

# Homosexuality

GARY KINSMAN

Laurentian University, Canada

Social theory is the various ways in which people have theorized how the “social” works in the emerging and developing capitalist social relations of the last few centuries. “Homosexuality” is a term that emerges in the later nineteenth century in the “West” in the midst of capitalist and state relations among psychiatrists and sexologists to describe the “truth” of people’s beings (Foucault 1980) who had sex with members of the same gender, especially men who had sex with other men. Bringing social theory together with “homosexuality” combines broader social analysis with the realm of bodies and eroticism and how “homosexualities” are lived, constructed, and analyzed. It joins together what has often been described as the “public” and “political” realms, often considered the proper terrain for social theory, with what has often been portrayed as a “private” realm of erotic desires and practices that was not considered the proper terrain for social theory. This linkage makes it clear that, as the feminist method puts it, the “personal is political,” making visible links between sexualities and broader social and political relations and extending social theory into terrains of bodies and desires. The bringing together of same-gender eroticism with social theory creates an explosive and generative terrain for social theorizing that can only be partly addressed in this entry.

Although, as mentioned, “homosexuality” has been used to describe same-gender eroticism, and more specifically men who have

sex with other men, this has often been contested and transformed given its clinical and male-centered character by the gay, lesbian feminist, and what is often now referred to as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans), or queer movements, through the use of a range of other terms and identifications. In this entry, “homosexuality” is used in a broad sense to include all those who participate in same-gender erotic practices no matter how they socially identify and also to associate this with challenges to the two-gender (male–female) binary system that includes trans experiences.

## HETEROSEXISM, DEVIANCE, AND SOCIAL THEORIZING

The ideology and practices organizing the oppression of homosexuals are often referred to as heterosexism – the assumption that only heterosexuality is “normal” and “natural” and therefore that homosexualities are not normal and are unnatural. Classical and modern social theory did not simply ignore or forget about homosexuality but heterosexist assumptions emerged at the very heart of social theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This included more socially critical approaches such as that of Marx and Engels (Weeks 1975; Parker 1993), who accepted a form of gender and sexual naturalism and were unable to apply their critical historical materialist method to genders and sexualities (Kinsman 1996). It is also very present in more moderate and conservative approaches in the work of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons (Seidman 1996). This is the case even in the rather different work of Sigmund Freud, where “homosexuality”

often becomes problematized whereas heterosexuality, with all of its contradictions, is “normalized.” Even sex radicals such as Wilhelm Reich, who attempted to bring psychoanalysis and Marxism together in the 1930s, and who supported early homosexual law reform, assumed that heterosexual orgasms were superior to homosexual ones (Ollman 1978).

Mainstream social theory is not simply descriptive but is also *actively* prescriptive in participating in making the relations of heterosexual hegemony as they also are put in place in state formation, social policies, and cultural production. This is most clear in psychology and sociology, where the conceptualization of “deviance” as a major way of accounting for “social problems” has been a central theoretical “contribution” and has entered into media and broader social discourses. This has come from a number of different theoretical directions, ranging from mainstream work on “abnormal” psychology, to structural functionalism, to deviance approaches in sociology, and within cultural studies. Rather than examining the social organization of “normality,” the focus has been on those deemed to be social troubles who fall outside this “normality” (Brock 2003). Constructions of “deviance” are often used as a cutting-out device from regular social interaction for those identified as “deviant” and can mandate social courses of action leading to name-calling, harassment, and even violence (Smith 1998). Both on the level of theorizing and how this has shaped popular “common sense,” the paradigmatic examples of “deviance” have been homosexuals and sex workers. This participated in actively organizing social relations against homosexuals.

However, demarcating the “deviant” – what one is not to be like – in a relational fashion is actually productive of the “normal.”

The other side of this “deviance” of “homosexuality” has been the construction of heterosexuality at the center of the social as the “normal” sexuality. At the same time, the focus on “deviance” hides this social making of “normality.” Under the conceptualization of “deviance,” the tables are never turned in the same way on “sexual normality.”

