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Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet

MICHAEL WARNER

"Oh, the sly Myra Breckinridge! Nothing can escape the fine net of her dialectic!"

Myra Breckinridge¹

This special section of *Social Text* has two purposes. The first is to suggest that much social theory could be usefully revised by taking gay politics as a starting point. The second is to urge that lesbian and gay intellectuals find a new engagement with various traditions of social theory in order to articulate their aims. Both interventions have been made necessary by a new style of "queer" politics that, no longer content to carve out a buffer zone for a minoritized and protected subculture, has begun to challenge the pervasive and often invisible heteronormativity of modern societies.

It might seem that the bridge between left social theory and lesbian/gay studies is already in place. Many of the leading figures of social thought for the past century have in varying degrees seen the necessity of thinking about sexuality as a field of power, as a historical mode of personality, and as the site of an often critical utopian imagination. There have been major branches of social theory in which the connection between sexuality and politics was an important or even paradigmatic concern — French social thought from Bataille to Deleuze; radical psychoanalysis, elaborated from Freud by Reich and others; the Frankfurt School, especially the strand that resulted in Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*; comparative anthropological theory beginning with Malinowski's *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*; even the critical liberalism of Bentham (or Sade). Liberationist sexual movements from as early as Whitman, Carpenter, and Wilde involved reflections on democracy and socialism; and radical gay social theory revived after 1969 in France, England, and Italy, in the work of Guy Hocquenghem, Jeffrey Weeks, the Gay Left Collective, Mario Mieli, and others. To these traditions Foucault brought such a reinvigorating transformation that his *History of Sexuality* has become an inescapable text for intellectuals otherwise oblivious to its subject. Meanwhile feminism has made gender a primary category of the social in a way that makes queer social theory newly imaginable. And in recent years feminists have returned powerfully to the topics of sexuality and lesbian/gay politics in the work of Gayle Rubin, Adrienne Rich, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Iris Marion Young, and many others. These

writers have argued that a nonoppressive gender order can only come about through a radical change in sexuality, even while they have also begun to argue that sexuality is a partially separate field of inquiry and activism.²

With such an illustrious history, with a literature so massive that it can be sketched this broadly, it might seem that queer left social/sexual theory stands at a convergence point for many of the most important intellectual movements of our time. What intervention could be needed to create this convergence when so many paths of modern thought already lead there?

Yet it remains depressingly easy to speak of “social theory” and have in mind whole debates and paraprofessional networks in which sexuality figures only peripherally or not at all — to say nothing of manifestly homophobic work. Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, and others have been able to write ambitiously comprehensive works (with titles like *The Constitution of Society*) in which sexuality plays no role.³ In most such cases the politics of marginal sexualities seems not so much neglected as blocked from view. In other writers, especially those such as Niklas Luhmann who share a structural or system-theoretical bent, sexuality features more importantly but only as a rather unqueer institution — not only heterosexual but normalized and functional.⁴ Perhaps more surprising is the absence of a more than fleeting consideration of sexuality in Laclau and Mouffe, in Bourdieu, or in the current theory of post-Fordism. Marcuse has fallen from view, while Foucault’s history increasingly tends to be summarized as a treatise on power or on an abstraction called “the body.”⁵ Social theory as a quasi-institution for the past century has returned continually to the question of sexuality, but almost without recognizing why it has done so, and with an endless capacity to marginalize queer sexuality in its descriptions of the social world.

Even the literature on the so-called New Social Movements, where theorists might have been expected to take gay politics as a model, continues to treat it as an afterthought, and then often with significant homophobia. Alberto Melucci, for example, refers to the gay movement only twice in a book designed to argue that new forms of democratic social movements are transforming the political landscape. The first instance is in a section called “Reproduction as a Choice,” which as a heading for sexual politics already inclines toward hetero and voluntarist assumptions: “In addition to the model of the heterosexual and monogamous couple, who are the foundation of the family institution and guarantee of the continuity of the reproductive process, new choices become possible. These parallel models, which are capable of coexisting with the heterosexual model and even of becoming institutionalized, include homosexuality [sic], singles, and a range of mobile and temporary couples living outside a stable matrimonial friendship.”⁶ Melucci’s commitments to “the family institution” and reproductive continuity run so deep that he

doesn't seem to have imagined that lesbians and gays might be critical of them. Thus he only imagines "homosexuality" as an additional choice, one that entails no challenge to the heterosexual order and seems to have nothing to do with power. Even this sick-making gesture turns out to be too generous for Melucci, who a few pages later takes it back by remarking that gay culture, "depriving sex of its erotic content, reduces it to a gymnastics of orgasm...it hastened the reduction of sex to the genital level and revealed the poverty of an exclusively male sexuality without eros."⁷

