

Queer theories and militant practices

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This is a shortened translation from the French original (click on the flag above to get the original version).

Introduction

“Queer” intellectual and militant movements appear at the end of the 1990s in the United States. In a context marked by social and political backlash (Reagan, Bush), queer movements are politically groundbreaking, as they radically opposed essentialist developments within the gay and the feminist movements in the US. These movements claim that the identities resulting from oppressive structures are not natural and fixed, but rather a social and political construction. These radical premises are clearly in continuity with the emancipation movements of the 1970s. But during the 1990s and 2000s the concept of “queer” quickly became successful, getting institutionalized even within American universities (queer studies), in line with the wave of post-modern intellectual thinking. In fact, “queer” theories represent today a heterogeneous unit, an intellectual and political galaxy. As LGBT militants belonging to the revolutionary/ radical left, what kind of critical reading can we propose?

1) Sex/gender/sexuality

One of the most interesting elements of queer theory is undoubtedly its renewed critique of the patriarchal system. Patriarchy is indeed described as a system, a device articulating sex, gender and sexuality, founded on the primacy of the obligatory reproductive heterosexual norm. In fact, in order to put this critique into perspective, it is necessary to take into account the feminist context of the 1980s, dominated in the United States by essentialist currents. This criticism is however not fundamentally new, as it results from previous feminist and lesbian problematizations. Indeed, one of the great theoretical assets of feminism during the years 1970s was the establishment of a distinction between sex and gender (Oakley, 1972). Sex is analyzed as a “biological” given, which is not determinant, while gender is described as the social and political construction that frames biological differences, thus determining their meaning. On a social scale, many debates have taken place - and are still raging - on the importance and the weight of the cultural and the biological in determining relations between men and women. The distinction between sex and gender is a landmark of feminist thought, but it has a pitfall, too, which quickly emerged in the debates (in the USA as in France: see the depolitized use of “gender”): by focusing on gender as a social construct, one is likely to leave aside sex, and thus to reify it. Sex then becomes an unquestioned, naturalised element, taken as a social and historical invariant. This is where “queer” criticism comes in, bringing an interesting reading which remobilises feminist materialist analyses. On the basis of medical writings on intersexuality, “queer” theorists attempt to demonstrate that sex, too, is a social and political construct. On the basis of the sex/gender link, “queer” theorists propose to analyze gender as determined by a sexual apparatus, i.e. a system organized around the obligatory heterosexual

norm. From this point of view, it is the heterosexual political system – based on sex as a social construction – which founds gendered (social) relations. The articulation of these three dimensions allows to problematise sexuality (practices, orientations), in relation with gender, and not in addition to gender, or even without any link to gender, as it is often the case within LGBT or feminist movements.

2) Strategies/politics

As there is no political current, nor any structured or homogeneous theoretical school defined as “queer”, there is no single strategic emancipatory “queer” perspective. For Butler, the strategic question within emancipatory movements implies strong attention towards the “subjects” of social movements, as she calls them. What is the political subject of feminism? What are the political subjects of LGBT movements? she asks, questioning in this way the political identities that are used to support social movements. These questions are obviously related to the context of feminist and gay struggles in the US. The affirmative identity “women” or “gay” is strategically useful to build collective mobilizations founded on common experiences of oppression, but it must be the object of permanent critical reflection. This essentialist political process, by supposing a homogeneity under the category of “woman”, excludes in fact the experiences of minorities, such as the experiences lived by lesbians, black women, migrant women, lower class women... Butler criticizes the hegemonic and mainstream feminist movement in the United States, as it implicitly bases its collective identity on the experience of white, middle class, heterosexual women. By criticizing the homogenizing effect of identity-based assumptions, Butler proposes to conceive the subject of the struggles (“women”, “gays”, “lesbians”) as the product of the struggles, and not as their precondition. Feminist or LGBT movements must then conceive themselves as coalitions of minorities, recognizing the diversity of oppressions. Alliances with other oppressed minorities would make it possible to overcome the limits of identity-based mobilizations.

Conclusion

To conclude, and to open up the discussion, I will present some critical reflections on queer theories and militant practices.

- 1) The free play with identities, pushed by a fashionable trend, can quickly come closer to an individualistic and liberal ideology, denying or underestimating real living conditions, and criticizing those who are not able to emancipate themselves.
- 2) Risks of re-essentialisation: how to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism, even within a “minority coalition”? There is a real risk of renewing identity groups, in the name of the recognition of minority conditions.
- 3) The rejection or critique of organization: “queer” theories found an important echo in the criticism of organizations, and particularly in the critique of the “party” as a form of organization. The idea of a coalition of minorities echoes certain experiments of the global justice or LGBT movements: the creation of affinity groups with fluid boundaries, or the rejection of structured forms of organization...
- 4) A strategic disagreement with certain queer theoreticians/militants: They do not explain how to organize and structure these practices of subversion, in order to question the gender system. Here one sees the limits of strategies of “subversion”: by avoiding thinking through the issue of power, and of the conquest of power, “queer” currents or those influenced by “queer” generally neglect the analysis of the state as a repressive and ideological apparatus.

P.S.

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