

# Coming Out Ahead: The Homosexual Moment in the Academy

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The journal *Victorian Studies* recently invited submissions for a special issue, entitled "Victorian Sexualities." "Topics," stated the call for papers, "may include (but certainly are not limited to) Victorian homosexualities; the erotics of dress and cross-dressing; sexuality and city life, desire and Orientalism; sexuality and victimization; commodification and desire; religious ritual and sexuality; the erotics of spectacle. Essays which emerge from interdisciplinary study are particularly encouraged." Far from being idiosyncratic, the projected issue of this eminent journal is indicative of a larger moment in American academic culture—the homosexual moment.

By referring to the present as "the homosexual moment" I do not mean that persons of homosexual orientation are necessarily more prominent in academe than they have been in the past. It has long been the case that such persons have been represented in the professoriate, as they have of course been in most walks of cultural life. The difference is that what was once a private disposition has now become the stuff of public identity and ideology.

No doubt the academy has always had its share of distinguished practitioners of sexual and other offenses. But while the practitioners of, say, adultery have not sought openly to proclaim the virtue of seduction or the intrinsic merit of infidelity, the practitioners of what has long been considered at best a disability and at worst an abomination have increasingly banded together to proclaim their practice as praiseworthy, and to demand that others do so as well. What is new is not only the increasing public acknowledgment of homosexuality or the increasing scholarship about homosexuals. What is most important is the rising demand for public recogni-

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tion and respect for homosexuality as such. There is a growing body of literature by academics who define themselves as homosexuals, and who make homosexual identity into a perspective from which our culture is to be evaluated. For those interested in the larger cultural ramifications of the homosexual moment, this may be its most significant feature.

My purpose here is to provide a general *tour d'horizon* of the current place of the homosexual movement in the American academy as well as to examine the aims and claims of some of its most accomplished spokesmen. I hope to convey the self-understanding of the more articulate voices of the homosexual movement in the universities, and to indicate why their linkage with other trends in the academy is likely to increase their influence in the years to come. They claim that the issue of the legitimacy of homosexuality cannot be examined in isolation, that it is necessarily related to wider claims about the nature of culture. My assumption is that they are correct, and that it is not least for this reason that we ought to attend to what they have to say.

I

Recently, and especially within the last year, homosexual ideology has made a great leap forward in its institutionalization in the American academy. At many colleges, gay/lesbian/bisexual student associations are among the most active organizations on campus, funded by student fees and by institutional funds from the university's Office of Multiculturalism. Frequently, the program of extra-academic orientation for freshmen includes sessions in which students are presented with "homosexual perspectives" alongside what are alleged to be those of blacks, Asians, and other minorities; students are repeatedly reminded that antipathy to homosexuality is on a par with racism. At Harvard, each dorm has a designated gay tutor. Columbia University recently accepted a gift of \$200,000 to establish a

scholarship that will be given each year to a student who is active in gay matters on campus, and the chairman of Columbia's English Department has let it be known that he is "committed to hiring, tenuring, and working with" gay and lesbian scholars. Universities including Stanford, Chicago, Iowa, and Pitzer College have recently begun to offer spousal benefits including health insurance and tuition remission to the homosexual partners of faculty members. Columbia University Press publishes a series, "Between Men—Between Women: Lesbian and Gay Studies," including most recently Allen Ellen Zweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe* (1992). Commercial publishers with similar series include NAL Books and St. Martin's.

There have been several annual national academic conferences devoted to gay studies, three at Yale and one each at Harvard and Rutgers, with plans for others at CUNY and in San Francisco. The national Lesbian and Gay Studies Association was founded in 1991. There are academic journals focused on homosexuality, such as the *Journal of Homosexuality*, which published its twenty-third volume in 1992. The spread of gay studies has led to a proliferation of works on the history, incidence, and culture of homosexuality.\* This has certainly marked an increase in knowledge. Often, however, this new scholarship has reinterpreted Western cultural history in a manner that underplays the cultural condemnation of homosexual activity or overstates the incidence of homosexuality.†

But to focus only on explicitly homosexual journals, associations, and academic programs is radically to misjudge the impact and importance of homosexual ideology in academe. For its greatest influ-

\* David F. Greenberg's *The Construction of Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 1988) brought together a great deal of this burgeoning literature, which has continued to grow apace in the intervening years.

