

Queer

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# Queer

*Have you ever been to a restaurant or somewhere, and you go to the toilet and you find two doors, one marked women and one marked men, and they're both open and inside they're both identical? well, the other day I was in this restaurant and there they were, the two identical rooms, side by side: but there were no signs on the doors. And I just stood there for a minute. And I wondered why they weren't marked. It occurred to me that they could be marked with any words—and that at other times, and in other places, they might have been marked 'blacks' and 'whites'. And could they even be marked 'straights' and 'queers'? But these toilets belonged to some other era. They were the toilets of utopia.*

## Queer Politics

My personal disenchantment with queer politics had a particular moment—although writing this piece has served as the occasion for its re-enchantment for me. It came depressingly soon after the first wave of queer. There was an ad in *The Pink Paper* for the latest Outrage action and it read: 'Rejoice in your escape from HETERO HELL!' I was in a relationship with a woman at the time, and that particular piece of salvationist rhetoric left me cold. It marked out very powerfully two directions of queer, and the ways in which they collide. I want to begin by considering those directions in terms of their understanding of 'straight'.

One direction is defined by what straight is NOT. It argues for an expansive, inclusive dissident vision, where 'queer' signifies the deviation from a norm which is never attainable. Transvestites and transsexuals are queer; SM practitioners are queer; lesbian, gay and bisexual people are queer; maybe sex-workers are queer, maybe anyone who isn't monogamous is queer; maybe anyone who has sex in groups, in public or with objects is queer. In its most expansive sense 'queer' marks the ways in which so many of us are deviants from a narrow, prescriptive sexual standard, which is not simply about heterosexuality, but about: reproductive, monogamous, vanilla, gender-euphoric heterosexuality. That standard is also about: sex between adults (are children queer?) but not between old people; male-dominated sexuality (are heterosexual feminists queer? are anti-sexist men queer?); body fascist sexuality—where desire is supposed to circulate only between people with certain sorts of bodies. And I think we can take these arguments

even further in this direction: white culture views all expressions of black people's sexuality as exotic, disgusting or dangerous. Does that make blackness queer? And in a world where it is not just compulsory to be heterosexual, but compulsory to be sexual, is celibacy queer?<sup>1</sup>

The other direction of queer is defined by what straight IS: straight means male-female sex, so all people in opposite-sex relationships, or experiencing opposite-sex desires, are straight. This position was summed up in a depressingly narrow restatement of queer separatism in *The Pink Paper*.

The term 'queer' has its roots firmly in the lesbian and gay world and was never intended to encompass every social malcontent who felt that he or she did not have a cosy little niche to nestle into. Given the origins and functions of the term 'queer' its meaning simply cannot be stretched to fit anyone who may want to use it. This would stretch its meaning beyond recognition and it would rapidly become vapid.<sup>2</sup>

The word 'vapid' has important connotations for sexual politics—namely the connotations of being insubstantial. In *Sexual Dissidence* Jonathan Dollimore has shown how that term is crucial in discourses which define sexual deviance and name deviants as an insubstantial group: a vapid constituency, so far outside an acceptable and real mainstream that they have no existence; speaking an empty language, living empty lives, whose only effects or rationale is to pervert the healthy, the normal and the substantial. 'Straight' is another key term here, for it captures the Western metaphysical insistence on a teleology, a linear path from which any wandering is a fall into deviance—to become one of the queer multitude I sketched out earlier. So the straight and the narrow have a history of coupling (and needless to say it would have to be a white, heterosexual, monogamous, vanilla, able-bodied couple). Because the direction of culture, of history and of the individual is linear (the argument goes), towards that perfect teleological end-point, it is straight: and because it goes only to one point, one norm for all of us, it is narrow. Returning to that narrow version of queer, we can read in it the return of that metaphysics, described by Dollimore as follows:

