

## Twentieth-Century Social Theory

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## Queer Theory/Sociology

Edited by

Steven Seidman

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## Introduction

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Max Weber thought that one of the defining features of Western modernization was a process of "disenchantment." In a secular or disenchanting culture individuals would no longer look to spiritual or sacred forces – Gods, divine beings, or metaphysical principles such as Karma – to explain events or make sense of their lives. The world would be viewed as an order of natural and human forces – a universe of impulse, instinct, desire, evolution, mechanical laws of gravity and motion, etc. Sociology has not only sought to study this secularizing dynamic but has itself been a "disenchanting" discipline. Whereas the social thinkers of the eighteenth century revealed religion as a human artifice, sociologists exposed the new God of many secular moderns as equally a human creation: nature.

Sociology has been a de-naturalizing force. Sociologists aim to explain human behaviors as social and historical, not natural, occurrences. The idea of the "natural" functions for sociologists like that of "religion" for the figures of the Enlightenment – as an ideology concealing social processes and inequalities. Thus, while some classical economists described capitalism as rooted in a human instinct towards greed, competition, or survival, Karl Marx argued that capitalism is a social and historical phenomenon. Similarly, W. E. B. Du Bois de-naturalized race when he explained racial inequality as a legacy of slavery and racism rather than assume a natural hierarchy of the races. Sociologists have de-naturalized religion, economic behavior, race, gender, social class, the division of social labor, bureaucracy, and so on.

However, there is one aspect of human life that has resisted disenchantment: sexuality. Until recently, sociologists have viewed sexuality as a part of nature. They have shared with popular opinion the view that sexuality is biologically structured into the human species and obeys natural laws. Moreover, where sexuality was not defined as natural, it was approached as strictly a matter of individual feelings

and behavior. To the extent that sexuality was framed as a sphere of nature or a merely individual matter, there could be no sociology of sexuality.

Sexuality is perhaps the last human dimension that many of us refuse to grant is socially created, historically variable, and therefore deeply political. However, this is changing. And while psychoanalysis, feminism, and poststructural literary approaches have been important in de-naturalizing sex, so too has sociology. Sociologists in the last few decades have fashioned varied frameworks for analyzing sexuality. This volume presents a range of current sociological perspectives on issues relating to homosexuality, identity, and power.

This Introduction has two aims. First, I provide an overview of the history of sociology and sex studies. I detail the neglect of sexuality and homosexuality in early classical European and American sociology. I sketch the rise of a sociology of homosexuality and its complex interconnections to a history of political activism and the development of a robust lesbian and gay studies outside sociology and often outside the academy. Second, I provide a summary of the four parts of this book which might be useful as a guide to the volume and to the key debates around the question of homosexual desire and lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity.

### Sociology and the Study of Homosexual Desire: An Historical and Conceptual Perspective

We are familiar with the standard accounts of the rise of sociology. For example, sociology is described as born in the great transformation from a traditional, agrarian, corporatist, hierarchical order to a modern, industrial, class-based, but formally democratic system. The so-called classic sociologists are "classics" precisely because they have presumably provided the core perspectives and themes in terms of which contemporary social scientists analyze the great problems of modernity. These perspectives include Marx's understanding of capitalism as a class-divided system, Weber's thesis of the bureaucratization of modern institutions, and Durkheim's theory of social evolution as a process of social differentiation. If our view of modernity derived exclusively from the sociological classics, we would not know that a central part of the great transformation consisted of efforts to organize bodies, pleasures, and desires as they relate to personal and public life, and that this entailed constructing sexual (and gender) identities. In

short, the making of sexual selves and codes has been interlaced with the making of the cultural and institutional life of Western societies.

