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anyone's sense of what exactly it means.*

Michael Warner

Introduction

Once the term 'queer' was, at best, slang for homosexual, at worst, a term of homophobic abuse. In recent years 'queer' has come to be used differently, sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies. What is clear, even from this brief and partial account of its contemporary deployment, is that queer is very much a category in the process of formation. It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics.

Given this situation, it may seem counter-intuitive, even futile, to produce an introductory account of the queer phenomenon. For part of queer's semantic clout, part of its political efficacy, depends on its resistance to definition, and the way in which it refuses to stake its claim, since 'the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer "queer theory" can plausibly claim to be' (Halperin, 1995:113). Judith Butler (1994:21) likewise cautions that 'normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish', and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner point out that 'because almost everything that can be called queer theory has been radically anticipatory, trying to bring a world into being, any attempt to summarize it now will be violently partial' (1995:344). To attempt an overview of queer theory and to

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identify it as a significant school of thought, which those in pursuit of general knowledge should be familiar with, is to risk domesticating it, and fixing it in ways that queer theory resists fixing itself. However, this book does not attempt to stabilise the mobile field of queer identification. Instead, it maps that very mobility, and situates it within a history of sexual categories which have evolved over the last hundred years or so. While specifying the different political and theoretical work currently being carried out under the rubric of 'queer', this book assumes that queer is 'a zone of possibilities' (Edelman, 1994:114) always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet quite articulate.

The rapid development and consolidation of lesbian and gay studies in universities in the 1990s is paralleled by an increasing deployment of the term 'queer'. As queer is unaligned with any specific identity category, it has the potential to be annexed profitably to any number of discussions. Like many critical treatments of queer, however, this study reads it largely in relation to the more stable, more recognisable, categories of 'lesbian' and 'gay'. In the history of disciplinary formations, lesbian and gay studies is itself a relatively recent construction, and queer theory can be seen as its latest institutional transformation. Not only are new journals launched which specialise in the interdisciplinary field of lesbian and gay studies, but periodicals with other concerns bring out special issues on queer theory. Specialist journals include the North American *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, first published in 1993, and the Australian *Critical InQueeries*, whose first issue came out in 1995. Non-specialist periodicals which have each devoted a whole issue to queer theory include *Sociological Theory* (Summer 1994), *Socialist Review* (vol. 22, no. 1, 1992) and *Social Text* (vol. 9, no. 4, 1991), while *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* brought out two queer issues in 1991 and 1994. *Media Information Australia* and *Meanjin* published queer issues in late 1995 and early 1996 respectively. Universities are not only beginning to offer courses in lesbian and gay theory, but many of these courses are organised around notions of queer. This 'queering' of lesbian and gay studies has been the subject of violent debate. Some claim that it radically erodes the last traces

of an oppressive gender coherence, whereas others criticise its pan-sexuality as reactionary, even unfeminist.

While there is no critical consensus on the definitional limits of queer—indeterminacy being one of its widely promoted charms—its general outlines are frequently sketched and debated. Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'.

The recent intervention of this confrontational word 'queer' in altogether politer academic discourses suggests that traditional models have been ruptured. Yet its appearance also marks a continuity. Queer theory's debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions. Queer is not always seen, however, as an acceptable elaboration of or shorthand for 'lesbian and gay'. Although many theorists welcome queer as 'another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual' (de Lauretis, 1991:iv), others question its efficacy. The most commonly voiced anxieties are provoked by such issues as whether a generic masculinity may be reinstalled at the heart of the ostensibly gender-neutral queer; whether queer's transcendent disregard for dominant systems of gender fails to consider the material conditions of the west in the late twentieth century; whether queer simply replicates, with a kind of historical amnesia, the stances and demands of an earlier gay liberation; and whether, because its

constituency is almost unlimited, queer includes identificatory categories whose politics are less progressive than those of the lesbian and gay populations with which they are aligned.