Somewhat over-schematically (. . .) Western metaphysics can be represented in terms of three interrelated tenets: teleological development, essence, and universal, the last two being the source of essential and absolute truth respectively. One good reason for recovering the linguistic histories of perversion is because they have often constituted a transgression of normative and prescriptive teleologies,

and the regimes of essential and absolute truth which those teleologies underwrite.<sup>3</sup>

That narrow queerness, that straight queerness, is precisely a 'regime of essential and absolute truth' with its own 'normative and prescriptive teleology'—in this case that of exclusive and absolute homosexuality. And in that sense it is nothing new: it is rather a repetition of the heteronormative position which first constituted homosexuality as an absolute other, forever sundered from the norm by its errancy, and at a distance from which there was no risk of contamination. The eagerness with which the straight press has taken up various 'gay gene' and 'gay brain' theories over the last year (and have they ever shown as much interest in anything else a gay man has said about sexuality?) shows how much more comfortable they are with a minoritizing view of homosexual desire.<sup>4</sup> The strength of the more expansive use of queer is that it gets beyond straight logic to suggest a field of sexual diversities. If it can be seen to repeat that straight thinking in any way it may be in that it conceives of a 'small, distinct, relatively fixed minority': heterosexual, able-bodied, monogamous, vanilla men—to whom I shall return later.

### *Identity Politics*

Queer signals a place from which to speak, and desire and act, a place which defines who I am. It can do so either for a very small and homogeneous vanguard, or for a very large and diverse array. In identifying queer desire it exposes the myths of normative sexual spaces—be they discos, bedrooms, families or minds—and points to the traces of queerness circulating everywhere. This also highlights the ways in which queerness is relational, for different spaces have different outlaw desires—such as the circulations of male-female desire in lesbian and gay spaces (discos, bedrooms and minds alike).

'Space' is an important term for identity politics, in that such a politics carves out spaces of habitation, of togetherness, on the basis of identity. Lesbian and gay centres, women-only spaces: the space assumes coherent identities, such that entry-requirements can be assured. And in order to enter we must take on the coherent identities required of us. Identity politics is therefore concerned with purity. It requires stable and coherent positions that people can assume: yes, I'm a man; yes, I'm gay. It requires that everyone occupy one or other of the available positions: male/female; gay/straight; black/white. It polices

the marginals, pressing them into appropriate sites of a two or three term topology. Purity might be defined as: any ideology where there are fewer positions than there are people.

In this sense it functions within a version of the metaphysics I outlined earlier, and it is significant that where the hegemony of the dominant term starts to break down, the subordinate term can be accepted provided it will conform to a version of that system. Thus the Church of England finds a way to accept 'homosexuality' as a sad but—crucially—inevitable condition. It is the inevitability, the essence, which makes those deviations bearable to the hegemony, because they do not threaten the underlying premiss that there is an order, and it exists with reference to that central term, and within that metaphysics.<sup>5</sup>

There are challenges to those teleologies: transsexuals challenge male/female splits, people of mixed race challenge black/white splits, bisexual people challenge gay/straight splits. But often these new others take up their place in a new identity, which captures within a supposed coherence everyone who does not fit into the available categories. What might seem radical positions thereby solidify into a way of preserving the logic of the telos, the essence and the universal truth. If you're not gay or straight, it's OK you're bisexual, and the category 'bisexual' thereby siphons off that restless energy which might challenge the coherence of the concept of 'sexual orientation' and its privileging of the gender of one's object-choice above all else.

In her anthropological study of purity Mary Douglas has stated that 'purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise'.<sup>6</sup> The delineation of purity collects those central places, practices and beliefs from which a culture marks its others, and declares the terrible consequences of mixing across that border. The irony of purity is that it generates a kind of eternal crusade against the traces of that outside within its centre, a process of scrutiny and self-scrutiny which induces panic so complete that in the end the centre disappears, its every content marked as a potential—or actual—source of dangerous transgression. And yet the empty centre persists as a structuring principle against which the margins are defined.

