The Normalization of Queer Theory

David M. Halperin, PhD

University of Michigan

"Queer" is such a simple, unassuming little word. Who ever could have guessed that we would come to saddle it with so much pretentious baggage–so many grandiose theories, political agendas, philosophical projects, apocalyptic meanings? A word that was once commonly understood to mean "strange," "odd," "unusual," "abnormal," or "sick," and was routinely applied to lesbians and gay men as a term of abuse, now intimates possibilities so complex and rarified that entire volumes are devoted to spelling them out. Even to define queer, we now think, is to limit its potential, its magical power to usher in a new age of sexual radicalism and fluid gender possibilities. How did a word with such humble origins, a word that until quite lately many decent people were reluctant even to utter, come to acquire so many portentous–weighty yet vaporous–significations? While waiting for someone to explain that trajectory, I will review a few points along its path.

Queer theory originally came into being as a joke. Teresa de Lauretis coined the phrase "queer theory" to serve as the title of a conference that she held in February of 1990 at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she is Professor of The History of Consciousness. She had heard the word "queer" being tossed about in a gay-affirmative sense by activists, street kids, and members of the art world in New York during the late 1980s. She had the courage, and the conviction, to pair that scurrilous term with the academic holy word, "the-

---

Correspondence may be addressed: University of Michigan, Department of English Language and Literature, 3187 Angell Hall, 435 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1003 (E-mail: halperin@umich.edu).

[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "The Normalization of Queer Theory." Halperin, David M. Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Homosexuality* (Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 45, No. 2/3/4, 2003, pp. 339-343; and: *Queer Theory and Communication: From Disciplining Queers to Queering the Discipline(s)* (ed: Gust A. Yep, Karen E. Lovaas, and John P. Elia) Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003, pp. 339-343. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-HAWORTH, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: docdelivery@ haworthpress.com].

http://www.haworthpress.com/store/product.asp?sku=J082
© 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
10.1300/J082v45n02_17

ory." Her usage was scandalously offensive. Sympathetic faculty at UCSC asked, in wounded tones, "Why do they have to call it that?" But the conjunction was more than merely mischievous: it was deliberately disruptive.

In her opening remarks at the conference, Professor de Lauretis acknowledged that she had intended the title as a provocation. She wanted specifically to unsettle the complacency of "lesbian and gay studies" (that "by now established and often convenient formula," as she called it) which implied that the relation of lesbian to gay male topics in this emerging field was equitable, perfectly balanced, and completely understood–as if everyone knew exactly how lesbian studies and gay male studies connected to each other and why it was necessary or important that they should evolve together. She also wished to challenge the erstwhile domination of the field by the work of empirical social scientists, to open a wider space within it for reflections of a theoretical order, to introduce a problematic of multiple differences into what had tended to be a monolithic, homogenizing discourse of (homo)sexual difference, and to offer a possible escape from the hegemony of white, male, middle-class models of analysis.

Beyond that, she hoped both to make theory queer (that is, to challenge the heterosexist underpinnings and assumptions of what conventionally passed for "theory" in academic circles) and to queer theory (to call attention to everything that is perverse about the project of theorizing sexual desire and sexual pleasure). Queer theory was thus a placeholder for a hypothetical knowledge-practice not yet in existence, but whose consummation was devoutly to be wished.

The moment that the scandalous formula "queer theory" was uttered, however, it became the name of an already established school of theory, as if it constituted a set of specific doctrines, a singular, substantive perspective on the world, a particular theorization of human experience, equivalent in that respect to psychoanalytic or Marxist theory. The only problem was that no one knew what the theory was. And for the very good reason that no such theory existed. Those working in the field did their best, politely and tactfully, to point this out: Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, for example, published a cautionary editorial in PMLA entitled "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?" But it was too late. Queer theory appeared on the shelves of bookstores and in advertisements for academic jobs, where it provided a merciful exemption from the irreducibly sexual descriptors "lesbian" and "gay." It also harmonized very nicely with the contemporary critique of feminist and gay/lesbian identity politics, promoting the assumption that "queer" was some sort of advanced, postmodern identity, and that queer theory had superseded both feminism and lesbian/gay studies. Queer theory thereby achieved what lesbian and gay studies, despite its many scholarly and critical accomplishments, had been unable to bring about: namely, the entry of queer scholarship into the academy, the creation of jobs in queer studies, and the acquisition of academic respectability for queer work. Indeed, queer theory has been so successful in its dash