† A recent work by a classicist at Berkeley, for example, notes of Michel Foucault's interpretation of Greek sexuality that "Foucault, like many other scholars, is committed to finding that in Greek culture homoeroticism is regarded as natural, that a heterosexual/homosexual bivalence and accompanying modes of normalization do not exist. . . . Accordingly, he does find just those things which he needs for the larger story which makes up the enterprise of his history of sexuality. . . ." (David Cohen, *Law, Sexuality, and Society: The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens* [Cambridge University Press, 1991], pp. 172-73.) Similarly, a critic of John Boswell's influential *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980) shows on the basis of careful textual reconstruction that while "homosexual behavior is not a major issue for early Christian writers, particularly the writers of the New Testament . . . it is fallacious . . . to infer that they were tolerant of it. On the contrary, the evidence that does exist suggests that they regarded it as so self-evidently loathsome as hardly to require discussion. This attitude appears to be one which the early church inherited from its Jewish wellsprings." (Richard Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Spring 1986, p. 203.)

ence has been exerted through other channels, especially women's studies, and is often carried on under rubrics such as gender studies, the study of "sexuality," or "cultural studies."

The history of sexuality has become a growth field within academic history, including the new *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, published by the University of Chicago Press. Within the journal as within the new subdiscipline, homosexuality is heavily overrepresented in both subject matter and personnel. The past year has seen the publication of a plethora of works on sexuality, increasingly focused on intermediate or marginal forms of sexuality. One commercial publisher of highly priced books aimed at the academic market—Routledge—has made homosexuality and sexual ambiguity a specialty. Its current catalogue of recently published works includes *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience*; *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*; *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*; *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*; *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*; *Peers, Queers, and Commons: The Struggle for Gay Law Reform*; and *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. The most widely hailed of Routledge's current crop is *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* by Marjorie Garber, the Director of the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies at Harvard University. The great appeal of transvestism, Garber notes, lies in the fact that it calls into question "binary hegemonic structures," a theme that is becoming the leit-motif of academic homosexual theory. In recent years, "sexuality" has become a dominant theme in interdisciplinary areas such as women's studies, film studies, gay studies, and cultural studies. The focus of much of this writing has been on marginal, intermediate, and transitory sexual identities, including an outpouring of work on hermaphrodites and cross-dressers.

Most important in measuring the influence of homosexual thought in the academy is its impact upon women's studies, by far the fastest-growing area within the humanities and social sciences, both institutionally and in terms of publications. It is estimated that there are now five hundred women's studies programs, thirty thousand courses, and fifty feminist institutes, including the Institute for Advanced Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota.

The logic by which lesbianism is regarded as the truly authentic form of feminism was memorably spelled out by Charlotte Bunch in her article "Lesbians in Revolt," first published in 1972. "Heterosexuality separates women from each other," she wrote. "It makes women define themselves through men; it forces women to compete against

each other for men and the privilege which comes through men and their social standing. . . . Lesbianism is the key to liberation and only women who cut their ties to male privilege can be trusted to remain serious in the struggle against male dominance." The assertion that heterosexual masculinity is defined by the subordination of women has since become a mainstay of gay/lesbian theory. On this understanding, non-oppressive sexual relations are only possible between members of the same sex, and heterosexual women are victims of false consciousness, brainwashed into believing that their true interests lie in loving men rather than other women.

