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Introduction

After Queer Theory – Manifesto and Consequences

Setting the Scene

This book makes the scandalous claim that queer discourse has run its course, its project made obsolete by the full elaboration of its own logic. Far from signalling the demise of anti-homophobic criticism, however, the end of queer offers an occasion to rethink the relation between sexuality and politics. Via a critical return to Marxism and psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan), I argue that the way to implant sexuality in the field of political antagonism is paradoxically to abandon the exhausted project of sexuality's politicisation.

There are two principal premises from which I develop each chapter's discussion. First: queer theory was set in motion by transformative developments in Anglo-American sexuality theory in the early 1990s, inspired by decidedly post-Marxist currents in what is generally known as poststructuralism. Derived from these currents, the hegemonic assumptions of queer theory have proven to be irreconcilable with the premises of a generically emancipatory politics. Second: queer's demise presents a strategic opportunity to reconceive how we think about sexuality and politics. Indeed, a quite paradoxical truth is exposed. The sexual politics of both feminism and queer theory generally insist that sex is inherently political. I argue instead that the reverse contention – that politics is inherently sexual – inserts sexuality immanently within the field of political antagonism. By *sexualising the political*, it becomes possible to wrest sexuality discourse from its various minoritarianisms,

opening it up to a genuinely universal emancipatory struggle beyond the reach of capitalism's complicity with the continuing proliferation and deconstruction of sexual and gender identities. My alternative thesis further exposes the underwhelming political implications of sexuality, as queer theory has generally understood this term – that is, as a discourse in the vague sense of the social constructionists and the more carefully articulated sense of Michel Foucault's poststructuralist historicisation.

Some context: on the left today, one hears from time to time that the gay and lesbian movements of the 1960s and 1970s featured a broader political horizon, linked to their organic relation to feminism and the New Left, than the more lifestyle-oriented, theoreticist and narrowly defined interests of the more recent queer agendas. There were remnants of authentic socialist praxis among members of the first post-Stonewall generation, and it's still possible to find work by writers who remain faithful to varying degrees to this seminal moment.¹ Even in the best-case scenarios, by contrast, poststructuralist queers tend merely to add 'class' to the end of their long list of preferred categories of social difference to which they lend their reformist attention.

But there is a second reality, much more paradoxical, which has been left largely unobserved to this day. Whereas previously politicised gay and lesbian communities, founded on generally unproblematized ideas of (minority) sexual identity, saw inherent links between their own ambitions and those of other oppressed constituencies (in particular straight women and people of colour), more recent queer writers and activists, asserting identity's inherently normative and exclusionary workings, have been comparatively self-concerned, reluctant to forge alliances with groups that don't define themselves in sexual terms. This has remained the case despite the often universalising reach of their claims (i.e. everyone is actually or potentially queer). To be sure, queer theory has been more interested in complex theoretical articulations and transgressing presumptive identity categories, than in thinking through its relation to the historical social movements that made queer possible in the first instance.

Counterintuitively, the subversion of sexual identity has turned the sexually marginal inward. With few exceptions, the queer contingent has been less willing than its predecessors to articulate its concerns to those of other groups, particularly geopolitically distant ones

whose marginality takes a more conventionally material, that is to say socioeconomic, form. As a theoretical discourse, the queer project has primarily addressed itself to an Anglo-American academic readership. More specifically, particularly during its early history, it has been situated in elite centres of academic capital in the United States. For these reasons, it should hardly come as a surprise that queer discourse in general reflects the interests and investments of this group of privileged academics and students in the global North.

The advent of queer saw a project coupling minority sexual identity with a wide-reaching emancipatory political agenda, cede ground to an approach that wed sexual identity's immanent subversion and a vision of the universal implications of queerness with an issue- and lifestyle-oriented micro-level politics, alarmingly distanced from the critique of capitalism or any programme for thoroughgoing social change. Far from forging broad political alliances, the project of identity's subversion has had the unanticipated effect of strengthening the boundaries that separate a given identity, however problematised or deconstructed, from the wider social field. Meanwhile, in the world of academic publishing, queer studies and queer theory are intellectually dead discourses. Excluding for the time being its elite theoretical vanguard, recent queer textual production can be divided into two moribund categories: introductions and textbooks that repeat old mantras from the 1990s, and a range of largely untheorised studies of cultural phenomena featuring non-normative sexual content, otherwise fully conventional in scope and aim.²

For its part, the vanguard of queer theory has most recently turned its attention to what we might loosely call the negative. Shame, impersonality, the antisocial and 'the end of sex' are the new fashionable themes.³ But these emergent tropes are still marked by the discourse's inherent contradiction. This contradiction can be traced all the way back to queer's dawning moment, when Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asked if homosexuality is of universal or particular concern. In light of queer's subsequent history, we can ask: is sexuality inherently, universally, queer? Or should it rather name a distinguished minority, an elite experimental constituency pushing the boundaries of community, social life, politics and subjectivity?⁴