There is a major and active impact of this social theory on social life. Mainstream or hegemonic forms of social theory have contributed to the oppression that homosexuals face. This construction of heterosexism in social theory was also often drawn upon and been associated with the institutionalization of heterosexuality in state and social policy and the construction of homosexuality as a major national security threat during the “Cold War” (Kinsman and Gentile 2010), for instance.

#### THEORIZING HOMOSEXUAL OPPRESSION: THE LIMITATIONS OF HOMOPHOBIA

Earlier homosexual rights and homophile organizing often drew upon more “liberal” and “tolerating” strands within psychology and sometimes sociology. With the emergence of the gay and lesbian liberation movements following the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City, and their spread across parts of the world, activists directly confronted the hegemony of heterosexism in social theorizing, in scholarship, and the ways in which this informed popular cultures. This led to important critiques of heterosexism in social theory.

Initially, the major theoretical contribution was “homophobia,” given the key part that psychiatry and psychology played in the construction of homosexual oppression in that period, which required a major challenge to conceptualizations of mental illness and “deviance.” Homophobia (Weinberg 1972)

was a very creative reversal of the hegemonic conceptualization that homosexuals were mentally ill, instead shifting the focus onto those heterosexuals who had problems with homosexuals. It was not homosexuals who had a phobia but those heterosexuals who were bothered by homosexuals. This was a very useful theoretical innovation in challenging the regulatory regimes of psychiatry, psychology, and mental illness. This theorization was far less useful, however, when it was extended to become the major way of theorizing the social basis of homosexual oppression, which is how it was taken up in much gay organizing in the "West." Oppression was theorized in a particular way given that homophobia was based on the inversion of hegemonic psychological discourses and carried with it an individual and psychological focus. Although this allowed it to have relevance when discussing individual responses to homosexuals, it did not center on the social and institutional relations producing "homophobia." Instead, it located antihomosexual oppression as an individual and psychological problem that was to be addressed on this level and not through challenging and transforming broader social and institutional relations.

Recognizing these limitations, other theories were put forward to analyze "homosexual" oppression with more of a focus on these broader social and institutional relations. This included Charlotte Bunch's (1975) early theorization of institutionalized homosexuality, which was at the center of the oppression of all women, which became a central tenet in lesbian feminism, and Adrienne Rich's (1980) powerful theorization of compulsory heterosexuality that focused on the moment of coercion and repression in the social organization of heterosexuality but neglected the active incitement of heterosexual desire and the active construction of consent to heterosexuality as "normal" and

"natural." Other more Gramscian-inspired theorizations of heterosexual hegemony attempted to address both repression and consent and the active construction of desire as a shifting historical and social relation (Kinsman 1996). Most recently, heteronormativity has become common in queer theory, with an emphasis on processes of normalization regarding heterosexuality. Each of these approaches, in different ways, shifts attention back to the social and institutional character of heterosexuality as the problem that theorization and organizing need to address.

#### THEORIZING THE HOMOSEXUAL

These theorizations also raised broader questions about how to theorize homosexuality more generally and also, by implication, heterosexuality.

The hegemonic "commonsense" explanation has been an essentialist one that assumes that homosexuality is an essential characteristic of the individual usually rooted in forms of biological determinism or reductionism (Weeks 2010), establishing homosexuality as a minority sexuality in an ahistorical sense. Despite the socially hegemonic character of this approach, it is unable to account for the available anthropological, cross-cultural, historical, and social evidence of widespread sexual and gender variation and diversity. Essentialism produces images of a static and ahistorical homosexual (minority) and heterosexual (majority) when these are actually historical and social creations. Across history and cultures, there was no transhistorical heterosexual or homosexual. Specific analyses of the social organization of erotic desires and gender formation are required in different historical and social contexts. As Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) pointed out in

her critical analysis of biological determinism, these approaches are not able to address the deeply social character of physiological developments.

