
The refusal of sexual difference: queering sociology

If we follow the recent history and theory of sexuality, we are asked to assume that sexuality is a social fact. What is imagined as sexuality, its personal and social meaning and form, varies historically and between social groups. Indeed, if we are to take seriously Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1980), the very idea of sexuality as a unity composed of discrete desires, acts, developmental patterns, and sexual and psychological types, is itself a recent and uniquely "modern" Western event. For example, the ancient Greeks imagined a sphere of pleasures (*aphrodisia*) which included eating, athletics, man/boy love, and marriage, not a realm of sexuality (Foucault 1985). This new theorizing figures sex as thoroughly social: bodies, sensations, pleasures, acts, and interactions are made into "sex" or accrue sexual meanings by individuals, groups, discourses, and institutional practices. Framing "sex" as social unavoidably makes it a political fact. Which sensations or acts are defined as sexual and what moral boundaries demarcate legitimate and illegitimate sex and who stipulates this is political. Paralleling class or gender politics, sexual politics involves struggles around the formation of, and resistance to, a sexual social hierarchy (Rubin 1982).

The current theorization of sex as a social and political fact prompts a rereading of the history of modern societies and social knowledges. In this chapter, I offer a sketch of a critical reinterpretation of classical and current sociology from the vantage point of recent Western queer studies. In an admittedly preliminary way, I argue that, until the 1980s, classical and contemporary sociology has either assumed the naturalness of the domain of the body and sexuality or the universality of "modern" western categories of sexuality. The rise of an affirmative lesbian and gay or queer studies exposes the participation of sociology in the making of a sexual social system organized around a hetero/homosexual binary and the normative

status of heterosexuality. This critical field of social knowledge (i.e. queer studies) challenges sociology to re-examine both its implicit politics of sexual identity and its conceptual foundations which lack an analysis of the social formation of “bodies” and “sexualities.”

We are familiar with the standard accounts of the rise of sociology. For example, sociology is described as born in the great transformation from a traditional, agrarian, and corporatist hierarchical order to a modern industrial, class based but formally democratic system. The so-called classic sociologists are “classics” precisely because they are said to have provided the core perspectives and themes in terms of which contemporary social scientists analyze and debate the great problems of modernity. These perspectives include Marx’s theorization of capitalism as a class-divided system, Weber’s thesis of the bureaucratization of the world, and Durkheim’s theory of social evolution as a process of social differentiation. The classics posed the question of the meaning of modernity in terms of the debates over capitalism, secularization, social differentiation, bureaucratization, class stratification, and social solidarity. If our view of modernity derived exclusively from the sociological classics, we would not know that a central part of the great transformation were efforts to create a sphere of sexuality, to organize bodies, pleasures, desires, and acts as they relate to personal and public life, and that this entailed constructing sexual identities (often interrelated with racial, gender, class, and national identities), producing discourses and cultural representations, enacting state policies and laws, that made personal life the site of religious and familial intervention. In short, the making of embodied sexual selves and codes has been interlaced with the making of the cultural and institutional life of western societies.

The standard histories link the rise of the modern social sciences to social modernization (e.g., industrialism, class conflict, and bureaucracy), but are silent about sexual conflicts. At the very time in which the social sciences materialized announcing a social understanding of the human condition, they never questioned a natural order linking sex, gender, and sexuality. Such silences cannot be excused on the grounds that sexuality had not become a site of public organization, conflict, and knowledges. From the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries, there were public struggles focused on the sphere of the body, desire, pleasure, intimate acts and their public expression – struggles in the family, church, law, and in the realm of knowledges and the state. The women’s movement flourished in Europe between the 1780s-1790s, the 1840-1860s and between the 1880s and 1920, the key junctures in the development of modern sociology. Struggles over the “women’s question” were connected to public conflicts around sexual-

ity. Sexual conflicts escalated in intensity and gained public attention between the 1880s and World War I – the “breakthrough” period of classical sociology. In Europe and the United States, the body and sexuality were sites of moral and political struggle through such issues as divorce, free love, abortion, masturbation, homosexuality, prostitution, obscenity, and sex education. This period experienced the rise of sexology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry (Irvine 1990; Birken 1988; Weeks 1985). Magnus Hirshfeld created the Scientific Humanitarian Committee and Institute for Sex Research in Germany. Homosexuality became an object of knowledge. For example, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs published twelve volumes on homosexuality between 1864 and 1879. One historian estimates that over 1,000 publications on homosexuality appeared in Europe between 1898 and 1908 (Weeks 1985, p. 67).

