Part 3

Identity-politics and its consequences
Sexual identity-politics
Activism from gay to queer and beyond

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the complex entwinement of sexual identity-politics and sexuality struggles for freedoms that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century to the ongoing challenges, political movements and identity claims that minority sexual groups continue to experience in the early twenty-first century. The chapter primarily draws upon the experiences of sexual minorities in the United States and Western Europe due to the initial emergence of documented sexual politics within these locals. However, through the chapter’s approach it will become clear to the reader that claims around specific sexual identities, rights movements or historical events have to be understood through the specificity of geographical location, time, culture and the intersection of other identities present. This chapter will examine the important historical and intellectual developments which gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements gave birth to during the 1960s and 1970s. It will then move to discuss the advent of the HIV and AIDS crisis in the 1980s and the emergence of queer activism in the late 1980s and 1990s, in so doing the major claims and developments, and the contributions that queer political action provided in understandings of sexual identities, will be examined. The successes of the assimilationist agenda and normalising discourses in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century provide further analysis of current politicised claims and developments. Contributions made by the assimilationist agenda for understandings of ‘sexual citizenship’, particularly in the global north, will also be drawn upon. The main criticisms that can be framed around each of these key sexual minority movements will then be presented. In concluding, the chapter will offer an insight into future developments for sexual identities suggesting that citizenship rights struggles and gains in the global north, although potentially beneficial to many lesbians, gay men and heterosexuals, must not eclipse the material realities of those excluded from such ‘gains’ within the global north or the growing identity movements and right-wing backlash to lesbian and gay ‘rights’ and identities in the global south.

Within the United States and Western Europe, the late 1960s and early 1970s were a pivotal time for the claiming of sexual identities, particularly for the once despised homosexual, who during these years gained significant achievements. This historical period reflected a
new identity beginning to emerge, distinctive from the past and rejecting previous medicalised understandings offered of ‘homosexual identity’ by the sexologists several decades earlier. Non-heterosexuals were now beginning to produce their own sexual identities that had previously been denied to them, through the medical and psychological regulation and naming of their ‘homosexuality’, instead claiming and celebrating their identities as lesbian women and gay men. However, it is important to understand the emergence of this politicised action and gains through an acknowledgement of ‘what went before’. This ‘pre-Stonewall’ era (Taylor et al., 2002) can be recognised as showcasing the importance of the growing spatial concentration of lesbians and homosexual men in large urban areas in the US, along with the emergence of ‘first wave’ assimilationist politics. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, lesbians and homosexual men were forming their own subcultures and communities in major US and Western European cities, formed around shared characteristics regarding sexual object choice and gender performance (Chauncey 1994). The gradual emergence of these underground social movements can be attributed to a significant number of social and cultural developments post-Second World War (see Adam, 1987 for a further discussion).

One of the first recorded ‘rights groups’ to be established for lesbians and homosexual men was ‘The League’ in 1948 in Denmark (Lutzen 1998: 235). In the US the first lasting social movement established by and for homosexual men was the ‘Mattachine Society’ in 1951, soon to be followed by the lesbian rights group ‘Daughters of Bilitis’. In the UK the ‘Homosexual Law Reform Society’ and the London-based lesbian organisations ‘Kenric’ and ‘Minorities Research Group’ had existed throughout the course of the 1940s and 1950s. Although lacking access to political power and facing routine opposition from the state, these groups began to challenge the double binary which non-heterosexuals existed within, being at once invisible and yet highly visible through the stigmatised, penalised and criminalised position they held within most societies. The goals of the early homophile movements varied over the years. Some of the groups such as The League, the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis wanted assimilation for lesbians and homosexual men – making similar demands to those present within current claims to ‘heteronormative’ citizenship rights. These groups were recognised through their assimilationist aims, presenting lesbians and homosexual men through normative discourses, unthreatening to and as sharing similarities with heterosexuals. As D’Emilio (1989: 469) has shown, the US groups fostered a culture of middle-class (white) respectability, with members wearing gender-appropriate clothing and hairstyles. The identity they wished to foster was one of sameness, where the lesbian or homosexual body was not a threat to heterosexuals or wider ‘normal society’.

Emerging lesbian and homosexual groups in the 1950s shared the common desire to educate professionals about the realities of homosexuality, with the hope that, in turn, (medical) professionals would advocate changes in state policies on behalf of homosexuals. The role of medicine in stigmatising and problematising dysfunctional lesbian or homosexual male identities had considerable weight and influence upon wider professional, public and governmental beliefs held against these groups. These homophile movements were often only known via word of mouth, with homosexuality still being illegal in countries such as the UK – they did not publicise their meetings for fear of exposing their members as homosexuals and the consequential punishment this could bring from the state. However, such groups really could not formulate a mass movement rally as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was soon to achieve. For all the groups’ struggles, through their assimilationist beliefs and the desire for members to present gender specific identities, they failed to provide an affirmative and prideful collective identity for members.
Historical and intellectual development

The 1960s and 1970s was undoubtedly one of the most important periods in the history of sexual politics this century. This was a time which saw the revival of feminism and the emergence of lesbian and gay liberation movements, at the same time morality campaigners redoubled their efforts to resist social changes associated with ‘sexual liberalism’.

(Richardson 2000: 35)

Both the young gays and the young lesbians dissociated themselves from what they perceived as the pathetic homophiles who wanted to be accepted. Who the hell they asked wants to be accepted by this patriarchal, capitalist, imperialist, compulsory heterosexual corrupt society.

