Sexuality and Gender: Linked Through Theory

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This essay is an examination of queer theory in the context of the perceived systems of domination over women and homosexuals. It is an attempt to explain these systems using existing theoretical parameters, those of queer theory, as defined by Annmarie Jagose. The relevance and application of the theory is debated, and the systems are analyzed for the purposes of identifying aspects which queer theory can be applied to. Finally, the usefulness of queer theory to overall social science studies is examined, with the conclusion that queer theory is worthy of study, but very difficult to institute in an attempt to bring about change.

Those who are predisposed to conditions outside the dominant power norms are inevitably led to formulate knowledge bases that justify their condition in light of the general repression they are faced with. Both women and homosexuals are two groups who have attempted to escape subjugation through application of intellectual modes of resistance, whether through artistic expression or attempts at the attainment of political power. Through the later formulation of theoretical frameworks to integrate these resistances into patterns of human actions, a more salient picture can be drawn of these events that reflects larger movement towards a system lesser dominated by the status quo. Queer theory, which relates to the principles and constructions of the concept of identity, offers explanations and perspectives that can illuminate the experiences of women and homosexuals toward recognizing the social building of prescribed identities that essentially have no bearing on personal realities, according to this theoretical framework. In sum, queer theory offers a crucial perspective on the construction of identity in the context of past and present struggles, but is extremely difficult to accept as a solution to the problems its presents.

Queer theory is one that does not particularly lend itself to easy categorization, as it contains principles that can become easily disintegrated when introduced to a wider spectrum. Its basic tenet regards the fallacy of identity, even, according to Jagose (1996), “calling into question such apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’.” Recognizing identity as entirely a construction of the individual, queer theorists seek to remove the barriers that formulate and assign identities; the goal of this identity-based theory is to basically remove identity as constituted in our culture as a viable reality. This essential goal has been somewhat undermined by the politicizing of the concept of the “queer,” with many attempting to use this term as a description of only gay and lesbian individuals and only in reference to their organized resistance to heterosexual normativity. In fact, queer theory has application for all of the subaltern groups, or groups outside the dominant cultural norms. This includes women and minorities, consid-
ering its general goal of divorcing socially constructed identities from individuals who act independent of societal expectation. Utilizing these theoretical principles to examine resistance to heterosexual normativity and patriarchy allows for questions about the construction of identity in terms of the function that social hierarchies have on perpetuating the status quo and domination over the subordinate.

The concept of identity was the root of many of the ideas and constructions of homosexuality in the early twentieth century, showing how constructed identities can be traced to emergence within a historical context, thus revealing their constructed identity. The concept of gender inversion, articulated in response to the Harlem Renaissance in the middle of the twentieth century, was one which identified homosexuality as the result of confusion of gender roles in the individual practicing homosexual behavior; the psychological definition of the homosexual would have posited that homosexuals were simply the product of psychoses that led to gender reversal; or, in Kevin Mumford’s (1996) words “the dominant belief that sexual being and gender role were inextricably linked.” Following this was a general projection of deviance “attributing more power to sexuality as a singular force shaping human personalities.” The essential result of such classification was to give homosexuals an identity that kept them from infiltrating the mainstream culture, despite their presence as a distinctive cultural unit. Compounding the complexity of the issue, according to Mumford, dominant whites reacted to this new unit by conflating homosexuals with African Americans, apparently finding no suitable identity for something as abstract to their religious mores as differing sexual orientations. Lumping homosexuality with African Americans allowed the overarching ideas about inherent inferiority and deviance to merge into an easily identifiable group of subalterns. Such combination of biologically unrelated concepts of race and sexuality has impacted people to this day, as many black men still see homosexuality as “a white man’s perversion.” The queer theorist would recognize that the projection of identity in this case has led to nothing but confusion, conflict, and subjugation due to a principle (identity) that has no business being assigned unwillingly to a group of people.

Patriarchy is equally associated with societal constructions of identity, though the structure of patriarchy, according to theoretical models such as queer theory, is significantly more socially bound than the identity of homosexuals. Patriarchy is regarded as being ingrained into all aspects of civil and professional life, with its advantages being characterized as a total system of perpetuation that collectively benefits males over females. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) asserts that “all women occupy the category of devalued Other that gives meaning to all masculinities,” (p. 207) thus stating her belief that patriarchy is not only a system that favors the continuance of male domination, but inherently requires that all women are forever subjugated as to not upset the status quo gender hierarchies that are beset on particular socially constructed identities. Collins goes on to describe the particular plight facing African American women, who “have learned to become strong black women (SBW). Being a SBW often means enduring abuse, namely, physical, emotional, and sexual harassment” (p. 208).
Collins cites numerous such examples of the ways in which the hegemonic gender identities, even when supposedly granting newly, more powerful identities to groups such as black women, still use these identities in ways that lead to further abuse and subjugation. Through the identity of gender roles, furtherance of domination is virtually assured and only through critically examining the purpose and ends of such identities can change occur.

Overt resistance to the systems of patriarchy and heterosexual normativity were and are faced with the enormous challenge of converting set assigned identities of gender and sexual roles into those which could allow for greater movement within society. The gaining of women’s suffrage in 1919 is an example of the decades-long struggle of women to shed the identity assigned to them. This identity rendered them as politically incapable of projecting agency, and thus set into motion a set of progressive steps that would weaken the notion that a woman’s place was so specific as to prevent her from acting outside of it under any circumstances. The intellectual power it took to force this change in identity, however, is an example of the strength that constructed identities have over individual freedom. Similarly, homosexuals were in this period given biologically deviant identities that precluded the possibility of them ever achieving assimilation into “normal” society under this scenario. Resistance primarily consisted of expression of identity as seen from the bottom up; the creation of locations and intellectual spaces such as those in Harlem, N.Y. allowed non-heterosexuals to forge their own identities free of the repression placed upon them by a society that would generally refuse to even acknowledge the existence of what was to them biological reality. Resistance to societal assignments of identity requires intense organization in order to begin the process of creating identities that can reflect individuality.

The organization required for such movements of change have to be based in an intellectual set of principles that can lead to understanding and change. Queer theory, as described above, constitutes a very interesting approach to the development of interpretive frameworks. Its resistance to complete application makes it very difficult to institute it in a concrete fashion to bring about progressive change. Its misuse regarding the political ramifications of the word “queer” are an example of its misinterpretation when applied to a larger scale; assigning a “queer” identity to a group of people as large and diverse as non-heterosexuals violates the principles of the theory wholly. The violation of these principles retains relevance in contemporary language with such terms as “Islamic” or “Asian” being assigned to enormous groups of vastly diverse people; these represent but two modern examples of terms that rely on social construction.

Unfortunately for organized gay resistance to domination, queer theory would also seem to resist their attempts to gain social advances for all homosexuals. A queer theorist would not only have no interest in being classified in ways that would result from political organizing, but end result goals such as attainment of marriage rights would have little significance given the fact that they would only permit marriage among set identities of people. Men marrying men or
women is irrelevant, in this perspective, because all identities involved are constructed and not representative of individuals. Queer theory’s construction being so thoroughly post-modern, there is some sense that its desire to completely tear down the walls of identity is, like much of post-modernism, an interesting but somewhat unattainable and fruitless goal. However, the general theory certainly could aid in allowing people to understand the reality of identity as a thing which they have not themselves chosen or attained, and this realization could lead to an awareness that there truly is no set rationalization behind identity, and that they should essentially strive to loosen some of their adherence to social identities that lead to domination.

References

