

Back to Utopia - “Always been gay?”

Tuesday 7 September 2010, by [DE JONG Alex](#) (Date first published: December 2009).

The Stonewallriots, forty years ago this year, marked the birth of a renewed movement for gay-liberation and sexual self-determination. Influenced by this new movement, historians and other thinkers started to search for the origins of the oppression of sexual minorities. Their findings still have a lot to offer us.

Contents

- [Always been gay?](#)
- [The creation of homosexuality](#)
- [...and of homophobia](#)
- [Utopia renewed](#)

Always been gay?

To fight suffocating social norms – and the ways in which these norms are enforced, like discrimination and violence – activists went searching for their root causes. The idea that people are born ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ is so dominant that its often accepted without further thought. However, this generation of activist historians reached very different conclusions. The mistake people who believe in an innate ‘homosexuality’ make is, they stated, to equate sex between people of the same biological sex with a homosexual identity.

It is one thing to have sex with people from the same sex or to desire them – it is something different to consider oneself homosexual. Some married men who go cruising for sex with other men probably consider themselves ‘gay’ – others don’t, for these men this sex is just something they do from time to time. The idea of an homosexual identity, used by a certain group of people as an important building bloc for their identity, and a cause for other people to approach them with disapproval or even violence, is a relatively recent idea.

Historical examples of men having sex with other men – women have often been made invisible – are plenty and are often used to illustrate the notion that ‘homosexuality has always existed’. But these examples only show how much sexual norms have changed through history. A classic example is the story of men having sex with each other in the Ancient Greek civilizations: these men were not a group separate from men who had ‘straight’ sexlives. Besides, this behaviour was accepted but subjected to rules that differ from current conceptions of what ‘gay sex is’. For example, actual penetration was disapproved and looked upon as degrading.

Another exemple: the prosecution of ‘sodomites’, the term used for men who had sex with men in the eighteenth century Dutch Republic. It’s historically incorrect to say these men were ‘gay’ or to talk of the ‘prosecution of homosexuals’. These men were not prosecuted for their identities, ‘sodomites’ were prosecuted because they committed specific acts. In principle all men had, in the eyes of the prosecutors, the potential to commit the sin of ‘sodomy’. A few centuries earlier, a majority of the male population of Florence was accused of similar sins as the ‘sodomites’. Does that mean there

were more homosexual than heterosexual men in medieval Florence? Of course not, it only means being found guilty of 'sodomy' is something different than being homosexual. Sodomy was just one of many sins people could commit: the courts made no distinction between 'sodomy' or bestiality – both were sins against christian regulations. People found guilty of these sins were punished regardless of how they identified.

The creation of homosexuality...

If the categorie 'homosexual' is not natural, then when was it created? When did people start to think of themselves as a sexual minority? Historians and activists like Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks developed the idea, based on historical sources like dairies, court records and guidebooks for 'ethical living', that the homosexual identity took shape in the nineteenth century [1]. What was lacking in their work was an explanation for the birth of this new identity at that time.

In 1979 the marxist historian John d'Emilio wrote a essay called 'Capitalism and gay identity' [2] arguing it was capitalism that, thanks to the Industrial Revolution and subsequent growth of cities, made it possible for people to develop and claim a homosexual identity. Capitalism broke the old social ties between people that shaped social, including sexual, norms. In contrast to the small rural villages the new cities offered their inhabitants a certain degree of aninomy. And many people who didn't live permanently in cities travelled up and down between them or between city and countryside.

The new urban population had the opportunity to meet many more people than was possible before, influencing them and being influenced in their turn. Sexuality became more detached from procreation; in the countryside, large families made economical sense because the children could work on the land and in their later lives could take care of their aging parents. The wage-workers in the cities faced a different situation- the number of available jobs was limited and a large family often meant poverty.

In these changing circumstances, parts of the urban population created subcultures that could grow and nurture new identities. For d'Emilio, the homosexual identity is one of these new identities. Just how exactly these identities took shape for individual people is impossible to say. Different factors compound on eachother, reinforcing or contradicting eachother – what for one is reason to explore homosexuality further can for the other remain an isolated incident.

