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Queer theory is a field of study that critically examines sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual desire from a dissident and “gay affirmative” (Sedgwick 1990) perspective. Its primary aims are the denaturalization of (hetero)sexuality and (hetero)normative gender categories, identities, and expressions.

In the USA, queer theory emerged in the 1990s, augmenting the fledgling gay and lesbian studies of the late 1970s and 1980s. The shift from “gay and lesbian” to “queer” signaled the field’s refusal of identity categories and its commitment to a dissident politics that disdains propriety. The first usage of the term in this sense is often credited to Teresa de Lauretis (1991). Queer theory tends to be theoretically poststructuralist, politically “antihomophobic” (Sedgwick 1990) and pro-sexual freedom, and resistant to any attempts to name, define, or circumscribe its purview and possibilities. Indeed, pleasure in undecidability and the flouting of decorum are sometimes named as the demarcators of queerness itself.

Queer theory in the USA has at least three significant sources, each both political and theoretical: (1) internal critiques of feminism that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s; (2) volume I of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*; and (3) the proliferation of radical cultural, artistic, and political activism in the midst of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s.

Critiques of Feminism

In the late 1970s and 1980s, US feminism underwent a thoroughgoing internal critique by women of color feminists, transsexual and transgender feminist activists, bisexuals, lesbian sadomasochists, and sex radicals, all of whom argued in different ways that feminism

subscribed to a hegemonic understanding of gender that was coercive, exclusionary, and/or presumptively heterosexual.

Women of color and self-identified third-world women criticized feminism for its racism (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1981; Lorde 1984). Dissatisfied with feminism’s focus on white, middle-class women and its political aspirations to equality with white men, women of color feminists emphasized differences among women by race, class, nationality, and sexuality, and the political importance of such differences for feminism conceived as a broader movement for social justice. This critique questioned the universality of the category “woman” and laid the foundation for a broader political project of liberation (Muñoz 1999; Ferguson 2004; Johnson & Henderson 2005).

Others were critical of lesbian feminism’s sometimes reactionary and dogmatic identity politics. Transgender feminists protested lesbian feminist denial of transsexual women’s womanhood and their expulsion from women-only feminist communities on the grounds that they remain men seeking to colonize women’s bodies and spaces (Raymond 1979). Bisexual feminists rejected lesbian feminist condemnation of their relationships with men (sexual and otherwise) as “male-identification” or an assumption of heterosexual privilege. Laying the groundwork for poststructuralist claims, these feminists insisted that transsexuality and bisexuality help destabilize identity categories, itself the important work of radical queer and feminist politics (Däumer 1992; Stone 2006 [1991]).

Feminism’s antipornography wing was also criticized by self-identified perverts, lesbian sadomasochists, and sex radicals for claiming all sexual behavior – for example, pornography, promiscuity, homosexuality, crossdressing, butch–femme, sadomasochism, sex work, transsexuality – as byproducts of a single, hierarchical, gendered dynamic of masculine

domination and feminine subordination. This debate has since become known as the feminist sex wars and culminated at the 1982 Scholar and Feminist IX Conference at Barnard College, "Towards a Politics of Sexuality" (Vance 1984). Gayle Rubin's contribution to this conference has proven crucial to the formation of queer theory. Rejecting what she saw as the feminist antipornography movement's totalizing critique of all sexuality as the consequence of male domination, Rubin argued that sexuality is a "vector of oppression" irreducible to the feminist analysis of gender (1984: 293). This sundering of sexuality and gender made visible and legitimate a multiplicity of gender and sexual variations that, Rubin insisted, are hierarchized by an independent axis of "sexual oppression."

