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Nietzsche and Emancipatory Politics: Queer Theory as Anti-Morality¹

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Abstract

This article offers an emancipatory appropriation of Nietzsche's work, making the case that the founding of the field of queer theory exemplifies and proffers a liberatory Nietzschean praxis of anti-morality. This argument requires reading Nietzsche's work from the perspective of the oppressed and (re-)reading queer theory as part of the project of critical theory.

Keywords

Nietzsche, Queer Theory, Critical Theory, morality, emancipation

Introduction

The juxtaposition of Nietzsche's name with any invocation of the tradition of critical theory, as in the phrase, "Nietzsche and Critical Theory," presents a double challenge. On the one hand, it raises the question of what relationship, if any, might exist between Nietzsche and critical theory; on the other, and more robustly, it invites us to consider Nietzsche's work as a contribution to critical theory. This latter is clearly the more difficult task, perhaps most obviously because Nietzsche was undeniably disinterested in capitalism, much less in mounting any sustained or transformative resistance to it. Yet, even from a new(er) left perspective that takes into account the vast range of work now considered to fall under the purview of critical theory, work that exceeds both the narrow parameters of socialist analysis as well as critical theory's more traditional origins in the Frankfurt School, it nevertheless seems difficult to count Nietzsche as a critical theorist insofar as critical theory's aim, whether old or new, is "the practical and political aim of freedom or emancipation" (Allen, 2016: xiv).

It is true, of course, that some read Nietzsche as an advocate of freedom (see, e.g., Gemes and May, 2009). Yet, as even Nietzsche himself would argue, freedom is itself a matter of perspective: does one imagine and theorize freedom from *above* or from *below*, from, as he puts it in one place,

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the vantage point of the artist or the frog (Nietzsche, 1966 [1886]: §2)? This distinctly Nietzschean question confronts us with the real obstacle to assimilating Nietzsche's work to the project of critical theory, which is not his lack of commentary on capitalism so much as the more general and still under-acknowledged fact that Nietzsche is a conservative. By this I mean what Corey Robin (2013) means; namely, that Nietzsche is a conservative because he is a defender of naturalized, elitist, socio-political hierarchy and understands the emergence of modernity and the enfranchisement of the masses as a direct threat to that hierarchy. For Robin, a crucial distinguishing marker between Left and Right is the latter's commitment to maintaining and justifying elitist hierarchy and the former's commitment to dismantling it. Nietzsche's clear loyalty to elitist hierarchies of all sorts and his unflinching attack on any person, movement, or event that seems to undermine them makes him, in short, a reactionary. Thus even if Nietzsche may be a champion of freedom, he would nevertheless be a champion of it from above, in the name or from the perspective of the elite few. His advocacy of freedom, in other words, would not be liberatory.²

I nevertheless think that Nietzsche's work can be used to support left or liberatory politics in ways that are consistent with his philosophy, but which he could neither have anticipated nor endorsed (Schotten, 2009). That is, Nietzsche does indeed make a contribution to critical theory, but it is a contribution that can only be wrested from him "against his will," so to speak, via an act of appropriation that necessarily and purposefully transforms his work's original aim and purpose. That aim and purpose is the defense of naturalized, elitist hierarchy and its protection from democratization—whether "democratization" be understood as the denaturalizing of privilege and entitlement; agitation by the excluded for recognition, inclusion, and/or representation; or radical overthrow of both socio-political hierarchy and the "nature" in which it is couched and justified. To count as critical theory, in other words, the content of Nietzsche's work must be used to serve the opposite of his purposes: it must be used to serve projects of mass-based emancipation, rather than to protect and perpetuate elitist, hierarchical domination.

In this article, I provide one such version of emancipatory appropriation by offering a critical Nietzschean re-reading of the founding of the field of queer theory. Although queer theory is increasingly reticent to acknowledge its own political project and commitments, with scholars in recent years even rejecting outright the field's seemingly definitive political project of antinormativity (Wiegman and Wilson, 2015), I will nevertheless argue that queer theory does indeed have a distinctively left political project, a project most apparent in its 1990s beginnings, and that this project consists of a resolute opposition to morality and moralisms of all sorts. In this construal, both Nietzsche and queer theory understand morality to be an oppressive, punitive, and normalizing force in social life. The difference between them is that queer theory advances this view from the perspective of queers—that is, from the perspective of the oppressed—rather than from the perspective of the "masters," the noble, the great, or the (ostensibly) superior few. It is this loyalty to and solidarity with those "below" that renders queer theory's anti-morality an emancipatory commitment rather than, like Nietzsche's, a reactionary one. If correct, this analysis provides not only a successful appropriation of Nietzsche for critical theory, but also specifies queer theory's distinct contribution to emancipatory politics.