The standard histories link the rise of the modern social sciences to social modernization (e.g. industrialism, class conflict, and bureaucracy), but are silent about sexual (and gender) conflicts. At the very time in which the social sciences emerged proposing a social understanding of the human condition, they never questioned a natural order linking sex, gender, and sexuality. Such silences cannot be excused on the grounds that "sexuality" had not become a site of public conflict and knowledges. From the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries, there were social conflicts focused on the body, desire, pleasure, intimate acts and their public expression – struggles in the family, church, law, and in the realm of knowledges and the state. The women's movement flourished in Europe in the 1780s and 1790s, the 1840s to 1860s and between the 1880s and 1920 – key junctures in the development of modern sociology. Struggles over the "women's question" were connected to public conflicts around "sexuality." Sexual conflicts escalated in intensity and gained public attention between the 1880s and World War I – the breakthrough period of classical sociology. In Europe and the United States, the body and sexuality were sites of moral and political struggle through such issues as divorce, free love, abortion, masturbation, homosexuality, prostitution, obscenity, and sex education. This period experienced the rise of sexology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry (Irvine 1990; Birken 1988; Weeks 1985). Magnus Hirschfeld created the Scientific Humanitarian Committee and Institute for Sex Research in Germany. Homosexuality became an object of knowledge. For example, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs published twelve volumes on homosexuality between 1864 and 1879. One historian estimates that over 1,000 publications on homosexuality appeared in Europe between 1898 and 1908 (Weeks 1985: 67).

What is striking is the silence in classical sociological texts regarding these sexual conflicts and knowledges. Despite their aim to view the human condition as socially constructed, and to sketch a social history of the contours of modernity, the classical sociologists offered no accounts of the social making of modern bodies and sexualities. Marx analyzed the social reproduction and organization of labor but not the process by which laborers are materially reproduced. Weber sketched what he took to be the historical uniqueness of the modern West. He traced the rise of modern capitalism, the modern state, formal law, modern cities, a culture of risk-taking individualism, but had little to say about the making of the modern regime of sexuality. The core premises and conceptual strategies of classical sociology defined the

important social facts as the economy, church, military, formal organizations, social classes, and collective representations.

Perhaps the silence of the classical sociologists on "sexuality" is related to their privileged gender and sexual social position. They took for granted the naturalness and validity of their own gender and sexual status the way, as we sociologists believe, any individual unconsciously assumes as natural those aspects of one's life that confer privilege and power. Thus, just as the bourgeoisie asserts the naturalness of class inequality and their rule, individuals whose social identity is that of male and heterosexual do not question the naturalness of a male-dominated, normatively heterosexual social order. It is then hardly surprising that the classics never examined the social formation of modern regimes of bodies and sexualities. Moreover, their own science of society contributed to the making of this regime whose center is the hetero/homo binary and the heterosexualization of society.

Sociology's silence on "sexuality" was broken as the volume level of public sexual conflicts was turned up so high that even sociologist's trained incapacity to hear such sounds was pierced. Confining my remarks to early American sociology, isolated and still faint voices speaking to the issue of sexuality can be heard through the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, sociologists could not entirely avoid addressing this theme in the first few decades of this century.

Issues such as municipal reform, unionization, economic concentration, the commercialization of everyday life, race relations, and the internationalization of politics were important topics of public debate. At the same time, Americans were gripped by conflicts that placed the body at the center of contention. The women's movement, which in the first two decades of this century was often closely aligned to socialist and cultural radical politics, emerged as a national movement. Although the struggle for the right to vote was pivotal, no less important were feminist struggles to eliminate the double standard that permitted men sexual pleasure while pressuring women to conform to Victorian purity norms or suffer degradation if their erotic desires were acted upon. As women were demanding erotic equality, there were public struggles to liberalize divorce, abortion, and pornography; battles over obscenity, prostitution, and marriage were in the public eye (e.g., Peiss 1986; D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Seidman 1991; Smith-Rosenberg 1990). Sex was being talked about in magazines, newspapers, journals, books, the theater, and in the courts. For example, in the literally millions of volumes of sex-advice literature published in the early decades of this century there existed a process of the sexualization of love and marriage (Seidman 1991). Books such as Theodore Van de

Velde's *Ideal Marriage* ([1930] 1950), which constructed an eroticized body and intimacy, sold in the hundreds of thousands. Americans were in the first stages of a romance with Freud and psychoanalysis; social radicals such as Max Eastman, Emma Goldman, Edward Bourne, and Margaret Sanger, connected institutional change to an agenda of sexual and gender change (Marriner 1972; Simmons 1982; Trimberger 1983). Despite the vigorous efforts of vice squads and purity movements, pornography flourished and obscenity laws were gradually liberalized.