This book suggests that these questions are no longer productive because they assume a false dilemma. If the former is the case, then

we lack a rationale for queer's existence as a special field of inquiry and, in any event, we already know all about it from Freud's strong theses about a constitutive bisexuality in the subject, and the drive's resistance to reproductive normalisation.⁵ Even more importantly, on the level of theoretical practice, the premise of queer universality – the idea that sexuality is inherently queer – demonstrates against its own intentions how sexuality is an inauspicious starting point for a project invested in genuine social change, one which addresses itself to a humanity generically conceived. This is so because the universality premise implicitly desexualises expressions of political interest that don't make explicit reference to sex. In other words, sexual politics is viewed as a subspecies of a generic politics, which implies unhelpfully that there's a politics that has nothing to do with the libido. For their part, artists and critics who opt for the alternative minoritising option have produced texts that are not without interest. Because they adopt a mode of aesthetic and experiential analysis limited to merely sexual or erotic utopian horizons, however, work in this mode fails to qualify as political in any genuine, that is to say socialist, sense of the term.

After Queer Theory foregrounds the strong, if not absolute, determination of sexual identities by economically structured social relations. Sexual identities, however deconstructed or problematised, are always in a significant sense responses to developments in the relations of capital. This is to say that the discourses of sexuality and sexual identity are necessarily ideological. As Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai argued with respect to women, *class antagonism has always-already divided the 'queer community' from itself*. Or, perhaps more accurately, the identification of class antagonism places the queer on the side of what we used to call the bourgeoisie. Class is a diagonal difference that cuts through all the other differences – with the exception of sexual difference – that queer theory and poststructuralism have alternatively valorised.

Each of the chapters that follows this introduction seizes upon a significant aspect of the queer argument, exposing its inconsistencies and problematic political assumptions. Each then begins to propose challenging alternatives inspired by a critical return to the psychoanalytic and Marxist traditions. Although the elaboration of these alternatives has barely begun, *After Queer Theory* aims to clear the terrain for a fresh start. It looks forward to the day when the concern

for sexuality in cultural and political studies is wedded to a genuinely emancipatory and transformative vision of anti and post-capitalist social change.

Six Points

The argument this book develops can be summarised in the form of six main theses. Each is outlined below, followed by a condensed exposition. I revisit each argument in more detailed and complex ways throughout the rest of the book. Everything relates back in one way or another to these key points. Some readers may wish to return periodically to this section as they work their way through.

1. *All the valuable points queer theory has made about human sexuality were previously made by Freud and developed in (aspects of) the psychoanalytic tradition.* For instance, the foundational claim that queer theory ‘politicizes sex, gender and sexuality in a way that severs the notion of identity from any stable reference points’⁶ fails to add substantial insight to the argument of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. In fact, Freud’s theory is more radical than at least this particular queer iteration. Rather than assume that sexual identities slide promiscuously and unpredictably from one ‘reference point’ to another, psychoanalysis posits instead that sex is coterminous with the immanent subversion of each and every such point. Sex is the obscene shadow of every social identity; it presents the constant threat of collapse into nonsense, non-meaning.

2. *The promise of queer universalism – that everyone is (potentially) queer – is compromised by both an identitarian gesture of self-privileging and a reference, tending towards paranoia, to the quasi-omnipotence of heterosexism or ‘heteronormativity’.* To rationalise its distinct existence, queer generically references a style or aesthetic, a (non)identity, a set of affects or feelings, a politics, or a mode of sociality or relation, which it then routinely differentiates from an idealised and hostile adversary, the social and psychical purchase of which is unhelpfully exaggerated. To be clear, I don’t wish to minimise the sometimes lethal effects of homophobia. The point is rather that the premise of

a heteronormativity embedded in the very fabric of culture, society, 'power', or subject production is both incorrect and self-defeating.

Here again, psychoanalysis is more instructive. It first takes the homosexual current of the libido *as such* as a foundational and universal fact of psychic life, and then sets out to analyse its manifold vicissitudes. There is no non-libidinal, non-sexual obstacle to homosexuality. The corollary of this is that any such obstacle is already homosexual. Further, the psychoanalytic claim that sexuality is neither primarily reproductive nor naturally heterosexual is generic in nature. There's no such thing as reproductive or fully heterosexual – 'normal' – sex. In this precise sense, *sex as such is queer* and, despite the protestations and asceticisms of various moralistic would-be legislators, there's no actually existing normality against which it might be contrasted. Sex is always-already transgression of the norm. This also implies that there's no such thing as (a particular) 'transgressive sexuality'. As a result, the injunction to (be) queer tends to have perversely normalising effects. This is the case, for example, with the various queer vanguardisms that wish to normalise promiscuity, inveigh against same-sex marriage, or impose regimes of aesthetically-conceived forms of alternative social being.

