



Cultural Identities

by Matthew D. Johnson

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Much commonsense logic about gay and lesbian life in North America, Western Europe, and Australasia (as well as much scholarship on gay history in these regions of the world) has assumed that in the wake of gay liberation, new, politically informed conceptions of sexual identity have irrevocably overtaken "older" modes of identification among persons engaging in same-sex sexual behavior. Such "alternative" sexual identities are frequently imagined as an unenlightened historical circumstance to be superseded.

As the politics of gay and lesbian liberation and the modes of identification that they prescribe have made their way into more and more regions of the world, contemporary indigenous sexual identities are often also dismissed as atavistic products of profoundly homophobic societies.

Many have assumed that the homogenization of diverse sexual identities into a global "lesbigay" identity is necessarily a good thing, proof that gay liberation is working. Arguably as more people take on an openly gay or lesbian identity, they appear to aspire to a set of social and behavioral ideals understood as common to this particular cultural identity. Lesbians and gay men are imagined as white, middle-class, urban residents. They are coupled, monogamous in their sexual relations, even formally partnered or married as changes in local law permit. Partners are approximate social equals in terms of their age, income, class, and occupational status. The gender identity and sexual object-choice of each partner is to remain consistent, meaning that bisexual and transgendered persons are perforce excluded from this matrix. Sexual relations between partners are supposed to be non-coercive, reciprocal, and loving.

Such a vision of a "liberated" gay identity had begun to crystallize as early as 1977, when Charles Silverstein and Edmund White were able to state the following in their landmark book, *The Joy of Gay Sex*: "To simplify the difference [between 'old-fashioned,' 'unliberated' sexual relations between men and those of the present], we might picture a 35-year-old Athenian in love with a 17-year-old ephebe whom he fucks and instructs in geometry and whom he will stop loving when the youth turns 20. By contrast, in New York we might picture a 35-year-old lawyer in love with a 35-year-old doctor; they take turns fucking each other, they share expenses and household duties and they will stay together forever (or so they hope)."

Such ideals as this have been widely disseminated through lesbian and gay media and political organizations over the course of the past three decades. Yet in the great scheme of same-sex sexuality, this remains but one mode of identification among many. A great number of lesbian and gay people aspire to such an identity, but fewer achieve it, and many more openly refuse it in favor of alternate, concurrent conceptions of sexual identity.

Alternatives to the above model are stratified most strongly by sex/gender roles and sexual object-choice of individual persons. They are further inflected by phenomena pertaining to these persons, such as social class and income, race and ethnicity, disability, occupation and institutionalization, and sexual preference (meaning not sexual object-choice but rather such practices as sadomasochism, sexual fetishism, polyamory, and others).

Sex/Gender Role Stratification

Common to many cultural conceptions of same-sex sexuality is the notion that equality and reciprocity of partners' sex and/or gender roles is impossible and, indeed, undesirable. Among men, the division of sex partners into "active" (insertive) and "passive" (receptive) partners is often paramount. This was broadly true in the classical Mediterranean and remains so in contemporary Latin American societies, though such cleavages have been found historically as well as currently in North America among the military, prisoners, and prostitutes. Indeed, the logic of "top" versus "bottom" remains pervasive in the way that contemporary gay-identified men imagine themselves and their prospective partners in anal intercourse.

This sex-role differentiation, in turn, implies a gender differential between partners (the receptive partner is frequently cast in the role of the woman and may be expected to be more effeminate) as well as a differential in terms of sexual identity (receptive partners are often "gay" or perceived as such, while insertive partners may not be).

Undeniable, too, is the power differential between partners as a result of these apparent social inequities. Such a differential is taken to a logical (albeit often highly theatricalized) extreme among leathermen and S/M enthusiasts, Bears and cubs (older, larger, hirsute men and their frequently younger admirers), as well as boy-lovers and boys.

Among women, such sex/gender role stratification also exists, expressed most frequently as a division between "butch" (masculine) and "femme" (feminine). In this case, however, we find the reverse of the male situation: it is the "dominant," masculine role that is more visible and generally stigmatized. Additionally, butch/femme roles are not as dependent on a sexual economy of insertion and reception (although these may be factors in defining and allocating roles). They are more frequently characterized by their emphasis on gendered self-presentation: butches wear men's clothing and sport short haircuts, whereas femmes do not.