This is the kind of stuff that often passes as left social theory of gay politics; that it can do so indicates how little people like Melucci imagine participating in exchange with lesbian or gay intellectuals. (For this reason, although I'm arguing that such cant will only be eliminated by better social theory, I also think that the schoolyard typographical incantations made famous by Michelangelo Signorile's *Outweek* columns might be appropriate here. So this is for you, Alberto. Stop your IGNORANT MORALIZING, you HATEFUL PIECE OF TOE JAM! What would an UPTIGHT FUCKLESS PRIG like you know about eros, anyway? And if you think you can say MINDLESS CRAP like that and not hear back from us, then watch out for some GYMNASTICS IN YOUR FACE, Alberto!)

At the same time it remains possible to speak of "gay studies" and have in mind a booming field dominated by literary criticism, film criticism, and cultural history — but not social theory.⁸ The major theoretical debate over constructionism seems exhausted. Partly because that debate resulted in a more historicized and localized view of gay interests, and partly because the disciplines of literature and film studies have afforded a relatively free space for lesbian and gay critics, there has been a turn in gay studies toward the production of impressive new readings of particular cultural texts, usually with a psychoanalytic emphasis.⁹ The effect of this new "queer theory" wave has been to show in ever more telling detail how pervasive the issues of lesbian and gay struggles have been in modern culture, and how various they have been over time. But the success of that work now makes some other kinds of thinking necessary.

In keeping with that pattern the contributors to this issue all teach in university or college English departments. Their work opens directly onto social-theoretical issues that other disciplines have not taken up, suggesting that the new wave of lesbian and gay studies is at the point of having to force a thorough revision within social-theoretical traditions, of the kind being won by feminism. There are a number of distinct reasons why that engagement has become necessary: 1) from the most everyday and vulgar moments of gay politics to its most developed theoretical language, a major obstacle is the entanglement of the sexual order with a wide range of institutions and social ideology, so that to challenge the sexual order is sooner or later to encounter those other institutions as problems;

2) most broadly, there are very general social crises that can only be understood from a position critical of the sexual order; 3) many of the specific environments in which lesbian and gay politics arises have not been adequately theorized and continue to act as unrecognized constraints; 4) concepts and themes of social theory that might be pressed to this purpose are in fact useless or worse because they embed a heteronormative understanding of society; and 5) in many areas a new style of politics has been pioneered by lesbians and gays, little understood outside of queer circles.

Sexual Politics and the Social Order

In the everyday political terrain, contests over sexuality and its regulation are generally linked to views of social institutions and norms of the most basic sort. Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is intricated with gender, with the family, with notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences. It means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what "health" entails, or what would define fairness, or what a good relation to the planet's environment would be. Queers do a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer. (Alternatively many people invest the better parts of their lives to avoid such a self-understanding and the social reflection it would imply.)

Social reflection carried out in such a manner tends to be reactive, fragmentary, and defensive, and leaves us perpetually at a disadvantage. And it is easy to be misled by the utopian claims advanced in support of particular tactics.¹⁰ But the range and seriousness of the problems that are continually raised by queer practice indicate how much work remains to be done. Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts. The dawning realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have an idea of how widespread those institutions and accounts are.

The theoretical literature on modernity, for instance, says nothing at all about the fact that one of the most pervasive, deeply felt, and distinctive

structures of the modern world is the opposition between hetero- and homosexualities. As Jonathan Goldberg's essay in this issue makes clear, this opposition is such a constitutive moment in the self-understanding of modernity (or in its unconscious) that we cannot easily think comparatively about it, either in the epic period of New World colonialism or in current anthropology. Yet it is clear enough that modernity has entailed the globalization of a new and exacting sexual order, so that the regime of sexuality that first transformed Europe has now been registered not only in the New World but in all the reaches of modern colonialism.