3. *No positive social or political claim can be made in the name of queer when queer is defined, as above, as the generic real of sex.* Further, there is nothing in this claim that in any way hinders the war against homophobia, which should and will continue. The proper way to pursue the intersection of sex and politics is to inquire after the libidinal logic, the unconscious fantasies, that buttress particular political judgments and desires.

Speculatively, the imperative is to theorise and instantiate new forms of liberatory sublimation. As Alain Badiou has forcefully argued, the truths from which can be deduced the project of human emancipation from oppression and inequality are generic, universal in their address.⁷ Generic humanity is sexed (*sexué*, as the French say), and *in this precise sense only*, queer. The corollary of this is that political programmes that fail to acknowledge human sexuality in this way (for example, programmes that normalise heterosexuality and legislate against 'deviations') are fundamentally illegitimate, and can be shown to be illegitimate without arduous effort.

4. *There can be no meaningful, specifically sexual, utopianism from an authentic psychoanalytic perspective.* This doesn't imply that properly political utopias of all kinds are inherently and always undesirable. Although his misinformed polemic against psychoanalysis continues to have disastrous effects on the study of sexuality, Foucault was well placed historically to draw the lesson of the various ill-fated 1960s and 1970s lifestyle vanguardisms. Utopianisms centred on erotic subjectivity remain without exception tied to liberal or libertarian individualisms, which can only detract from a meaningfully political horizon of social transformation.

5. *Properly formulated, the psychoanalytic idea of sexual difference is neither heterosexist nor anti-feminist.* The various anti-oedipal and gender theory arguments animate a wish-fulfilment fantasy of infinite sexual and gender possibilities, which solves only a false problem. For psychoanalysis, there are only two possibilities for sexualisation, for *failing* to achieve a sexual identity. That these possibilities are masculine and feminine in no way establishes a sexual relation, nor does it impose a putative 'compulsory heterosexuality'. There is no necessary connection between either biological and psychical sex, or psychical sex – masculine or feminine – and the biological sex of one's partner(s).

Usually taken to mean that men and women are neither sexually complementary nor naturally inclined to one another, Lacan's dictum 'there is no sexual relation' must inevitably relate to same-sex partners also. Same-sex partners are neither more nor less naturally suited to one another than their heterosexual counterparts. Freud was right to insist that there are fundamental psychical differences between the sexes, and in this precise sense only they're unequal. This inequality, however, carries no *necessary* political or social consequences. Nor is it even necessarily hostile to programmes based on the feminist principle of 'equality between the sexes', which usually acknowledge anyway that sexual equality is contingent on the recognition of particular differences between the sexes, however these are conceived.

6. *The recent queer interests in affect and the negative are politically inadequate.* The affective turn is apolitical and narcissistic because it ignores the psychoanalytic insight that affect – with the exception of anxiety – is always connected to an unconscious object that has been

disguised or distorted in order to break the barrier of repression. Unanalysed, affect is fundamentally a mechanism of defence. For its part, the so-called antisocial thesis in queer theory is desirable to the extent that it lays bare the connection between, on the one hand, the drive's involuted, nonsocial, incommunicable qualities and, on the other, the constitutive antagonism of the social, that is the inability of the social world to organise itself into a consistent, unbroken whole.

The antisocial current has also provided a refreshing alternative to the bourgeois and assimilationist trajectory of the (post) gay movements, at least to the extent that we discount the bourgeois, primarily American, academic milieu to which its purchase has largely been limited. Politically, however, both tendencies leave much to be desired. The cult of the death drive offers only a decadent nihilism, which casts any and all references to futurity as abstractly reactionary.⁸

Alternatively, when antisocial queer theory acknowledges the need for a dialectical counterpart to the negative, it produces only elitist programmes for vanguard social life or alternative aesthetic programmes with political implications that are ambiguous at best. Any politically significant discourse on social negativity must acknowledge its relation not only to psychical antagonism, but also to the antagonisms of capitalism, both internal and external. The internal antagonisms pertain to how capitalism's conflict with itself creates a dependency on crisis, imperialism and war; the external to how capitalism necessarily produces a class conflict, on which it must expend tremendous resources in order to disguise its workings from the oppressed.

The following five chapters offer detailed examinations of specific sites of discourse that raise central questions concerning the relation of queer discourse to the Marxist and psychoanalytic traditions. Each chapter makes suggestions about how the anti-homophobic project can integrate itself with a new political discourse that extends beyond the limits of the queer problematic. The concluding chapter resumes where the first chapter leaves off: it examines one final thematic in contemporary queer discourse – so-called antisocial queer theory – and elaborates on the parameters of a new way of thinking about the place of sexuality in transformative political thought.