In Section I, I criticize previous left appropriations of Nietzsche, arguing that they fail because they remain either complicit with or unable to surmount his intransigent conservatism. In Section II, I argue for a reading of the founding of queer theory as a contribution to (and a re-thinking of some of the premises of) critical theory that emphasizes its latently Nietzschean tendencies and, in Section III, flesh out the concrete details of queer theory's founding political project of anti-morality. In short, I claim that queer theory is an exemplary emancipatory political program that, unlike prior left appropriations of Nietzsche, manages to remain Nietzschean without surrendering its emancipatory commitment. For Nietzsche, moralism is a weapon of the weak, and that is how and

why it is objectionable. From a queer/left perspective, however, moralism is the means by which morality is institutionalized; it is, in other words, the perpetuation of oppression that serves the interests of the elite few, not the masses. Queer theory, emerging as it does from the lived experiences of queer people, is perhaps best able to articulate this specifically political critique of morality. In so doing, queer theory as an enterprise demonstrates that morality is part and parcel of the array of oppressions that left politics is invested in undoing—including but not limited to capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonial and imperial domination—and therefore insists that principled opposition to morality is essential to any left political agenda.

I. Nietzsche and Emancipatory Politics

It is by no means obvious that Nietzsche's critique of morality would be a particularly useful starting point for left political projects, seeming as it does to lie at the very heart of his conservatism. A specific rejection of Christianity and its modern derivatives, Nietzsche's critique of morality more generally suggests that any repudiation of hierarchy or social stratification must be understood not as righteousness but rather as the vengeful path to power taken by weak and contemptible people who cannot survive or flourish any other way. In other words, emancipatory or anti-oppression politics would be another version of slave morality. As well, and throughout his work, Nietzsche seems to suggest that oppression is a natural feature of life or existence (e.g., "life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation") and that it is not even really best understood as oppression at all ("but why should one always use those words in which a slanderous intent has been imprinted for ages?" [Nietzsche, 1966 (1886): §259]). Hierarchy, domination, and exploitation, as he says, are the very features of life itself. Attempting to challenge, resist, transform, or undo them is not simply hubris; it is contemptible and a form of nihilism. From a Nietzschean perspective, then, critical theory's emancipatory project would constitute a vengeful attack not simply on the strong or the exploitative, but in fact on life itself, and is initiated by all those unable to cope with or counter the forces of strength and power that naturally and necessarily domineer over them (whether intentionally or not).

In some sense, this critique is nothing new; it is at least as old as Plato. Yet, perhaps like the doctrine of "free will," which never fails to incite even the most ambitious intellects to attempt to refute it (Nietzsche 1966 [1886]: §18), Nietzsche's scathing critique of morality has nevertheless continually tempted critical theorists to see what, if anything, they might do with it in order to recuperate Nietzsche for emancipatory political purposes. For example, political theory had a brief affair with Nietzsche in the 1990s, with many prominent thinkers attempting to appropriate his work for democratic theory. However generative, each of these efforts nevertheless had to concede at some point that producing a "Nietzschean democracy" demanded either tempering democracy with a Nietzschean element, insisting on some form of (sometimes post-Nietzschean) political agonism or contestation, or else claiming an anti-democratic element as necessary in order for democracy to remain democratic (Brown, 2001; Connolly, 1992; Hatab, 1995; Honig, 1993). In other words, Nietzsche's conservative commitment to naturalized, elitist hierarchy proved too formidable to assimilate or overcome; instead, it had to be incorporated into critical theory by preserving it as democracy's necessary other or internal challenge.

The more influential appropriations of Nietzsche's work for left politics have not even attempted such hybrid formations but rather have adopted his conservatism outright, using his critique of morality to critique emancipatory politics as itself a form of slave morality. The most famous and definitive version of this argument is still Wendy Brown's still widely-cited essay, "Wounded Attachments" (1995b), although iterations of its argument abound (particularly with

regard to feminism).³ This troubling use of Nietzsche has the consequences of both solidifying the Right and further entrenching Nietzsche as (only) a thinker of the Right. Most obviously, of course, it reproduces all-too-familiar right-wing stereotypes of the left—for example, that progressive measures to redress historical oppression amount to special pleading or are forms of “political correctness,” unfair limitations on speech and behavior necessary to protect “snowflakes” who cannot cope with the realities of meritocracy and the market.⁴ Much worse, however, is that this critical use of Nietzsche actually retains his notion that any challenge to exploitative hierarchy can only be understood as a reactionary clinging to one’s own victimization and hence a vengeful form of politics.⁵ The net effect is that this ostensibly left critique of left politics ends up construing the cry of the oppressed as of the same power and status as the cry of the oppressor, even going so far as to present—as Nietzsche does—the cry of the oppressed as of *greater* status or power than the cry of the oppressor. But this elides fundamental distinctions between the powerful and the powerless, oppressor and oppressed, without which critical theory loses its critical project. Indeed, without acknowledging this disparity, there is no meaningful distinction between a critique of oppression and a retrenchment of privilege and hierarchy in the guise of righteous victimhood.⁶ However apt a diagnosis of left politics such a critique may be (a conclusion that is itself increasingly being called into question⁷), what is most problematic about it is that it overlooks—if not wholly accepts—Nietzsche’s conservatism; that is, his commitment to naturalized, elitist hierarchy. We thereby have a left Nietzscheanism that retrenches anti-emancipatory agendas.