(Lutzen 1998: 235)

The weak political clout of the early homophile movements was challenged with the emergence of the Gay Liberation Movement in the summer of 1969 in the US, with this soon spreading to other Western nations. A major concern for lesbian and gay liberation in the late 1960s and 1970s was to question and deconstruct assumptions around sexuality and gender. In particular they attacked the ability of science and medicine in defining dominant constructions of homosexuality and its worth, value and meaning. Previously unquestionable identity labels, based within essentialist notions, were now the focus of a new generation of politicised and angry sexual minorities.

The emergence of the gay liberation movement and the identities so associated, at least within the US, is often pinpointed to an exact date and time: 1.20 a.m. on Saturday 28 June 1969. On this day police officers raided a well-known gay bar, the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village in New York. Although the police raid in itself was not an uncommon occurrence – with police persecution of homosexuals growing during the 1960s in several US states and cities, the reactions of the bar’s patrons on the other hand was startlingly different. Rather than allowing themselves to be arrested or victimised, patrons within the bar resisted and fought back, turning the raid into two days and nights of riots (Engel 2002). This event is understood as being symbolically crucial because it signifies the emergence of new and more radical group action of a previously docile, invisible, victimised, regulated and seemingly powerless minority. The actions and the identities that were to grow from the emergence of gay liberation were mirrored in other movements and groups that embodied the New Left – such as the student movement, the anti-war movement, black power movement and the second-wave feminist movement. These movements utilised a new vocabulary to understand their situations, where instead of aiming for assimilation and equality with the white, heterosexual majority, their goal was focused upon liberation of identities and self-determination (ibid.: 386–7). The Stonewall riots and the political fallout marked a move away from the assimilationist agenda of groups such as the Mattachine Society (who in response to Stonewall pleaded for homosexuals not to fight with the police), and the claiming of new identities through the use of terms such as ‘gay’ instead of homosexual, reflecting a real shift in self-perception, group identity and belonging.

Soon after the riots, various organisations, including the GLF were created to mobilise gay men and lesbians into a viable political force. Activists in the early 1970s were denouncing the invisibility and silence that many felt characterised the homosexual lifestyle. However, leaders of organisations central to the liberation movement demonstrated uncanny ability to mobilise these supposedly silent and isolated masses, where by the middle of the 1970s over one thousand lesbian and gay organisations existed within the US alone. This quick organisation of thousands
of lesbians, gay men and their friends belied the rhetoric of isolation and invisibility. Isolated men and women do not create, almost overnight, a mass movement premised upon a shared group identity. In other words, the gay and lesbian movement did not suddenly start at a given hour on a certain day, following a specific event – although the myth of the Stonewall riot would have us believe this. Rather it embodies a historical process marked by diverse opportunities, multiple organisational networks and instances, such as the Stonewalls riots, which ushered in a shift in the personal perspectives of lesbians and gay men themselves. Other factors that have been discussed earlier in this chapter, from the cultural and social developments post-Second World War, the establishment of homosexual organisations in the 1940s and 1950s (although different in their politics), to the growing concentration of lesbians and homosexual men within some metropolitan settings, tied in with continued regulation and resistance, all fed the development and birth of the gay liberation and its powerful politics at the end of the 1960s.

The gay liberation movement was not concerned with the goals of lesbians and gay men alone, but with overturning what it viewed as the white male hegemony that characterised modern capitalism. By asserting that all individuals were sexually androgynous, gay liberation attempted to obliterate the boundaries of the patriarchal gender dynamic that insist on masculine/feminine and homo/hetero division. The GLF was a group of revolutionary homosexual men and women formed with the realisation that complete sexual liberation for all people could not come about unless existing social institutions were abolished. The roots of oppression that gay people suffered were claimed to run deep in society, in particular the structure of family patterns of socialisation and Judeo-Christian culture. Legal reform and education against prejudice was wanted, but such reform was not understood as sufficient whilst existing social structures remained. The GLF, therefore, saw itself as part of the wider movement aiming to abolish all forms of social oppression, working to ally itself with other oppressed groups such as the women’s liberation movement, black people and other national minorities and the working class. The GLF did not believe that any existing revolutionary theory had all the answers to the problems facing lesbians and gay men, but it found strength in its members and through challenging negative and constraining identities (Engel 2002).

As Stein (1997: 264) has shown, the GLF strongly rejected the notion that homosexuality represented a perversion in identity development, where instead lesbian and gay identities and the relationships they would allow were to be celebrated as more ‘complete’ than their non-sexual homosocial counterparts. GLF rejected the notion that it was simply about a minority group seeking rights and instead encouraged everyone to deepen their same-sex relationships, to move beyond the simple hetero/homo binary. For Engel (2002) and Weeks (2007), the struggle of the GLF to end oppression raised consciousness amongst a growing urban collective of lesbians and gay men. Their demands focused upon a number of key issues such as informing that all people who feel attracted to a member of their own sex should know that such feelings are good and natural, to stopping psychiatrists from treating homosexuality as though it were a problem or a sickness. The GLF wanted that police harassment should end, that employers should no longer be allowed to discriminate against anyone on account of their sexual preference and that the age of consent for homosexuals should be reduced to the same age as for heterosexuals. Through their highly visible organisation and growing political power, the GLF allowed women and men to share their experiences, discover commonalities and foster a collective identity. For Engel (2002: 388) ‘radicals chose the word “gay” because it was how homosexuals referred to each other, the word symbolised self-definition and as such was a recognition of internal power’. The term ‘homosexual’ that had been imposed upon a sexual minority for so many decades by science and medicine, a term of illness, was rejected and overturned.
The act of coming out and the visible claiming of one’s sexual identity became a significant group and political event during the 1970s. Where once claiming a homosexual identity or being diagnosed as homosexual could be characterised as a deeply personal experience, claiming a gay or lesbian identity was in part claiming to belong to a wider positive group identity. Part of the claims to name oneself as lesbian or gay, and the rejection of the medicalised naming of the ‘homosexual’, was the fundamental restructuring of the definition of ‘coming out’ by the GLF. Whereas the phrase had previously referred to an individual acknowledgement of homosexuality to oneself, gay liberationists transformed it into an extremely public and political act. Where coming out was to be symbolised as an act of the total rejection of the negative definitions that society inflicted on the homosexual, and substituted both acceptance and pride in one’s gayness. As the work of Sala and De La Mata Benítez (2009: 835) has found, for lesbians in Spain during the late 1970s and early 1980s the act of coming out was the rejection of ‘a historically stigmatised, silenced and forcibly invisible identity’ that was a source of ‘personal suffering’. In coming out, these women were able to deconstruct these stigmatised meanings, giving themselves a sense of self-satisfaction and personal empowerment. Coming out was the ultimate means to conflate the personal and political, in that it was combining the personal act of coming out with the political act of claiming a visibility and rejecting a medicalised ‘homosexuality’ in the naming of oneself as lesbian or gay. Through acknowledging oneself as lesbian or gay, a person exposed themselves to social injustice, hence such individuals had a personal tie to the success of gay liberation (D’Emilio 1983). Through the process of coming out, the victim status was discarded; homosexuality was transformed from a stigma to be hidden to a source of pride to be celebrated. Indeed by coming out, the homosexual became gay (Engel 2002: 388). Coming out as gay man or lesbian was the psychological and political break necessary to do what the homophile movement in the 1950s could never accomplish – attract a large following based around a positive concept of shared identity.