What is striking is the silence in classical sociological texts regarding these sexual conflicts and knowledges. Despite their aim to view the human condition as socially constructed, and to sketch the contours of modernity, the classical sociologists offered no accounts of the making of modern bodies and sexualities. Marx analyzed the social reproduction and organization of labor but not the process by which laborers are physically or sexually reproduced. Weber sketched what he assumed to be the historical uniqueness of the modern west. He traced the rise of modern capitalism, the modern state, formal law, modern cities, a culture of risk-taking individualism, but had little to say about the making of the modern regime of sexuality. The core premises and conceptual strategies of classical sociology defined the real and important social facts as the economy, church, military, formal organizations, social classes, and collective representations.

Although the classical sociologists did not make the social formation of sexuality a thematic concern or integrate it into their core sociological analytic framework, this does not mean that they completely ignored this topic. For example, Georg Simmel (1984) wrote several essays on human sexuality (see Bologh 1990 on Weber). Simmel’s ideas about sexuality were inseparable from his views of gender. To simplify and state his ideas in contemporary terms, Simmel argued that men and women are different in basic ways. He speaks of the “trans-historical basis of sexual difference” (1984: 106). Men’s essential nature is to “objectify” their selves through creating a public world of culture, organizations, and institutions. Male sexuality is viewed as an extension of this instrumental, objectifying principle – that is, it is “penetrative” and reproductive in its core, defining impulse. Moreover, because men’s essential character is to be social and cultural producers, sex is an important but only partial aspect of their selves. By contrast, women are defined thoroughly by their feminine nature which

is said to be self contained, organic, personalistic, and emotionally spontaneous. Women's femininity leads to a life organized around the private, domestic sphere – as wives, mothers, and caretakers of the household. Simmel assumes that women's femininity is thoroughly sexualized and hence sexuality is said to infuse their entire being. Somewhat paradoxically though precisely because a woman's sexuality is more fundamental she experiences her sexuality as both needing men more than they need her (since men's primary life is in the public realm while women's life is in the domestic sphere) and as somewhat independent of men, to the extent that women's femininity sexualizes aspects of her life (e.g., pregnancy and mothering) that men do not share. The relative autonomy of women's sexuality does not mean however that women can define their sexuality apart from men or that their desires or pleasures are different from men's. Women never escape their (hetero)sexuality since their lives are organized around men, for example, around pregnancy, children, motherhood, and the feeding and caring of men. If Simmel had inquired into the social formation of this gender and sexual configuration or if he had examined the social factors producing this historically distinctive gender and sexual order, he would have proposed a powerful sociology of sexuality. However, Simmel assumed the naturalness of bipolar gender identities, with sexuality a mere extension of this gender order, and the naturalness and normative status of heterosexuality.

Perhaps the failure of the classical sociologists to make sexuality into a primary topic of social analysis is related to their privileged gender and sexual social position. They took for granted the naturalness and validity of their own gender and sexual status in just the way, as we sociologists believe, any individual unconsciously assumes as natural and good (i.e. normal, healthy, and right) those aspects of one's life that confer privilege and power. Thus, just as the bourgeoisie had asserted the naturalness of class inequality and their rule, individuals whose social identity is that of male and heterosexual have not in the main questioned the naturalness of a male dominated, normatively heterosexual social order. It is then hardly surprising that the classics never examined the social formation of modern regimes of bodies and sexualities. Moreover, their own science of society contributed to the making of this regime whose center is the hetero/homo binary and the heterosexualization of selves and society.

Sociology's silence on sexuality was broken as the volume level of public sexual conflicts and discourses was turned up so high that even sociologists' trained incapacity to hear such sounds was pierced. Confining my remarks to early American sociology, isolated and still-faint voices speaking to the issue of sexuality can be heard through the first half of the twentieth

century. Indeed, sociologists could not entirely avoid addressing this theme in the first few decades of this century.