In the first half of this century, sex entered the public culture of American society in a manner that sociology could not ignore. And yet sociologists managed to do just that to a considerable degree. Through the mid-century, sociologists had surprisingly little to say about sexuality. For example, the Chicago School of sociology studied cab drivers, immigrants, factory workers, and youth but had little to say about the domain of sexuality. Sociologists such as Park, Cooley, Thomas, Parsons, and Ogburn, had much to say about urban patterns, the development of the self, political organization, the structure of social action, and technological development, but little or nothing to say on the making of sexualized selves and patterns. Finally, while sociologists were surveying every conceivable topic, and while a proliferation of sex surveys were stirring public debate (e.g., Dickinson and Beam 1932; Davis 1929; Kinsey 1948 and 1953), sociologists did not deploy their empirical techniques to study human sexuality.<sup>1</sup>

It took the changes of the 1950s and the public turmoil of the 1960s for sociologists to begin to take sex seriously. The immediate postwar years are sometimes perceived as conservative. However, the war and patterns of mobility, prosperity, and social liberalization relaxed sexual constraints. Indicative of changes in the American culture of the body and sexuality, the fifties witnessed Rock music, the beginnings of the women's movement, the appearance of homophile organizations, and the figures of the beatnik and the rebel for whom social and sexual transgression went hand in hand. The sixties made sexual rebellion into a national public drama. The women's movement, gay liberation, lesbian feminism, the counterculture, magazines such as *Playboy*, sex manuals such as *The Joy of Sex*, and cultural radicals like Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, made sexual rebellion central to social change.

A sociology of sexuality emerged in postwar America (e.g., Henslin 1971; Reiss 1967). Sociologists approached sex as a specialty area like crime or demography. Sex was imagined as a property of the individual whose personal expression was shaped by social norms and attitudes.

Sex and society were viewed as antithetical; society took on importance as either an obstacle or tolerant space for sexual release. The idea of a "sexual system" or a field of sexual meanings, discourses, and practices that are interlaced with social institutions, was absent from sociological perspectives. Moreover, although sociologists studied patterns of conventional sexuality, most conspicuously, premarital, marital, and extramarital sex, much of this literature was preoccupied with "deviant" sexualities, for example, prostitution, pornography, and most impressively, homosexuality.

A sociology of homosexuality emerged as part of the emerging field of the sociology of sex (e.g., Reiss Jr. 1964; Gagnon and Simon 1967a, 1967b; Sagarin 1969). Sociologists turned to the study of homosexuality in the context of the heightened public visibility and politicization of homosexuality.

Between the early decades of this century and the mid-1970s, homoerotic desire was defined by scientific-medical knowledges as indicative of a distinctive sexual and personal identity: the homosexual. In other words, individuals for whom homosexual desire was important in their emotional and sexual desires now saw themselves as a unique type of person. Ironically, the framing of homosexuality as a social identity contributed to the rise of homosexual subcultures. To simplify a very complicated story, homosexual subcultures evolved from the largely informal networks of pre-World War II, to the marginal, clandestine homophile organizations of the fifties, to the public cultures and movements of affirmation and public contestation of lesbian feminism and gay liberation in the seventies (Adam 1987; D'Emilio 1983; Faderman 1981). Integral to the redefinition of homosexual desire into a homosexual/lesbian and gay identity were the changing meanings of homosexuality in scientific-medical discourses. From the early 1900s through the 1950s, a psychiatric discourse that figured the homosexual as a perverse, abnormal human type dominated public discussion. Kinsey (1948, 1953) challenged this psychiatric model by viewing sexuality as a continuum. Instead of assuming that individuals are either exclusively heterosexual or homosexual, Kinsey proposed that human sexuality is ambiguous with respect to sexual orientation; most individuals were said to experience both hetero- and homosexual feelings and behaviors. Kinsey's critique of the psychiatric model was met with a headline defense of the medical model (e.g., Bergler 1956; Bieber 1962; Socarides 1968). At the same time, new social models of homosexuality appeared which suggested an alternative to both the biological and psychological models of psychiatry and Kinsey. These social approaches viewed the homosexual as an oppressed minority, a