In response to biological determinist theories that were initially deployed to argue that homosexuality was a form of biological anomaly or degeneration, various social constructionist approaches emerged out of movements against gay and lesbian oppression. These approaches, without denying the physiological, stressed the social and historical character of sexualities and sexual identifications. This position was used to challenge the social hegemony of institutionalized homosexuality as “natural.” Mary McIntosh (1968), early on, wrote about the social and historical emergence of the “homosexual role.” Jeffrey Weeks (1981), coming out of the Gay Left Collective, developed a social constructionist critical analysis of sexual regulation. Michel Foucault (1980), in his critique of the “repression hypothesis” of sexuality, developed a powerful critique of essentialist approaches, pointing to the recent historical invention of the “homosexual” with the emergence of bio-power and the explosion of sexual classifications in the later nineteenth century.

There are a number of differing social constructionist approaches, with some having a more discursive focus and others a more social relational and materialist character. In some of Foucault’s work, for instance, it is almost as if the homosexual emerges fully formed off the pages of medical and sexological discourse. What is not attended to in the same way is what this official discourse was responding to in the emergence of networks of people engaging in same-gender desire and also the response of the police and legal systems to this emergence. For some discourse-oriented approaches, there is an ontological problem since they are unable to explicate the social relations leading to

the emergence of the homosexual and the heterosexual beyond the level of official discourse. Responding to the limitations of this discursive emphasis, others have developed a more social relational and mediational analysis that includes the discursive. These approaches locate the emergence of the homosexual in the social spaces opened up by capitalist social relations beyond the different gender-based family “economy” (D’Emilio 1983), in how people came to seize and use these social spaces to develop their own erotic cultures, and in how they resisted policing and state and social regulation (Kinsman 1996). Others such as Jonathan Ned Katz (1995) have focused on how these social transformations and struggles also set the stage of the emergence of the heterosexual in a relational social fashion.

#### QUEER THEORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

More recently in relation to gay and lesbian organizing, including Queer Nation organizing in the United States and parts of Canada against anti-queer violence and queer invisibility, and also in critique of the narrowness of “homosexual,” there has been the generation of “queer theory.” In a broad sense, queer theory can refer to theories produced in response to heterosexual hegemony and the tyranny of the two-gender binary “system,” but in a more narrow and specific usage it is associated with the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and Judith Butler (1990), and is more discourse focused and influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist theorizing (Jagose 1996). The use of “queer” has also been contested as some lesbian and trans activists and theorists have pointed to how “queer,” like “homosexual,” can be used to submerge gender relations and the social experiences of women and

trans people. Although there has been some important work on connections of sexuality with race and gender, and that people are never just narrowly homosexual or queer, there has been a general eclipsing of class relations. Those with a more Marxist inclination have pointed out how currents in queer theory can be used to separate queer struggles from the social relations of class and class struggles.

Queer theory has made important contributions in attempting to shift gay politics away from being a “minority” politics to putting heterosexuality in question once again. It troubles the normal and heterosexuality, but unfortunately largely only on the discursive terrain. It is often not very grounded in social relations and struggles.

Partly in response to these currents in queer theory, a series of theorists, in different ways, have been attempting to give the insights of queer theory a more grounded historical and social basis. Some of this work can be loosely grouped together as “Queer Marxist,” and this includes the work of Rosemary Hennessy (2000), Kevin Floyd (2009), Alan Sears (2005), Gary Kinsman (1996), and Peter Drucker (2014). This work links queer struggles more directly to transformations within globalized capitalist relations and with struggles over class and against poverty, racialization, and gender relations.