Issues such as municipal reform, unionization, economic concentration, the commercialization of everyday life, race relations, and colonialism were important topics of public debate. At the same time, Americans were gripped by conflicts that placed the body at the center of contention. The women's movement, which in the first two decades of this century was closely aligned to a socialist and cultural radical politics, emerged as a national movement. Although the struggle for the right to vote was pivotal, no less important were feminist struggles to eliminate the double standard that permitted men sexual expression and pleasure while pressuring women to conform to Victorian purity norms or suffer degradation if erotic desires were claimed. As women were demanding erotic equality with men, there were public struggles to liberalize divorce, abortion, and pornography; battles over obscenity, prostitution, and marriage were in the public eye (e.g., Peiss 1986; D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Seidman 1991; Smith-Rosenberg 1990). Sex was being discussed everywhere – in magazines, newspapers, journals, books, the theatre, and in the courts. For example, in the millions of volumes of sex advice literature published in the early decades of this century, there is manifested a process of the sexualization of love and marriage (Seidman 1991). Books such as Theodore Van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage* ([1930] 1950), which constructed an eroticized body and intimacy, sold in the hundreds of thousands. Americans were in the first stages of a romance with Freud and psychoanalysis; social radicals such as Max Eastman, Emma Goldman, Edward Bourne, and Margaret Sanger, connected institutional change to an agenda of sexual and gender change (Marriner 1972; Simmons 1982; Trimberger 1983). Despite the vigorous efforts of vice squads and purity movements, pornography flourished and obscenity laws were gradually liberalized.

In the first half of this century, sex was put into the public culture of American society in a manner that sociology could not ignore. And yet sociologists managed to do just that to a considerable degree. Through the mid-century, sociologists had surprisingly little to say about sexuality. For example, the Chicago School of Sociology studied cab drivers, immigrants, factory workers, and "troubled" youth but had little to say about the domain of sexuality. Sociologists such as Park, Cooley, Thomas, Parsons, and Ogburn had much to say on urban patterns, the development of the self, political organization, the structure of social action, and technological development – all worthwhile topics – but little or nothing to say on the making of sexualized selves and institutions. Finally, while sociologists were surveying every conceivable topic, and while a proliferation of sex

surveys were stirring public debate (e.g., Dickinson and Beam 1932; Davis 1929; Kinsey 1948 and 1953), sociologists did not deploy their empirical techniques to study human sexualities.

Indicative of this neglect by sociologists, the index of the *American Journal of Sociology* reveals that between 1895 and 1965 there was one article printed on homosexuality and thirteen articles listed under the heading of "Sex," most of which concerned issues of gender and marriage. Similarly, the index of the *American Sociological Review* indicates that between 1936 and 1960 there were fourteen articles published under the heading of "Sexual Behavior," most of which were focused on gender or the family. The absence of a sociology of sexuality was noted by a contemporary sociologist:

The sociology of sex is quite undeveloped, although sex is a social force of the first magnitude. Sociologists have investigated the changing roles of men and women . . . [and] the sexual aspects of marriage . . . Occasionally a good study on illegitimacy or prostitution appears [e.g., Davis 1937, 1939]. However, when it is stated that a sociology of sex does not exist, I mean that our discipline has not investigated, in any substantial manner, the social causes, conditions and consequences of heterosexual and homosexual activities of all types. (Bowman 1949)¹

It took the changes of the 1950's and the public turmoil of the sixties for sociologists to begin to take sex seriously. The immediate postwar years are sometimes perceived as conservative. However, the war and patterns of mobility, prosperity, and social liberalization relaxed social constraints. Indicative of changes in the American culture of the body and sexuality, the fifties witnessed rock music, the beginnings of the women's movement, the appearance of homophile organizations, and the figures of the beatnik and the rebel for whom social and sexual transgression went hand in hand. The sixties made sexual rebellion into a national public drama. The women's movement, gay liberation, lesbian-feminism, the counterculture, magazines such as *Playboy* and sex manuals such as *The Joy of Sex*, cultural radicals like Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, made sexual rebellion central to social change.

A sociology of sexuality emerged in postwar America (e.g., Henslin 1971; Reiss 1967). Sociologists approached sex as a specialty area like organizations, crime, or demography. Sex was imagined as a property of the individual whose personal expression was shaped by social norms and attitudes. Sex and society were viewed as antithetical; society took on importance as either an obstacle or tolerant space for sexual release. The idea of a "sexual regime," of a field of sexual meanings, discourses, and practices that are interlaced with social institutions and movements, was absent from sociological perspectives. Moreover, although sociologists studied patterns

of conventional sexuality, most conspicuously, premarital, marital, and extramarital sex, much of this literature was preoccupied with “deviant” sexualities, for example, prostitution, pornography, and most impressively, homosexuality.