victim of unwarranted social prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Cory 1951; Hoffman 1968; Hooker 1965; Martin and Lyon 1972). By the early seventies, the women's and gay liberation movements fashioned sophisticated social understandings of homosexuality. These movements proposed images of homosexual desire and identity as normal and natural; moreover, they criticized the institutions of heterosexuality, marriage and the family, and conventional gender roles for not only oppressing homosexuals but for oppressing women (e.g., Altman 1971; Atkinson 1974; Bunch 1975; Rich 1976).

The growing national public awareness of homosexuality and the rise of new social concepts of homosexuality prompted sociologists to study homosexuality. Through the early 1970s, sociologists viewed homosexuality as a social stigma to be managed; they analyzed the ways homosexuals adapted to a hostile society. Sociologists studied the homosexual (mostly the male homosexual) as part of a deviant sexual underworld of hustlers, prostitutes, prisons, tearooms, baths, and bars (e.g., Reiss 1967; Humphreys 1970; Weinberg and Williams 1975; Kirkham 1971). My impression is that much of this sociology aimed to figure the homosexual as a victim of unjust discrimination. Nevertheless, sociologists contributed to the public perception of the homosexual as a strange, exotic human type in contrast to the normal, respectable heterosexual.

Sociological perspectives on sexuality in the sixties and early seventies proved influential in shaping knowledges of sexuality and homosexuality, in particular, the labeling theory of Howard Becker (1963), Goffman (1963), and Schur (1971) and the "sexual script" perspective of John Gagnon and William Simon (1973). However, in the late seventies and early eighties a new sociology of homosexuality was fashioned primarily by lesbian and gay identified and often feminist sociologists. This new cadre of sociologists took over the conceptual tools of sociology as well as drew heavily from feminism and critical social approaches circulating in the lesbian and gay movements (e.g., Plummer 1975, 1981; Troiden 1988; Warren 1974; Levine 1979a, 1979b; Murray 1979; Harry and Devall 1978). This work underscored the social meaning of homosexuality. It contributed to recent gay theory which has largely neglected sociological research as a distinctive social tradition of sex studies. The sociology of homosexuality from the early 1970s through the 1980s has not played a major role in recent lesbian and gay theory debates, in part because sociologists did not critically investigate the categories of sexuality, heterosexuality, and homosexuality. They did not question the social functioning of the hetero/homosexual binary as the master category of a modern regime

of sexuality. Moreover, many sociologists lacked an historical perspective while perpetuating an approach that isolated the question of homosexuality from dynamics of social modernization and politics.

As sociologists were beginning to approach sex as a social fact, there were, as I alluded to previously, social perspectives on sexuality that were developed by the women's and gay movements. With the formation of homophile groups in the 1950s (e.g., the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis), homosexuality was alternately theorized as a property of all individuals or as a property of a segment of the human population. Viewing homosexuality as natural was intended to legitimate it. Moreover, despite the radicalization of gay theory in lesbian feminism and gay liberation in the seventies, few challenged the view of homosexuality as a basis of individual and social identity. A good deal of lesbian-feminist and gay liberationist theory aimed to reverse dominant sexual views by asserting the naturalness and normality of homosexuality. The notion of homosexuality as a universal category of the self and sexual identity was rarely questioned in the homophile, lesbian-feminist, and gay liberationist discourses (exceptions include Altman 1971; MacIntosh 1968).