Whatever ambivalences structure queer, there is no doubt that its recent redeployment is making a substantial impact on lesbian and gay studies. Even the formidable 650-page *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*—whose very title seems to take a stand against queer's recent expansion—closes its introduction with a justification which is less a defence than defensive:

It was difficult to decide what to title this anthology. We have reluctantly chosen not to speak here and in our title of 'queer studies,' despite our own attachment to the term . . . our choice of 'lesbian/gay' indicates no wish on our part to make lesbian/gay studies look less assertive, less unsettling, and less queer than it already does. (Abelove et al., 1993:xvii)

Sticking to their formulation of 'lesbian/gay studies', the editors nevertheless worry that this might seem a conservative gesture. In asserting their wish not to make 'lesbian/gay studies look . . . less queer than it already does', they suggest that the older formation is already queer. This is by no means an idiosyncratic move. Queer's contemporary proliferation is enabled, in part, by claims that it has always already significantly structured the anti-homophobic impulse. Queer's powerful refiguring of lesbian and gay studies is evident in the way in which it is able to install itself retrospectively at the heart of that project. Although queer theory's institutional growth is commonly associated with academic developments in the early 1990s, the tendency to date its moment of origin increasingly earlier suggests an ambivalent figuring of queer as not only a radically new conceptual model but also one already imbricated in and informing existing knowledges of sexuality. In introducing her collection of 'deviant readings', *Perversions*, Mandy Merck (1993:1) describes the book as 'begun in London in the late 1970s, an era of Queer Studies *avant la lettre*'. Wayne Koestenbaum (1993:18) similarly antedates queer when describing Bertha Harris's novel *Lover* as 'a vaudeville version of queer theory; presciently it explains everything theory has come laboriously to know since 1976'. On the back-cover blurb of

the 1993 edition of Guy Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire*, Douglas Crimp argues that while the book was 'written over two decades ago, in the aftermath of May '68 and Stonewall', it 'may well be the first example of what we now call queer theory'.

In a movement simultaneously forwards and backwards, queer is designated as not only the evolutionary extension of a more conventional lesbian and gay studies but also its bent progenitor. ^{parent} This slippage is evidenced in the difference between the first and second editions of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. First published in 1985, and reprinted in 1992 with a new preface, *Between Men* dramatises the evolution of an ambivalent but productive relation between gay and queer. The back cover of the 1992 edition reproduces accounts of the book which situate it within that critical field which its publication significantly consolidated. According to *Rolling Stone*, it is 'universally cited as the text that ignited gay studies', while the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* describes it as 'in many ways, the book that turned queer theory from a latent to a manifest discipline'. If queer and gay seem synonymous here, in her new preface Sedgwick dramatises a historical and disciplinary shift through the mobilising of these terms. She notes that, while 'a growing gay and lesbian studies movement already existed in American academia at the time [1985]', between then and 1992 there emerged a 'highly productive queer community whose explicit basis is the criss-crossing of the lines of identification and desire among genders, races and sexual definitions' (Sedgwick, 1992:x). Yet having identified queer as a new structure whose energy and effectiveness developed out of a more established lesbian and gay model, in her last sentence Sedgwick recasts this developmental narrative by situating queer as the source rather than the destination of lesbian and gay studies. 'The proliferation . . . of so much subsequent work in the field', she writes, 'has vastly more to say for the inveterate, gorgeous generativity, the speculative generosity, the daring, the permeability, and the activism that have long been lodged in the multiple histories of queer reading' (ibid.).

Rather than represent queer as unequivocally either progressive or reactionary, this book argues that it does not have any fixed

value. Simplistic attempts to evaluate this new terminology and conceptual framework ignore the fact that, since the late nineteenth century, knowledge of homosexuality has always been structured by strenuously contested categories (see, for example, Chauncey, 1982). Nor is this kind of classificatory uncertainty characteristic only of an unenlightened and remote historical moment. Similar claims have been made more recently, and specifically in relation to gay and lesbian studies. 'With the recent transformation of gay and lesbian studies from an underground phenomenon to an exciting area of academic discourse', notes Marilyn Farwell (1992:165), 'has come a strange plague: definition'. *Queer Theory* examines the constitutive discourses of homosexuality developed in the last century in order to place queer in its historical context and surveys contemporary arguments both for and against this latest terminology. In deferring any final assessment of queer as a critical term, this book acknowledges that if queer lives up to its radical potential—and does not solidify as merely another acceptable (though oppositional) category—its ongoing evolutions cannot be anticipated: its future is—after all—the future.