A sociology of homosexuality emerged as part of the sociology of sex (e.g., Reiss, Jr. 1964; Gagnon and Simon 1967a, 1967b; Sagarin 1969). Sociologists turned to homosexuality as an object of knowledge in the context of the heightened public visibility and politicization of homosexuality. The social context of the rise of a sociology of homosexuality needs to be at least sketched.

Between the early decades of this century and the mid-1970s, homoerotic desire was defined by scientific-medical knowledges as indicative of a distinctive sexual and sometimes gender human type: the homosexual. In other words, individuals for whom homosexual desire was important in their emotional and sexual desires now saw themselves as a unique type of person. Ironically, the framing of homosexuality as a social identity proved to be productive of homosexual subcultures. To simplify a very complicated story, homosexual subcultures evolved from the marginal, clandestine homophile organizations of the fifties to the public cultures and movements of confrontation and affirmation of lesbian-feminism and gay liberation in the seventies (Adam 1987; D’Emilio 1983; Faderman 1981). Integral to the transformation of homoerotic desire into a lesbian and gay identity was the framing of this desire in scientific-medical knowledges. From the early 1900s through the 1950s, a psychiatric discourse that figured the homosexual as a perverse, abnormal human type dominated public discussion. Kinsey (1948, 1953) challenged this psychiatric model by viewing sexuality as a continuum. Instead of assuming that individuals are either exclusively heterosexual or homosexual, he proposed (with the support of thousands of interviews) that human sexuality is ambiguous with respect to sexual orientation or that most individuals experience both heterosexual and homosexual feelings and behaviors. Kinsey’s critique of the psychiatric model was met with a hard-line defense of this medical-scientific model (e.g., Bergler 1956; Bieber 1962; Socarides 1968). At the same time, new social models of homosexuality appeared which suggested an alternative to both the biological and psychological models of psychiatry and Kinsey. These social approaches viewed the homosexual as an oppressed minority and a victim of unwarranted prejudice and social discrimination (e.g., Cory 1951; Hoffman 1968; Hooker 1965; Martin and Lyon 1972). By the early 1970s, the women’s and gay liberation movements had fashioned sophisticated social understandings of homosexuality which viewed homosexuality as normal and natural. Moreover, they criticized the institutions of

heterosexuality, marriage and the family, and conventional gender roles for oppressing homosexuals and women (e.g., Altman 1971; Atkinson 1974; Bunch 1975; Rich 1976).

The growing national public awareness of homosexuality and the rise of new social concepts of homosexuality prompted sociologists to study homosexuality. Through the early 1970s, sociologists viewed homosexuality as a social stigma to be managed; they analyzed the ways homosexuals adapted to a hostile society. Sociologists studied the homosexual (mostly the male homosexual) as part of a deviant sexual underworld of hustlers, prostitutes, prisons, tearooms, baths, and bars (e.g., Reiss 1961; Humphreys 1970; Weinberg and Williams 1975; Kirkham 1971). Much of this sociology was inspired by a humanitarian impulse: to show the homosexual as a victim of unjust social discrimination. Nevertheless, sociologists contributed to the public perception of the homosexual as a strange, exotic other in contrast to the normal, respectable heterosexual.

Sociological perspectives on sexuality in the sixties and early seventies proved influential in shaping knowledges of sexuality and homosexuality, e.g., the labeling theory of Howard Becker (1963), Goffman (1963), and Schur (1963) and the "sexual script" concept of John Gagnon and William Simon (1973). However, in the late seventies and early eighties a new sociology of homosexuality was fashioned primarily by lesbian-and gay-identified and often feminist sociologists. This new cadre of sociologists took over the conceptual tools of sociology, as well as drawing heavily upon feminism and critical social approaches circulating in the lesbian and gay movements to study gay life (e.g., Plummer 1975, 1981; Troiden 1988; Warren 1974; Levine 1979a, 1979b; Murray 1979; Harry and Devall 1979). This work underscored the social meaning of homosexuality. It contributed to recent gay theory, which has largely neglected sociological research as a distinctive social tradition of sex studies (Epstein 1996). The sociology of homosexuality from the early 1970s through the 1980s has not played a major role in recent lesbian and gay theory debates, in part, because sociologists did not critically investigate the categories of sexuality, heterosexuality, and homosexuality. They did not question the social functioning of the hetero/homosexual binary as the master category of a modern regime of sexuality (Stein and Plummer 1996; Namaste 1996). Moreover, sociologists lacked an historical perspective while perpetuating an approach that isolated the question of homosexuality from dynamics of modernization and politics.