As the initial wave of a gay affirmative politics, roughly from 1968-73, passed into a period of community building, personal empowerment, and local struggles, we can speak of a new period in lesbian and gay theory - the age of "social constructionism." Drawing from labeling and phenomenological theory, and influenced heavily by Marxism and feminism, social constructionists had roots in both academia and political activism. Social-constructionist perspectives challenge the antithesis of sex and society. Sex is viewed as fundamentally social; the modern categories of sexuality, most importantly, those of heterosexuality and homosexuality, are understood as social and historical creations. Social constructionist perspectives suggested that "homosexuality" was not a uniform, identical phenomenon but that its meaning and social role varied historically. In particular, constructionists argued that instead of assuming that "the homosexual" is a trans-historical identity or a universal human type, the idea that homosexual desire reveals a distinctive human type or social identity is said to be unique to modern Western societies. Michel Foucault (1980) provided the classic statement. "As defined by ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, a life form . . . Nothing that went into total composition was unaffected by his sex-

uality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions . . . because it was a secret that always gave itself away" (p. 43). Foucault's thesis of the social construction of "the homosexual" found support in the concurrent work of Jeffrey Weeks (1977), Jonathan Katz (1976), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975), and Randolph Trumbach (1977).

Social constructionism emerged in the context of prodigious efforts at lesbian and gay community building in the seventies. Constructionist studies sought to explain the origin, social meaning, and changing forms of the modern homosexual (e.g., D'Emilio 1983; Plummer 1981; Faderman 1981). As much as these perspectives challenged essentialist or universalistic understandings of homosexuality, they contributed to a politics of the making of a homosexual minority. Instead of asserting the homosexual as a natural fact made into a political minority by social prejudice, constructionists traced the social factors that produced a homosexual identity which functioned as the foundation for homosexuals as a new ethnic minority (e.g., D'Emilio 1983; Faderman 1981). Social-constructionist studies legitimated a model of lesbian and gay subcultures as ethnic-like minorities (Epstein 1987; Seidman 1993).<sup>2</sup>

Social-constructionist perspectives dominated analyses of homosexuality through the eighties and have been institutionalized in lesbian and gay studies programs in the nineties. Debates about essentialism (Stein 1992) and the rise, meaning, and changing social forms of homosexual identities and communities, are at the core of lesbian and gay studies. However, since the late eighties aspects of this constructionist perspective have been contested. In particular, discourses that sometimes circulate under the rubric of Queer theory, though often impossible to differentiate from constructionist texts, have sought to shift the debate somewhat away from explaining the modern homosexual to questions of the operation of the hetero/homosexual binary, from an exclusive preoccupation with homosexuality to a focus on heterosexuality as a social and political organizing principle, and from a politics of minority interest to a politics of knowledge and difference (Seidman 1995).

What is the social context of the rise of Queer theory?

By the end of the seventies, the gay and lesbian movement had achieved such a level of subcultural elaboration and general social tolerance, at least in the US, that a gay politics focused on social assimilation far overshadowed the liberationist politics of the previous decade. Thus, Dennis Altman (1982), a keen observer of the gay movement in the seventies, could speak of the homosexualization of

America. And yet at this very historical moment events were conspiring to put lesbian and gay life into crisis.

A backlash against homosexuality, spearheaded by the New Right but widely supported by neoconservatives and mainstream Republicans, punctured illusions of a coming era of tolerance and sexual pluralism (Adam 1987; Seidman 1992). The AIDS epidemic energized an anti-gay backlash and put lesbians and gay men on the defensive as religious and medicalized models which discredited homosexuality were rehabilitated. While the AIDS crisis also demonstrated the strength of established gay institutions, for many lesbians and gay men it underscored the limits of a politics of minority rights and inclusion. Both the backlash and the AIDS crisis prompted a renewal of radical activism, of a politics of confrontation, coalition building, and the need for a critical theory that links gay affirmation to broad institutional change.

