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Class matters . . . but how much? Class, nation, and queer life

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The triumph of a class-based social theory and sociology was at best short-lived. During much of the 19th century, Marx's ideas about social class and capitalism were rivaled, and in many respects, surpassed in influence by the sociology of Comte and Spencer. And by the turn of the century, social theories took shape in France and Germany that rivaled Marxism in sophistication and scope while criticizing a class-centered sociology. If we consider, moreover, the internal history of Marxism, the foundational status of class has not fared much better. The generation of theorists that succeeded Marx and Engels, that of Korsch, Gramsci, and Lukacs, reconstructed Marxism in ways that circumscribed class and the critique of political economy. Unlike their contemporaries, Lenin and Luxemburg, these critical Marxists underscored the central role of the state, cultural processes, and the dynamics of civil society. The third generation of critical Marxists, the Frankfurt school, the school of 'Italian Marxists,' and the towering figure of Sartre, all but abandoned class and the critique of political economy in favor of a critique of instrumental or dialectical reason. Even the muscular Marxism of Althusser displayed a deep ambivalence regarding class analysis as the role of the state and ideology figured prominently. Of course, scientific Marxists, from the Second International to Baran and Sweezy, Mandel, Wallerstein and G.A. Cohen continued to defend a class-centered social analysis grounded in a revised critique of capitalism.

Euro-American nations experienced a resurgence of Marxism with the rise of the new social movements and populist rebellions in the 1960s. Virtually every social movement in the USA, UK, France, Netherlands, and elsewhere, from Black Power, Feminism, to Gay Liberationism, initially articulated a social critique in the idiom of Marxism. But it was also the case that each of these movements, especially in the USA and France, ended up abandoning Marxism and considerably narrowing the role of class analysis and the critique of political economy.

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During the formative years of these identity movements there were heated discursive struggles around which account of difference, social oppression, and liberation, and which social vision, would shape the politics of the movement. In each instance, Marxism, at least as a foundational theory of society and politics, ceded ground. Indicative of the marginalization of Marxism, by the 1980s the key texts of American theoretical feminism were the decidedly post-Marxist statements of Rich's 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence', Rubin's 'The traffic in women', Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, and Mackinnon's *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Apart from some early efforts to fuse Marxism and feminism (Eisenstein, Harstock, Hartmann), by the 1990s Marxism was absorbed into American feminism largely through standpoint theory and an intersectional analytic, both of which entailed the abandonment of the foundational status of political economy. In France, the towering influence of Lacan and poststructuralism shaped the post-Marxist feminism of Irigaray, Kristeva, and Wittig. It was perhaps *only in the UK that feminist theory incorporated Marxism in a central way*. But then it was arguably only in the UK that materialist feminism sustained a central place in academic and political circles through the 1990s.

Turning to critical sexuality studies we find similar national patterns. In the USA, gay liberationists and lesbian-feminists sought to absorb the critical spirit of Marxism, while rejecting its class and economic centered analytic. At the heart of gay liberationism was a critique of compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender norms. Although many liberationists imagined their critique as part of a broader analysis of capitalism, racism, and imperialism, this appeal was almost entirely rhetorical. The critique of capitalism played virtually no role in their concretized accounts of gay oppression. Similarly, American lesbian-feminists at best paid lip service to Marxism; the ground of their critique and politics was the dynamics of the patriarchal, heterosexual family. We should not be surprised then that Queer theory, which has been largely an American event, is a thoroughly post-Marxist discourse. To say this is not to say that Queer theory has been exclusively cultural or discourse-centered. Queer theory, at least in certain prominent currents, advanced a social structural critique but one that pivots on the critique of institutionalized or compulsory heterosexuality and gender binary rather than political economy and social class.