Finally, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) offered a groundbreaking poststructuralist critique of feminism, identity, and representational politics. Butler argued that feminism's commitment to the category "women" engages in the very domination it aims to dismantle insofar as it, too, adheres to the "heterosexual matrix," a "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (1990: 151). Claiming identity as an *effect* of language rather than its cause, Butler denied that gender is an essence expressed through speech or dress. Instead, gender is *produced* through the "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts ... that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990: 33). *All* genders are thus "unnatural" because gender is always already a derivative effect of language and action. Heterosexuality, then – just like "proper" manhood and womanhood – is not "natural" or "first." Rather, as with any other sex(uality) or gender, these are (re)productions of "originals" that can lay no actual claim to originality. Thus feminism's loyalty to the category "women" weds it to the cultural mandates of the heterosexual matrix, circumscribing "women" in homophobic and anti-queer forms. Ultimately, Butler urges feminism to relinquish identity politics and embrace a broader project

of identity destabilization. Her claims in this text, combined with Eve Sedgwick's path-breaking guidelines for "antihomophobic inquiry" delineated in *Epistemology of the Closet*, laid the groundwork for academic queer theory.

Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Volume I

Foucault's argument in this text is foundational to queer theory, and its historical methodology has been widely taken up by contemporary historians of (homo)sexuality and gay politics (D'Emilio 1983; Halperin 1989; Katz 1995).

Foucault argues that the notion of sexuality as something one "has" and is expressive of an inner truth about oneself, discoverable through introspection, is a relatively recent historical phenomenon. He arrives at this conclusion in part through a critique of the liberal and Marxist understandings of power as a commodity wielded by some over others that operates primarily through repression. Instead, Foucault argues that power is a dynamic *relationship* that *constitutes* the parties brought into relation with one another because of its *productive* (not simply repressive) character. Crucially, discourse is one relational form that power takes. So, for example, the figure of the "homosexual" became a distinct category of pathology in the newly emerging medical and sexological discourses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe. Prior to these discourses, the notion of intrinsic homosexuality was unknown. Today, by contrast, homosexuality is an identity that people willingly adopt as an honest description of the inner truth of their sexual lives. In each historical moment, then, configurations of power/knowledge constitute who and what "homosexuality" is, not an innate "truth" of human nature.

Foucault therefore argues that advocating on behalf of homosexuality (for example) as an identity in need of liberation from coercive state policies advances a "reverse discourse" (1978: 101) that retains an investment in the very identity that made such domination

possible. He concludes by calling not for sexual liberation, but rather for the proliferation of “bodies and pleasures” (1978: 159).

Foucault’s arguments have not gone undisputed within queer theory. Critics highlight his Eurocentrism (Massad 2007; Puar 2007) and racism (Johnson & Henderson 2005) and disdain the antiessentialist conclusions of his historical analysis of homosexuality (Bersani 1995).

AIDS Activism

In the early 1980s in the USA, gay men and others suddenly began getting sick from rare forms of pneumonia and cancer in a phenomenon referred to by the media and medical establishment as a “gay plague” or GRID – Gay-Related Immunodeficiency (Crimp 1988). In dramatic numbers and at breathtaking speed, gay men were dying, and the government took no action to address it.

The Reagan administration’s feckless AIDS nonpolicy politicized gay men as never before, while its defunding of social services for women and children and crackdown on abortion and sex education dismantled feminist gains. Feminism’s anti-pornography wing had also alienated many lesbians for its rhetorical resonance with the conservative, pro-family stance of the Reagan administration and the religious right, and many lesbians found common cause with gay men in their outrage at homophobic governmental inaction. These factors led to a historic collaboration between lesbians and gay men that in 1987 became ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a direct-action political organization that demanded government accountability for the disease ravaging the gay community.

ACT UP engaged in a “new kind of unabashedly progay, nonseparatist, antiassimilationist alliance politics to combat AIDS, which did not organize itself around identity categories but instead took aim at the overarching social structures that marginalized the disease and its victims,” which came to be called “*queer*” (Stryker 2008: 134). From ACT UP emerged

other emblematically queer activist groups like Lesbian Avengers – founders of Dyke March, the explicitly political demonstration staged the day before (and partly in protest at the increasingly commercialized) Pride festivals – and Queer Nation, famous for staging kiss-ins at suburban malls and their much-revered chant, “We’re here; we’re queer; get used to it.” This political and cultural ferment was a significant contribution to academic queer theory.

SEE ALSO: Butler, Judith (1956–); Feminism; Foucault, Michel (1926–84); Gender and Identity Politics; Gender and Sex; LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) Politics; Sex/Gender Relationship

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