Identity is a key part of this process, enabling subjects to consolidate their position, in the face of ambiguity about their selfhood—and the fear of being cast outside the charmed circle (because it is not just a metaphysical or structural circle: it is a circle of rights, privileges, property and income). Identity gives a place from which to say 'I am this, I belong here'. But also: 'I conform to the entry-requirements; I am pure.'

In that sense, queer is as susceptible as any other term to recuperation into a hierarchy of the queer and the just-not-queer-enough. But if we think of queer as signalling not so much a position for some as a name for the failure to conform which affects us all (albeit differently), then our queerness might bring us together not as a queer nation, complete with visas, border controls and entry requirements, but in a queerness without frontiers.

It is in that sense that queer can be most effective, rather than by designating boundaries and putting up fences for the rest of us to sit on, and thereby solidifying the oppressive culture which it might otherwise aim to dislodge. We can speak and organize in another way than 'us and them', disrupting that model by positioning ourselves and others as the vast margins defined around an empty centre.<sup>7</sup> Used this way, queer is what Lévi-Strauss called a *mana-word*: a restless term which captures meanings not yet stabilized. 'A value of indeterminate significance, which is itself empty of meaning and therefore able to receive any meaning at all';<sup>8</sup> or, in Barthes's definition, 'a word whose ardent, complex, ineffable, and somehow sacred signification gives the illusion that by this word one might answer for everything'.<sup>9</sup> Queer is, then, harking back to the article I quoted, a vapid word. Its emptiness is a refusal to replicate the policing gestures of current sexual purist positions, gay or straight. Its vapidness is the promise of a politics whose basis is not our commonality, but our very dispersion, a diaspora of sexual dissidents which queer's empty meaning does not organize into a coherent category. A queerness without redemption from difference.

Formulations—such as this—of what we might call a 'post-identity' politics have always been countered by the objection that they do not take on board the realities of discrimination. Celia Kitzinger, for instance, has written:

In struggling to make a real world where labels do not matter, it is a mistake to behave as though those labels are already meaningless. Their current meanings are sufficiently potent to infuse the legal system, national traditions, religion, the tax system, work patterns, art and culture, etc.<sup>10</sup>

Queer enables a way out of this labels/no-labels impasse. Although it is an empty sign for a free and multiple space whose contents are open to negotiation and whose perimeters are not sealed, to denote that space it makes available a word which is saturated with the facts of heterosexist power and abuse: Queer.

*Exorbitant Politics*

We might call queer 'exorbitant' because it works against remaining within the orb, and the orbit, of a purist sexual epistemology. But it is also exorbitant in that it champions the excessive, supplementary, exorbitant desire of sexual pleasure. Our traditional models of political resistance are about the primacy of our needs for survival, and arguments about the debilitating consequences of oppression. We cannot abandon that sexual politics: the facts are that we do get murdered and imprisoned for our desires, and we do get discriminated against by courts and employers. But: queer, as much as it names our pain, focuses, exorbitantly, on our delight. It is a politics in the name of more pleasures, better pleasures, more frequent, more intense, more varied pleasures. Perhaps in this sense all desire is queer, from the most heterosexual blow-job (illegal in some US states let's not forget) to the most outrageous SM: all exorbitant.

This is not an apocalyptic politics, in the sense of promising an imminent and total transformation of the world. If my reading of queer smacks of sixties sexual liberation, and is therefore vulnerable to Foucault's argument that the more we turn to sex for truth, the more we submit to power, nonetheless against this I am arguing for a queerness that does not claim sex to be the source of a radical, redemptive revolution. After all, that is a discourse which would pull it back into the orbit of teleological thinking, sexual purism and salvation politics. Rather, queer maps out the vast zones of deviance in our society and our psyches and suggests that they are to be celebrated and enjoyed for their own sake.

A feature of apocalyptic politics is the claim that the addressing of a particular issue will lead to the overthrow of the world as we know it. Queer makes more modest proposals: less megalomaniac, less heroic, less phallic. In that sense queer is a camp politics: cherishing its commitments, but not believing in them too much—committed, but ironic; another defence against purity and identity. The paradox of this reading of queer is that in tracing out a web of pleasures and championing them, queer opens up new sites for activism, resistance and campaigning, as well as new places to party. So in making that exorbitant gesture of pleasure for pleasure's sake, queer nevertheless serves as a radical challenge to the demands for conformity and repression which constitute the unattainable sexual standard.