It is therefore crucial to acknowledge that, while Nietzsche is surely a critic of morality, he is so from the perspective of those in power—whether we want to call them the oppressor, the ruling class, the “masters,” the elite, the great, the few, or what have you. Rather than use this critique to reprimand or discipline the left by misrepresenting and exaggerating oppressed people’s power and influence, I suggest instead that Nietzsche’s critique of morality be appropriated and re-deployed from the perspective of oppressed people(s) so as to make it useful for left politics. Although Nietzsche himself would surely reject this move, he would just as surely be unable to deny the fact that his work authorizes it or, at least, is appropriable for this purpose. For Nietzsche’s critique of slave morality is more than simply a claim that the undeserving many have now taken the reins of power to the detriment of the exceptional few. This is, indeed, one thing it claims, and is a by-now familiar articulation of the troubles of the embattled white guy as well as a predominant mainstream explanation for the surprise 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump.⁸ However, elsewhere I have argued that this is the rhetorical armature of Nietzsche’s critique of slave morality more than the actual substance of it, which is better read as a critique of the *way* that the many have come to power (Schotten, 2016). It is this method that he dismisses as weak and contemptible, and it is their employment of this method that redounds back upon them and (further) renders them weak and contemptible.

That method for achieving political triumph is moralism. In Nietzsche’s view, the weak or the many or the otherwise undeserving have come to power by transforming the natural, hierarchical order of things into a moral problem of agency, harm, and suffering, a fundamentally de-politicizing move that becomes hegemonic by abjecting dissenting positions, existences, and worldviews as evil, irresponsible, immoral, or nihilistic. Indeed, as Nietzsche makes clear, sanctimony is simultaneously the vehicle of and a disguise for the will to power. Moralism becomes an effective morality, then, when it gains the right to rule; its great ruse is to pretend that such aspirations are outside or beyond politics. Once hegemonic, however, it determines what is and is not true, what is and is not right, what is and is not good, and the rest of us transgress its dictates at our peril. Declaring itself and its adherents to be righteous and just, it condemns those who live otherwise as immoral and depraved and seeks to inflict suffering, limitation, and harm upon them for their transgressions

and misdeeds (Nietzsche, 1967 [1885]: I: 14–15). As Nietzsche rightly points out, the sanctimonious insistence on agency and responsibility in fact demonstrate morality's fundamental investment in punishment. Like religions, we might say that moralities too "are at the deepest level systems of cruelties" (Nietzsche, 1967 [1885]: II: 3).

My suggestion here is that queer theory's origins provide a superior version of left Nietzscheanism than either 1990s political theory or Brown and Brown-derived critiques of left politics as slave morality. What early queer theory shares in common with Nietzsche is the conviction that morality is a political tool by which populations are segregated according to manufactured idealizations of merit or worth in order to stigmatize, demean, ostracize, and punish those deemed undeserving by its measure. The debt to Foucault here is obvious, whose understanding of genealogy as facilitating the insurrection of subjugated knowledges (2003 [1975–1976]) combined with his formidable critical anatomy of normalizing and disciplinary powers (1977, 1978) provide the necessary bridge from Nietzsche's conservatism to queer theory's left anti-morality (see Schotten, 2009, forthcoming). Indeed, to use Foucaultian language, we might say that morality serves power's normalizing and disciplinary functions by stigmatizing, ostracizing, and punishing some in the name of abstract and coercive ideals such as the common good, social welfare, the defense of society, or the protection of children. Rather than use this critique to defend or uphold a decaying aristocratic order, as Nietzsche does, or to critique social movements for their resentful attachments to their own injury, as political theory has too often done, queer theory instead marshals this critique *on behalf of* queers, an evasive if expansive collection of anti-normal, anti-normative, anti-moral refusers of propriety and its dictates. Rejecting both Nietzsche's view that those on the bottom are by definition contemptible and political theory's grudging acquiescence to Nietzsche's naturalization of that hierarchy, queer theory instead champions bottoms and all those *on* the bottom as the abjected dissidents of a stultifying moral order that actually works to oppress everyone by hegemonically imposing impossible-to-attain ideals regarding the proper, upright, and best way to live. "Queer," then, is simultaneously a mark of abasement and a badge of dissent. It is neither the self-serving sanctity that Nietzsche argues the weak use to compensate themselves for their inevitable failure to win at the game of life, nor a reactionary shoring up of one's own status as injured or oppressed. It is rather an open and radical embrace of immoralism in the name of undoing morality and its array of punitive moralisms. This makes queerness simultaneously an instantiation of anti-morality and an emblem of revolt. Queerness, in short, is an emancipatory rejection of morality more appropriate to critical theory than either "Nietzschean democracy" or political theory's hitherto accommodationist reprimands of the left and identity politics that have been advanced in Nietzsche's name.