Goldberg's essay demonstrates that the interaction between different cultures of sexuality mediates the colonial encounter on many levels at once. Much more remains to be said on this problem: not only could local analyses be done of comparable colonial settings around the world, but we could begin to consider why the heterosexualization of society was such a fundamental imperative for modern colonialism. This would involve considering, among other things, the way modernity models self-other relations, or the way modernity's consciousness of time is deeply intricately with a reproductive growth economy and its oedipal household. Thus modernity may be the historical epoch of what might be called repro-narrativity: the notion that our lives are somehow made more meaningful by being embedded in a narrative of generational succession. Needless to say, it would be difficult to claim here that a particular connection between modernity and hetero/homosexuality has been established, and my point is simply that the questions remain to be asked in a sustained way. Lesbian and gay critics have had much to say about the opposition of hetero- and homosexualities, but we are only beginning to speculate about its embeddedness in modernity, colonialism, structures of civil society, ideologies of liberalism, and the like.¹¹

The tactical necessities of queer politics mean that not every question facing us will be of such a global scale. Many will be embedded in too many contradictions to admit of a programmatic theoretical rationalization. But large-scale social questions tend to be backgrounded in all local struggles, and bringing them into view can often transform those struggles. As Cindy Patton has shown in *Inventing AIDS*, for example, the local requirements of AIDS organizing have newly brought into focus problems of welfare state-client relations, health care professionalism, first-third world relations, civil society structures of voluntary association, the privatized production of health services and goods, disparities of position between gays and other affected populations or between lesbians and gay men.¹² The more lesbians and gay men elaborate our positions in this political environment, the more we are called upon to consider our resistance to normalized sexuality in terms that are not always initially evident as sex-specific. Care of the elderly, to take yet another example, does not initially seem to be an issue of sexuality. But a society that relegates care

systematically to offspring and spouses leaves elderly lesbians and gays with a disproportionately high likelihood of neglect.

Two arguments by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Between Men* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), more forcefully suggest the necessity for such reconceptualizations, where gay politics would be the starting-point rather than the exception, and where it would not be limited to manifestly sex-specific problems. One of Sedgwick's best-known theses is that "homosocial" forms of domination are constituted in part by the repudiation of erotic bonds among men. According to Sedgwick, the ability to project those erotic bonds onto a marginal figure — the stigmatized body of the homosexual — has been crucial to the creation of modern homosociality, which in turn has inflected class identity and male domination. A more recent addition to this view is her argument that the strategic separation of mutually implied knowledges — secret knowledge, superior insight, disavowal, science, coded knowledge, open secrets, amnesia, the unsayable — is a medium of domination not reducible to other forms of domination, and one that finds its paradigmatic case in the homosexual and the closet.

In effect Sedgwick's work has shown that there are specifically modern forms of association and of power that can only be seen properly from the vantage of anti-homophobic inquiry. Both arguments therefore point the way toward significant social-theoretical problems. In the face of such questions, queer theory is opening up in the way that feminism did when feminists began treating gender more and more as a primary category for understanding problems that did not initially look gender-specific. The prospect is that queer theory may require the same kinds of revision on the part of social-theoretical discourse that feminism did, though we do not know yet what it would be like to make sexuality a primary category for social analysis — if indeed "sexuality" is an adequate grounding concept for queer theory. As more work develops on these lines, it will become more and more plausible to assert, as Sedgwick does in the first paragraph of *Epistemology*, that "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition."¹³

Social theory, moreover, must begin to do more than occasionally acknowledge the gay movement because so much of heterosexual privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society. Even when coupled with a toleration of minority sexualities, heteronormativity has a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world.