As sociologists were beginning to approach sex as a social fact, there were, as I alluded to previously, social perspectives on sexuality that were developed by the women's and gay movements. With the formation of

homophile groups in the 1950s (e.g., the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis), homosexuality was either theorized as a property of all individuals or as a property of a segment of the human population. Viewing homosexuality as natural was intended to legitimate it. Moreover, despite the radicalization of gay theory in lesbian feminism and gay liberation in the 1970s, few challenged the view of homosexuality as a basis of individual and social identity. A good deal of lesbian feminist and gay liberationist theory aimed to reverse the dominant sexual views by asserting the naturalness and normality of homosexuality. The notion of homosexuality as a universal category of the self and sexual identity was hardly, if at all, questioned in the homophile, lesbian feminist and gay liberationist discourses (exceptions include Altman 1971; McIntosh 1968).

As the initial wave of an anti-homophobic, gay affirmative politics (roughly from 1968 to 1973) passed into a period of community building, personal empowerment, and local struggles, we can speak of a new period in lesbian and gay theory, the age of social constructionism. Drawing from labeling and phenomenological theory, and influenced heavily by marxism and feminism, social constructionist perspectives challenged the antithesis of sex and society. Sex was viewed as fundamentally social; the modern categories of sex, most importantly, heterosexuality and homosexuality, but also the whole regime of modern sexual types, classifications, and norms are understood as social and historical creations. Social constructionist perspectives suggested that “homosexuality” or, more appropriately, same-sex experiences, were not a uniform, identical phenomenon but their meaning and social role varied historically. In particular, constructionists argued that instead of assuming that “the homosexual” is a transhistorical identity or a universal human type, the idea that homosexual desire reveals a distinct human type of social identity is said to be unique to modern western societies. Michel Foucault (1980) provided the classic statement:

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. (p. 43)

Foucault’s thesis of the social construction of “the homosexual” found parallel articulations in the concurrent work of Jeffrey Weeks (1977), Jonathan Katz (1976), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975) and Randolph Trumbach (1977).

Foucault’s genealogical studies of sexuality aimed at exposing a whole

sexual regime as a social and political event. In this regard, Foucault questioned the political strategy of an affirmative lesbian and gay movement on the grounds that it unwittingly reproduced this regime. Foucault's deconstructionist message fell on largely deaf ears in the context of a politics affirming identity and the prodigious efforts at lesbian and gay community building in the 1970s. Many so-called social constructionist studies through the early 1980s sought to explain the origin, social meaning, and changing forms of the modern homosexual (e.g., D'Emilio 1983; Plummer 1981; Faderman 1981). As much as this literature challenged essentialist or universalistic understandings of homosexuality, it contributed to a politics of the making of a homosexual minority. Instead of asserting the homosexual as a natural fact made into a political minority by social prejudice, constructionists traced the social factors that produced a homosexual subject or identity which functioned as the foundation for homosexuals as a new ethnic-like minority (D'Emilio 1983; Faderman 1981). Social constructionist studies often legitimated a model of lesbian and gay subcultures as ethnic-like minorities (Epstein 1987).²

Social constructionist perspectives have dominated studies of homosexuality through the 1980s and have been institutionalized in lesbian and gay studies programs in the 1990s. Debates about essentialism (Stein 1992) and the rise, meaning, and changing social forms of homosexual identities and communities, are at the core of lesbian and gay social studies. Since the late 1980s, however, aspects of this constructionist perspective have been contested. In particular, discourses that sometimes circulate under the rubric of queer theory, though often impossible to differentiate from constructionist texts, have sought to shift the debate somewhat away from explaining the modern homosexual to questions of the operation of the hetero/homosexual binary, from an exclusive preoccupation with homosexuality to a focus on heterosexuality as a social and political organizing principle, and from a politics of minority interest to a politics of knowledge and difference (see ch. 7). What is the social context of the rise of queer theory?

By the end of the 1970s, the gay and lesbian movement had achieved a level of subcultural elaboration and general social tolerance, at least in the US, that a politic oriented to social assimilation far overshadowed the liberationist politics of the previous decade. Thus, Dennis Altman (1982), a keen observer of the gay movement in the seventies, could speak of the homosexualization of America. And yet at this very historical moment, events were conspiring to put lesbian and gay life into crisis.