By contrast, the struggle over the theory and politics of sexuality and gender among gay and lesbian radicals in the UK has had a decidedly different tone and trajectory. Marxism, and a robust materialist feminism, has been incorporated into critical sex studies. Even under the pervasive influence of Foucault, key figures such as Weeks, Mort, and Richardson, have continued to stipulate (if not actually analyze) the key role of the political economy of capitalism. But, above all, it has been among British lesbians and feminists that we find a critical sexuality studies that retains both the 'materialism' of Marxism and the refusal to separate gender and sexuality, which has been a feature of American queer studies (e.g. Jackson, 2006; Richardson et al., 2006). It's hardly surprising then that the

recent surge of class analysis in critical sexuality studies comes chiefly from the British.

We need to be precise about exactly what is at stake here. The issue is not whether social class should be a part of critical sexuality studies. No one would take issue with the claim that 'social class [is] a major axis of power which positions LGBT people unequally and unjustly' (McDermott, this volume). Rather, at issue is the status of class, its salience, and its connection to the critique of political economy. Specifically, should social class and the critique of capitalism serve as a foundation or as a sustaining ground of concretized social accounts of queer life?

If the essays collected in this volume are indicative of the current direction of class-related research, it must be said that there is little support for the robust claims for social class and capitalism. These essays offer nuanced empirical case studies of the role of class and its intersection with sexuality or gender in shaping varied aspects of queer life. There is virtually no effort to ground class analysis in a critique of political economy. This holds true, I might add, for those critics who have defended a Marxist queer studies, for example Morton (1996), Hennessy (2000), Evans (1993). Though often provocative in productive ways, these critics have so far refused to seriously defend Marxism as a foundational theory and politics against its many critics, from Weber and Parsons to Sahlins, Habermas, Giddens, Baudrillard, and Foucault. Until they do so, or alternatively provide empirically concretized accounts that actually link capitalism, class, and sexuality in ways that bear comparison to the empirically rich accounts inspired by Foucault or the critical sociology of a Rubin or Weeks, their critique registers more as rhetoric or political posturing than serious social analysis.

But what of the narrower claim that class should be at the center of critical sex studies? Here too we need to be clear. At issue is not whether lesbian, gay, and queer life is class structured or whether class is a dimension of inequality within queer life, but *whether it's a central axis of difference and hierarchy*. In other words, *are queer lives and cultures class based?*

To simplify, and hopefully to bring some analytical clarity to this topic, I will argue the negative case. For reasons of space I reference only the USA, and do so in an admittedly circumscribed way. The proposition I wish to defend is that from roughly the 1970s, queer life in the USA has been class mixed. I am not discounting or denying the ways in which class structures the culture and politics of queer life. Clearly some tensions and conflicts within queer life are class related. However, I am suggesting that class has not been a central axis of difference and division in post-Stonewall queer life. It would be more compelling to argue that gender, not class, has been the central axis of social and political division in post-Stonewall queer life, but even that has been changing in the past decade or so.

Consider the following. Between roughly the pre-Second World War period and the post-Stonewall era, there occurred a significant shift in queer life. In the former, *class did organize separate queer worlds*. The prewar lesbian world was class divided. Many studies have documented the contrast between a working-class lesbian bar culture and a middle-class world organized around private, informal

networks and parties (Faderman, 1991: 181; Kennedy and Davis, 1993). For example, after analyzing class dynamics in prewar lesbian life, Faderman concludes: 'In the 1950s and '60s and earlier, such class mixing was extremely rare. Working-class lesbians tended to socialize only with other working-class lesbians. . . Middle-class lesbians groups. . . tended to be made up exclusively of women who earned their livings in professions as teachers, librarians, or social workers' (1991: 178; Gilmartin, 1996). Similar class patterns were evident among men in prewar America. In this regard, Chauncey documents a public gay working-class culture in Manhattan's Lower East Side in the 1920s. This culture revolved around pubs, cafes, dance halls, saloons, and balls, and was integrated into working-class neighborhood life. By contrast, middle-class men gravitated to private settings. Indeed, Chauncey speaks of a 'middle class gay residential enclave [that] developed on the Upper East Side in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s' (1995: 159). Moreover, whereas working-class men understood same-sex desire as indicative of a gender-inverted status ('the fairy'), middle-class men tended to separate gender and sexuality. The latter pioneered the notion of homosexuality as an exclusively sexual identity (1995: 100).