The impact of this logic upon the lives of feminists has been palpable. "Lesbian feminism, by affirming the primacy of women's relationships with each other and by providing an alternative feminist culture, forced many nonlesbians to reevaluate their relationships with men, male institutions, and male values," explains Estelle Freedman, a historian at Stanford. "In the process, feminists have put to rest the myth of female dependence on men and rediscovered the significance of female bonding." As Peter Novick observes in his recent book on the American historical profession:

While only a minority of feminist historians were or became lesbians, a much larger number were inclined to agree that heterosexuality was to some substantial extent a male-imposed construct. A common response was a kind of political or cultural lesbianism. Lesbians were honored as *serious* feminists, much as Jews accorded special respect to those who demonstrated the depth of their Zionism by emigrating to Israel. Even if women did not physically separate themselves from men—and many, in various ways, did—a kind of moral separatism was fairly widespread. (*That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity" Question and the American Historical Profession*, 1988)

It has become ever more common for distinguished and not-so-distinguished academic feminists to "come out," including, most recently, Angela Davis.

Feminist academic journals have focused increasingly on lesbian topics. Recently, such journals have devoted whole issues to the subject, a decision which, as the editors of *Feminist Studies* (published in association with the Women's Studies Program at the University of Maryland) note, reflects "the extraordinary rapid growth and acceptance of queer theory in the humanities." The Fall 1992 issue of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* is devoted to lesbian philosophy, and includes a bibliography of works on lesbian philosophy and culture, based, we are told, on what its editor has "found valuable in teaching lesbian feminist philosophy since 1977 and lesbian culture in women's studies since 1981 at the Universi-

ty of Wisconsin." *Hypatia* is published by Indiana University Press, as is *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media Culture*, which also devoted its Fall 1992 issue to gay and lesbian perspectives.

While the majority of academic feminists are not lesbians, lesbians constitute the largest faction of the National Women's Studies Association, and they are increasingly influential in setting the tone of academic feminism. The influence of lesbianism is perhaps the prime reason for the shift within women's studies from a concern with the roles of women as workers, mothers, wives, and political actors toward an increasing focus on "gender," defined as the social and cultural construction of sexual identity. The key assumption behind such work is that while men and women are biologically differentiated (i.e., they have a different "sex"), the characteristic qualities of maleness and femaleness are largely artifacts of culture, and arbitrarily imposed cultural constructions at that. The emphasis on the relative importance of "gender" as opposed to "sex," then, is intended to challenge the assumption that differences between men and women are either natural or immutable.

To those outside the academy, it may come as a surprise to learn that it is lesbians rather than gay men who are most important in the spread of homosexual ideology within the academy, and that most homosexual studies (whether under the rubrics of gay studies, cultural studies, men's studies, or gender studies) have evolved from or remain linked to academic feminism. This reflects the fact (as John Diggins notes in his recent book *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*) that of all the trends to come out of the countercultural left of the 1960s, it was the feminist left that was most successful in institutionalizing itself within the American academy. With its firmament of organizations, its experience in transforming academic bureaucracies through political pressure, and its supporters in high places, academic feminism has served as an institutional basis and model for homosexual scholars. Within the American Historical Association, for example, the legitimization of homosexuality has occurred under the aegis of the Committee on Women Historians, which has sponsored a survey of gay and lesbian historians. In a recent issue of the association's newsletter, the committee recommends that universities provide domestic partner benefits for homosexuals, and that in order to make historians comfortable with coming out, their colleagues should "positively demonstrate they are not homophobic . . . by publicly criticizing homophobia, and listening with interest and asking questions about gay and lesbian issues when relevant, instead of changing the subject uncomfortably." In response to the demands of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus for Political Science, the American Political Science Association established a Committee on the

Status of Lesbians and Gays in the Profession. Similar committees now exist in the professional associations of most academic disciplines, and in the American Association of University Professors in the form of an ad hoc Committee on Discrimination Policy.\*