A backlash against homosexuality, spearheaded by the New Right but widely supported by neoconservatives and mainstream Republicans, punc-

tured illusions of a coming era of tolerance and sexual pluralism (Adam 1986; Seidman 1992; Patton 1985). The AIDS epidemic both energized the anti-gay backlash and put lesbians and gay men on the defensive as religious and medicalized models which discredited homosexuality were rehabilitated. While the AIDS crisis also demonstrated the strength of established gay institutions, for many lesbians and gay men it emphasized the limits of a politics of minority rights and inclusion. Both the backlash and the AIDS crisis prompted a renewal of radical activism, of a politics of confrontation, coalition building, and the need for a critical theory that links gay affirmation to broad institutional change.

Internal developments within gay and lesbian subcultures also prompted a shift in gay theory and politics. Social differences within lesbian and gay communities erupted into public conflict around the issues of race and sex. By the early 1980s, a public culture fashioned by lesbian and gay people of color registered sharp criticisms of mainstream gay culture and politics for its marginalization and exclusion of their experiences, interests, values, and unique forms of life e.g., their language, writing, political perspectives, relationships, and particular modes of oppression. The concept of lesbian and gay identity that served as the foundation for building a community and organizing politically was criticized as reflecting a white, middle class experience or standpoint (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Lorde 1984; Beam 1986; Moraga 1983). The categories of "lesbian" and "gay" were criticized for functioning as disciplining social forces. Simultaneously, lesbian feminism was further put into crisis by challenges to its foundational concept of sexuality and sexual ethics. At the heart of lesbian feminism, especially in the late 1970s, was an understanding of the difference between men and women anchored in a spiritualized concept of female sexuality and an eroticization of the male that imagined male desire as revealing a logic of misogyny and domination. Being a woman and a lesbian meant exhibiting in one's desires, fantasies and behaviors a lesbian feminist sexual and social identity. Many lesbians, and feminists in general, criticized lesbian feminism for marking their own erotic and intimate lives deviant or male-identified (e.g. Rubin 1982; Allison 1981; Bright 1984; Califia 1979, 1981). In the course of what some describe as the feminist "sex wars," a virtual parade of female and lesbian sexualities entered the public life of lesbian culture, e.g., butch-fems, sadomasochists, sexualities of all kinds mocking the idea of a unified lesbian sexual identity (Phelan 1989; Ferguson 1989; Seidman 1992a). If the intent of people of color and sex rebels was to encourage social differences to surface in gay and lesbian life, one consequence was to raise questions about the very idea of a lesbian or gay identity as the foundations of its culture and politics.

Some people in the lesbian and gay communities reacted to the “crisis” by reasserting a natural foundation for homosexuality (e.g., the gay brain) in order to unify homosexuals in the face of a political backlash, to defend themselves against attacks prompted by the plague, and to overcome growing internal discord. However, many activists and intellectuals moved in the opposite direction, affirming a stronger thesis of the social construction of homosexuality that took the form of a radical politics of difference. Although people of color and sex rebels pressured gay culture in this direction, there appeared a new cadre of theorists. Influenced profoundly by French poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, they have altered the terrain of lesbian and gay theory and politics (e.g., Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1990; Fuss 1991; de Lauretis 1991; Doty 1993).

Queer theory has accrued multiple meanings, from a merely useful shorthand way to speak of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered experiences to a theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion. I take as central to queer theory its challenge to what has been the dominant foundational concept of both homophobic and affirmative homosexual theory: the assumption of a unified homosexual identity. I interpret queer theory as contesting this foundation and therefore the very telos of Western homosexual politics.

Modern western homophobic and gay affirmative theory has assumed a homosexual subject. Dispute has revolved around its origin (natural or social), changing social forms and roles, its moral meaning, and political strategies of repression and resistance. There has been hardly any serious disagreement regarding the assumption that homosexual theory and politics has as its object, “the homosexual” as a stable, unified, and identifiable human type. Drawing from the critique of unitary identity politics by people of color and sex rebels, and from the poststructural critique of “representational” models of language, queer theorists argue that identities are always multiple or at best composites with literally an infinite number of ways in which “identity-components” (e.g., sexual orientation, race, class, nationality, gender, age, able-ness) can intersect or combine. Any specific identity construction, moreover, is arbitrary, unstable and exclusionary. Identity constructions necessarily entail the silencing or exclusion of some experiences or forms of life. For example, asserting a black, middle-class, American lesbian identity silences differences in this social category that relate to religion, regional location, subcultural identification, relation to feminism, age or education. Identity constructs are necessarily unstable since they elicit opposition or resistance by people whose experiences or interests are submerged by the assertion of identity. Finally, rather than viewing the affirmation of identity as necessarily liberating, queer theorists

figure them as, in part, disciplinary and regulatory structures. Identity constructions function as templates defining selves and behaviors and therefore excluding a range of possible ways to frame the self, body, desires, actions, and social relations.