Over the course of the 1970s divisions began to mount between some lesbians and gay men within their political values and identity claims. The ideals of the GLF were increasingly understood as failing to answer or address successfully the needs of lesbians, where the politics of identity that had been so pivotal increasingly became a politics of difference. For many lesbians the claiming of a lesbian identity became associated with the claiming of a political identity, as a political alternative, rather than as a derivative of (failed) heterosexuality (see Lutzen 1998; Richardson 2000). The claiming of a lesbian identity as a politicised identity during the 1970s and early 1980s was reflected in the establishment of new lesbian identities, such as lesbian feminist, radicalesbians, political lesbian and woman-identified woman. This gradual claiming of ‘lesbian’ as a political identity moved the lesbian category away from an identity based exclusively on sexual practice alone. Any woman could now claim a political lesbian identity without ever having engaged in sexual acts or desire to do so with another woman. For those theorists such as Ken Plummer and Jeffrey Weeks, the ‘Woman-identified woman’ paper by the Radicalesbians and the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists ‘Love thy enemy?’ paper in 1970, acted as initial attempts in the association of a lesbian identity with a political agenda. This emergence of a new politicised group of women for Lutzen (1998: 236) is shown in the grouping of women who were ‘feminists using their private life as a revolutionary force. They regarded heterosexuality as an oppressive institution that you could evade by becoming a lesbian.’ These ideals and the challenging of heterosexual power and privilege, along with the value of a political lesbian identity were theoretically engaged with in Adrienne Rich’s ground breaking paper ‘Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence’.

But we must acknowledge that not all lesbians were aligned with the increasing politicisation of lesbian identity. Some lesbians were concerned that lesbianism was becoming too associated
with a critique and rejection of heterosexuality, rather than acting as a positive identity that could be claimed, and one in which sexual attraction to other women could be signalled. As the work of Nicol and Smith (2008: 679) has shown, some lesbians and gay men were still invested in the assimilationist politics that began a decade earlier. As they have documented, a minority of lesbians and gay men in the US spent the early 1970s trying to apply for marriage licences with legal challenges mounted in the province of Manitoba in the US.

For gay men during this time, and some lesbians, the claiming of a gay or lesbian identity was not as politicised as it was for most lesbian feminists, but was tied in with an increasing engagement in the consumption of commodities, services and spaces in the public visibility for this ‘new’ gay identity. The claiming of a gay identity through the act of coming out and an engagement within the commercialisation of ‘gay lifestyles’, particularly within the US, increasingly defined what it meant to be a gay man during the 1970s and early 1980s. For gay men who lacked their own institutions, political consciousness or historical roots, the importance in the claiming of an identity for empowerment and community growth became a central concern. Rights claims were no longer based upon a desire for tolerance towards their sexual identities within the spheres of the private, but increasingly were demands for equality and a new visibility in the public.

But, significant developments and shifts in movements of sexual politics were to occur through the emergence of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and the consequential backlash against lesbians, but in particular gay men. In response to this crisis a new age of activism developed, with AIDS creating a new context in which people could talk about sex. Lesbians and gay men now had a legitimate focus to discuss safe(r) sex practices in public sites, from the park, to the café to daytime television chat shows – leaving the spaces of the private behind and claiming inclusion and lesbian and gay visibility within everyday public sites (see Plummer 2008).

**Major claims, developments and key contributions**

The AIDS movement had distinct aims from the gay and lesbian movement, but perhaps more importantly, it achieved those aims through strategies never conceived as possible by the gay rights activists in the 1970s.

