

Queer Politics

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I will argue today that queer theory and politics is composed of the politics, culture and sexual interests of gay men. They were created in direct opposition to the lesbian feminism which had developed a powerful challenge to men's sexual rights in the 1970s and 1980s. Queer is the enemy of feminism and lesbian feminism, not just because it excludes, us but because the whole mindset and practice is based upon the degradation of women and the embrace of 'gender' i.e. the sex roles and sex stereotypes that create and maintain women's oppression.

Introduction: where did queer politics come from?

Today the word queer means very different things from when it was invented in the very early 1990s. Queer politics and theory have become the orthodoxy in universities, where queer theory dominates the study of feminism and sexuality. Generations of students already have been brought up under the thrall of these ideas. Queer politics dominates entirely the communities in which young lesbians seek to come out. It is hugely influential in culture and entertainment. It is hard to imagine that once queer politics was seen as edgy and transgressive! Today it means homosexual, but also adventurous heterosexuals, transvestites, various forms of fetishistic and harmful sex and a host of other identities. It has become a euphemism for gay so that many lesbians in particular are happy to call themselves queer but not lesbian. Lesbian is a bit too out there, too confrontational, too women centred, might even indicate not loving men, and

loving men is compulsory. Bisexual or non-binary are acceptable terms because neither means rejecting men and queer is very safe. Queer culture and politics have always been diametrically opposed to feminism from its very beginnings and never included lesbians unless they imitated and assimilated themselves into gay male forms.

There was a time before queer. In the 1950s, the word for those attracted to the same sex was homosexual, a term from sexology textbooks. In the 1960s the term gay was adopted as a way to reject being defined by the medical profession and because it sounded joyful and revolutionary. Its usage to describe gay men originated in the demimonde or world of prostitution in the late nineteenth century. That was called the gay world. At that time homosexual men and prostituted women often socialised together as both were outcasts. In the late 1960s the word 'gay' was promoted by the new Gay Liberation Movement as the correct term for homosexuals. Neither the term homosexual or the term gay originated with or described lesbians. The terms in their generic forms referred to men and if women were referred to, modifying adjectives were required, so lesbians were female homosexuals or gay women.

When the Women's Liberation Movement and lesbian feminism got going in the early 1970s, the term 'gay' was rejected as specifically male and having no relationship to women's experience. As women who loved other women, we called ourselves lesbians. We were out and proud.

What was lesbian feminism?

Lesbian feminism was based on recognising the great political differences between lesbians and gay men. We considered that lesbians and gay men had little if anything in common. Lesbians are women and members of the oppressed sex class. Gay men are members of the oppressor class. In this way our interests are opposed. But gay men's relationship to women is different from that of heterosexual men. Gay men are taught to worship masculinity as everyone else in male supremacist culture is, and to despise women. But gay men are seen to lack masculinity themselves because they do not penetrate women. Gay male culture, therefore, embraces the default position, of subordinated and cringing effeminacy. I don't want to suggest that all gay men subscribe to this culture. Indeed, at the time of gay liberation for a few years after the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, gay male activists were incisively critical of the adoption of sex roles and effeminacy by their brothers. Some still are. But for the most part, those cultural forms that are still and indeed increasingly seen to represent gay culture, such as camp and drag, are about derision towards and the despising of women. Queer culture and politics without the oppression of women is not imaginable.

In 1994 I wrote a journal article out of my fury and despair at the development of queer politics which seemed designed to destroy the theory and culture that lesbian feminists had created, it was called *The Queer Disappearance of Lesbians*. Lesbian feminists, I said, refused to be assimilated into gay men's politics. We refused to be seen as related to gay men but just less interesting and adventurous. The gay male historian Jeffrey Weeks described lesbian culture at the end of the nineteenth century as being 'a pale version of the male'. We did not see ourselves as pale versions of the male or indeed any kind of males at all. I explained that 'Lesbian liberation requires...the destruction of men's power over women'. We challenged everything that queer politics came to represent.