Stonewall symbolized a break not only from the politics of assimilation, but from the class politics of the earlier era as well. One way of stating this change is as follows: the queer middle class came out. Thus, the new lesbian, often young, educated, and feminist, fled the bar culture of the preceding decades in favor of class-mixed spaces such as cafes, political organizations, cultural festivals, collectives, and C-R groups. Many working-class lesbians and older middle-class women apparently found this more class-mixed, public lesbian culture intimidating and, for some, unwelcoming. So, while the ideal of the new lesbian community, especially the lesbian-feminist one, was that of a role-free, class-mixed social world, it is unclear just how much this ideal was realized in these new social spaces. As Faderman argues, despite idealizing working-class women, many lesbian-feminists were themselves middle and upper middle class, and this informed their approach to lesbian life. By contrast, in the course of the 1970s and 1980s a public gay culture formed around bars and bathhouses, which was decidedly class mixed. Arguably, gay men had an easier time creating class mixed spaces. Their sense of masculine entitlement, their financial independence, along with a disposition to collapse homosexuality into a form of erotic play and self expression, and the forging of a declassed clone style, encouraged working-class men to participate in a class-mixed public culture.

If post-Stonewall lesbian and gay culture was more class mixed than previous decades, it remained fundamentally *gender divided*. The gender-mixing ideal of gay liberationists gave way to a reality of gender division and separatism. Gay liberationism and, by the mid-1970s, gay rights organizations, were dominated by men. At the same time, lesbians forged their own culture and politics, in particular lesbian-feminism. And even as lesbian-feminism began to unravel by the late 1970s, many American women gravitated towards cultural feminism and a women-centered life that upheld a separatist norm. Gender division and

antagonism, rather than class division, defined queer identity, social life, and politics through the 1970s and 1980s. This was reflected in the rise of separate gender-based cultural production, for example publishers, literature, and scholarship.

By the mid-1980s, this culture of gender separation and antagonism was beginning to erode. AIDS, along with a right-wing assault on queer life, proved to be unifying events for gay men and lesbians. But also, tensions and heated conflicts were erupting within these gender exclusive cultures. In this regard, it is telling that some of the fiercest discursive struggles of the 1980s occurred among gay men for whom the AIDS crisis raised questions about the morality of the bathhouse culture with its separation of carnal desire and affect. Similarly, feminists and lesbians turned on each other as they publicly aired their disagreements around S/M and pornography. In these debates, we see the beginning of the breakdown of gender separatism, as discursive and political alliances were formed across gender lines.

Tellingly, as class and gender separatisms were weakening, race was assuming a prominent place in American queer culture. While some critics interpret the new salience of race in the late 1980s and 1990s as exposing the racism of queer life, my own view is that it is as much a result of the new publicness of nonwhite queer people. Black, Latino, and Asian men and women were coming out in unprecedented numbers in the 1980s. To the extent, moreover, that nonwhite queer men and women were unwilling or unable to come out in their racial and ethnic communities, in part because of the absence of public queer cultures and a robust women's movement, many migrated to what were overwhelmingly white gay and lesbian public cultures. The claim to publicness on the part of nonwhite queers generated the race debates of the 1980s, and produced in the 1990s more race-mixed spaces, as well as the rise of race-specific queer public cultures.

To summarize, the historical triumph of a rights oriented, professional, national movement inspired by multicultural ideals, along with the AIDS crisis, eroded the class and gender divisions of the previous decades. Today, many of the key social environments of queer life, from community centers and lobbying organizations to gay-straight alliances, parent, and recreational groups, are class and gender, and often race, mixed, at both the leadership and mass base levels. Of course, there are still class-specific, gender-specific, and race-specific social spaces and organizations addressing real differences and inequalities along these social dimensions. However, these subgroups are today, at least in the USA, set within gender-class-and-race mixed social worlds, even if they still exhibit patterned asymmetries and inequalities.

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