As Sedgwick shows in the first of the essays printed here, any imagination of desirable queerness is conspicuously absent in the psychoanalytic and psychiatric literature about child-rearing, which has only

allowed itself to imagine tolerating adult gays (lesbians rarely figure there). The idea that the emergence of more queers might be a desirable outcome remains unthinkable. Heterosexual ideology, in combination with a potent ideology about gender and identity in maturation, therefore bears down in the heaviest and often deadliest way on those with the least resources to combat it: queer children and teens. In a culture dominated by talk of “family values,” the outlook is grim for any hope that child-rearing institutions of home and state can become less oppressive.

Sexuality and its Global Environment

Part of the difficulty lies in the apparent separation — made practical and enforceable by family ideology — between alternative sexualities and social reproduction. Indeed, in Anglo-American culture the colloquial term by which many queer people define the enemy is not “straights” but, bitterly, “breeders.” The folk usage of this term illustrates the involvement of sexual identities with a wide range of cultural norms; it also illustrates the difficulty in clarifying what is at stake in those contested norms. The folk theory of breeder-identity attempts to demystify what could be called reprosexuality — the interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity. The point is not necessarily to forego childbearing, still less to manage population technocratically. Anti-breeder rhetoric represents a politically developed suspicion about a traditionalized self-understanding and about the way the premises of a growth economy govern the sexual order. Because those premises shape everything from gender norms to understandings of history and fantasies of self-transcendence, they are difficult to bring into focus. Reprosexuality involves more than reproducing, more even than compulsory heterosexuality; it involves a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission. Queers often find themselves in transgression not simply of a commandment to be fruitful and multiply, but more insidiously of the self-relation that goes with it.

Probably most lesbians and gay men have at some point encountered the obliterative heterosexual rationale in which it is asserted that if everyone were queer, the race would die out (i.e., so don’t be queer). Reproduction must be the logic of sexuality and the means of self-transcendence. Though this passes as enforceable wisdom in most contexts — where it is made natural by countless institutions of generational transmission of capital and culture — its illogic should need little comment here; it presupposes that there are no lesbian or gay parents, that people who have gay sex do not have other kinds, that heterosexuals only have sex when they want to reproduce, that sex always means coupling, that parental narcissism is higher consciousness. In fact, reproduction rationalizes nothing about sex; even granting the absurd premise that humans

are in short supply, a population would sustain itself if every coupling were random as to gender. These problems with repro dogma would be so obvious that we must seriously ask how anyone manages to believe it, for it seems to assert a paradigmatic status for heterosexual coupling against all reason. And why should that be so important? Why indeed, unless the real reason is to render the tacit value on reproduction itself unquestionable? Would heterosexuality find it necessary to exist — i.e., to be meaningfully opposed to something else — were we not invested in a growth economy of population?

Perhaps. At least repro ideology is not the only dimension of homophobia. But for many queer people it is an irony not entirely lost that we are being held morally culpable for not contributing to repro-narrative progress at a time when the global growth economy that has come to inform reprosexuality also threatens the ecological devastation of the planet. The reprosexual order has lately become embattled over abortion as well, of course, and although the most obvious drive in that conflict is the reaction against feminism, there is also a level on which the current obsession with the fetus represents, à la 2001, a displaced identification with future generations and a denial about the present. Modern Western culture seems to fantasize that a world destroyed for future generations can be redeemed by reproducing.

This complex convergence of sexuality, identity, economics, choice, and ecology is the starting point for Gore Vidal's Myra Breckinridge, that redoubtable and eminently queer social theorist: "I believe in justice, I want redress for all wrongs done, I want the good life — if such a thing exists — accessible to all. Yet, emotionally, I would be only too happy to become world dictator, if only to fulfill my mission: *the destruction of the last vestigial traces of traditional manhood in the race in order to realign the sexes, thus reducing population while increasing human happiness and preparing humanity for its next stage.*"¹⁴ Few of us can manage divinity of Myra's ample proportions, and any such statement of mission faces so many contradictions of its own (as in the prospect of first-third world relations that would be dictatorial, to use Myra's own term, a kind of ecofascism) that Vidal eventually crashes her chariot, returning her to a more local strategy of queerness. Thus while in *Kalki* Vidal works through the dangers of a merely Malthusian ecology of population that treats people rather than economies as the problem, in *Myra Breckinridge* and *Myron* he explores strategies of gender identity and self-transcendence that could challenge an instrumentalizing economy of global expansion.