Lesbian feminists separated off from gay male politics in the early 70s. We had our own organisations, discos, theatre, all focussed on loving women, creating spaces for women and campaigning for women's freedom. We developed a profound critique of the male view of the world, what the lesbian theorists Julia Penelope called the Lesbian Perspective. We had our own ethics and philosophy, all based on creating a world worthy of women and lesbians.

Lesbian feminists developed a profound critique of gay male politics and gay male ambitions, as is clear in Marilyn Frye's work in *The Politics of Reality* and my own *Unpacking Queer Politics*. Lesbian feminists criticised gay male politics on a number of very important grounds. We saw gay men as having a sexuality very similar to that of heterosexual men even though it was aimed at other men and not women. We saw male sexuality as constructed out of the power relations of male domination, as the sexuality of the ruling class. It was, we argued, formed from men's bonding through the sexual subordination of women, and out of men's 'male sex right', the right of sexual access to women and children. It is centred on the penis and penetration, shaped by the eroticised power difference of sadomasochism, powered by the prostitution and pornification of women by the sex industry. This model is the basis of gay male sexuality too. Gay men saw their very identity as tied to the enactment of eroticised power difference and a profitable industry of sadomasochism developed in gay male culture in the 1970s and 1980s, with clubs and bathhouses, leatherwear and torture implements, pornography and prostitution all based upon the eroticising of power difference. Gay men, like women, were likely to eroticise powerful masculinity. Most gay sadomasochists were 'bottoms' rather than 'tops'.

A good example of the basis of queer politics in male sexuality is the lauding of sex in public toilets, which is called cottaging in the UK and is a part of cruising in the US. It is celebrated by queer theorists in academic writings, in poetry and novels. This is an exclusively male practice, providing enhanced excitement for the men by the chance that they would be caught, and, some said, by the degradation of choosing to do sex where there was the smell of shit and urine. It is a practice of objectification which lesbians do not take part in. Back in the 1980s some lesbians who were desperate to imitate gay men in everything did try to meet up for sex in public toilets, but it was a fad. Generally, lesbians are not interested in amassing numbers of partners for anonymous encounters. Though this practice was a big part of male homosexuality historically, it was certainly never so for lesbians. The celebration of anonymous sex continues in queer culture. A 2018 article is called 'Fucking With Dignity: Public Sex, Queer IntimateKinship'. Lesbians are not desperate to engage sexually with strangers in alleyways or parks. Public sex of any kind has never been an ambition.

Lesbians are so different from gay men politically, sexually, socially that a generic word could never suffice. Without the word lesbian for ourselves, lesbian feminism would not have been possible. You cannot create a liberation movement for a group that cannot define itself. Gay male politics was forced to respond to lesbian feminist demands that they recognise the existence of lesbians. The result was that the word lesbian was usually included with the word gay in the titles of events, journals, conferences or organisations. In the 1980s events would be advertised with the word lesbian first, as in lesbian and gay film festivals for instance. Even the phrase LGB has the word lesbian first. There may still have been very little lesbian content but at least the word was there to suggest that lesbians had been considered.

Use of the term 'queer' to describe a politics developed in the very early 1990s out of AIDS activism. Male gay activists who came out onto the streets to protest the wave of anti-gay hatred that accompanied the AIDS epidemic used the term 'queer' to differentiate themselves from what they saw as an older generation of men who used the term 'gay'. They saw the older generation as too accommodating and not sufficiently confrontational for the moment of emergency that the new activists saw themselves to be confronting.

We lesbian feminists were horrified, it clearly disappeared lesbians all over again. Lesbians were subsumed under gay men and this was clear in the fact that immediately lesbians needed special words to describe them. Queer meant men and lesbians were queer women or female queers, adjectives were needed to modify the generic male of queer politics.