II. Queer Theory and Critical Theory

From its beginnings, queer theory has been animated and inspired by critical social theory, even if critical theory has not always included queer theory as part of its scholarly tradition and even if its 1990s origins are not always acknowledged by contemporary queer theorists. Indeed, that legacy may not always be evident due especially to the fact that much of the field has also been defined by rigorous critique of those 1990s origins for its race, class, and other exclusions, not to mention its inattentiveness to white supremacist, capitalist, and imperial and colonial forms of domination. Those beginnings, however, were formative and its commitments remain active concerns in current and ongoing work in the field (Amin, 2016). Moreover, I would suggest that there is a reason why these critiques of what Marlon Ross (2005) calls "(white)queer theory" and that (white)queer theory itself remain, however uneasily, part of the same theoretical tradition. This shared history, I suspect, has as much to do with left commitment as it does with sexuality; moreover, I will suggest that fully understanding queer theory's commitment to sexuality requires understanding how it is

that “queer” functions to name and specify left/liberatory politics, a terminological capaciousness of “queer” that derives at least in part from its Nietzschean commitment to anti-morality and bridges the divide between (white)queer theory and its critical discontents.

In the early days, queer theorists marshaled all sorts of meanings for the word “queer,” which was imagined simultaneously as an identity marker, a methodology for intellectual inquiry, and the name of political dissidence. As an identity marker, queer became the anti-identity marker: the signifier with no clear or stable referent or the identification that indicates one’s opposition to identity as such (and thus one’s interest in undermining or undoing it). As a method, queering operated similarly: as a refusal of orthodoxy, normalization, and homogenization in the domain of knowledge, as well as a delight in revealing the hidden improprieties of disciplinarity and celebrating the perversities it is complicit in both erasing and producing. As a political praxis, queerness signaled non-cooperation with, if not active undermining of, regimes of normalization which, following Foucault, were recognized to be at work effectively everywhere: at home, school, work, government agencies, public transportation, shopping malls, toilets, bars, convenience stores, airports, sidewalks, parks, movie theaters—the list goes on.

Michael Warner famously systematized these proliferating meanings and provided what, both then and since, has become among the most oft-cited passages used to explain just what in the world the “queer” of queer theory might mean, in the introduction to his now-canonical edited volume *Fear of a Queer Planet*. There, he writes:

The preference for “queer” represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. (1993: xxvi)

For Warner, this definition means that “‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (1993: xxvi). One of queer theory’s innovations, then, was not simply the fugitive dissidence of *queer* but also the formation of power and social meaning called *heteronormativity* which, together with Lauren Berlant, Warner elsewhere defines as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (Berlant and Warner, 1988: 548). The political and critical target of “queer,” in other words, was not heterosexuality “itself,” much less heterosexual people. Following both the Foucaultian injunction to examine particular tactics and technologies of power rather than look for “the headquarters that presides over its rationality” (1978: 95) and to locate these tactics and technologies by examining their subjectifying power-effects, Warner and Berlant’s heteronormativity named neither an oppressor group nor specific people (much less their choices, intentions, or behavior) so much as a system of power and social meaning that unified and privileged a particular sexual/social order whose “power-effects” are registered by the ways in which all of us are subjectified by it.

This field-defining preference for “queer” over “gay,” “heteronormativity” over “homophobia,” is emblematic of the anti-identitarian dissidence so crucial to queer’s emergence, announcing therefore that it would be difficult to definitively capture just who or what, exactly, might fall under its purview. As Eve Sedgwick wrote memorably, in the same year as *Fear of a Queer Planet*:

That’s one of the things that “queer” can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries,

fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunties, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or ... people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such. (1993: 8, original emphasis)

For Warner, “queer” can encompass this varied and illimitable, inevitably incomplete listing of sexual subjects because its distinct advantage is that it points to a “wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence” (1993: xxvi). On this reading, queerness names the violence and power-effects of this heteronormative social system and, through affirmative reclamation, suggests its users’ resistance to them, both symbolic and actual. “Originally generated in a context of terror” (Warner, 1993: xxvi), queer becomes the mark of refusal to regimes of the normal, a resistance in particular to the specific regime and subjectifying effects of heteronormativity. It is, to use Foucaultian language, resistance to “the material agency of subjugation insofar as it constitutes subjects” (2003 [1975–1976]: 28).