Theorising Same-Sex Desire

What is homosexuality exactly?

Homosexuality is commonly and widely understood to describe sexual attraction for those of one's own sex. There does not seem to be anything problematic or uncertain in such a definition. Nevertheless, the theoretical enterprise of deciding exactly what constitutes homosexuality—or, more pragmatically, who is homosexual—is far from self-evident. While there is a certain population of men and women who may be described more or less unproblematically as homosexual, a number of ambiguous circumstances cast doubt on the precise delimitations of homosexuality as a descriptive category. For example, is the man who lives with his wife and children, but from time to time has casual or anonymous sex with other men, homosexual? Many men in this situation, when interviewed for the purposes of AIDS research, did not identify themselves as homosexual. One interviewee said of his sexual identity: 'It's not important to me. I do it with men on occasions. It's more important that I am married and love my life. . . . It's no one's business what I do on my odd afternoon off' (Bartos et al., 1993:27). Another interviewee rejected a gay identity more explicitly:

I am also not really gay. Gay sex is something that I do 2-3 times a week. It amounts to so little of my time. If you were to add up the time I spend looking for and having sex with men it

would total 1-2 hours weekly. The rest of the time I am heterosexual, married, a family man. (ibid:29)

Is the woman who identifies herself as a lesbian but is currently in a sexual relationship with a man homosexual (cf. Califia, 1983; Clausen, 1990)? What sexual category describes a woman currently in a sexual relationship with a self-identified gay man (Schramm-Evans, 1993)? Is it possible to be homosexual without ever having had or intending to have sex? These questions become more complicated when worked across cultural or historical variations which raise the issue of whether 'homosexuality' is a constant term in radically different contexts. As David Halperin (1990:46) asks:

Does the 'paederast,' the classical Greek adult, married male who periodically enjoys sexually penetrating a male adolescent share *the same sexuality* with the 'berdache,' the Native American (Indian) adult male who from childhood has taken on many aspects of a woman and is regularly penetrated by the adult male to whom he has been married in a public and socially sanctioned ceremony? Does the latter share *the same sexuality* with the New Guinea tribesman and warrior who from the ages of eight to fifteen has been orally inseminated on a daily basis by older youths and who, after years of orally inseminating his juniors, will be married to an adult woman and have children of his own? Does any of these three persons share *the same sexuality* with the modern homosexual? (original emphasis)

To a certain extent, debates about what constitutes homosexuality can be understood in terms of the negotiation between so-called essentialist and constructionist positions. Whereas essentialists regard identity as natural, fixed and innate, constructionists assume identity is fluid, the effect of social conditioning and available cultural models for understanding oneself. Essentialists hold that a person's sexual orientation is a culture-independent, objective and intrinsic property', writes Edward Stein (1992b:325), 'while social constructionists think it is culture-dependent, relational and, perhaps, not objective'. Essentialists assume that homo-

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sexuality exists across time as a universal phenomenon which has a marginalised but continuous and coherent history of its own. Constructionists, by contrast, assume that because same-sex sex acts have different cultural meanings in different historical contexts, they are not identical across time and space. For example, constructionists would not assume that a man was lying or deceiving himself when saying, 'I'm not gay. If I was gay I would kiss the men I have sex with. I never kiss men' (Bartos et al., 1993:29). Rather, they would assume that different meanings can attach themselves to the same sexual acts; moreover, they would argue that 'identity' is not a demonstrably empirical category but the product of processes of identification. While essentialism and constructionism are most frequently understood as oppositional categories, it is important to remember that they have a more complicated relation to each other than this suggests. There are certain coincidences between them (Fuss, 1989:1-21) and they are not synonymous with other related binarisms such as determinism and voluntarism (Stein, 1992).

It is often assumed that essentialist understandings of homosexuality are conservative, if not reactionary, in their consequences, whereas constructionist understandings of homosexuality lend themselves to progressive or even radical strategies. However, it is more correct to say that the nature of a political intervention is not necessarily determined by the assumption of either position. The essentialist claim that "some people are born homosexual" has been used in anti-homophobic attempts to secure civil rights-based recognition for homosexuals; on the other hand, the constructionist view that homosexuality is somehow ~~or~~ ~~later~~ acquired has been aligned with homophobic attempts to suggest that homosexual orientations can and should be corrected. Combinations of the two positions are often held simultaneously by both homophobic and anti-homophobic groups.