Sexual Object-Choice Stratification

Males with "dominant," masculine, insertive roles in the sex/gender hierarchy, as well as "submissive," feminine, receptive females, are less marked as sexually non-normative, even when they engage in same-sex sexual behavior. They may also be more heterodox in their sexual object-choices, partnering with both men and women at the same or at different points in their lives without necessarily being bisexually identified. Of course, many behaviorally bisexual persons do not share these sex/gender role identifications or refuse a bisexual identity.

It is usually more difficult for "submissive" males and "dominant" females to escape being identified as homosexual, except in cases where homosexual behavior is understood to be "situational," perhaps coerced (for example, in institutions such as in military installations, schools, hospitals, and prisons), and not "constitutional." Among sex workers, too, sexual object-choice may also be less consistent, though not necessarily coerced.

In instances of marked sex/gender role differentiation not necessarily marked by a sexual economy of penetration (leather and S/M being a prime example), participants may be likelier to be less consistent in their object-choices *qua persons* because sexual encounters revolve around the dramatization of power differentials, painful sensations, or inanimate objects rather than a partner's primary and secondary sexual characteristics. For a sexual masochist, for example, receiving pain at the hands of a man or a woman may make little difference as long as he or she is receiving pain.

Social and Political Implications

The political ideology of gay and lesbian liberation has traditionally required a particular and consistent

constellation of sex/gender role and sexual object-choice in order to cultivate gay and lesbian sexual identities. Yet like any other identity (including heterosexual monogamy), this vision of gay and lesbian identity is an ideal that can only ever be approximated.

Given the fundamental role of sexual desires in structuring such identities, as well as the social and material constraints on their cultivation by individuals, a failure to achieve and maintain such an identity in all its particulars over the lifespan is hardly extraordinary. Unfortunately, it has often been viewed as extraordinary--and extraordinarily negative--by persons and institutions responsible for enforcing the changing cultural ideals of lesbian and gay life.

Perhaps the persons most likely to be marginalized in the reification of gay and lesbian identity politics are behaviorally bisexual and transgendered people. For example, behaviorally bisexual African-American men who are circumspect about their sexual contacts with men, or "on the down low," have been frequently accused of covertly (if unwittingly) spreading HIV/AIDS from "homosexual" to "heterosexual" populations. The black community has been excoriated for its presumed homophobia by gay and lesbian organizations and media.

The logic at work here is that if black people were supportive of gay and lesbian identity formation, such duplicity would be unnecessary and these men could choose to live their lives as openly gay or bisexual. This, of course, assumes with very little qualification that black communities are that much more homophobic than white ones, which may say less about homophobia among African-Americans than it does about racism among gay men and lesbians. It also overlooks the fact that these men are assuming an identity that has its own cultural relevance, one which should not be lightly dismissed by gay activists and HIV-prevention workers.

The men described above are understood to be denied an inner, fundamental gay or bisexual identity despite their making no claim of such. Transgendered persons often experience the opposite problem: their claims to gay or lesbian identity are denied by gay men and lesbians who see them as inauthentically male or female and thus also inauthentically gay or lesbian. The exclusive admission of "womyn born womyn" to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival as well as other events and organizations, and the rifts such policies have caused within lesbian communities, are a case in point.

Since gay liberation's inception, sex/gender role differentiation and bisexual behavior have been perceived as either the causes or consequences of everything from patriarchy and homophobia to sexual assault and abuse. Yet there is a tradition and a growing body of scholarly and other work that challenges the "naturalness" (and even the political necessity) of a unitary gay and lesbian identity.

Some scholars, as well as a short-lived political movement, have invoked the term "queer" to describe inconsistencies in social and sexual identities like those outlined here. They have worked to demonstrate the prevalence of such inconsistencies as well as their inevitability and even their desirability for overturning the very hierarchies that the politics of gay and lesbian liberation have all too often accused alternate conceptions of sexual identity of reinforcing.

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