#### NEW CHALLENGES: HOMOSEXUALITY, GLOBALIZATION, AND HOMONATIONALISM

A growing series of challenges have also been made by activists and theorists about the “Western”–“Northern” character of “homosexual” and “queer” and much of the theorizing based on this that has largely ignored histories and relations of colonization and imperialism. In the Global South, and among indigenous peoples, there are different

histories and traditions of gender and sexual organization that do not conform to the hetero–homo binary that have hegemonized sexual and gender formation in the “West.” Part of the current process of capitalist globalization has been an attempt to impose the heterosexual (majority)–homosexual (minority) binary on the rest of the world. This has come to undermine indigenous gender and erotic practices in many countries that can include more than two genders and erotic practices that cannot be made sense of through the heterosexual–homosexual binary. Massad (2007), for instance, has challenged the relevance of “homosexual” in Arab countries, given the differences in gender and sexual organization in these societies. While he may have put forward these arguments in a rather one-sided fashion, they raise major challenges to Western-centered homosexual and queer theorizing.

Forms of what Jasbir Puar (2007) described as homonationalism have also been generated in the “North” and “West” that construct these states as more “advanced” and “civilized” on homosexual rights than many countries in the global south. This in turn is tied up with class and racial formation in many Western homosexual/gay communities where new middle-class forces have emerged that wish to accommodate themselves with capitalist relations and with the neocolonizing and “civilizing” ambitions of their states toward parts of the Global South. This raises crucial theoretical questions. Some of the burning questions in social theory are related to how to develop a broader internationalist critical gender and sexual politics that is rooted in a critical analysis of class and racialization. This must be an approach that is able simultaneously to defend indigenous gender and erotic practices from attack while also defending those who now identify as homosexual and queer against sexual and gender oppression.

SEE ALSO: Compulsory Heterosexuality; Crime and Deviance; Heterosexism and Homophobia; Heterosexuality; Lesbianism; Queer Theory; Sexualities; Transgender and Transsexual

#### REFERENCES

- Brock, Deborah R., ed. 2003. *Making Normal: Social Regulation in Canada*. Toronto: Thompson/Nelson.
- Bunch, Charlotte. 1975. Not for Lesbians Only. *Quest*, 2(2): 50–56.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- D’Emilio, John. 1983. Capitalism and Gay Identity. In *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, 100–113. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Drucker, Peter. 2014. *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anticapitalism*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 2000. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Floyd, Kevin. 2009. *The Reification of Desire, Toward a Queer Marxism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. 2000. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Jagose, Annamarie. 1996. *Queer Theory, An Introduction*. New York: NYU Press.
- Katz, Jonathan Ned. 1995. *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. New York: Dutton Books.
- Kinsman, Gary. 1996. *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities*. Montreal: Black Rose.
- Kinsman, Gary and Gentile, Patrizia. 2010. *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Massad, Joseph. 2007. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McIntosh, Mary. 1968. The Homosexual Role. *Social Problems*, 16: 182–192.
- Ollman, Bertall. 1978. *Social and Sexual Revolution: Essays on Marx and Reich*. Boston: South End Press.
- Parker, Andrew. 1993. Unthinking Sex, Marx, Engels and the Scene of Writing. In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, edited by Michael Warner, 19–41. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1980. *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. London: Onlywomen Press.
- Sears, Alan. 2005. Queer Anti-Capitalism: What’s Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation? *Science and Society*, 69(1): 92–112.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Seidman, Steven, ed. 1996. *Queer Theory/Sociology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Smith, George. 1998. The Ideology of “Fag”: The School Experience of Gay Students. *Sociological Quarterly*, 39(2): 309–335.
- Weeks, Jeffrey. 1975. Where Engels Feared to Tread. *Gay Left*, (1): 3–5.
- Weeks, Jeffrey. 1981. *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*. Harlow, UK: Longman.
- Weeks, Jeffrey. 2010. *Sexuality*. London: Routledge.
- Weinberg, George H. 1972. *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

#### FURTHER READING

- Drucker, Peter, ed. 2000. *Different Rainbows*. London: Gay Men’s Press.
- McCaskell, Tim. 2016. *Queer Progress: From Homophobia to Homonationalism*. Toronto: Between the Lines.
- Parker, Andrew. 1993. Unthinking Sex, Marx, Engels and the Scene of Writing. In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, edited by Michael Warner, 19–41. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Seidman, Steven. 1997. *Difference Troubles: Queering Social Theory and Sexual Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.