to academic institutionalization that it has left tread marks all over earlier avatars of postmodern theory (who now even remembers The New Historicism?). As such, queer theory was simply too lucrative to give up.

Queer theory, therefore, had to be invented after the fact, to supply the demand it had evoked. (The two texts that, in retrospect, were taken to have founded queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, were written well before anyone had ever heard of it.) All this would be merely amusing, if the hegemony of queer theory hadn't had the undesirable and misleading effect of portraying all previous work in lesbian and gay studies as under-theorized, as laboring under the delusion of identity politics, and if it hadn't radically narrowed the scope of queer studies by privileging its theoretical register, restricting its range, and scaling down its interdisciplinary ambition.

That does not mean all the consequences of queer theory have been bad. Queer theory has effectively re-opened the question of the relations between sexuality and gender, both as analytic categories and as lived experiences; it has created greater opportunities for transgender studies; it has pursued the task (begun long before within the sphere of lesbian/gay studies) of detaching the critique of gender and sexuality from narrowly conceived notions of lesbian and gay identity; it has supported non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, encouraging both theoretical and political resistance to normalization; it has underwritten a number of crucial theoretical critiques of homophobia and heterosexism; it has redefined the practice of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender history; and it has dramatized the far-reaching theoretical promise of work in lesbian and gay studies.

But with the institutionalization of queer theory, and its acceptance by the academy (and by straight academics), have come new problems and new challenges. There is something odd, suspiciously odd, about the rapidity with which queer theory–whose claim to radical politics derived from its anti-assimilationist posture, from its shocking embrace of the abnormal and the marginal–has been embraced by, canonized by, and absorbed into our (largely heterosexual) institutions of knowledge, as lesbian and gay studies never were. Despite its implicit (and false) portrayal of lesbian and gay studies as liberal, assimilationist, and accommodating of the status quo, queer theory has proven to be much more congenial to established institutions of the liberal academy. The first step was for the "theory" in queer theory to prevail over the "queer," for "queer" to become a harmless qualifier of "theory": if it's theory, progressive academics seem to have reasoned, then it's merely an extension of what important people have already been doing all along. It can be folded back into the standard practice of literary and cultural studies, without impeding academic business as usual. The next step was to despecify the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness, thereby abstracting "queer" and turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy version of "liberal": if it's queer, it's politically oppositional, so everyone who claims to be progressive has a vested

interest in owning a share of it. Finally, queer theory, being a theory instead of a discipline, posed no threat to the monopoly of the established disciplines: on the contrary, queer theory could be incorporated into each of them, and it could then be applied to topics in already established fields. Those working in English, history, classics, anthropology, sociology, or religion would now have the option of using queer theory, as they had previously used Deconstruction, to advance the practice of their disciplines–by "queering" them. The outcome of those three moves was to make queer theory a game the whole family could play. This has resulted in a paradoxical situation: as queer theory becomes more widely diffused throughout the disciplines, it becomes harder to figure out what's so very queer about it, while lesbian and gay studies, which by contrast would seem to pertain only to lesbians and gay men, looks increasingly backward, identitarian, and outdated.

