaces, are "heterosexualized."

These are only a few ideas, but they suggest a rethinking of some of sociology's core assumptions in a fashion which goes beyond the current tendency to treat sexuality (at worst) as peripheral and unimportant, and (at best) as something which can be conveniently tacked onto course syllabi or research designs without considering how it reshapes the questions that are being asked.

The process of paradigm shifting entails two dimensions: (1) the transformation of existing conceptual frameworks and (2) the acceptance of those transformations by others in the fields (Stacey and Thorne 1985). In terms of the "missing sexual revolution," sociologists have made some very preliminary progress toward the first goal, but the second – the acceptance of those transformations by others in the field – continues to impede progress. These innovations, however, will not only allow us to better represent those who are marginalized by current frameworks of theorizing; they will also make for better sociology.

Notes

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- 1 There are a few earlier studies: in the United Kingdom, Schofield (1966); in the United States, Leznoff and Westley (1956). There are a few hints as well in the early Chicago School (Murray 1984: 65), but it is McIntosh (1968) that is widely cited as the first major statement.
- 2 Though the authors of this article come from different generational cohorts (Plummer, from the first generation of constructionists; Stein, from the second), we share a general sympathy for the latter tradition. Plummer was active in the early London-based Gay Liberation Front. He first published an article on the sociology of homosexuality in 1973, which used a symbolic interactionist perspective (Plummer 1973). His subsequent work, *Sexual Stigma* (Plummer 1975), was an attempt to apply the core ideas of social constructionism to sexual diversity. Stein's lineage is more recent. She came of age between the lesbian-feminist and the "queer" movements and received her training at Berkeley, publishing her first article on the subject 16 years after Plummer – a survey of approaches to the sociology

of sexuality (Stein 1989). She has continued these interests in her work on lesbian identity (Stein 1992). For a useful discussion of generational differences in lesbian/gay theory, see Escoffier (1992).

- 3 For an early statement of this criticism, see Gagnon and Simon (1967). Some recent work on the social aspects of AIDS, however, manages to be empirically as well as theoretically sophisticated. Because HIV transmission itself does not tend to respect sexual categories, many researchers in this area have come to recognize the problematic nature of sexual categories. See, for example, Connell and Kippax (1990).
- 4 See, for example, LeVay (1993), the latest in a century-long obsession with linking homosexuality with particular genes and chromosomes.
- 5 See, for instance, Stan Cohen, "Footsteps in the Sand," in McIntosh and Rock (1974).
- 6 The theme of the "outsider" is important but will not be taken up here. There is a long tradition of concern with marginality and outsiders in sociology – via Simmel, Stonequist, Park, Becker, Goffman, Garfinkle, and others – and it anticipates yet another theme of queer theory: the transgressive.
- 7 The tension between these two schools of lesbian/gay sociology may mirror the political tension which has long existed within the movement, between nationalism and assimilation, between fixing homosexuals as a stable minority group and seeking to liberate the "homosexual" in everyone (Epstein 1992; Stein 1992).
- 8 There were two previous "moments" when "out" lesbians and gay men – particularly gay men – were visible intellectual innovators. The first was in the 1890s and early 1900s, when Magnus Hirschfeld and Edward Carpenter were in the vanguard of an intellectual and cultural movement to remake gender and sexuality (see Rowbotham and Weeks 1977). The second "moment" was half a century later, when gay liberation began to raise questions about power and sexuality (see Fernbach 1981; Hocquenghem 1978). Thanks to R. W. Connell for reminding us of this.
- 9 Feminism has shown this only too clearly. More recently, the analysis of race has revealed a hidden structure which is potentially racist. See, for example, Collins (1990) and Gilroy (1993).
- 10 Similarly, though queer theory de-ghettoizes queer concerns within the academy, it tends to restrict access to those outside. Resolutely and unapologetically laden with theoretical jargon, it limits its audience to only the most theory-literate. In contrast, sociology has been more accessible to non-intellectuals, and should continue to strive for greater accessibility.
- 11 For a related understanding of culture which looks at symbols, stories, and other cultural products as tools in persistent "strategies of action," and points to a way of understanding identities in culture, see Swidler (1986).

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7

A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality

Steven Epstein

In just the past few years in much of the English-speaking world, the term *queer* – formerly a word that nice people didn't use – has escaped the bounds of quotation marks. Its growing currency reflects three roughly congruent, yet uneasily related, developments: the emergence of new repertoires of political mobilization in groups such as Queer Nation, ACT UP, and (in England) Outrage; the foothold gained by new programs of lesbian and gay studies within the academy; and – partially in response to both of the above – the rise of an intellectual enterprise explicitly calling itself queer theory.

Queer theory and sociological theory confront one another with some suspicion, and more profoundly with misrecognition. No doubt to many sociological theorists, queer theory suggests this month's trendiness, just the latest progeny spawned by the Foucauldian Revolution and adopted by over-eager literary critics and proponents of cultural studies. To practitioners of queer theory, sociology perhaps is often seen as irrelevant or, at the very least, a bit stuffy. My point is not to call for some warm and fuzzy rapprochement, but to emphasize the queerness (in the so-called "original sense of the word") of this particular impasse.

In the 1960s and 1970s, sociologists (along with anthropologists and others) contributed significantly to a fundamental shift in the theorization of sexuality and homosexuality. Against naturalized conceptions of sexuality as a biological given, against Freudian models of the sexual drive, and against the Kinseyan obsession with the tabulation of behavior, sociologists asserted that sexual meanings, identities, and categories were intersubjectively negotiated social and historical products – that sexuality was, in a word, *constructed*. Though sexuality never became institutionalized as a formal subfield of sociological