I want to conclude with three comments on what I have said so far.



1. If we are to follow a politics of sexual pleasure to its final conclusions, it takes us into other politics: for instance, shouldn't class be a key question in the politics of SM, and just who has the money to afford what gear? And yet there are obviously many issues which queer does not address. I don't think that is problematic in itself; after all it is precisely the damage done by any position or identity's claim to encompass everyone's needs that I am challenging. BUT: how can queer foreground its own limitations so as to avoid seeming like an adequate solution, and therefore closing itself off from other oppression issues?
2. There are classic problems and debates in sexual libertarianism which I feel are too big to take on here, but need to be acknowledged. So, for instance, I haven't raised pornography or inter-generational sex in discussing sexual hegemonies because they seem so much more problematic. What are the ethics of queer?
3. It can be argued that all words categorize. How can we live without categories? Queer is a word just like gay, it doesn't solve the problem of signs on toilet doors. Perhaps the problem is not categorization as such; it is a particular sort of categorization of people into walled-off essences, between which there can be no flow, and which are established within a discourse of purity. As a gesture against that, to contribute towards the disruption of any either/or logic lingering in queerness, consider this. Queer dissolves a set of barricades which keep desires separate: homosexual from heterosexual, SM from vanilla, monogamous from non-monogamous, freeing in the polysemant space of queer an infinite array of interstices, imbrications and miscegenate possibilities. That opens up questions of queer's Other: the straight. What hybrid might be possible there? Can queer facilitate its own dissolution, its 'vapidity' permitting it to be coupled with that which is supposedly its opposite? After all, in the polysexual world of queer, the monogamous, heterosexual, gender euphoric, vanilla male is himself a kind of fetishist, clinging to an alarmingly narrow node in the field of sexual possibilities, and thereby signalling his own exuberant deviance.

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## NOTES

- 1 For an expansion of some of these issues Gayle Rubin's 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' is an excellent starting point, in spite of some significant omissions. It is reprinted in *The Lesbian and Gay*



- Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (London, Routledge, 1993).
- 2 *The Pink Paper*, 14 March 1993, p. 10.
  - 3 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 116.
  - 4 I am using 'minoritizing' as defined by Eve Sedgwick to refer to the view that there is 'a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority', *Epistemology of the Closet* (London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 1.
  - 5 We can think of the UK's age of consent laws for gay men as marking a similar, and crucial, line of normality, such that in the February 1994 vote even two years difference had to be preserved between heterosexual and homosexual ages of consent in order to secure the difference between a norm and its inferior. The parliamentary debates around the issue highlighted the three main conceptions of straightness at work (and in power). First, the traditional homophobic position that we should all be straight, and any deviants must be punished, killed, incarcerated or cured. Second, the modified version that it would be best if we were all straight, but given that we aren't there should be pity and understanding for the sad deviants. Last, a liberal minoritizing vision of two separate (and equally legitimate) sexual cultures—one of which is, crucially, much smaller than the other, and never crosses the line drawn between the two. All three, albeit in different ways, operate within a straight metaphysics.
  - 6 *Purity and Danger* (London, Routledge, 1992), p. 162.
  - 7 Rereading this I am struck by how it invokes its own straight track: a single (if expansive) 'direction' for queerness, and a vapid mirror-image (the narrow queerness) which is variously lapsed, sick or insubstantial.
  - 8 Quoted by Leslie Hill, 'Barthes's body', *Paragraph*, 11:2 (July 1988), 113.
  - 9 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, translated by Richard Howard (London, Macmillan, 1977), p. 129.
  - 10 *Heterosexuality: A Feminism and Psychology Reader*, edited by Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (London, Sage, 1993), p. 29.