The exclusive focus on sexuality, however, as both the center and site of queer’s non-conformity, was evidence to many of queer theory’s whiteness, not to mention its middle-class if not bourgeois origins and normative assumptions. Jose Muñoz (1999), for example, argued for an alternative genealogy of queer theory rooted in women of color and Third World feminisms of the 1980s and suggested “disidentification” as a life-sustaining praxis for queers of color in relationship not simply to dominant racist society, but dominant racist queer theory, as well. Cathy Cohen offered a recuperative if nevertheless formidable critique of (white)queer theory in her essay, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” (1997), a text that should be seen as just as foundational to defining queer theory’s specifically left political project as Warner or Sedgwick. Cohen faults queer theory’s account of heteronormativity for failing to include race and class, yet also attempts to materialize queer theory’s radicality precisely by including them, suggesting a “broadened understanding of queerness ... based on an intersectional analysis that recognizes how numerous systems of oppression interact to regulate and police the lives of most people” (1998: 441). Muñoz does something similar in proposing a queer of color performance/critique that does not demand either surrendering queerness to whiteness or abdicating a specifically brown queerness or queerness of color. Muñoz offers an array of examples of disidentifications in the realm of queer and avant garde performance; for Cohen, by contrast, the example she provides, as referenced in her title, is that of the single black mother on welfare. Although perhaps nominally heterosexual, Cohen asks whether or not this person’s outsider status with regard to heteronormativity—a regulatory ideal that is substantially structured by if not founded upon white supremacy—thereby constitutes the “welfare queen” as a “queer” subject, or at least as a member of a marginal constituency called queer that resists, undermines, or falls outside of dominant heteronorms. She cites the prohibition of slave marriages and the long history of obsession with black women’s reproductive choices in the U.S. as examples of ostensibly heterosexual people inhabiting positions outside the bounds of normative sexuality and sexual morality due to race, class, and property status. Arguing for a queer politics that is accountable not simply to the question of who is and who isn’t heterosexual but, more broadly, to the question of what each of our relationships with and proximity to normalizing power may be, Cohen writes:

As we stand on the verge of watching those in power dismantle the welfare system through a process of demonizing the poor and young—primarily poor and young women of color, many of whom have existed for their entire lives outside the white, middle-class heterosexual norm—we have to ask if these women do not fit into society’s categories of marginal, deviant, and “queer.” As we watch the explosion of prison construction and the disproportionate incarceration rates of young men and women of color, often as part of the economic development of poor white rural communities, we have to ask if these individuals do not fit society’s definition of “queer” and expendable. (1997: 458)

Ultimately, Cohen suggests a coalitional politics for the meaning of queerness based on one's position with regard to and relationship with power rather than one's sexual orientation. This type of queer politics allows for an analysis of heteronormativity as part and parcel of a series of interlocking oppressions that co-constitute both one another and those they subject.

Although he did not grasp its consequences at the time, then, Warner was nevertheless right to name the other important consequence of the dissident notion of queerness; namely, the difficulty of "defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics" (1993: xxvi). Cohen's "welfare queen" and Muñoz's array of queer of color performers aptly gives this schematic assertion both form and content in ways unanticipated by Warner, Berlant, and Sedgwick but wholly consistent with—and necessarily expanding—what they say. Indeed, if queer, by definition, opposes the power-effects of something like a material system of subjectification and social meaning called heteronormativity, then it inevitably cannot demarcate from the outset on whose behalf it advocates or whose interests it represents. That is, it may well include not simply white homosexual men and women but also unmarried black mothers, heterosexual or otherwise, as well as a range of disidentificatory performances of brownness/queerness, since capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonial and imperial domination are co-imbriated with heteronormativity and produce an array of interlocking normalizing and oppressive political formations. In short, because "regimes of the normal" are multiple, dispersed, overlapping, and intersectional, so too are those subjected to its regimes and normalized by it, as Cohen, Muñoz, and Warner each make clear in different ways. Thus, knowing not fully whereof he spoke, Warner argued early on that queers are a constituency unlike any other that has hitherto graced the pages of critical theory: "at present there is no comparable category of social analysis to describe the kind of group or nongroup that queer people constitute" (1993: xxiv). He considers the possibilities of class ("conspicuously useless"), status ("somewhat better," but still inadequate), and (a non-Foucaultian version of) population (which makes "the question who is and is not 'one of them' not merely ambiguous but rather a perpetually and necessarily contested issue"). He concludes: "Queer people are a kind of social group fundamentally unlike others, a status group only insofar as they are not a class" (1993: xxiv-xxv).

These beginning moments of queer theory serve as an important reminder that at least one of the field's founding investments was an interest in a decisively left project of critical praxis.⁹ Warner, Cohen, and Muñoz are explicit in this regard: Warner seeks to claim queer theory as part and parcel of "left traditions of social and political theory" in order to imagine how "queer experiences and politics might be taken as starting points" for these traditions "rather than as footnotes" (1993: vii), while Cohen anchors her analysis of queer politics firmly in the left and holds queer theory accountable to explicitly left concerns. Muñoz characterizes disidentification as both a matter of survival and practice of freedom, proposing a queer of color critique that does not require either helpless relegation of queerness to whiteness nor the abdication of a specific, people of color queerness: "This maneuver resists an unproductive turn toward good dog/bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification that enables politics" (1999: 9). Yet, this queer/left politics is anything but familiar to critical social theory. Not only does it prioritize sexuality as a site and locus of both oppression and liberatory praxis, but it also does not fix that sexuality, refusing to disaggregate it into discrete categories, identities, or "orientations." It cites no stable class system as the domination to be opposed and identifies no clearly formed revolutionary constituency that might overthrow it, focusing instead on the multiple apparatuses and institutions of power that produce coherence, intelligibility, order, and meaning through the subjectifying institutional tools of discipline, normalization, and punishment. In other words, shifting apparatuses of power *produce* their abjected