Vidal gives Myra a compellingly clear vision of the way issues of sexuality involve not just personal expression, but judgments about social questions of considerable scope. Myra's character-defining insight is that the instrumental reason and growth economy that are destroying the

planet have been mediated through the institution of a paradigmatically reproductive sexuality enforcable at all levels, and that “traditional manhood” is a medium of that sexuality. Myra’s queerness is therefore rather more than the reactive politics of a natural minority. It is solicitation on a messianic scale.

As a strategy it contrasts sharply with that of the Chinese state and the United Nations, which have similarly become interested in population growth. In China the strategy has been one of simple control, a state policy of limiting births under criminal penalties. That policy does not in the least translate into support for nonreproductive sexualities, since the Chinese state also has a policy of criminal penalties and forced electroshock therapy for “homosexuals.” And neither the United Nations nor Amnesty International has been willing to classify that policy as a human rights issue.

The extreme version of homophobia enforced by the Chinese government thus demonstrates that homophobia does not in all contexts draw on the energies of a growth economy based in reproductive dogma. There is nothing rational or market-driven about the politics of alternative sexualities, since the promotion of nonreproductive sexuality might otherwise be seen as the state’s interest. In China and the US, then, homophobia is linked in very different ways to population growth. This is in keeping with one of the most important lessons of lesbian and gay theory in the past ten years: sexuality can have different meanings in different contexts. Sexual norms vary culturally, but not in any predictable relation to other factors, and there is therefore no necessary politics of intragender sex. The task of building an international lesbian and gay culture or politics depends on a great deal of comparative work, and must continually be regulated by critical comparison.

The Social Environment of Queer Politics

The theoretical problem of coordinating the local and the global is also a political problem. It requires bringing differently sexualized and differently politicized people into a movement that can address broad questions. Much depends on how the common ground is defined, and in recent years an important multicultural critique has shown that too often the common ground has been assumed to be that of relatively dominant positions: whites, males, middle-class activists of the US.

In order to continue this self-clarification of the movement, queer social theory must also reflect on the conditions that make the current practices of queer politics possible. This means, among other things, partially disarticulating itself from other kinds of identity politics and, partly, from the frame of identity politics itself. The first necessity here is to understand the historical constraints that stylize sexual politics as a form of identity politics — often with the result of major distortions. The

second necessity is to see that the differences between queer struggles and those of other identity movements, or alternatively of other New Social Movements, are often important, even definitive.

In saying this I am of course cutting against current wisdom, which is to insist on the alliance politics of the slogan, "race, class, and gender." And indeed alliance politics are necessary and fragile. The slogan, however, often implies not alliance or intersection so much as a fantasized space where all embodied identities could be visibly represented as parallel forms of identity. This political desire has exerted a formative influence on Anglo-American cultural studies in the form of an expressivist pluralism that might be called Rainbow Theory. It aspires to a representational politics of inclusion and a drama of authentic embodiment. There are many worse things in the world than Rainbow Theory, but its standard of expressivist pluralism results in several dangers, especially a reification of identity. Already people speak as though "difference" were in itself a term of value. (It isn't.) Marginal styles of embodiment, even while they appear more in a public arena, therefore continue to do so in hyper-allegorized form; i.e., as representing "race" or "gender" or "sexuality," now interpreted as signs of inclusion and authenticity.

A popular button sold in gay bookstores says, "Racism, Sexism, Homophobia: Grasp the Connections." Whatever the connections might be locally, they are not necessary or definitive for any of these antagonisms. Any one can do without the others and might have more connection with political conflicts less organized by identity. "Race, class, and gender" stand for different and overlapping ways of organizing people in response to different kinds of power. As styles of politics they have to be disarticulated from the national-representational space often fantasized in the very act of listing them. Historically we might say that queer sexuality is like gender or race in being a political form of embodiment that is defined as noise or interference in the disembodied frame of citizenship.¹⁵ This is to point to the common ground of "identity politics," itself insufficiently theorized as yet, and to the close relation between identity politics and a national imagination. Within this liberal-national frame of citizenship there is an important common ground to be grasped among identity movements. But it will be necessary to break this frame if we are to see the potential alliances with movements that do not thematize identity in the same way. The theory of New Social Movements has the advantage of cutting up the pie differently, and thus has the potential of reinserting queer politics in another frame. And political contexts other than the US have less disposition to identity parallelism; so there may be important lessons to be learned from a more comparative queer politics.