*(Engel 2002: 390)*

The advent of HIV and AIDS in the early 1980s in the US and its quick globalised spread brought a new backlash from the conservative right against newly confident lesbians and gay men. Their confidence celebrated in the liberal sexual lifestyles of many in the 1970s was now facing a serious threat with the arrival of this unknown (terminal) illness. The lack of political will or desire to address the emerging AIDS crisis by both the Reagan and the Bush administrations in the US and the Thatcher government in the UK had the consequence that gay men and lesbians increasingly mobilised themselves to tackle the emerging crisis. Together with AIDS, the 1980s saw a backlash against lesbian and gay rights discourses, with the British government introducing ‘Section 28’ in 1988 to ban the ‘promotion of homosexuality’ within schools in the UK. Fuelled by the impact of HIV and AIDS on gay communities and the anti-homosexual feelings and responses that HIV and AIDS revitalised, especially among the ‘moral right’, a new perspective on sexuality and sexual politics emerged. Lesbian and gay political action groups that had functioned at the local level, in response to this crisis became nationally orientated (Engel 2002). And as Richardson (2000) argues, the emergence of AIDS and the growing power of the conservative right created a new shared political interest between lesbians and gay men. The fracture lines that had developed between the GLF and political lesbian movements decreased
as both lesbians and gay men overcome their divisions to tackle both AIDS and continued homophobia within society and mainstream politics. The then political and social climate gave birth to new and powerful queer political movements in the form of ‘AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power’ (ACT UP) and ‘Queer Nation’ in the US, and the UK-based ‘OutRage!’ ACT UP was established in the US in March 1987, to promote media attention for the AIDS crisis in the hope of creating a universal awareness and gaining political leverage. For Joshua Gamson (1996) activists within ACT UP drew on the supposed abnormality and various expressions of gay identity to challenge the process by which stigmatised identities were defined.

The political events of ACT UP were most apparent in the US cities of New York and Washington DC, allowing them almost direct access to the powerful US media and government. The actions of ACT UP often evolved from the rejection of the stigmatised or (deserving) ‘victim status’ identity of those with HIV and AIDS, and the turning of grief into anger and active, politicised identities. Such activists were drawing on the labels given to lesbians and gay men living with HIV and AIDS and in turn using them to challenge ingrained processes by which such identities had been defined and stigmatised. By the end of 1993, it was estimated that around 200,000 gay men were infected with HIV in the US alone – with such large numbers contributing to the radicalisation of the lesbian and gay population. ACT UP’s most famous slogan ‘Silence = Death’ can be understood as a denouncement of the homophobic authorities and their ineffective response to the AIDS epidemic. Through ACT UP’s demonstrations, civil disobedience and politicised protests, media attention was guaranteed.

At a meeting of ACT UP in New York in 1990 the political group Queer Nation was founded. Queer Nation developed in attempts to address and overcome racial and gender divisions within lesbian and gay communities, by uniting under the label ‘queer’. Queer Nation wanted to challenge and bring to the political forefront concerns that AIDS had eclipsed. In particular Queer Nation had in its focus institutionalised homophobia, the dominance of heterosexuality and the desire to achieve full liberation and rights for all sexualities. Queer Nation, as with the GLF before it, emphasised visibility as a means to safe public existence, using ‘in your face politics’ to appropriate national icons of space. It was particularly famous for its ‘queer Kiss-ins’ at American malls, where masses of lesbians or gay men would gather and kiss, to fracture the heteronormativity of such sites. Queer Nation urged lesbians and gay men to leave the ghettos and queer the heteronormative street. Queer Nation sought to develop radical understandings of citizenship and to make the nation a safe place for queers, not just create spaces of limited tolerance.

Queer activism, in the form of groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation, was part of a greater opposing logic directed towards the distinct identities and group logic of earlier gay liberation. Where for Weeks (1989) the shift from ‘homosexual’ to ‘gay’ two decades earlier was a shift of not just new labels for old realities, but it pointed to a changing reality – both in a way that a hostile society saw the homosexual and in the way those who had previously been stigmatised saw and presented themselves. Similarly, the project of queer in distinguishing itself from earlier identity labels (such as homosexual, lesbian and gay) that formed its history, reflects a changing reality for ‘sexual others’ during the late 1980s and 1990s. Queer Nation sought to unite its members under the umbrella term of ‘queer’ taking a once negative homophobic term and reclaiming it as a sign of power, pride and identity:

queer means leading a different sort of life. It’s not about the mainstream, profit margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It’s not about . . . privilege and elitism. It’s about being on the margins, defining ourselves.

(Blasius and Phelan 1997: 74, cited in Engel 2002: 395)
Unlike gay liberation’s eventual desire to name and make claims to identity positions, queer activism saw socially produced binaries such as gay/straight, man/woman, as the basis of oppression. These identities were then positioned as unstable experiences of the self, that only become fixed primarily in the service of social control. The key to true liberation was to disrupt these categories and refuse them, rather than embrace them. These ‘deconstructionist politics’ saw collective identities such as lesbian, gay and heterosexual as obstacles to true resistance and change, with queers urged to resist and refuse these. For Richardson (2000: 37) queer was used as a term to indicate an identity or political position that questions and rejects the very notion of sexual difference and deviance, where both difference and deviance are dependent for their meaning on an assumed (hetero)sexual norm. Warner (1993) presents queer politics as opposing society itself, protesting not only against normal behaviour of the social, but the very idea that ‘normal behaviour’ exists. However, for Gamson (1996), the ultimate challenge of queerness is not just the questioning of the content of collective identities but its concern with the questioning of the unity, stability, viability, and political utility of sexual identities even as they are used and assumed.

The value and political power of groups such as ACT UP, Queer Nation and OutRage! began to decline during the 1990s. In the US a new Democrat government took office developing responsive programmes to the HIV and AIDS crisis, whilst being lead by a ‘gay friendly’ President Bill Clinton. In the UK, Western Europe and Australasia new governments, along with the growing power wielded by the European Court of Human Rights, began to adopt markedly positive policies and laws concerned with the position of non-heterosexuals within their respective societies. These developments, tied with a wider acceptance of lesbians and gay men in the wider public and the media, made the actions of the queer movement appear dated and out of touch with a growing assimilationist agenda and clamouring claims to citizenship rights (see Richardson 2000; Grindstaff 2003; Bonthuys 2008).