An explanation of what queer meant was given in the editorial of a new academic journal, GLQ or Gay, Lesbian, Queer, founded in 1993. It says that the Q in the title has two meanings, quarterly and also "the fractious, the disruptive, the irritable, the impatient, the unapologetic, the bitchy, the camp, the queer" (p. iii). All these adjectives describe the traditional culture of gay men. Camp and drag are forms of behaviour that imitate what are seen as women's mannerisms and dress. Camp behaviour was a sign of male homosexuality right up to the 1970s but is less common now. It consisted of men flapping their hands and being 'limpwristed' and speaking in an affected way, 'Oh Darling'. High voices and wristflapping were associated with femininity. It became an aesthetic style which emphasised appreciation of bad taste in which gay men idolised extremely effeminised heterosexual women,

particularly those with a tragic story, like Judy Garland. Camp is based on the sending up of womanhood. Drag, as everyone here will know, consists of gay men dressing up as extremely exaggerated versions of femininity for amusement and to excite other men. The culture and theory of queer depends upon the subordination of women and its exploitation by gay men.

Origin in the sex wars

Queer politics emerged from the so-called feminist sex wars of the 1980s. The 'sex wars' consisted of a fightback by sexual libertarians, sadomasochists, and pornographers against the powerful campaign waged by radical feminists and lesbian feminists to change the way sexuality was constructed under male dominance, i.e. the eroticising of male power and women's subordination. Groups that I was in such as the London anti-pornography group which was set up in 1977, London Women Against Violence Against Women, set up in 1980, Lesbians against Pornography, set up in 1983 and Lesbians against Sadomasochism, set up in 1984, campaigned against male violence and sexual violence, against pornography and prostitution, and against the eroticising of power difference amongst lesbians in both sadomasochism and butch/femme roleplaying.

Lesbian feminists like me were horrified by the arrival of queer politics, but our adversaries, the sexual libertarian lesbians who were promoting the sex of dominance and submission, were delighted. They were happy to be absorbed into queer politics which was based on that kind of sex. They were delighted to swear loyalty to their libertarian gay male allies. They continued to excoriate lesbian feminists for their intransigence in resisting the male model of sex, but now they had new weapons. There was a whole new queer dawn which justified

them in making the clearest possible separation from the boring, anti-sex, manhating lesbians who, in their opinion, gave lesbianism a bad name. These lesbians promoted the seamless disappearance of lesbian politics as a separate entity within the queer, and rapidly expanding, rainbow alliance.

Queer Theory

Queer politics constituted a defence of the male dominated sexual freedom agenda that feminism and lesbian feminism in the 1970s and 80s had sought to overturn. Queer theory was developed to accompany queer politics and activism and created a way of thinking about sex that supported that agenda. It emerged from postmodern theory, Foucauldianism and the work of Gayle Rubin. Queer theory and politics incorporated and promoted from the beginning those sexual practices by gay men that feminist critics had identified as most problematic such as sadomasochism, pedophilia and transgenderism. They embraced the work of the American lesbian sadomasochist, Gayle Rubin, lesbian, anthropologist, sadomasochism proponent and theorist of sexuality. She argued in a very influential paper in 1984 that a historical moment had arrived in which the sexual perversions were being liberated from the sanctions of the law and the prejudices of religion and medicine. These practices included, she said, ‘fetishism, sadism, masochism, transsexuality, transvestism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and paedophilia’ (p151). Most of these practices were overwhelmingly if not entirely male and harmful to women and children.

Rubin’s ideas emerged from the work of another great inspiration for queer theory, the French gay sadomasochist, Michel Foucault. Both Rubin and

Foucault promoted the sexual use of children by adult men. In one of his published conversations he discusses with others the charging of Roman Polanski with the drugging and rape of a 13-year-old girl child. Foucault announces confidently, 'She seems to have been a consenting party' (204). He supports this view with the statement that 'There are children who throw themselves at an adult at the age of ten - so? There are children who consent, who would be delighted, aren't there?' (204'). He was one of a large group of French intellectuals in the late 1970s who campaigned to protect men who sexually used children from prosecution. These are the progenitors of queer politics which was dedicated to the protection and promotion of all forms of problematic gay male behaviour such as prostitution, pornography, paedophilia and transgenderism, practices formed from women's oppression and immensely harmful to women and children.