constituencies through their own operations, which work to subjectify simultaneously as they subject. What matters is not one's location in a class structure, then, but rather one's relationship to hegemonic formations of subjective propriety and coherence, and it is this abjection that precisely "queers" one and produces one *as* queer. The spelling out of this operation is an especial contribution of Cohen's essay, which not only helps realize queer theory's aspiration to a left politics committed to opposing "regimes of the normal," but also makes explicit in its very title the moralized ways those regimes function in order to produce subjects of domination and control. That title suggests that "welfare queen" is a stigmatizing and demeaning insult used moralizingly to justify racist, sexist, capitalist, and heteronormative oppression, and that it is on par with the more familiar degrading terms of abuse so often used to constitute, punish, and control black LGBTQ people. In arguing that "welfare queens" are queer(s), too, Cohen makes clear that oppression includes not simply the more familiar culprits of material deprivation, abuse, political marginalization, and exploitation but also the ideological, cultural, and epistemological configurations that name and produce these conditions of oppression. Thus "welfare queen" serves simultaneously to name and justify the condition of abasement, neglect, and impoverishment this queer subject finds herself in. It names the abjected black woman who, as Dorothy Roberts puts it, is "unfit to bear and raise children" according to "popular mythology promoted over centuries." Thus,

The sexually licentious Jezebel, the family-demolishing matriarch, the devious welfare queen, the depraved pregnant crack addict, accompanied by her equally monstrous crack baby—all paint a picture of a dangerous motherhood that must be regulated and punished. An unmarried Black woman represents the ultimate irresponsible mother—a woman who raises her children without the supervision of a man. (2006: 45)

Cohen's and Roberts's important catalogues of the U.S.'s historical abjection of black women make clear the relevance of queer theory for understanding this intersectional oppression and the importance of refusing not simply its material harms, but its moral and ideological punishments as well. Although critical theory has not always included queer theory within its purview, then, it seems clear enough that it is a project fundamentally animated by emancipation, even if it necessarily challenges critical theory's presuppositions regarding what that emancipation might look like. Moreover, because of its attention to normalization, queer theory makes clear that morality is one vehicle of that oppression, which justifies itself and other subjectifying oppressions via stigmatic and degrading moralisms that abject all those who dissent from its dictates, thereby presenting queers as deserving of the punishment, neglect, and deprivation already visited upon them. In short, morality is part and parcel of oppression and, through its operation, *produces* the oppressed, whom we can recognize by their immoralized social (non-)standing. This is an important contribution not only to critical theory, but also to the continuing envisioning of emancipatory futures.

III. Queer Theory as Anti-Morality

Although Nietzsche focuses on the punishing effects of morality on the elite few, there is no reason why we cannot re-situate his critique of morality from the terrain of the embattled white guys of the world to the situation and perspective of the oppressed. This is what queer theory, in my view, does at its best. Despite some reticence of the field to explicitly position or understand itself as a tradition of the oppressed, queer theory is, I want to suggest, a liberatory critical theory to the extent that it understands morality as a form of oppressive power—as a kind of Foucaultian bio-power, that delineates populations in order to target them for death, and/or as a kind of Foucaultian discipline, that normalizes through examination and surveillance in order to produce compliant and docile bodies.

Reading queer theory in this way aligns it not simply with Nietzsche, a perhaps unlikely forebear, but also with Gayle Rubin, whose justly famous 1984 essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes Toward a Radical Politics of Sexuality," is widely considered to have facilitated the emergence of 1990s queer theory and shaped its distinctly political content.¹⁰ It is known for, among other things, a set of charts that visually map the myriad ways that various forms of sexual activity are hierarchized and (de)valued, as well as Rubin's indexical listing of the theoretical obstacles that impede the construction of a radical politics of sexuality. These five obstacles are: (1) sexual essentialism (the presumption that sexual desire is an innate, pre-social drive); (2) sex negativity (the belief that sex is dangerous, unhealthy, destructive, or depraved); (3) the fallacy of misplaced scale (the exceptionalizing of sex to the point that it becomes burdened with "an excess of significance" [1984: 279]); (4) the domino theory of sexual peril (the fear that sex must be contained or else it will leak out and spread and destroy everything); and (5) the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation (as Rubin puts it, "One of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way" [1984: 283]). Among other things, these five obstacles offer a useful map of the many ways that sex and sexuality are moralized and, in calling for their elimination, Rubin effectively authorizes and demands a strictly political, non-moral(ized) analysis of sex and sexuality. Now, in her essay, Rubin writes in terms of "value," not morality per se, noting the ways in which medical, legal, social, and religious discourses classify and rank different forms of sexuality and sexual activity. But she sees clear continuity across these different classificatory and ranking schemes. The common element that gives them their power and coercive force is, I suggest, that of morality. Indeed, it is by now a commonplace that the seemingly more scientific or "objective" categories of pathology and neurosis are medicalizations of formerly moral categories and, as such, carry punitive and normalizing force. And whether religious, scientific, philosophical, or lesbian feminist, Rubin calls all such frameworks for ranking and classifying sex "systems of sexual judgment" (1984: 122). A central premise of Rubin's important essay, then, is that politics and morality are mutually exclusive endeavors, and that we must refuse the moralization of sex and sexuality if it is to remain a site of contestation, interrogation, and dissent, rather than an uncovering of nature, value, or truth.¹¹ As we know, these latter terms—nature, value, truth—are different modes of insulating otherwise contestable claims from interrogation or critique. Nietzsche argues as much, further instructing that this act of insulation is simultaneously the operation of moralism, which attempts to bypass politics altogether, even as it asserts its own will to power. As Judith Butler similarly pointed out in her early, embattled defense of poststructuralist feminism, the determination that a premise is beyond question because it resides in the realm of nature or truth is a quintessentially political act: "To establish a set of norms that are beyond power or force is itself a powerful and forceful conceptual practice that sublimates, disguises, and extends its own power play through recourse to tropes of normative universality" (1992: 39). Indeed, later in this same essay, she noted that "this movement of interrogating that ruse of authority that seeks to close itself off from contest ... is, in my view, at the heart of any radical project" (1992: 41).¹²