Approaching identities as multiple, unstable, and regulatory may suggest to critics the undermining of gay theory and politics but, for queer theorists, it presents new and productive possibilities. Although I detect a strain of anti-identity politics in some queer theory, the aim is not to abandon identity as a category of knowledge and politics but to render it permanently open and contestable as to its meaning and political role. In other words, decisions about identity categories become pragmatic, related to concerns of situational advantage, political gain, and conceptual utility. The gain, say queer theorists, of figuring identity as permanently open as to its meaning and political use is that it encourages the public surfacing of differences or a culture where multiple voices and interests are heard and shape gay life and politics.

Queer theory articulates a related objection to a homosexual theory and politics organized on the ground of the homosexual subject: This project reproduces the hetero-homosexual binary which, in turn, perpetuates the heterosexualization of society (Namaste 1996). Modern Western affirmative homosexual theory may naturalize or normalize the gay subject or even register it as an agent of social liberation, but it has the effect of consolidating heterosexuality and homosexuality as master categories of sexual and social identity; it reinforces the modern regime of sexuality. Queer theory wishes to challenge the regime of sexuality itself, that is, the knowledges and social practices that construct the self as sexual and that assume heterosexuality and homosexuality as categories marking the truth of selves. The modern system of sexuality organized around the heterosexual or homosexual self is approached as a system of knowledge, one that structures the institutional and cultural life of Western societies. In other words, queer theorists view heterosexuality and homosexuality not simply as identities or social statuses but as categories of knowledge, a language that frames what we know as bodies, desires, sexualities, and identities. This is a normative language as it shapes moral boundaries and political hierarchies. Queer theorists shift their focus from an exclusive preoccupation with the oppression and liberation of the homosexual subject to an analysis of the institutional practices and discourses producing sexual knowledges and the ways they organize social life, with particular attention to the way these knowledges and social practices repress differences. In this regard, queer perspectives suggest that the study of homosexuality should not be a study of a minority – the making of the lesbian/gay/bisexual/ subject – but a study of

those knowledges and social practices that organize “society” as a whole by sexualizing – heterosexualizing or homosexualizing – bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, culture, and social institutions. Queer theory aspires to transform homosexual theory into a general social theory or one standpoint from which to analyze social dynamics.

Queer theory and sociology have barely acknowledged one another. Queer theory has largely been the creation of Humanities professors (see ch. 7). Sociologists have been almost invisible in the debates around queer theory. Moreover, in its deconstruction of modern Western categories of sexual identity, and in its analyses of the interpenetration of sexuality and society, queer theory has evolved into a distinctive social theoretical tradition that assumes an independence from sociology. Indeed, many queer theorists claim to draw exclusively from poststructuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics for its conceptual resources in understanding the social formation of sexualities. However, as some recent observers have commented (e.g. Epstein 1996; Plummer and Stein 1994), queer theory in fact owes a great deal to sociology, both to general sociological theories such as labeling theory, feminist sociology, the interpretive-ethnomethodology of Garfinkel and Goffman, functionalism, and conflict theory, and to the sex studies of sociologists such as Gagnon and Simon, McIntosh, Plummer, and Weeks.

The mutual isolation and indifference of queer theory and sociology is beginning to change. There is increasingly a sense that the emphasis on discourse, intertextuality, and knowledges in queer theory, though important for critical social analysis and politics, is one-sided (see ch. 7). Efforts to rearticulate queer theory giving it a stronger institutional or social structural grounding are underway, often drawing on the traditions of sociology. For example, Cindy Patton (1995) has sought to rework the category of identity drawing on Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital; Michael Warner (1993) draws on Giddens and others to propose rethinking queer theory as a social theory; Donald Morton (1996) and others are reinventing marxism one more time in an effort to formulate a materialist queer theory.