Comparative thinking is needed even within the frame of the identity movements. The family may be a site of solidarity and value for racial or ethnic struggles, for example, but current definitions of the family are

abysmally oppressive for lesbians and gays. Familial language deployed to describe sociability in race- or gender-based movements (sisterhood, brotherhood, fatherland, mother tongue, etc.) can be a language of exile for queers.¹⁶ Similarly, notions of alternative traditions or canons have been very useful for African-American and feminist scholars. But because queer politics do not obey the member/nonmember logics of race and gender, alternative canons and traditions cannot be opposed to the dominant ones in the same way.¹⁷ Indeed, the emphasis on reproductive continuity in such models can produce an extreme homophobia, and the tension resulting from such unrecognized disparities can make alliance politics difficult.

Different conditions of power give rise to different strategies that cannot always be made homogenous. Sometimes alliance politics can force important corrections; many themes and organizational efforts in gay politics have been based on the model of white, middle-class men in ways that are only beginning to be apparent. But strategic requirements may differ even where people act in the best faith. Because queer embodiment is generally invisible, for instance, it occasions a unique politics of passing and knowing, building into many aspects of the queer movement a tactics of visibility — classically in the performative mode of coming out, or “screaming,” and more recently in “outing” and the in-your-face politics pioneered by Queer Nation and ACT UP. Considerable stress, both within these organizations and in relation to other political groups, has resulted from the fact that these new tactics of public display respond in a primary way to the specific politics of queer embodiment.¹⁸

There are many unavoidable structural relations between the different fields of identity politics, if only because of the intrication of genetic and erotic logics in both race and gender. But the very incommensurability between genetic and erotic logics suggests that queerness, race, and gender can never be brought into parallel alignment. Sedgwick has gone so far as to suggest that “a damaging bias toward heterosocial or heterosexist assumptions inheres unavoidably in the very concept of gender.... Although many gender-based forms of analysis do involve accounts, sometimes fairly rich ones, of intragender behaviors and relations, the ultimate definitional appeal in any gender-based analysis must necessarily be to the diacritical frontier between different genders. This gives heterosocial and heterosexual relations a conceptual privilege of incalculable consequence.”¹⁹

This sort of speculation about the specificity of one or more queer problematics, their irreducibility to and/or definitional conflict with other problematics, is still only emergent. Much remains to be said about the unique relation of queer politics to histories of all sorts. Unlike other identity movements, for example, queerness has always been defined centrally by discourses of morality. There have always been moral pre-

scriptions about how to be a woman or a worker or an Anglo-Saxon; but not about whether to be one. Queerness therefore bears a different relation to liberal logics of choice and will, in ways that continually pose problems both in everyday life and in contexts of civil rights. Such historical conditions render the field of queer politics unlike any other even in the context of modern identity movements. The comparative problems posed by other cultural contexts are even more daunting.

Heteronormativity in Social Theory

Much of the work of feminist social theory has consisted of showing that basic conceptualizations — ways of opposing home and economy, political and personal, or system and lifeworld — presuppose and reinforce a paradigmatically male position.²⁰ Queer theory is beginning to be in position to make similar criticisms, sometimes with reference to the same oppositions (political and personal, intimate and public, market and lifeworld) but also with others — ways of distinguishing group members from nonmembers, the sexual from the nonsexual, ways of opposing the given and the chosen, or identifying the intimate with the familial.

It is too early to say how many conceptualizations of this sort may have to be challenged, but many of them have been central to left social theory. In this issue Andrew Parker suggests that at a fundamental level Marx's thought is especially intricately with a reproductivist conception of the social, falsely ontologized. Parker suggests that the language of theatricality in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* marks a crisis in the relation between production and interests, on one side, and politics and representation on the other. Metropolitan sexuality appears unruly if not untheorizable given Marx's general productivist and economist commitments. Theatricality and metropolitan sexuality, in Parker's reading, are therefore related and indicative problems in Marx's thought because the othering of each helps to constitute the marxian paradigm of production and reproduction.