In the first six months after the first civil partnership in December 2005, over 6000 were contracted... What seemed unthinkable 30 years ago, impossible 20 years ago, improbable (at least in famously slow moving Britain) 10 years ago, is now up and running with only the rumblings of the evangelical religious and occasional jokes about who does the dishes and wears the trousers to remind us of an earlier time when heterosexual marriage was the only access to sanctioned sexuality and respectability, and when homosexuals were ‘the most evil men in Britain’.

(Weeks 2007: 3)

For Weeks (2007) in his key book *The World We Have Won*, the rapid changes witnessed within the UK, Western Europe, Australasia, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, South Africa and the US reflect a world in transition. These changes are part of wider claims to citizenship rights – from the claim to same-sex unions or marriage, adoption rights, pension rights, employment rights, discrimination laws and fertility rights – transforming the way in which we understand and theorise sexual identities and the way in which people live their intimate lives. Ken Plummer (2008), who like Jeffrey Weeks has experienced and documented the struggles of non-heterosexuals since the 1970s, recently reflected upon key events around sexualities since the beginning of this century, along with suggesting new areas of focus that are now arising. For Plummer, as for Weeks, the rise of new citizenship rights discourses are transforming the way that lesbians, gay men and heterosexuals live their personal lives, epitomised in the rise of assimilationist politics. What were once a ‘rather straightforward’ bundle of rights and responsibilities, that were primarily reserved for (some) heterosexuals, have developed into a complex and evolving series of
The centrality of claims to marriage, parent status and family rights within contemporary lesbian and gay discourses cannot be attributed solely to shifts in lesbian, gay or queer identities. As Kelly (2007) reminds us, there have been significant shifts within and between gender identities. Where only a few decades ago (heterosexual) men and women had distinct roles in marriage — men were expected to be the primary wage earner and women were expected to be the primary caregiver — in contemporary societies these roles are changing significantly. The shift within gender norms and gendered expectations allows discourses to open around relationships and families that not only challenge traditional gender roles, but also offer a different format to the traditional nuclear family. As Weeks (2007: 15) reflects, marriage (in the UK) has become for the majority of the population, a matter of choice, carrying rights and responsibilities. The meaning of marriage has long ceased to be what it was, often being the only gateway to adulthood, respectability and financial security. The changes that occurred between the 1960s and 2000s for Weeks have severed the automatic unity between marriage, sex, reproduction and parenting. The lesbian or gay family, rather than challenging the heterosexual family unit can be understood as part of a wider diversity in ‘ways of doing’ family. As Turner (1999: 32) has claimed, ‘the liberal regime of modern citizenship privileges parenthood, rather than heterosexuality as such, as the defining characteristic of the normal citizen and as a basis for social entitlement’.

For Richardson (2000) what has now been witnessed since the beginning of this century is the expansion of political campaigns and discourses concerned with issues of family and intimate relationships. Campaigns by gay and lesbian groups are increasingly focused upon securing various rights as citizens on the same basis as heterosexuals. For Richardson, the AIDS crisis, although giving rise to queer activism, also brought into sharp relief the lack of legal recognition for non-heterosexual relationships, with consequences for pensions, housing, inheritance...
and other rights. The assimilationist agenda that can be found within some of these campaigns echoes some of the desires of the early homophile movements in the 1950s and 1960s. Similar to these earlier movements, lesbian and gay identities are often presented as non-threatening and as distinct from the (hyper)sexualised lives stereotyped upon lesbians, gay men and queers. Where for Sala and De La Mata Benitez (2009) and others, the value of identity allows lesbians and gay men to make claims to citizenship rights as lesbians and gay men, although this is often packaged in discourses borrowed from the homophile movements around ‘their similarity’ to heterosexuals. This assimilationist agenda in its use of presenting lesbians and gay men through their similarity reflects the institutionalisation of heterosexuality within citizenship rights and discourses. To make equal claims to equal rights, lesbians and gay men must forego their difference and (hetero)normalise their values and intimate lives. For Richardson (2000: 11) good citizenship and the values and rights it bestows must be understood within a heterosexual context. However, for others, such as Turner (1999), the liberal regime of modern citizenship rights discourses privileges identities and institutions such as parenthood and marriage. Where as in the past the homosexual was condemned in his inability to present a lasting monogamous marriage or to reproduce, which in turn failed it in its support for citizenship, in those societies that now offer diverse ‘citizenship rights’ to lesbians and gay men, they are now tolerated and accepted through their legitimisation (and normalisation) within the institution of marriage/civil unions and active parenting through adoption and fostering.

Approaches to the inclusion of lesbians and gay men into the act of marriage or civil union can be theorised from two perspectives – those in support, and those against. Often those in support of gay marriage argue that irrespective of whether lesbians and gay men want to marry, they should have the ability to decide for themselves. In allowing non-heterosexuals to marry, legal rights that are denied to non-married couples can be accessed and obtained. Such access can improve the material everyday lives of lesbian and gay couples, allowing them next of kin status, inheritance rights, tax breaks and adoption rights (in some countries). In accessing certain citizenship rights through their legal union, lesbians and gay men can make claims to a visibility in citizenship markers as partners and parents. As Kelly (2007: 410) reflects, ‘pro-gay marriage advocates argue that, since the right to marry is viewed as part of being a first-class citizen, denying this right to gays [and lesbians] consigns them to second class citizen status’. The previous exclusion of lesbians and gay men from marriage created a hierarchy of monogamous intimate partnerships – the married and the non-married, with worth and value given to married heterosexuals (Bonthuys 2008: 727). This ‘de-heterosexualising’ of marriage that is only at best partial and limited across the world (and contentious in the US) represents a shift in the value systems of Western societies (Weeks 2007: 15).