In reflecting on the institutionalization of gay/lesbian culture in the American academy, it is useful to conceive of academic disciplines as having an institutional core of professional associations and journals, beyond which lie a penumbra of more peripheral journals and associations. If the extent of academic influence is measured by the degree of representation in core institutions, then the appearance of homosexual journals and organizations is less significant than the representation of homosexual ideology in mainstream organizations and journals. Feminist journals occupy an intermediate position. On the one hand, their interdisciplinary orientation puts them on the margin of the more established disciplines. On the other hand, the establishment and institutionalization of women's studies within the academy gives established feminist journals (such as *Feminist Studies* or *Signs*) a core position within these newly institutionalized disciplines. A mark of the homosexual moment in American academic life is the increasing appearance of articles on gay/lesbian theory in mainstream academic journals. The November 1992 issue of *Political Theory*, for example, featured an article entitled "An Ethos of Lesbian and Gay Existence" by Mark Blasius, which defines "heterosexism" as "a structure of power in society (as racism and sexism are) that privileges as superior (natural, more healthy, normative) heterosexuality over homosexuality and, through a variety of procedures of subjectification, creates homophobic subjects. . . ."

## II

In political arguments aimed toward the non-homosexual public, the homosexual movement has tended toward a deterministic portrait of homosexuality as grounded in irrevocable biological or social-psychological circumstance. Yet among homosexual theorists in the academy, the propensity is toward the defense of homosexuality as a voluntarily affirmed "self-fashioning." The confluence of feminism and homosexual ideology has now led to a new stage, in which the politics of stable but multicultural and multisexual identities is being challenged by those who regard all permanent and fixed

\* An important caveat here is that because gay/lesbian scholars, following the model of academic feminists, tend to be more activist in professional associations, it is possible that their organizational weight and salience may be substantially greater than their actual influence on scholarship and teaching in the field. I suspect, however, that in the long run scholarship and teaching do follow the lead of disciplinary activists. The disproportionate influence that such activists have in matters of funding and academic appointments creates substantial incentives for others to follow their lead.

identity as a coercive restriction of autonomy, which is thought to include self-definition and redefinition. Among the most articulate spokesmen for this view is Judith Butler, Professor of Humanities at the Johns Hopkins University and a rising star in the field of gender studies. Butler's claims in her much-cited recent book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), are examined here at some length because she is not unique or marginal, but rather representative of the merging of homosexual theory and feminism that increasingly dominates discussion of issues of sex and gender in the humanities and in some of the social sciences.†

The conceptual lodestar of Butler's book, like much of the recent work in gender studies, gay/lesbian studies, and the study of "sexuality," is the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault's writings span a remarkable range of topics, from the rise of mental institutions, prisons, and academic disciplines such as political economy and linguistics, to conceptions of sexuality. Yet his works are unified by an underlying theme: "It could be otherwise." In his writings on each of these topics, Foucault undertook to trace the genealogy of one or another conception of "normalcy," with the aim of demonstrating that what we take to be standards of normalcy are merely historical and, by implication, arbitrary constructs.

A key term in Foucault's thought is the notion of "knowledge/power." Foucault's use of the term is ambiguous, and its ambiguity accounts for much of its attraction. On the one hand, Foucault seems to mean that what counts as "knowledge" is merely the result of power, of the institutionalization of one system of belief or another, backed up with the threat of force. On the other hand, he indicated that the real locus of power in modern society lies not in the state, but in the institutionalized systems of purported knowledge that entitle their practitioners to exercise control over others. For Foucault there is no such thing as legitimate authority, there is only "power," and the most insidious form of power is self-discipline, which comes from having internalized standards of normalcy from social institutions. Indeed, the modern conception of the self is portrayed by Foucault as particularly insidious, because it involves subjecting the body to self-control according to socially defined standards. In his *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1976), Foucault maintained that the very notion of "sex" was itself a relatively recent historical construct, a new category that "made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological func-

† Butler makes related arguments in "Imitation and Gender Subordination," in Diana Fuss, ed., *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (Routledge, 1991), and in "Sexual Inversions," in Donna C. Stanton, ed., *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS* (University of Michigan Press, 1991). Together with Joan W. Scott of the Institute for Advanced Study, Butler is editor of *Feminists Theorize the Political* (Routledge, 1992).

tions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures." Implicit in Foucault's key works, such as *Discipline and Punish* (1975), is a liberationist ideal of the body as open to the multiple possibilities of polymorphous perversity. It was an ideal that Foucault strove to realize in his own life, as documented in James Miller's recent *The Passion of Michel Foucault*.