Consider, as a recent example, the controversial founding of the Queensland-based International Heterosexual Foundation, which 'aims to promote heterosexuality as the only lifestyle for teenagers' (Gurvich, 1995:2). In explaining the need for such a foundation, a spokesperson, Mr Kris Pickering, has recourse to both essentialist and constructionist models of homosexuality: 'He said only a small

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percentage of homosexuals were genetic homosexuals, and most were psychological homosexuals who chose that lifestyle because of a bad experience with a member of the opposite sex, together with influential propaganda promoting homosexuality' (ibid.). The Victorian AIDS Council vigorously disagreed with the International Heterosexual Foundation's description of heterosexuals as 'real people' (ibid.). Yet a spokesperson, Mr Eric Timewell, likewise framed their opposition in both essentialist and constructionist ways: "Beyond the age of 11, people's sexual preferences are pretty well decided whether they know it or not" (ibid.). Whereas Timewell sees constructionist and essentialist models working sequentially in the sexual development of any individual, Pickering understands them to be operating simultaneously throughout the population: "People can help themselves from becoming homosexual, except that very small percentage" (ibid.). In opposing one another on this issue, each man uses a combination of essentialist and constructionist assumptions to make his point.

The invention of homosexuality

The constructionist position so widely taken up in recent lesbian and gay studies is frequently sourced to the work of the French historian Michel Foucault, although as early as 1968 Mary McIntosh was proposing that "the homosexual should be seen as playing a social role rather than as having a condition" (1992:29). In what was to become an enormously influential text for an as yet unimaginable lesbian and gay studies—volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*—Foucault provides a persuasive historical narrative about the formation of a modern homosexual identity.¹

Taking a constructionist line, Foucault argues that homosexuality is necessarily a modern formation because, while there were previously same-sex sex acts, there was no corresponding category of identification. Provocatively furnishing an exact date for the invention of homosexuality, Foucault (1981:43) writes:

We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized—Westphal's famous article of 1870 on 'con-

trary sexual sensations' can stand as its date of birth—less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself.

Foucault's argument is premised on his assertion that around 1870, and in various medical discourses, the notion of the homosexual as an identifiable type of person begins to emerge. No longer simply someone who participates in certain sexual acts, the homosexual begins to be defined fundamentally in terms of those very acts: "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history . . . Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality" (ibid.). Foucault argues that although same-sex sex acts were condemned in both religious and civil law before 1870, they were regarded as temptations to which anyone might succumb. Sinful and illegal, those forbidden acts were not understood to constitute a certain kind of individual. After 1870, same-sex sex acts began to be read as evidence of a particular type of person about whom explanatory narratives began to be formed: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (ibid.).

Foucault's confident dating of the emergence of the homosexual as 'a species' is rhetorically impressive. However, there is no critical consensus on the historical circumstances that gave rise to the modern homosexual. In his 1982 book, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, Alan Bray suggests a much earlier date—the late seventeenth century—and for quite different reasons. Following Foucault, he argues that, as late as the mid-seventeenth century, there was nothing equivalent to the modern conception of homosexuality. "To talk of an individual in this period as being or not being "a homosexual" is an anachronism and ruinously misleading', he writes. "The temptation to debauchery, from which homosexuality was not clearly distinguished, was accepted as part of the common lot, be it never so abhorred" (Bray, 1988:16–17).