However, for those opposed to lesbian and gay marriage the ‘de-heterosexualising of marriage’ or the growing assimilation and normalisation of lesbians and gay men into heteronormative institutions are problematic. The religious right, especially in the US, but also to be found across Africa, Western Europe and Australasia, have been particularly vocal in their opposition to allowing lesbians and gay men to marry and claim other such similar citizenship rights. Richardson (2000: 79) reflects on President Mugabe of Zimbabwe and his outspoken attacks on lesbians and gay men, condemning homosexuality as ‘Uun-African’ and an imported ‘foreign concept and practice’. Lesbians and gay men within Zimbabwe are not only denied rights as Zimbabweans but are denied identifying as African through their ‘un-African’ identities. Equally in the US, the most recent Bush administration was vocally opposed to growing politicised claims for the right to lesbian and gay marriage, the right to adopt or even the basic right to serve in the US army. For Bush, lesbians and gay men were the ‘other’, unequal and abhorrent to heterosexual values, identities and institutions. Within Europe the Vatican under a new and
more conservative pontiff, Pope Benedict, has been an outspoken critic of granting once heterosexual privileges and rights to lesbians and gay men in many European nations. The granting of increased citizenship rights and the growing value placed upon lesbians and gay men, especially within Western Europe, has been positioned as a direct threat to the institution of marriage and heterosexuality itself by the Vatican.

Main criticisms

The 1960s and 1970s as we have seen, were a pivotal time for the naming and claiming of new sexual identities. The negative values and meanings that were held around the medicalised ‘homosexual’ – which for over half a century had placed the homosexual as the inferior ‘other’ to the heterosexual, were challenged and rejected. The act of coming out became central to political claims to visibility, rights and the desire to name oneself as lesbian or gay. However, the experience and meaning behind ‘coming out’ as celebrated in the 1970s in the US and other Western nations cannot be universalised to all those who claim a non-heterosexual identity. As the work of Ridge et al. (1999) has shown, ‘coming out’ and being openly gay may lack cultural relevance to some ethnic minority groups. For such groups, coming out will intersect with rejection and separation from their ethnic networks, wider societal racism and difficulties in attempts to assimilate into what was and continues to be a mainly white, able-bodied, middle-class gay male culture. The desires of the GLF and the centrality of ‘coming out’ were very much US and Western European specific, having limited or no relevance to the sexual lives of non-heterosexuals in South America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe during this historical moment. Coming out discourses challenged the medical authority of the earlier sexologists who named and classified the modern homosexual, who themselves were based within Western Europe and the US. The modern homosexual was a Western construct, and although exported to a number of non-Western countries (Weeks 1989), for many nations around the globe, meanings around homosexual or gay or lesbian held little relevance at this time. For theorists such as Mary McIntosh, Michel Foucault, Diane Richardson, Jeffrey Weeks, Ken Plummer and Stevi Jackson, involved in ‘the historical investigation of sexual identities’ during this historical period, they did not approach lesbian and gay identities as essentialist or universal in meaning. Such identities they have argued were never denied or waiting to be claimed. Instead they theorised these new identities as constructed within and by discursive fields, Western products of the late twentieth century. The identities that were now being celebrated by the GLF and other such similar political movements were not pre-existing and ‘just hidden in history’, but were historically and socially constructed and given specific meaning within limited geographical locations during the 1960s and 1970s.

Another critique that can be levelled at the gay liberation movement is that the gay male movement, and some lesbians, increasingly bought into their own commercialisation, targeted as new consumers within the increasingly visible ‘gay ghettos’. The politics that had upheld the values of the gay liberation movement increasingly gave way to rampant commercialisation. As a number of observers have commented, lesbians and gay men did not envisage the extent to which the new gay culture of the 1970s would be heavily commercialised by capitalism seeking a new target market. As Jeffrey Weeks, Diane Richardson and Ken Plummer reflect, the earlier aspirations of the gay liberation movement for an alternative sexual–political culture and identities had been answered by the organisation of a huge gay market. Profits could now be made from the newly confident sexual minorities, in the provision of specialist clothing, sex toys, commercial cruising grounds and through the growing centrality of commercial lesbian and gay social spaces for urban lesbians and gay men. Coming out that had been so politicised during the
1970s, increasingly came to be understood as an end in itself, and not as a challenge to the heteronormativity that continued to exist within society. Lesbians and gay men were increasingly targeted as consumers, an emerging market to be valued and desired by capitalism, which only several years earlier had been understood as central to the oppression of non-heterosexuals.

For writers such as Crimp (1993), as the 1980s progressed, identity-politics and the identities it nurtured were increasingly problematised through an essentialist position. Identity-politics had failed in its inability to form alliances with those movements which secured the identities of lesbians and gay men. The failure of gay liberation to truly grasp race, social class and gender within its own ranks and how these identities impacted and intersected with sexual identity caused the focus of newly politicised, AIDS-aware lesbians and gay men to shift. Crimp (1993) goes on to posit that the AIDS crisis brought lesbians and gay men face to face with the consequences of their separatism and liberalism – with the emergence of queer asserting new political identities, as has been discussed earlier in this chapter. However, the queer political movement was and is not without its critics. In particular there have been significant differences between various generations of men and women in how useful or threatening the project of queer has been.

The queer linguistic tactic that has attempted to reclaim and embrace a term of stigma had been rejected by many older lesbians and gay men or those who still craved assimilation and wider citizenship rights. In using letters from the San Francisco Bay Times in the early 1990s, Joshua Gamson (1996) strongly illustrates the generational divide in the usage or resistance to the term ‘queer’. For one writer, they asserted that the age of thirty-five marks those accepting of the queer label from those rejecting it. Younger people, a number of readers claimed, could only reclaim the word ‘queer’ because they had not felt the strong sting, ostracism, police batons and baseball bats that accompanied the this word a generation earlier. Whereas for older generations, queer’s oppressive meaning can never be lifted, can never be turned over from overpowering to empowering. For those who were still pushing an assimilationist agenda in the early 1990s, wanting in on heterosexual rights and norms, the use of queer and the associated political actions were seen as rocking an already fragile claim to ‘normality’. Queers actions and the associated beliefs went against the grain of civil rights strategies, where the appearance of normality (if not a true ‘hetero-normality’ itself) was central to getting into the political room. The queer slogan of the 1990s ‘we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it’, was a highly unapologetic call for a queer confrontational and political visibility.