Since d'Emilio wrote his essay there have been many new findings regarding the history of homosexuality and same-sex desire. Research has shown that that subcultures of men having sex with men are much older than was assumed before, dating back to the Middle Ages. The link between the growth of these subcultures and the development of cities remains however strong – a fact that seems to confirm one of d'Emilio main points: that 'homosexuality' is a creation of and between people.

...and of homophobia

If capitalism made homosexuality possible, then what caused the always present homophobia? Religious ideas are an obvious cause but what made homophobia persist in the secularizing societies of, for example, twentieth century north-west Europe? In the seventies some leftists tried to develop a theory to explain capitalism's contradictory impact on same-sex desiring identities. The key was the modern nuclear family.

The division of labour between men and women, with men working in the 'public sphere' and women working in the 'private sphere', predates capitalism. But capitalism had a contradictory impact on the family. Like never before, children and women were pushed into the public sphere as wage-workers during the Industrial Revolution, weakening traditional family structures. At the same time however, the family came to fulfil a crucial role in the reproduction of labour; the family became the site where – without pay – new generations of workers were taken care of and children were taught how to be 'productive members' of the new capitalist societies. For the factory workers of the nineteenth century the family became a refuge, a space where there – unlike most times the factory floor – was some possibility for affection and relaxation.

When the current Dutch christian-democrat prime minister calls the nuclear family 'the corner-stone of our society', he is more right than he realizes; it truly is the cornerstone of our current profit based society. The shadowside of the reinforcement of this cornerstone, after the heady first decades of industrialization and urbanisation, was, so socialist feminists stated, the banishment of women back to the private-sphere to work as the unpaid care-takers and educators of their children, the future wage workers. People who didn't fit in this model of the family – like homosexuals – were excluded. Jeffrey Weeks has described the nuclear family as both a site with room for emotion and love and as an 'effective police agent of sexual behaviour'.

This discrimination and exclusion had the unintended consequence of reinforcing the creation of a homosexual identity. After all, in order to judge and disapprove of something it has to be discussed and defined. Homophobes always faced the dilemma that they want to warn the world about homosexuality but at the same time don't want to give people any bold ideas...

Utopia renewed

The idea that people aren't born as homosexuals has important consequences for activists. Maybe the idea seems to confirm, at first sight, the accusations of homophobes that homosexuality is a 'lifestyle', a choice one can make or refuse that is the product of 'social decay'. Two responses should clear away this mistake; first, saying homosexuality is a historical and social construct, made by and between people, is something completely different from saying it is a free choice. After all, we don't choose freely our influences or surroundings, what factors influence us most or what label others attach to us. Secondly, the moral objections of conservatives remain of course nonsense.

Some defenders of gay-rights have tried to prove that homosexuality is 'natural', caused by biological factors. The American neuro-biologist Simon Le Vay for example has tried to find the 'gay-gene' that causes people to be gay. Le Vay, who identifies as gay, has said that if he can prove people are born gay, he will have a strong argument against homophobia; 'who can blame people for the way they were born?' This attitude has provoked a sarcastic reply from activists saying that Black people can not help being black either but that this has never stopped a racist. Besides, if homosexuality was caused by genetic factors, what would stop homophobes from propagating biological procedures to 'cure' homosexuality like any other genetically conditioned 'afflictions'? It also needs to be said that Le Vay's work has come under heavy, purely scientific criticism [3].

When the modern gay movement was born in the seventies its radical wing wanted so much more than 'tolerance' and 'acceptance'; it fought for the right to sexual self-determination for everybody and for a future in which labels like 'gay' or 'straight' would be meaningless. Such an Utopia would remain a dream if our sexualities were indeed the products of our biology. Viewing homosexuality as a construct makes the revival of this Utopia as possible as its desirable and gives room in the movement for people who will not or can not fit in the categories 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual'.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London, 1998) Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, 2nd ed. (London, 1989).

[2] John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York, 1992) Online at:
http://platypus1917.home.comcast.net/~platypus1917/demilio_captialismgayid.pdf

[3] Sherry Wolf, *Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics, and Theory of LGBT Liberation* (Chicago, 2009).