Instead Bray argues that the origins of modern homosexuality can be discerned only fifty years later, at the close of the seventeenth century, with the emergence of an urban homosexual subculture that sprang up around those 'molly houses [which] were scattered across the whole of the built-up area north of the

Thames (ibid.:84; see also Norton, 1992). Whether private dwellings or part of a tavern, molly houses were places where men with sexual interests in other men gathered, but not necessarily for sex. For although 'sex was the root of the matter . . . it was as likely to be expressed in drinking together, in flirting and gossip and in a circle of friends as in actual liaisons' (Bray, 1988:84). Places for procuring sex with other men had existed previously but they were not as coherent as the system of molly houses, which constituted a community within a community, a specifically homosexual culture. Homosexuality came to be understood as the grounds for community; on this basis, a recognisable—though small and discreet—culture began to develop, which had its own 'ways of dressing, of talking, distinctive gestures and distinctive acts with an understood meaning, its own jargon' (ibid.:86). The molly houses provided a cultural context for homosexual identity and community, in so far as they constituted a nascent homosexual subculture, which 'existed independently of the individuals who might compose it at any time', and was distinguishable from the surrounding culture (ibid.). Bray argues that the molly houses are significant because they constituted homosexuality as more than a sexual act or inclination; in fact, they constituted it in the modern sense as an identity, a way of being in the world.

Like Foucault, John D'Emilio argues that it is the late nineteenth century which provides a significant context for the emergence of modern homosexuality. Whereas for Foucault the decisive event is an increasing medicalisation of sexuality in that period, D'Emilio (1992b:5) takes a Marxist approach and argues that what generates the conditions necessary for a homosexual identity is the 'historical development of capitalism—more specifically, its free-labor system'. In mapping the growth of capitalism in the United States, D'Emilio focuses on the ways in which the family or household became decreasingly self-sufficient in terms of its patterns of production and consumption. No longer primarily a self-contained economic system, the family came to be thought of as an affective unit, that is, as 'an institution that provided not goods but emotional satisfaction and happiness' (ibid.). Jeffrey Weeks (1977:2) makes a similar point in relation to the United Kingdom when arguing that the best way of understanding 'the emergence of new

definitions of homosexuality and the homosexual' is to see them 'as part of the restructuring of the family and sexual relations consequent upon the triumph of urbanization and industrial capitalism'. For D'Emilio (1992b.:8), the same shifts that enabled heterosexuality to be invested culturally with meanings other than the procreative also created conditions for the emergence of urban homosexual communities:

Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity—an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one's own sex.

All accounts of the invention of homosexuality considered so far deal with the formation of male homosexuality. This is partly because these theorists focus on male examples and partly because the formation of female homosexuality or lesbianism does not follow exactly the formation of male homosexuality. Female homosexuality does not occupy the same historic positions as male homosexuality in the discourses of law or medicine. For example, the internationally influential British judicial system—which during Britain's colonial period was adopted or enforced as the legal template in many other countries—criminalised male homosexual acts while ignoring the possibility of female homosexuality. The Labouchère Amendment of 1885, on which much current anti-homosexual western legislation is founded, specifically outlaws acts of 'gross indecency' between 'male persons', but leaves comparable acts between female persons legal by default. Similarly—and partly as a consequence of its different relation to criminalisation—female homosexuality took much longer than male homosexuality to constitute the basis of a communal, subcultural identity. *did it really?*

The most influential and detailed account of the development of the modern lesbian identity is Lillian Faderman's book, Surpassing the Love of Men (1985). Spanning the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, Faderman reads a range of historical and literary texts in order to demonstrate the ubiquity in western culture

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of sexual or intensely affectionate relations between women. Before the twentieth century, she argues, romantic friendships between women—which may or may not have been sexual—were socially sanctioned. Neither declarations of intense and sensual affection between women nor pledges of eternal and faithful devotion were pathologised: 'There is nothing to suggest that [romantic friends] were self-conscious about these passions or saw them as being abnormal in any way' (Faderman, 1985:125). Even when sexual activity between women was written of disparagingly, 'lesbianism itself was seldom the focal point of attack', since the 'aggressive sexuality [of the lesbian] was used primarily as a metaphor' to reprimand women who behaved in 'an unwomanly fashion' (ibid:45-6).