Internal developments within gay and lesbian subcultures also prompted a shift in gay theory and politics. Social differences within the gay and lesbian communities erupted into public conflict around the issues of race and sex. By the early eighties, a public culture fashioned by lesbian and gay people of color registered sharp criticisms of mainstream gay culture for its devaluation and exclusion of their experiences, interests, values, and unique forms of life — e.g., their writing, political perspectives, relationships, and particular modes of oppression. The concept of a lesbian and gay identity that served as the foundation for building a community and organizing politically was criticized as reflecting a white, middle-class experience (Anzaldua and Moraga 1983; Lorde 1984; Beam 1986; Moraga 1983). The categories of “lesbian” and “gay” were criticized for functioning as disciplining political forces. Simultaneously, lesbian feminism was further put into crisis by challenges to its foundational concept of sexuality and sexual ethics. At the heart of lesbian feminism, especially in the late seventies, was an understanding of the difference between men and women anchored in a spiritualized concept of female sexuality and an eroticization of the male that imagined male desire as revealing a logic of misogyny and domination. Being a woman and a lesbian meant exhibiting in one’s desires and behaviors a lesbian-feminist sexual and social identity. Many lesbians, and feminists in general, criticized lesbian feminism for stigmatizing their own erotic and intimate lives as deviant or male-identified (e.g. Rubin 1984; Allison 1981; Bright 1984; Califa 1979, 1981). In the course of the feminist “sex wars,” a virtual parade of female and lesbian sexualities entered the public life of lesbian culture, e.g., butch-fems, sadomasochists, sexualities of all

kinds mocking the idea of a unified lesbian sexual identity (Phelan 1989; Ferguson 1989; Seidman 1992). If the intent of people of color and sex rebels was to encourage social differences to surface in gay and lesbian life, one consequence was to raise questions about the very idea of a lesbian or gay identity as the foundations of gay culture and politics.

Some in the lesbian and gay communities reacted to the “crisis” by reasserting a natural foundation for homosexuality (e.g., the gay brain) in order to unify homosexuals in the face of a political backlash, to defend themselves against attacks prompted by the plague, and to overcome growing internal discord. However, many activists and intellectuals moved in the opposite direction, affirming a stronger thesis of the social construction of homosexuality that took the form of a radical politics of difference. Although people of color and sex rebels pressured gay culture in this direction, there appeared a new cadre of “Queer” theorists. Influenced profoundly by French poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, they have altered the terrain of gay theory and politics (e.g. Sedgwick 1991; Butler 1991; Fuss 1991; de Lauretis 1991; Warner 1993; Dory 1993).

Queer theory has accrued multiple meanings, ~~from a merely-useful shorthand way to speak of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered experiences to a theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion.~~ I take as central to Queer theory its challenge to what has been the dominant foundational concept of both homophobic and affirmative homosexual theory: the assumption of a unified homosexual identity. I interpret Queer theory as contesting this foundation and therefore the very telos of Western homosexual politics.

Modern Western homophobic and gay-affirmative theory has assumed a homosexual subject. Dispute revolved around its origin (natural or social), changing social forms and roles, its moral meaning, and political strategies of repression and resistance. There has been little serious disagreement regarding the assumption that homosexual theory and politics has as its object “the homosexual” as a stable, unified, and identifiable human type. Drawing from the critique of unitary identity politics by people of color and sex rebels, and from the poststructural critique of “representational” models of language, Queer theorists argue that identities are always multiple or at best composites with literally an infinite number of ways in which “identity-components” (e.g., sexual orientation, race, class, nationality, gender, age, able-ness) can intersect or combine. Any specific identity construction, moreover, is arbitrary, unstable, and exclusionary. Identity constructions necessarily entail the silencing or exclusion of some

experiences or forms of life. For example, asserting a black, middle-class, American lesbian identity silences differences that relate to religion, regional location, subcultural identification, relation to feminism, age, or education. Identity constructs are necessarily unstable since they elicit opposition or resistance by people whose experiences or interests are submerged by a particular assertion of identity. Finally, rather than viewing the affirmation of identity as necessarily liberating, Queer theorists view them as, in part, disciplinary and regulatory structures. Identity constructions function as templates defining selves and behaviors and therefore excluding a range of possible ways to frame the self, body, desires, actions, and social relations.