Queer theory, as the name suggests, saw itself as daring, defending male sexual outcasts against old-fashioned morality. Queer politics was based upon the notion that sexual transgression was revolutionary. This meant transgression of the old-fashioned sexual mores that had imprisoned gay men but it included all the rebels and revolutionaries that Rubin and Foucault championed. Queer politics was about outsiderhood. This was not helpful to lesbians who, as women, had a lot more to campaign for than outre sexual practices. Lesbians were struggling in the 80s and 90s, for instance, to assert their right to custody of their own children. Male partners were being automatically given custody because lesbianism was seen as perverted. Our campaigning for basic women's rights was not a good fit with queer theory or politics. A very early Queer Power manifesto from London in about 1991 shows the contradiction. It stated 'Queer means to fuck with gender. There are straight queers, bi-queers, tranny queers, lez queers, fag queers, SM queers, fisting queers in every single street in

this apathetic country of ours'. Fisting was a popular practice of male gay sadomasochism in which a man would insert his fist and forearm into the anus of an unfortunate partner with the risk of damaging tears that could lead to serious infection. Lesbian feminists like myself thought that such a manifesto, if introduced into a courtroom would certainly disadvantage a lesbian mother seeking custody. We did not see ourselves as permanent outsiders engaging in revolutionary sexual practices. We considered ourselves the very model of how all women could be, free of the rule of men. We wanted, and expected, that all women could become lesbians. We proclaimed and sang, that every woman can be a lesbian. Rather than outliers we were the forerunners. Queer is not a term which can encompass this.

The rehabilitation of gender

The most problematic part of queer politics from the point of view of feminists like ourselves, who are now resisting the politics of 'gender identity', was the way in which queer politics and theory was based upon sex stereotypes, i.e. gender. Gender in feminist theory is the sorting system that is necessary to show who is a member of the ruling sex class and who is a member of the subordinate class. This system is sexualized to create what is very generally understood to be sexual excitement i.e. the eroticization of dominance and submission through gendered roles, a form of everyday sadomasochism (Jeffreys, 1990; MacKinnon, 1989). It consists of the sex roles and sex stereotypes that created and maintain women's oppression. Feminists seek to abolish gender.

Queer theory reduced 'gender' to a form of personal expression or performance which disappeared the material power structure of male domination. In this queer interpretation, gender is 'transgressive' when adopted by persons of one biological sex who would normally be expected to display different characteristics. There is, however, no way out of gender, it can be swapped but not abolished. In this respect queer theory suited the socially conservative times of the 1990s when the idea of social transformation was forgotten and various forms of cavorting in line with the system were relabelled as fun and rebellious. I shall argue here that queer theory on gender, rather than being progressive, is coquettish, flirting with male domination and reproducing its contortions. It locks lesbians and gay men into precisely the old heteropatriarchal forms that more progressive movements, gay liberation and lesbian feminism, sought to demolish.

Queer theory embraced the idea that gender was socially constructed, but took the liberal approach in which it could be tinkered with instead of being eliminated. This rehabilitation of gender as fun, even necessary, to lesbian existence, was justified using the ideas of such luminaries of queer theory as Judith Butler. Butler argued that not only was gender a social construction, which was an orthodoxy of feminist theory in general, but that those persons of one physiological sex who 'performed' the practices of the 'gender' most usually associated with the other sex were behaving in a way which was transgressive (1990). Such 'performance' demonstrated that gender was indeed a social construction and could have a disruptive effect on the sex/gender system on which male dominance is based.