The key assumption Butler wishes to dispute is that there is anything natural, necessary, desirable, or ethically vital in the culturally imposed direction of female sexual drives toward men and toward conception. (She presumably holds that the social channeling of male sexual desire toward women is equally arbitrary, though she devotes little attention to this side of the issue.) Butler characterizes her task as "decentering" the defining institutions of "phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality." Her assumption is that existing social standards which present heterosexuality as normative are essentially arbitrary social constructions that serve to preserve the privileges of a dominant group (in this case, heterosexual men). She aims to disentangle what she calls the "heterosexual matrix": "a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality."

For Butler, *all* gender-related acts are unnatural, and all sexual roles are essentially an act. In the spirit of Foucault, Butler regards her task as exposing "the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power" in order to bring into question "the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality." The "foundational categories of identity" that make heterosexual behavior and desire appear natural and inevitable are to be unmasked as "performances," which are a product of culture rather than of nature. The paradigm of gender identity becomes the female impersonator: for, according to Butler, what heterosexual women do is essentially the same as what female impersonators do, i.e., they strive to adhere to cultural practices (such as heterosexuality) that are no more "natural" than the behavior of the drag queen is natural. Drag, Butler suggests, is not "the imitation of gender"; rather it dramatizes "the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established."

Butler radicalizes the longstanding feminist distinction between a biologically defined and fixed "sex" and a culturally defined and hence variable "gender." Butler rejects any such distinction on the grounds that it concedes too much to biological determination. Our very conceptions of biological "sex," she posits, are themselves *nothing but* cultural

constructs. Thus "*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one."

For Judith Butler, as for Foucault himself, the notion that each individual is of one sex rather than the other is a cultural construct, one which serves to socially regulate and control sexuality and which conceals and artificially unifies a variety of sexual functions that are in fact not intrinsically related. Our conception of the body as gendered, she claims, has no status in reality. "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all." The impression of the gendered body she characterizes as "performative," by which she means that it arises from the various acts which together give the *illusion* that gender has a deeper reality.

Butler's achievement is to merge Foucault's method and premises with a lesbian agenda. Butler takes issue with genitally oriented sexuality and calls for an alternative conception of pleasure that is "outside the reproductive economy" and "understood as a counterstrategy to the reproductive construction of genitality." Her quest is to subvert the understanding of the female body characteristic of the current "organization of sexuality," in which "the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire." Exposing "the maternal libidinal economy as a product of an historically specific organization of sexuality," and conceiving of the body as entirely a construction of culture is intended to liberate the body "to an open future of cultural possibilities." Just as Marx tried to show that the economic laws which bourgeois political economy regarded as a natural necessity were a result of passing historical configurations, so Butler conceives her task as exposing the purported natural necessity of heterosexual conceptions of gender and sex as contingent social constructs. The parallel with Marx is Butler's own. While his goal was to bring about revolution, hers is to bring about "gender disorder."

Butler holds to the Foucaultian axioms that power is ubiquitous and that it is only power which establishes truth. She concludes that "power can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed. Indeed, in my view, the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence." The "redeployment" of power, in this case, means that those with the power of interpretation use their power to subvert the belief that there is anything "natural" about sexual identity, desire, and conduct,

and to break the normative link between biological endowment, behavior, and sexual object. "The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: 'man' and 'woman.'"