To follow on Butler and Rubin, then, and also borrow from Rubin's terminology a bit, I want to suggest that early queer theory's contribution to left politics is its claim that morality itself should be considered a "vector of oppression" (1984: 293). Recognizing with Nietzsche that all moralities are more or less elaborate systems of punishment and cruelty, queer theory is a critique of oppression insofar as it recognizes the operation of morality as the production of queerness and an enduring stranglehold on the lives of everyone else. This is why, as Warner observed in 1993, it cannot be determined in advance who or what queers are or what constituency they name, even as we can be sure that queerness is a radical, indeed "fundamentalist" resistance to the hegemony of the social order. As I have argued here, queerness entails a rejection of moralism and the moralist pieties about survival and preservation that constitute political, social, and subjective intelligibility. It

is no accident, then, that queer theory focuses on and emerges from sexuality, itself a privileged locus of morality, moralisms, and moral panics of all sorts, as “Thinking Sex” aptly documents. This emergence, however, is also an astute recognition of the political importance of desire and a crucial argument for the foregrounding of desire as integral to liberation and liberatory politics. Because, in the end, politics is not a moral enterprise. Politics is about power: who has it and who doesn’t. What both Nietzsche and queer theory at its best recognize is that morality and its idealizations *are* politics and serve power’s authoritarian function of condemning all those who fail to comply with its mandates. Thus morality is never emancipatory—an important reminder the left must heed—but a Nietzschean critical queer theory actually might be.

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Notes

1. Parts of this article are drawn from my forthcoming book, *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (Columbia University Press).
2. Such a claim is neither an oversimplification nor an unacknowledged sidestepping of the considerable controversy over this issue that has unfolded within Philosophy and political theory over the decades. Rather, it is an attempt to take Nietzsche at his word about hierarchy and meaningfully confront it, rather than defer this confrontation endlessly by using Nietzsche’s aphoristic style, proto-deconstructionist tendencies, or historical location in an ostensibly “less progressive” temporal moment to obscure or undermine an otherwise perfectly clear political position. Indeed, the claim that Nietzsche is an advocate of naturalized, elitist hierarchy (whatever else he may be) remains controversial in some corners of Nietzsche Studies only to the extent that such views continue to prove uncomfortable for superficially neutral yet implicitly liberal commentators who would prefer that the study of Philosophy or political theory or Great Thinkers in general be easily separable from ostensibly pettier or more partisan questions of political positionality (I explore these issues in detail in Schotten, 2009). As the discipline that continues to understand itself as the unmarked pursuit of knowledge/truth, however, Philosophy remains among the last academic fields to have resisted the critical epistemological and political interrogations of women’s/feminist studies, postcolonial studies, critical ethnic studies, and queer studies in its academic institutionalization and professionalization. To that extent, then, I would suggest that it is perhaps Philosophy’s more general allergy to politically “marked” inquiry, rather than any substantial ambiguity on this point in Nietzsche’s texts, that makes my otherwise banal statement about his political loyalties so controversial.
3. Brown’s argument paved the way for a series of critiques of feminism as slave morality, a move that seems to have set an unspoken precedent that only left movements—or only feminism?—should be subjected to this particular analysis, a noteworthy critical consensus that seems to reflect rather than challenge broader right-wing and anti-feminist tendencies in academic Philosophy and political theory. This critique was more recently reincarnated in Halley (2008); for earlier examples, see Brown (1995a); Conway (1998); Stringer (2000); and Tapper (1993).
4. This is not to say that the left is beyond criticism. It is to say that critiquing the left’s critique of oppression as a form of slave morality comes uncomfortably close to refusing leftism’s *raison d’être* entirely, a move that neither reforms nor strengthens the left but rather disciplines and punishes it out of existence. Brown later adapts the argument of “Wounded Attachments” to suggest that moralism emerges on the left in the wake of the fall of the Communist bloc and the demise of progress narratives; temporality and desire thus become its new political challenges, rather than resentful attachment to injury (see Brown, 2005, 2001; Schotten, 2009: 199–206). In either case, however, Brown effectively concludes that the left *has no raison d’être* anymore (a thematic claim of her 1990s/early 2000s scholarship), a conclusion that Lisa Lowe (2015) describes as “mourning Western liberal democracy as the only form for imagining ‘the