This othering and the need to install it are not merely theoretical lapses but historical pressures that have conditioned marxist thought from the moment the two writing bodies of Marx and Engels began to collaborate. By calling our attention to the homosocial dynamics of that collaboration Parker suggests that marxist thought is embedded in a history of sexuality, reproductivism, and homosociality in a way that prevents it from grasping these problems as conditioning its own project. Similar objections could be made against other traditions of social thought, of course, and marxism has important countercurrents. But core elements of the marxist paradigm may have to be seen as properly ideological moments in the history of reproductivist heterosexuality.²¹

The general subordination of status conflict to class conflict in marxist thought has long been objected to by feminists and others. It is instructive

to consider, however, that at present there is no comparable category of social analysis to describe the kind of group or non-group that queer people constitute. "Class" is conspicuously useless: feminism could at least have a debate whether women constituted a specific economic class; in queer theory the question is unintelligible. "Status," the classical alternative in social theory, is somewhat better but does not account for the way the ascribed trait of a sexually-defined group is itself a mode of sociability; nor does it describe the terror and atomization by which its members become "members" before their presence in any co-defined group; nor the definitive pressure exerted by the assumption that this group, far from constituting one status among many, does not or should not exist. A lesbian and gay population, moreover, is defined by multiple boundaries that make the question who is and is not "one of them" not merely ambiguous but rather a perpetually and necessarily contested issue. Identity as lesbian or gay is ambiguously given and chosen, in some ways ascribed and in other ways the product of the performative act of coming out — itself a political strategy without precedent or parallel. In these ways sexuality defines — for most modern societies — a political interest-constituency unlike even those of gender or race. Queer people are a kind of social group fundamentally unlike others, a status group only insofar as they are not a class.

Queer Politics

The problem of finding an adequate description is a far from idle question, since the way a group is defined has consequences for how it will be mobilized, represented, legislated for, and addressed. Attempts have been made to use "nation," "community," even "ethnicity," just as "sexual orientation" has often been used as though it were parallel to "race" or "sex." But in each case the results have been partly unhappy, for the same reasons.²² Among these alternatives the dominant concept has been that of a "gay and lesbian community," a notion generated in the tactics of Anglo-American identity politics and its liberal-national environment, where the buried model is racial and ethnic politics. Though it has had importance in organizational efforts (where in circular fashion it receives concretization), the notion of a community has remained problematic if only because nearly every lesbian or gay remembers being such before entering a collectively identified space, because much of lesbian and gay history has to do with noncommunity, and because dispersal rather than localization continues to be definitive of queer self-understanding ("We Are Everywhere"). Community also falsely suggests an ideological and nostalgic contrast with the atomization of modern capitalist society.²³ And in the liberal-pluralist frame it predisposes that political demands will be treated as demands for the toleration and representation of a minority constituency.

It is partly to avoid this reduction of the issues that so many people in the last two or three years have shifted their self-identification from “gay” to “queer.” The preference for “queer” represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. The universalizing utopianism of queer theory does not entirely replace more minority-based versions of lesbian and gay theory — nor could it, since normal sexuality and the machinery of enforcing it do not bear down equally on everyone, as we are constantly reminded by pervasive forms of terror, coercion, violence, and devastation. The insistence on “queer” — a term defined against “normal” and generated precisely in the context of terror — has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence. Its brilliance as a naming strategy lies in combining resistance on the broad social terrain of the normal with more specific resistance on the terrains of phobia and queer-bashing, on one hand, or of pleasure on the other. “Queer” therefore also suggests the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics. And as a partial replacement for “lesbian and gay” it attempts partially to separate questions of sexuality from those of gender.

It would be a daredevil act of understatement to say that not all gays and lesbians share this view of the new queer politics. It will continue to be debated for some time. I have made my own sympathies clear because the shape of any engagement between queer theory and other social-theoretical traditions will be determined largely by the political practice in which it comes about. The task of queer social theory in this context as in so many others must be to confront the default heteronormativity of modern culture with its worst nightmare, a queer planet. This special issue will be followed, I hope, by many other efforts to that end.