Within this agenda, transitive and intermediate forms of sexual identity acquire a special significance. Drag, cross-dressing, and butch/femme lesbian identities, Butler writes, all serve to "parody" the notion of a nature-based gender, and reveal that cultural gender does not flow naturally and inevitably from anatomical sex, but rather is a socially learned role (performance) with no essential link to anatomy. "Parodic proliferation," she declares, "deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities."

While "feminist theory" of this sort may seem so abstruse as to be of very limited influence, it acquires a wider resonance because of the somewhat anomalous position of women's studies in the academy. Political pressures from organized feminists, and the perception that the study of women was being excluded from more established disciplines, provided the original impetus for women's studies. With aid from the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, programs and majors in women's studies have proliferated and are now well institutionalized. But women's studies, like other new academic disciplines, faces a problem of academic legitimation, since it does not have its own distinctive methods, nor is its subject matter discrete. When one includes everything that women have done, everything that has been done to women, and everything that has been thought, said, or imagined about women—and women's studies does include all of these—there are few areas of human history and culture that cannot in theory fall under the rubric of women's studies. Yet by the norms of the academy, the existence of a "major" or "program" without some integrative intellectual framework is embarrassing. Thus the supply of women's studies programs creates a demand for feminist theory, a set of propositions with which participating faculty members must be familiar and to which students must be exposed in introductory women's studies courses. The substance of such theory must, perforce, emphasize the differences between women and men—whether such differences are perceived as natural, or, as is increasingly the case, when they are treated as wholly a matter of cultural construction. When one combines this disciplinary imperative with the predilection of feminists to regard lesbians as those most faithful to the cause and with the understandable propensity of lesbians to be attracted toward women's studies, one has an institutionally fostered tendency for the propagation of lesbian-inspired theory within academic

feminism.

For reasons of academic (as well as extra-academic) politics, lesbian feminists tend to form coalitions with gay men, thus expanding the audience for their work. Moreover, to an extent difficult for those outside the academy to imagine, feminist scholarship exerts an attraction upon many heterosexual men, who perceive feminist studies to be where the academic action is hottest and who live in dread of the anxiety-inspiring accusation that they "don't understand what is happening in the discipline." Thus, in diffuse form, the influence of feminist theory and its lesbian avant-garde is more widespread than its esoteric language and assumptions might warrant.

The project of making heterosexuality seem unnatural is central to contemporary academic homosexual theory and practice. David Halperin, a professor of literature at MIT now at work on *Queering the Canon*, writes that the purpose of his scholarship is to demonstrate that "we need not assume that sexuality itself is a literal, or natural, reality. . . . One aim, and (I hope), one effect, of my interpretive strategy is to contribute, insofar as scholarship can, to the task of reconstituting the body as a potential site of cultural activism and resistance. If the sexual body is indeed historical—if there is, in short, no orgasm without ideology—perhaps ongoing inquiry into the politics of pleasure will serve to deepen the pleasures, as well as to widen the possibilities, of politics."<sup>\*</sup>

It is a mark of the homosexual moment that this understanding is increasingly finding its way into the mainstream press. The March 11, 1993 lead article in the *Washington Post's* "Style Section" on the growing salience of drag queens notes that "the feminism-inspired dismantling of traditional gender roles, with all the tension and celebration and confusion it has brought, has probably done the most to fuel the mainstreaming of drag." The article quotes Harvard's Marjorie Garber, who reminds us of the new truth that "Gender is always an act. It's not a natural but a culturally derived category."