Paralleling efforts to sociologize queer theory, some sociologists are attempting to queer sociology. Not surprisingly, these efforts have largely been initiated by sociologists working in the area of sexual studies. At one level, sociologists are drawing on queer theory to criticize existing sex, and especially lesbian/gay, studies. Sociologists are criticized for taking-for-granted the universality of modern categories of sexuality, for example, assuming the universality of categories such as homosexuality and heterosexuality. Similarly, a queer influence is evident in criticisms of sociological research which focuses exclusively on homosexuality and fails to analyze

heterosexuality as a social organizing force, not just a category of identity. Ki Namaste writes:

Both mainstream sociological perspectives (e.g., labeling theory) and (mainstream) gay studies . . . neglect the social production of heterosexuality, choosing instead to focus on gay and lesbian communities. Poststructuralism [i.e. queer theory] is particularly useful in this light because it considers the relations between heterosexuality and homosexuality. It addresses not only the emergence of and development of homosexual communities, but also the intersection of these identities within the broader context of heterosexual hegemony. (1996, p. 204)

Some sociologists are beginning to sketch a queer sociology of sexuality. This would mean expanding social inquiry beyond the formation of sexual identities and communities. Steven Epstein suggests the following expanded focus: “How are complex, often internally contradictory, and ambiguous systems of sexual meaning constructed and challenged in different cultures . . . Which institutions are central to the production or contestation of sexual codes and beliefs? How do sexual belief systems and patterns of sexual conduct and identity formation intersect with other markers of social difference and systems of oppression, such as class, race, and gender (1996: 157–58; cf. Stein and Plummer 1996)? Sociologists have gone beyond making programmatic statements to giving some empirical articulation to the notion of a queer sociology of sexuality. For example, drawing heavily on the work of Butler, Kristin Esterberg (1996) studied how lesbian identities are fashioned or performatively enacted through their everyday actions and interactions. Similarly drawing from a queer perspective which asserts the constructed, multiple, fluid character of identity, Amber Ault (1996) analyzes the way bisexuality troubles the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

Sociologists have only begun to imagine the larger project of queering sociology. Here I can only sketch the contours of what I consider this effort to involve.

First, queering sociology would initially entail a critical aim. Sociologists would examine the history and present role of this discipline in the making of sexual selves and social orders. In particular, queering sociology involves criticizing the way in which sociology has contributed unwittingly no doubt to naturalizing sex and normalizing a normative heterosexuality. Queers should critique sociology for the ways its premises, categories, and thematic perspectives are organized around normative heterosexuality (e.g., Ingraham 1996). This is a critique that assumes a link between epistemology and politics, as it exposes sociology’s undoubtedly unconscious rationalization of a heteronormative social order.

Secondly, queer standpoints have the potential to shift the categorical

and thematic focus of sociology. They can offer original narratives of society, history, and social change. For example, queer social knowledges can propose that the question of the making and organization of bodies, desires, and sexualities – no less than the question of class, ethnicity, race, or religion – are at the center of the formation of many contemporary societies. Queer perspectives can relate stories of the making of hetero-and-homosexualized bodies, desires, identities, and societies in modern Europe and the United States as master themes analogous to the rise of capitalism, the bureaucratization of social worlds, or modernization as social differentiation.

Thirdly, having denaturalized the body and historicized sexuality, a queer standpoint suggests a rethinking of general societal dynamics. For example, Stein and Plummer (1996) suggest one way of thinking about the challenge and opportunity queer theory presents to the sociology of stratification:

How can sociology seriously purport to understand the social stratification system . . . while ignoring quite profound social processes connected to heterosexism, homophobia, erotic hierarchies, and so forth . . . What happens to stratification theory as 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? . . . We need to reconsider whole fields of inquiry with differences of sexuality in mind. (pp. 137-138)

Or, as Epstein says, “The challenge that queer theory poses to sociological investigation is precisely in the strong claim that no facet of social life is fully comprehensible without an examination of how sexual meanings intersect with it” (1996: 156).

Fourthly, queering sociology points to reconsidering the sociological canon. Those social thinkers who figure the body, desire, and sexuality as social and historical, and who narrate history and modernity from the perspective of the making of bodies and sexualities merit inclusion in the sociological theory and analysis curriculum. For example, if we describe the classical period of sociology as roughly between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, why not teach Edward Carpenter and Freud alongside the texts of Marx, Weber, Du Bois or Charlotte Perkins Gilman? And when we turn to current figures and texts, why not place queer theory alongside exchange theory or neomarxism and perhaps teach, along with the texts of say Peter Berger, James Coleman, or Dorothy Smith, the texts of Ti-Grace Atkinson, Adrienne Rich, The Combahee River Collective, Dennis Altman, Jeffrey Weeks, Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and of course Michel Foucault.