Queer political action and the embracing of a queer identity allowed non-normative sexual identities to claim a new public visibility within the heteronormative public sphere. Queer provided fertile ground for an accelerated community-based response to mainstream political inaction to the AIDS crisis. But the queer project was short lived, with the growing questioning of queer as a ‘catch all term’ and vocal claims around the value of identities such as lesbian and gay. As Khayatt (2002: 498) argues, the term ‘queer’ presumes a middle-class, urban, white, euro-North American, where such labels cannot be transposed to other nations, cultures and ethnicities without calling into question who first made claims to these and consequently, the very category itself. As Ridge et al. (1999: 46) suggest, queer (as with the earlier GLF) had a cultural leaning towards an ‘Atlantic-centric’ view of the world, entangled within the cultures of the global north, engaging little with those of the global south. For Butler (1997), queer marked a predominantly white movement – ignoring the material realities of racism and ethnic difference. The movement in its desire to unite men and women created false unities between them. Butler asks, does queer engage with the material power inequalities and widespread social divisions or does it ignore these specificities of important material differences? In its challenge to and deconstruction of identity categories, queer ignores and erases the value of identity-politics. As Bannerji (1995, cited in Khayatt 2002: 495) points out, identities such as lesbian and gay have
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provided many individuals with a moment of naming themselves with identities of their choosing. Identity categories, although undoubtedly reinforcing a gay/straight binary, allow minority groups to claim a visibility, to challenge discrimination and to claim wider citizenship rights as lesbians and gay men. To remove labels (and the identities so associated) can remove opportunities to challenge very real material inequalities experienced by diverse sexual minority groups.

The broadening of access to marriage and civil unions for lesbians and gay men, as this chapter has shown, has been celebrated and welcomed by many. However, the advent of lesbian and gay marriage and unions has not been welcomed by all lesbians, gay men or heterosexuals. The strong assimilationist agenda of the early twenty-first century can be theorised as continuing to support the wider institution of marriage and heterosexuality, with sexual identities themselves continuing to exist unproblematically. Although there are many lesbians and gay men who wish to marry, some of the strongest critics of lesbian and gay marriage, and the identities it supports, have been other lesbians and gay men. The assimilation politics of the last ten to fifteen years and the growing normalisation of lesbian and gay identities and lifestyles are critiqued by those such as Richardson (2000), Grindstaff (2003) and Bonthuys (2008). For these authors and others, the changes in citizenship rights discourses strengthens the position of marriage, monogamy and parenting as the template and the ideal which heterosexual, lesbian and gay adults should strive for. At the same time as lesbian and gay marriage or unions allow some same-sex couples to access marriage-like status and rights, others are excluded from the benefits bestowed. The meaning behind such a union reinforces the notion of commitment, exclusive sexual relations with one partner and the value of the couple over the individual.

The (hetero)normalisation of lesbians and gay men is shifting the binary that once existed between ‘good’ heterosexuals and ‘bad’ homosexuals. Now that lesbians and gay men can claim identities and lifestyles that are supported as valid, worthwhile and positive by the state, those who oppose such normalising tendencies maintain their ‘bad’ gay and lesbian position. Such ‘bad’ lesbians and gay men are increasingly positioned against the normalised, monogamous and ‘good’ lesbian or gay man. As Grindstaff (2003: 260) suggests, the normative operations of power are often elided within marriage debates, where marriage discourses are both disciplinary and heteronormative. Equally as the work of Bonthuys (2008) and Bates (2010) have shown, the normative principles around lesbian and gay marriage often ignore the complexity of social class, ethnicity and gender that intersect with sexual identity in impacting who can make claims to a normative identity and a same-sex marriage. As with earlier groups such as the GLF, ACT UP and Queer Nation, the current assimilationist agenda is often represented through the young, attractive, white, non-threatening and commercially viable gay male body. For Ridge et al. (1999) and Bates (2010), the experiences of ethnic minority men and lesbians within the ‘gay world’ tend to destabilise the notion of a unified and inclusive community. The ‘dominance of Anglo cultures over other ethnic cultures’ in lesbian and gay life in the global north is institutionalised to the extent that white privileges go unspoken (Ridge et al. 1999: 45). The lesbian and gay press may now include multiple adverts for lesbian and gay unions, weddings, parenting and home buying, but the images are primarily of white, young, able-bodied, middle-class lesbians and gay men.

Conclusion and future developments

In concluding this chapter and thinking through future developments, it feels like we have almost come ‘full circle’ from the early assimilationist desires of the homophile movements to the assimilationist success stories of today. Struggles over identity for homosexuals, lesbians and gay men have marked every decade since the 1950s. The emergence of the homophile
movements post-Second World War in the UK and US signalled a growing desire and confidence by increasing numbers of urban lesbians and homosexual men to access new visibility, rights and inclusions into the wider heteronormative world. Markedly different from what was to arrive in the 1960s through to the 1990s, they began the slow process of building what was to become a new era of identity-politics and claims for non-heterosexuals in both Western and non-Western nations. The ideals of the homophile movement must be recognised as brave and daring in a time when the homosexual was the central focus of anxieties and paranoia present during the 1950s. Although those supportive of the homophile movement wanted increased tolerance and acceptance, they did not have the political will or power to challenge identity labels themselves. However, their assimilationist ideals and portrayals of ‘respectability’ were soon to be challenged with the advent of identity-politics. The 1960s and 1970s, as we have seen, were a pivotal time for the naming and claiming of new sexual identities. Lesbians and gay men rejected the rhetoric of isolation, coming together in their thousands to challenge the white male heterosexual hegemony that modern capitalism characterised. Through organisations such as the Gay Liberation Front, lesbians and gay men claimed new, politicised sexual identities.