Another facet of recent academic homosexual theory—namely to call into question not only the necessity of differences between men and women but the actual binary distinction between men and women—is also in the process of reaching the mainstream media. The day after the *Washington Post* focused on drag queens, the op-ed page of the *New York Times* was given over to the reflections of Anne Fausto-Sterling, a feminist professor of medicine at Brown University, whose previous writings have challenged the "nucleocentric assumptions" of molecular biology. "Biologically speaking," she claims, "there are many gradations running from female to male; along that spectrum lie at least five sexes—

<sup>\*</sup>"Historicizing the Sexual Body," in *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*.

perhaps even more." Her purpose is to question the accepted assumption within modern medicine that persons of mixed genital formation ought to be transformed by surgery or hormonal treatment into either men or women. Instead, Fausto-Sterling proposes "the alternative route of unimpeded sexuality," a path blocked only by the social need "to maintain clear distinctions between the sexes."

### III

One may concur in part with the observations of homosexual theorists like Judith Butler and yet find their logic and conclusions radically flawed. One can agree, for example, that sexual roles are learned, that they are learned from the observation and imitation of others, and that the way in which the fact of sex is to be expressed is in this sense a social construct. The weakness of Butler's position lies in the conclusion that because sexual roles are learned and vary across cultures, they are entirely arbitrary. The problem lies with the assumption that there are no socially or morally compelling reasons for culturally imparted conceptions of how sexuality ought to be expressed. Like most feminist theorists, Butler assumes that "gender" (behavioral norms linked to sex) is changeable to the extent that it is culturally rather than biologically determined. The possibility that particular standards of behavior may be socially necessary but not biologically programmed is not even considered. All such theorists appear to be unaware of the fundamental Humean insight that many important social codes and institutions are the result neither of nature nor of human design; they are patterns that arise unintentionally and over time are imbued with cultural sanction because they correspond most adequately to social necessities. The fact that shared rules of behavior are cultural artifacts does not therefore imply that there are not good reasons for sharing them.

The greatest weakness of such theorists lies in the assumption, championed by Foucault and articulated by Butler, that heterosexuality and reproductivity are merely arbitrary constructs. The natural basis of heterosexual attraction as part of normal human experience is bracketed out by homosexual theorists as part of the attack on the very notion of sexual normalcy—rather as if a deaf theorist were to insist that spoken language is abnormal merely because he does not hear it. Ignored as well is the long history of reflection on the necessary admixture of nature and culture, according to which the place of culture is to strengthen the more noble, holy, or socially useful parts of our nature while teaching us to repress degrading, dangerous, or asocial desires. In the name of self-fashioning, such theory deprives us of any model according to which the self ought to be fashioned.

These lacunae reflect the unwillingness (and possibly the inability) of homosexual theorists to

even raise the most basic and fundamental issues of moral, social, and religious thought. Over a decade ago in a special issue of *Salmagundi* devoted to homosexuality, Jean Bethke Elshtain noted that the ideologists of gay liberation presented a vision of politics with "no sense of social goods or purposes." The logical conclusion of their claims was "a social world in which everyone can openly and freely engage in sexual behavior of any sort and *be anything whatever.*" They presumed "that the ultimate premises of moral codes and restrictions in human culture are wholly arbitrary," and they were united by "opposition to social distinctions and categories *themselves*, not simply to invidious distinctions and to categories that, invariably, buttress unacceptable hierarchies of domination and structures of injustice." Today, Elshtain's characterization rings even more true. But such claims are increasingly becoming the mainstay not of a small group of gay liberationists, but of a network of scholars in a variety of disciplines and interdisciplines. In the name of self-creation and re-creation, the notion of shared standards according to which we ought to fashion ourselves is denounced as inherently oppressive. In this understanding, sexual choices, to be truly authentic, must be arbitrary. And the social impact of our sexual choices must be ignored.

It may at first seem puzzling that homosexual theorists fail even to *address* such central issues in social theory and religious thought as the role of stable familial structures in the process of human creation and moralization, the place of stable sexual identity in the preservation of marriage, and the place of reaching out to the sexual "other" in the order of creation. That failure may be explained in two ways. The first expresses the self-understanding of the theorists in question, the second offers a more critical perspective on their enterprise.