Notes

1. Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge* (1968; repr. New York: Vintage, 1987), 120.
2. This paragraph gestures toward a bibliography so enormous that it could not be given here, and need not since most of it is well known. Texts that might not otherwise be familiar or readily accessible include Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in Carole Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 267-319; Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* trans. Daniella Dangoor (London: Allison & Busby, 1978); Mario Mieli *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*, trans. David Fembach (London: Gay Mens’ Press, 1980); The Gay Left Collective, *Homosexuality: Power and Politics* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980); Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985). For an extended discussion of Bentham’s interest in homosexuality as a test case for the liberal paradigm of privacy, choice, and individual expression, see Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985).
3. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984).
4. Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986).
5. The English translation of Habermas’s *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* makes a revealing slip; it refers to Foucault’s text as *The History of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988, p. 270). The situation is not always better within gay studies. Because of the dominance of the textual model of literary or film criticism, Foucault’s work is often interpreted in the new gay studies as arguing, almost in an echo of Whorf, for the efficacy of lexical shifts — as though discourse theory required us only to date the coinage of the term “homosexuality.”

6. *Nomads of the Present* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1989), 152.
7. *Ibid.*, 159.
8. There are, of course exceptions, especially work produced by the *Socialist Review*, such as Jeffrey Escoffier's "Sexual Revolution and the Politics of Gay Identity," *SR* 15 (1985): 119-53. The very breadth and tentativeness of Escoffier's article, however, shows to what degree it is exceptional in the new gay studies. A similar example is Barry Adam's "Structural Foundations of the Gay World," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27 (1985): 658-71. Both essays make gestures toward continental social theory, but remain primarily interested in defining a minority constituency for American identity politics. Adam goes so far as to use the term "homosexual" descriptively. Work of this variety, important though it is, does not represent quite the same challenge to heteronormativity in general that I detect in more recent queer theory based in textual criticism.
9. Readers not familiar with this large and rapidly growing body of work might consult the essays in the following collections: Ronald Butters, John Clum, and Michael Moon, eds., *Displacing Homophobia* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1989); Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden, eds., *Engendering Men* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Karla Jay, ed., *Lesbian Texts and Contexts* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1990); and Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Outside* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Work more specifically on film and television theory is only beginning to find its way into print, though it is a boom industry at the graduate-student level.
10. For a critique of utopian interpretations of gay cultural tactics see Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197-222.
11. On liberalism, see my "Homo-narcissism; Or, Heterosexuality," in Boone and Cadden, *Engendering Men*, 190-206; and "Thoreau's Bottom," *Raritan*, Fall 1991.
12. Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
13. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 1.
14. Myra Breckinridge, 36 (italics in original).
15. Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1991), and Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," forthcoming in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).
16. Though not necessarily. It can also be parodied ("Oh, sister!") or appropriated as an important resource (especially in voguing houses where one queen acts as "Mother").
17. See Sedgick, *Epistemology*, 48-59.
18. On this subject see the forthcoming essay by Elizabeth Freeman and Lauren Berlant, "Queer Nationality."
19. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 31.
20. I have in mind here especially Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *New German Critique* 35 (Spring/Summer 1985): 97-131; reprinted in her *Unruly Practices* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989), 113-43.
21. Another blockage against sexual politics in the marxist tradition, noticeable in the Melucci passage I quoted earlier, is the close connection between consumer culture and the most visible spaces of gay culture: bars, discos, advertising, fashion, brand-name identification, mass-cultural camp, "promiscuity." Gay culture in this most visible mode is anything but external to advanced capitalism, and to precisely those features of advanced capitalism that many on the left are most eager to disavow. Post-Stonewall urban gay men reek of the commodity. We give off the smell of capitalism in rut, and therefore demand of theory a more dialectical view of capitalism than many people have imagination for.
22. For an explicit elaboration of this model, see Steven Epstein, "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: the Limits of Social Constructionism" *Socialist Review* 93/94 (1987).
23. On this problem see Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), 226-56.