Repeatedly, Faderman declares herself surprised at the absence of any social condemnation of female romantic friendships. Assuming that romantic friendships and lesbianism are historical variants of the same thing, Faderman asks: 'If these romantic friendships were in the quality and intensity of the emotions involved no different from lesbian love, why were they so readily condoned in earlier eras and persecuted in ours?' (ibid:19). What produced the change in attitude, she believes, were reactionary responses to the demands of first-wave feminism, and—even more emphatically—the increasing tendency by sexologists to pathologise female homosexuality:

Love between women was metamorphosed into a freakishness, and it was claimed that only those who had such an abnormality would want to change their subordinate status in any way. Hence, the sexologists' theories frightened, or attempted to frighten, women away from feminism and from loving other women by demonstrating that both were abnormal and were generally linked together. (ibid:240)

Despite its fascination with the conditions that contributed to the formation of lesbian identity, Faderman's book is resolutely un-Foucauldian, and the more surprisingly so because it draws back from the Foucauldian conclusions its argument seems to invite. Surpassing the Love of Men considers the increasing medicalisation of *fin de siècle* romantic friendship as a devaluation of the lesbian

identity, not as the moment of its modern formation. Despite this, Faderman's extensive research into the formation and proliferation of a twentieth-century lesbian identity as represented in sexology, literature and popular magazines can be seen to demonstrate not the pathologisation of an already existing model of identity but rather the articulation of a new—but demonised—sexual category.

More recently Valerie Traub has offered a constructionist account of the historical circumstances which enabled the development of a modern lesbian identity. In analysing some female-female erotic discourses produced before 1800, Traub argues that European colonial anthropology, travel narratives and anatomy texts persistently associated the clitoris with tribadism—'an early modern antecedent to "lesbianism"'—and that this connection has 'haunted modern discourse ever since' (Traub, 1995:82, 94). Avoiding the essentialising argument of Faderman, Traub neither conflates tribadism with lesbianism nor imagines that her project is to locate 'a pre-Enlightenment "lesbian" identity' (ibid.:85). However, she argues that 'notwithstanding assumptions about the nonexistence or invisibility of "lesbians", a vocabulary was available to Western writers with which to describe women's erotic desire for and contact with each other' (ibid:88). Her purpose in specifying an early modern erotic desire between women is not to give substance to a recognisably lesbian identity but to 'demonstrate the conditions of emergence for such an identity' (ibid.:85).

Although theories concerning the formation of modern homosexuality differ, there is significant agreement that homosexuality, as it is understood today, is not a transhistorical phenomenon. With the exception of Faderman, all the theorists discussed so far make crucial the distinction between homosexual behaviour, which is ubiquitous, and homosexual identity, which evolves under specific historical conditions. As Jeffrey Weeks (1972:2) writes:

Homosexuality has existed throughout history, in all types of society, among all social classes and peoples, and it has survived qualified approval, indifference and the most vicious

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persecution. But what have varied enormously are the ways in which various societies have regarded homosexuality, the meanings they have attached to it, and how those who were engaged in homosexual activity viewed themselves.

Halperin (1990:46) draws out the cultural implications of the same argument when observing that 'although there are persons who seek sexual contact with other persons of the same sex in many different societies, only recently and only in some sectors of our society have such persons—or some portion of them—been homosexuals'.

Homosexuality and heterosexuality

To foreground only those processes that resulted historically in the formation of homosexuality is to imply that heterosexuality—that frequently unremarked but no less historically contingent category—is somehow the more self-evident, natural or stable construction. This assumption is naturalised in a culture that commonly understands homosexuality to be a derivative or less evolved form of heterosexuality. Such an understanding is voiced in a number of different discourses, ranging from popular psychology—which offers supposedly reassuring accounts of homosexuality as a stage through which adolescents pass before maturing into heterosexuals—to those religious and legal definitions of 'family' by which homosexual family groupings are declared illegitimate or inauthentic. Heterosexuality cannot be substantially investigated here but many theorists argue that recent definitions of homosexuality and accounts of its historic development have important implications for naturalised or common-sense understandings of heterosexuality. For example, many theorists argue that since the term 'heterosexuality' is a back formation of 'homosexuality'—the former circulating only after the latter—heterosexuality is derivative of homosexuality, and that such a genealogy has important ideological consequences (Katz, 1983:147–50). Although heterosexuality is too often represented as unremarkable, it is significant that 'what distinguishes the emergence of "the homosexual" during the second half of the nineteenth

century is the fact that at this time it became inseparable from and literally incomprehensible without its "normal" twin, "the heterosexual" (Cohen, 1993:211).²