Last semester the Director of Graduate Studies in my department at the University of Michigan, who is herself a longtime contributor to lesbian/gay studies, asked me to teach a graduate seminar in queer theory, since that was one of the fields that our graduate students had expressed an interest in studying. I would have been more gratified by that request if I hadn't just taught a graduate seminar in queer theory the previous semester, which only one graduate student from my department had taken. The obvious problem was that I hadn't called my course "queer theory." But the more far-reaching problem was that "queer theory" has become so conventional, so indistinguishable from the other prerequisites for advanced literary and cultural studies, that not only is it no longer very queer, it also no longer resembles the sort of work that continues to go on within the orbit of lesbian, gay, or queer studies, even when such work is conducted in a theoretical register. In my case, the graduate seminar I had offered was an attempt to inquire into gay male subjectivity in a non-psychoanalytic mode by examining gay men's cultural identifications, their distinctive (which is to say queer) relation to mainstream culture, their engagement with figures like Judy Garland or Bette Davis–in short, their particular ways of reading. The purpose of the seminar was to approach questions of gay male subjectivity-formation by means of detailed, concrete analyses of gay men's cultural practices, the vagaries of their identifications and disidentifications, and to found a queer paedagogy on that reformulated basis.

Such a course is very different from a survey of queer theory, beginning with Sedgwick, Butler, Monique Wittig, Gayle Rubin, Michel Foucault, D. A. Miller, Leo Bersani, and Simon Watney, and extending through the work of de Lauretis, Diana Fuss, Douglas Crimp, Lee Edelman, Earl Jackson, Biddy Martin, Sue-Ellen Case, Michael Warner, and Judith Halberstam. For one thing, my course was concerned specifically with gay men, with their unique culture. It presumed a willingness to examine gay male cultural practices for their social and theoretical significance. Such an undertaking did not lend itself to abstraction or generalization, at least not in the first instance; it had to take off from a close examination of the social phenomena themselves, and it could not

escape intimate engagement with the sensibilities of gay men in particular. It did not rise quickly enough to a level of theoretical generality sufficient to place it obviously and easily within the intellectual reach of everyone–meaning students not necessarily familiar with or interested in the specifics of gay male life. In other words, the topic was irreducibly queer.

Queer theory proper is often abstracted from the quotidian realities of lesbian and gay male life. That doesn't undercut its importance. A survey of canonical queer theory, such as I have outlined above, can be immensely valuable, and I have willingly taught it in the past. But I would not want to teach such a course if it were to function as a means for (straight) students who do not wish to engage with queer culture or queer studies to acquire a qualification in queer theory, merely so as to complete an up-to-date graduate education. The challenge for those of us who want to do queer theory in an academic context today is to find ways of accommodating our students' legitimate professional demand for credentialization in queer theory while preserving the critical, or queer, dimensions of that very enterprise.

Of course, the ultimate irony in all this comes from the larger disciplinary situation. The people who invented feminism and lesbian/gay studies, who later introduced queer theory into the academy, were motivated first and foremost by an impulse to transform what could count as knowledge, as well as by a determination to transform the practices by which knowledge functioned within the institution of the university. Students nowadays who enroll in graduate school intending to work in queer theory, whatever their political background or ambitions, seek less to revolutionize the university than to benefit from what the university currently has to offer them. They also seek to create a space for themselves and their work within the field of queer theory as that field is already constituted.

That is not a bad a thing in itself. It is after all what many of us have struggled for–to make it possible for queer students, and others, to integrate the analysis and critique of gender and sexuality into their professional lives, into their identities, into their scholarly practices. Still, nothing in our background has prepared us for the kind of disciplinary relation to queer theory that consists not in working with students to create possibilities for critical reflection that have never previously existed but in using our authority to train students in queer theory as if it were any other established field ("B+: you made good use of Sedgwick, but you neglected to mention Michael Moon"). If queer theory is going to have the sort of future worth cherishing, we will have to find ways of renewing its radical potential–and by that I mean not devising some new and more avant-garde theoretical formulation of it but, quite concretely, reinventing its capacity to startle, to surprise, to help us think what has not yet been thought.