Coming out and the claiming of a gay or lesbian identity, the naming of oneself as gay, increasingly represented a political act. Through coming out, one was not only rejecting a heterosexual identity, but also the power of medicine to name the homosexual. In coming out the homosexual was now gay. For many lesbians the claiming of a lesbian identity focused on the claiming of a political identity, reflected in the establishment of numerous lesbian political groups during the 1970s. Women could now claim a lesbian identity beyond meanings of sexual relationships alone, challenging the oppressive institution of heterosexuality and traditional gender identities and roles. As the 1970s gave way to the arrival of the 1980s, a new era arrived that challenged the newfound confidence and visibility of lesbians and gay men. Through the advent of AIDS, the religious and political right had a new platform to challenge non-heterosexual identities and practice and assert the centrality of heterosexuality within culture and society. In response, a new era of political action and identities arrived in the form of queer.

The birth of groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation and the queer identities they (and the academy) espoused reflected the arrival of a new, angry and potentially more inclusive politicised movement. For queer and those who adopted its deconstructionist politics, collective identities were seen as an obstacle to true change within society, where the naming of oneself as gay, lesbian and even heterosexual should be refused. In queer’s attack on identity categories and the binaries that these are so often dependent upon (gay/straight, man/woman) the false truths of both gender and sexual identities were shown. However, as with the GLF, the queer movement increasingly came to be defined through a white, middle-class, young, urban and gay male identity position. As critics have shown (see Butler 1997; Ridge et al. 1999), queer created false unities between men and women, whilst ignoring wider societal racism and the intersection between sexuality, ethnicity, gender and social class. Ultimately, queer activism and the identities associated failed due to its inability to incorporate diverse social realities beyond the urban centres of the US or Western Europe and the arrival of a new wave of powerful assimilationist politics based upon lesbian and gay identities.

The last decade has witnessed a previously unthinkable growth of citizenship rights discourses and claims within many Western (and some non-Western) countries. What we are currently witnessing is the emergence of rights and identities not based on sexual identity alone, but ‘intimate citizenship’ (Richardson 2000; Weeks 2007). Citizenship rights and obligations such as marriage, parenting, adoption, taxation and so on, that were once simple markers of heterosexuality are being opened to and welcoming of lesbians and gay men. The hierarchy between heterosexuals and lesbians and gay men and their diverse access to markers of
citizenship is increasingly blurred and fractured. The arrival of a political movement based around intimate citizenship is allowing lesbians and gay men to claim other identities that reflect value and inclusive citizenship. Lesbians and gay men are no longer only marked by their sexual identity, but they can claim a visibility and inclusion as monogamous partners, parents, tax payers, home owners and so on. But as we have seen, although these developments are welcomed by many, the rise of the assimilationist agenda and normative politics is problematised by others. In the desire to access citizenship rights and status, lesbians and gay men are having to ‘play by the rules’ as set out by the wider (hetero)normative state. In so doing it can be argued that the (hetero)normalisation of lesbians and gay men has created a new binary between ‘good’ lesbians and gays, and the less respectable, non-monogamous lesbian or gay man. However, through the opening of marriage to non-heterosexuals, states around the globe are also slightly queered, where heterosexual privilege and values can no longer exist unproblematically. The embracing of citizenship rights discourses, in particular in relation to sexuality by individual states, but more importantly by the European Court of Human Rights and the United Nations is having consequences for the ability of individual countries to maintain the heterosexual/homosexual binary within the citizenship rights and responsibilities they will bestow upon their populations. Such values and struggles over intimate citizenship are creating new claims around neo-colonialism and Westernisation of sexual values, identities and rights within the global south.

The current citizenship rights granted to non-heterosexuals and the growing worth given to lesbian and gay lives and relationships must not eclipse the growing global backlash against lesbians, gay men and those heterosexuals who support them. As many Europeans, North and South Americans and Australians celebrate the right to marry, adopt, raise children, gain inheritance, have employment protection and so on, many other lesbians and gay men are facing a new era of hate, ignorance and violence. From the recent hanging of gay men in Iran, to the murder of lesbian and gay activists in Jamaica, the imprisoning of gay men in Malawi and Zimbabwe, the murder of gay men in Iraq and Afghanistan, growing homophobic violence within a number of EU nations and the growing challenges by the religious right in the US, Australia and Europe to the newly secured rights of lesbians and gay men – the coming future of lesbian and gay rights and identities is uncertain. For Plummer, the growing globalisation of sexual identities is flagging ‘important schisms over gender and sexualities between fundamentalist worlds (Christian, Muslim and others) and non-fundamentalist worlds’ (2008: 10). The intersecting of sexuality with other identities such as ethnicity, gender and social class, along with religion and geographical location has very real material consequences for the sexual identity/ies people desire or want to claim. As lesbian and gay identities and the lifestyles so associated continue to be globalised and co-exist, mix or come into conflict with local cultures and ways of being, the earlier monolithic generalisations around sexual identity and the values of the movements that underpinned them in the global north may have little or no meaning in other localities. What is clear as we reflect on our gains and what the future may hold is that struggles over sexual identities have been central to the multiple political movements of the last fifty years and are continuing to be key to current citizenship right claims and conflicts within both the global north and the global south.

References