Heterosexuality, then, is equally a construction whose meaning is dependent on changing cultural models. As a descriptive term its provenance is historical, no matter how often it lays claim to universality. It is difficult to think of 'homosexuality' not as a self-evidently descriptive term for certain identifications or inclinations but as a historically and culturally contingent category. It is even more difficult to think of 'heterosexuality' in this way on account of the extent to which it has been naturalised. Heterosexuality, after all, has long maintained its claim to be a natural, pure, and unproblematic state which requires no explanation. Indeed, in so far as many attempts to 'explain' homosexuality are grounded conceptually on heterosexuality, there is a sense in which heterosexuality is assumed to be a neutral or unmarked form of sexuality *per se*. In his account of late nineteenth-century understandings of same-sex desire as 'inversion', Christopher Craft (1989:223) argues that 'unable or unwilling to deconstruct the heterosexual norm, English accounts of sexual inversion indeed repeat it; desire remains, despite appearances, essentially and irrevocably heterosexual'.

In the late twentieth century both heterosexuality and, to a lesser extent, homosexuality have been thoroughly naturalised. This makes it difficult to think of either category as having histories, as being arbitrary or contingent. It is particularly hard to denaturalise something like sexuality, whose very claim to naturalisation is intimately connected with an individual sense of self, with the way in which each of us imagines our own sexuality to be primary, elemental and private. Halperin (1990:53) admits to just such an 'awkward spot' when, having argued for sexuality as a cultural construct, he closes by saying that heterosexuality and homosexuality

aren't merely categories of thought ... they're equally categories of erotic response, and they therefore have a claim on my belief that's stronger than intellectual allegiance. That, after all, is what it means to be acculturated into a sexual system: the

conventions of the system acquire the self-confirming inner truth of 'nature.' If one could simply think oneself out of one's acculturation, it wouldn't be acculturation in the first place.

To denaturalise either homosexuality or heterosexuality is not to minimise the significance of those categories, but to ask that they be contextualised or historicised rather than assumed as natural, purely descriptive terms.

Phrases such as 'homosexuality in the modern sense' or 'homosexuality as it is understood today' effectively draw attention to the paradigm shift from sexual acts to sexual identities, and to the problems inherent in assuming continuity between current and historically remote same-sex sex acts. Unfortunately, however, such phrases imply that modern homosexuality, unlike its predecessors, is coherent, certain and known. Much is invested culturally in representing homosexuality as definitionally unproblematic, and in maintaining heterosexuality and homosexuality as radically and demonstrably distinct from one another. Yet modern knowledges about the categories of sexual identification are far from coherent. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick draws attention to this tendency to cast present knowledges of homosexuality as fixed and certain in comparison with their confused and unstable antecedents. She argues that the lesbian and gay development of a Foucauldian perspective on historical forms of same-sex desire has tended to exempt current formations of homosexuality from a similarly defamiliarising scrutiny. 'The topos of "homosexuality as we know it today"', she observes, 'has provided a rhetorically necessary fulcrum point for the denaturalizing work on the past done by many historians' (1990:45).

In critiquing this tendency to represent contemporary homosexuality as somehow self-evident and unproblematic, Sedgwick draws attention to logical contradictions in current understandings of homosexuality. Far from cancelling each other out, these unacknowledged inconsistencies often appear simultaneously. Sedgwick's aim in *Epistemology of the Closet* is to specify—although not to resolve—those mutually contradictory conceptual models which constitute modern homosexuality. She describes these contradictions in the following way:

The first is the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as a minoritising view), and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalising view). The second is the contradiction between seeing same-sex object choice on the one hand as a matter of liminality or transitivity between genders, and seeing it on the other hand as reflecting an impulse of separatism—though by no means necessarily political separatism—within each gender. (ibid.:1–2)

Sedgwick argues that 'the now chronic modern crisis of homo/heterosexual definition' is a consequence of these two irresolvable contradictions, which constitute twentieth-century understandings—both homophobic and anti-homophobic—of homosexuality and heterosexuality. The first contradiction—between minoritising and universalising views—centres on how the group designated 'homosexual' is delimited: whether homosexuality is the identity of a small and distinct section of the general population or whether the identities of ostensibly heterosexual people are equally determined by same-sex desire. The second contradiction is the one between transitivity and separatism as models for the gendering of homosexual desire: the former characterises same-sex desire as proceeding from the homosexual's liminal or borderline location between genders; the latter constitutes homosexuality as the epitome of gender itself. Sedgwick (ibid.:83–90) argues that these two radical contradictions exist in tandem and thus ensure the fundamental incoherence of modern constitutions of homosexuality.