Queer theory and politics created a gender rescue mission for the purposes of sexual excitement. For most women and men under male dominance sexual desire is constructed precisely from eroticising the power difference between the sexes. Equality is unsexy, and the very idea of dismantling gender is detumescent. Gender, they say, puts the pzazz into sex. Judith Butler argues this. She explains that she is someone whose sexual desire is constructed out of gender difference. In an interview she says that she ‘situated’ herself ‘in relation to butchness’ in her early twenties, and has had ‘an active and complicated relationship with both butch-femme discourse and S/M discourse probably for almost 20 years’ (More 2000: 286). In *Undoing Gender* she explains that ‘There may be women who love women’ who cannot do this ‘through the category women’ and that ‘they/we’ are ‘deeply...attracted to the feminine’ (Butler 2004: 197). She asks ‘why shy away from the fact that there may be ways that masculinity emerges in women’ (Ibid). Lesbian feminists have been accused of being boring and sexless for their stance as conscientious objectors to the practice. Masculinity cannot, in a feminist understanding, ‘emerge’ in women. It is the behaviour of male power. Women do not have this power. They can imitate the behaviour of the powerful, men, but they cannot access its reality. In the degraded and antifeminist queer culture of today, many lesbians call themselves ‘butches’ with no understanding of the history of this term and the reasons it was rejected by feminists in the 1970s, many of whom had been ‘butches’ themselves, like the wonderful lesbian feminist philosopher Julia Penelope.

Lesbian feminists argue that queer theory arose out of a conservative time in the 1990s when the radical politics of lesbian feminism and gay liberation were being disavowed as unrealistic. The heady days in which social transformation could be imagined were over, and instead, a theory and politics developed

which argued that transposition, that is swapping roles, was a better strategy than changing the system itself. Queer politics coincided with the marketisation of many areas of life, including sex, and the queer consumer was born. More and more sex industry practices were incorporated into lesbian and gay social life, such as drag shows and strip shows.

Queer support for transgenderism

Queer politics was, and is, wholly supportive of transgenderism. This is not surprising considering the extent to which queer is based upon conservative ideas of gender. The lesbians and gay men who transgender use queer theory to justify their practice. Holly Devor, who is now Aaron, explains that queer politics enabled the emergence of ‘transsexual lesbians, of tranny fags and the men who love them, of lesbians and gay men who enjoy sex together, and of dyke daddies who live out their fantasies as SM gay men’. The transvestite Susan Stryker explains that transgender became ‘articulated’ with queer in the form of ‘an imagined political alliance of all possible forms of gender antinormativity’. These lesbians and gay men say that it is not possible to do without gender. Jamison Green, another lesbian who has adopted a male name, says that it is not possible to question the need for gender since it is the necessary basis of human interaction, ‘Everyone uses gender to communicate’. Clearly, within these understandings, there is no way out. Lesbians like me who are conscientious objectors to gender, who refuse gender, are seen as charlatans, failing to recognise the ways in which they too are inevitably and fundamentally gendered.

Judith Butler, the most famous and influential queer theorist whose ideas have been the orthodoxy of sexuality and gender studies for decades, is wholly supportive of transgenderism. She said in 2015, that transgender surgery is a necessity for those who want it, ‘we all have to defend those necessities that allow us to live and breathe in the way that feels right to us. Surgical intervention can be precisely what a trans person needs one should be free to determine the course of one’s gendered life’. She does not like my feminist opposition to transgenderism and says of me, ‘She appoints herself to the position of judge, and she offers a kind of feminist policing of trans lives and trans choices. I oppose this kind of prescriptivism, which seems me to aspire to a kind of feminist tyranny’. I am, it appears, a feminist tyrant. I am not very effective in my tyranny however. It is Butler’s work that generations of gender studies students have been taught as if it were the bible.

The impact of queer theory today

The point has been reached today where the word lesbian and the concept of being a lesbian have been almost eliminated in the queer culture into which young lesbians come out. They are likely to encounter a culture that has been entirely queered, and has not a trace, no historical memory of lesbianism, not even in a homeopathic sense. There is no model for lesbianism as a form of resistance to male domination.