- political” by “subsuming the histories of decolonization in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East to the normative narrative of liberal democracy—even in the critical project of observing how it has been hollowed out while being ideologically touted” (p. 198 n. 54).
5. Embedded in this claim but not made explicit is the presumption that those “below” are necessarily weak and that this weakness is necessarily contemptible. Although Brown (1995b) would likely not endorse such views, in appropriating Nietzsche’s critique of morality for a criticism of left identity politics, she ends up, however unwittingly, perpetuating them by failing to adequately distinguish between oppressor and oppressed. I address this issue more explicitly in Schotten, 2016, wherein I make clear that Nietzsche neither conflates mastery with oppression nor slavery with being oppressed. Unfortunately, it seems Brown (1995b) exploits this ambiguity in order to ignore the difference between oppressor and oppressed and instead uses Nietzsche to criticize the oppressed, going so far as to suggest a left power politics difficult to distinguish from the aspirations to domination and free marketeering the left otherwise seeks to dismantle.
 6. Failure to make such distinctions is how one ends up with complaints about, for example, “reverse racism,” sexism against men, or “special rights” for LGBTQ people. Such complaints are emblematic of liberal analyses of injustice, which can recognize only exclusion, discrimination, and under-representation as signs of oppression, measures that are easily reversible in any particular case (e.g., Abigail Fisher suing the University of Texas for denying her admission because she is white or Jack Phillips refusing to bake a wedding cake for a gay male couple because doing so would violate his religious freedom) and therefore complicit in erasing historical oppression and its contemporary manifestations.
 7. Brown’s argument is increasingly questioned in critical race and ethnic studies. Grace Hong (2015), for example, argues that Brown overstates the role of injured subjectivity as an animus of 1960s social movements and that she specifically overlooks women of color feminism’s “alternative notion of subjectivity and community not organized around injury.” The politics of resentment Brown charts, then, “became institutionalized” only later, “in the period of containment in the 1970s to the present” (p. 156). Alexander Weheliye (2014) argues that Brown’s critique of the left effectively blames the victim, and suggests instead that identity politics’ alleged attachment to suffering is “less a product of the minority subject’s desire to desperately cling to his or her pain but a consequence of the state’s dogged insistence on suffering as the only price of entry to proper personhood” (p. 77).
 8. Thus it may be a better analysis of reactionary conservatism than left-wing identity politics (see, e.g., Nealon, 2000).
 9. This fact is sidestepped entirely in the largely apolitical consideration of “Queer Theory Without Antinormativity” (Wiegman and Wilson, 2015).
 10. I defend the controversial claim that Nietzsche can be seen as an intellectual forebear of queer theory in Schotten, 2009; Rubin’s iconic essay (1984) is well-established as having inaugurated the field.
 11. Indeed, part of the controversy of Rubin’s essay was its suggestion that feminism was one of the moralized discourses that insulated sex and sexuality from political analysis and inquiry. In a particularly memorable passage, for example, Rubin aligns lesbian feminism with the Catholic Church: “Sounding like the lesbian feminist Julia Penelope, His Holiness explained that ‘considering anyone in a lustful way makes that person a sexual object rather than a human being worthy of dignity’” (1984: 298). This episode of the feminist sex wars suggests that queer theory emerges at least in part as a response to and rejection of a specifically left movement that, in and because of its moralism, became a conservative, even reactionary force for women in their sexual lives. In this vein, see also Califia (2002 [1979]) and Moraga and Hollibaugh (1992).
 12. It may perhaps be objected that poststructuralism’s relentless critique of foundations is incompatible with left politics, since fidelity to anti-oppression principles requires a normative ground of some sort in order to make that commitment both coherent and actionable. As Butler observed long ago, however, such a demand for normative foundations is itself a moralizing proposition that erases its own authoritarian insistence that politics must be grounded if it is to qualify as politics at all (1992). This defensive and reactionary posture, like all moralisms, actually forecloses political contestation; as such, it is what queer theory and left politics necessarily oppose. Indeed, if what were needed to fight for liberation were a normative ground upon which to stand and, inevitably, from which to wield our own (liberatory?)

disciplinary and punitive power, then the one thing we could be certain of (and there is indeed a longing for certainty here) is that the liberation we seek will never actually materialize.

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