To some extent, the crisis—epidemiological, governmental, activist—brought about by AIDS exemplifies the discursive incoherence that structures understandings of modern sexualities. Universalising versus minoritising conceptions of homosexuality can be seen in struggles over governmental and medical management of AIDS. Misrecognised initially—and persistently—as a 'gay disease', AIDS attracted the attention of previously indifferent

government agencies in North America only when it was perceived to be affecting what was callously referred to as 'the general population'.³

Activists were angered by the treatment of AIDS and homosexuality as discursively synonymous and concerned that such a metonymic slippage hampered effective intervention. They urged that the circuits of HIV transmission should be rethought, not in terms of minoritised and so-called 'risk groups'—gay men primarily, and other populations such as intravenous drug users and prostitutes—but with respect to universalised 'risk practices' like unsafe sex and the sharing of needles.

The importance of separating the concepts of homosexual identity and same-sex sex acts can be seen in recent health-policy reports, which emphasise both the urgency and the difficulty of targeting safe-sex information at men who have sex with other men but do not identify themselves as gay. As Gary Dowsett (1991:6-7) argues:

MSM [men who have sex with men but who are unattached to gay communities] are not a target group. They cannot be clustered by demographic descriptors as has been done with gay men . . . They are UNgroupable in any way which might have previously been thought of as high-risk groups . . . The only thing they have in common—the experience of sex with their own sex—is not even shared in common; they have no culture of sexuality, such as that of gay men, in which to enjoy a sense of belonging. (original emphasis)

Acknowledging the phenomenon Dowsett describes, AIDS education programmes now commonly privilege acts over identities. Even this brief example of AIDS-education strategies demonstrates the limits of that paradigm shift which is widely understood to distinguish modern from premodern sexualities.⁴ For in opposing the popular conflation of AIDS and homosexuality, such attempts at refiguring the discursive field of AIDS by emphasising acts rather than identities are more consonant with ancient laws than with that new regime which, for Foucault and his many adherents, inaugurates the modern.

Separatist versus transitive understandings of homosexual desire are also thrown into relief by popular knowledges about AIDS. Historically, the circumstantial development of the epidemic has resulted in gay male communities—among others—being devastated by AIDS. Yet for some there is a persistent association between lesbians and AIDS. Despite the fact that even now there is no accurate information about whether or how HIV is sexually transmitted between women (O'Sullivan and Parmar, 1989), transitive understandings of homosexuality continue to link lesbianism with AIDS. This conflation has not only prevented members of an American lesbian motorcycle club from making donations to a blood bank (on the grounds that their blood is unsuitable) but has also resulted in a political leader nominating 'gays, lesbians, and prostitutes [as] the source of AIDS' (Castle, 1993:12).

The discourse of AIDS here offers a contemporary instance of the long-standing (definitional incoherence) of homosexuality. In terms of Sedgwick's argument, it is not a matter of determining what homosexuality or heterosexuality really 'is', but of understanding that—despite various attempts (for a range of strategic purposes) to fix the definition of homosexuality—modern knowledges of it are structured by irresolvable incoherences and discontinuities.

It is evident that different understandings of homosexuality are mobilised in the early homophile movement, gay liberation, lesbian feminism and queer theory. Different historical circumstances and widely disparate models of knowledge have meant that no unbroken line can be traced between successive theoretical models and political strategies developed in relation to same-sex desire during the last century or so. What is sometimes less evident are certain relations of continuity that can be established productively between these different movements, each of which commonly represented itself as radically opposed to the configuration it succeeded. The following four chapters briefly discuss in turn the homophile movement, gay liberation, lesbian feminism and the ethnic model of gay identity in order to establish the specific cultural contexts in which queer has emerged as a contentious but significant critical term.