Approaching identities as multiple, unstable, and regulatory may suggest to critics the undermining of gay theory and politics, but, for Queer theorists, it presents new and productive possibilities. Although I detect a strain of anti-identity politics in some Queer theory, the aim is not to abandon identity as a category of knowledge and politics but to render it permanently open and contestable as to its meaning and political role. In other words, decisions about identity categories become pragmatic, related to concerns of situational advantage, political gain, and conceptual utility. The gain, say Queer theorists, of figuring identity as permanently open as to its meaning and political use is that it encourages the public surfacing of differences or a culture where multiple voices and interests are heard and shape gay life and politics.

Queer theory articulates a related objection to a homosexual theory and politics organized on the foundation of the homosexual subject: This project reproduces the hetero/homosexual binary, a code that perpetuates the heterosexualization of society. Modern Western affirmative homosexual theory may naturalize or normalize the gay subject or even register it as an agent of social liberation, but it has the effect of consolidating heterosexuality and homosexuality as master categories of sexual and social identity; it reinforces the modern regime of sexuality. Queer theory wishes to challenge the regime of sexuality itself, that is, the knowledges that construct the self as sexual and that assume heterosexuality and homosexuality as categories marking the truth of sexual selves. The modern system of sexuality organized around the heterosexual or homosexual self is approached as a system of knowledge, one that structures the institutional and cultural life of Western societies. In other words, Queer theorists view heterosexuality and homosexuality not simply as identities or social statuses but as categories of knowledge, a language that frames what we know as

bodies, desires, sexualities, identities. This is a normative language as it shapes moral boundaries and political hierarchies. Queer theorists shift their focus from an exclusive preoccupation with the oppression and liberation of the homosexual subject to an analysis of the institutional practices and discourses producing sexual knowledges and the ways they organize social life, attending in particular to the way these knowledges and social practices repress differences. In this regard, Queer theory is suggesting that the study of homosexuality should not be a study of a minority – the making of the lesbian/gay/bisexual subject – but a study of those knowledges and social practices that organize “society” as a whole by sexualizing – heterosexualizing or homosexualizing – bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, culture, and social institutions. Queer theory aspires to transform homosexual theory into a general social theory or one standpoint from which to analyze social dynamics.

Queer theory and sociology have barely acknowledged one another. Queer theory has largely been the creation of academics, mostly feminists and mostly humanities professors. Sociologists have been almost invisible in these discussions. This is somewhat ironic in light of the gesturing of Queer theory towards a general social analysis. Moreover, the silence of sociologists is most unfortunate since Queer theory has been criticized for its textualism or “underdeveloped” concept of the social (e.g., Seidman 1993, 1995; Warner 1993). Sociologists have both much to learn from Queer theory and the opportunity to make a serious contribution.

This volume has several aims: I hope to show that sociology has its own traditions of thinking about homosexual desire that have shaped much current political and intellectual debate about homosexuality and should continue to do so. I wish to showcase some important perspectives and social research by sociologists. At the same time, it is also clear that some of the most innovative work in lesbian and gay studies has occurred in the humanities. Queer theory has been dominated by literary theorists. I think sociologists have much to learn from this work. Hence, in part, this volume is an effort to carry on a dialogue between Queer theory and sociology. A fruitful exchange means both subjecting sociological perspectives to critique and criticizing Queer theory from the vantage point of sociology. Finally, the value of such a dialogue is, in the end, to be evaluated by the kinds of social and political analyses and opportunities it makes possible. Thus, this volume intends to showcase some recent sociological work that has attempted to conceptually and empirically bring together sociology and Queer theory.