For homosexual theorists influenced by Foucault (which in the contemporary American academic setting means most of them), what has been considered "truth" in the past is merely the product of power relations, and the way to transform "truth" itself is through changing the structure of power. From the point of view of such theorists, the role of theory is not to demonstrate the falsity of existing truth claims, since debates about truth are regarded as futile and nonsensical. Rather, such theorists can only assert, reassert, and insist upon the assumption of the arbitrary nature of existing standards in the hope that such emphatic reiteration will serve to still criticism, while they work to change existing standards by transforming the institutional structures of power through which, according to Foucaultians, truth is not discovered or institutionalized, but actually *created*. It is not intellectual cogency that leads to enhanced institutional prestige, but increased institutional power that leads to the acceptance of asser-

tions as "true" or at least as beyond the bounds of criticism.

Thus, from the Foucaultian point of view, intellectual arguments serve less to subvert existing truth by analytic rigor than to provide the verbal armature under which the struggle for academic power can be pursued. The road to the committee room is paved with theory, but it is only in the committee room that what will count as valid intellectual claims will be decided. In the words of Mark Blasius, a student of Michel Foucault who now teaches political science at the City University of New York, "If truth is created through communal life as an objectification of the values that the members of the community share, then the creation of truth—not only about lesbian and gay existence but, from that vantage point, about what politics is today—refocuses contemporary human reality in a new way. What will protect and enable lesbians and gay men to flourish is an ethos that serves as a condition of possibility for politics, understood both in the creation of community among and between lesbians and gay men as well as the transformation of institutionalized power relations to the extent that lesbians and gay men visibly occupy positions of sociocultural power and authority."

A more critical interpretation of the homosexual/Foucaultian position is that truth claims are not wholly arbitrary, but rather are subject to judgment based upon criteria of coherence, plausibility, and conformity to experience, which are at least partially universalizable. The homosexual position, however, is not capable of providing answers to the basic problems of human biological and social reproduction that would meet any such criteria. Any sociocultural system is based upon shared norms of behavior that are regarded as preferred, permitted, or prohibited. Through formal laws or through the punitive effect of social approbation and disapprobation (the allocation of "respect"), all sociocultural systems necessarily impose psychic costs on those who violate such norms and bestow psychic benefits on those who follow them. The question for most of modern social and political theory has been whether a given historical sociocultural system distributes psychic costs and benefits in a manner that provides for collective well-being, whether well-being is measured by moral, religious, or hedonistic standards.

The fact that a given sociocultural system inhibits certain pleasures (including the pleasure that comes from the respect of others), and that it inhibits the pleasures of some more than the pleasures of others—which homosexual/Foucaultian theorists treat as if it were a sufficient argument against the legitimacy of the heterosexual norm—is true of any conceivable social condition. Since such theorists cannot offer an answer to the question, "What would

be the moral, social, and biological consequences of the system you advocate, and why should we prefer it to normative heterosexuality?", their strategy must be to prevent the raising of such questions, or to deny the legitimacy of such considerations in adjudicating intellectual and cultural controversies.

This strategy has been remarkably successful. With a rapidity attributable in large part to a total lack of articulate resistance, homosexual ideology has achieved an unquestioned and uncontested legitimacy in American academic life.\* Within the academy, as within nonacademic elite culture, the definition of opposition to homosexuality as "homophobia"—a definition which implies that it is impossible to give good reasons for the cultural disapproval of homosexuality—is the best evidence of the success of this strategy.

The homosexual movement has defined the terms of the debate over homosexuality, and it may increasingly define the larger questions of sexual identity. Until recently, among the educated middle classes cut off from religious traditions, the Freudian paradigm of genitally oriented sexuality as a hallmark of psychological maturity served to delegitimize homosexuality by conceiving of it as arrested development. One effect of the decreasing prestige of Freudianism in our culture has been the diminished articulation of this understanding, which though ultimately secular in origin was compatible with Jewish and Christian understandings.

"But surely," it will be said, "none of this matters very much. The homosexual moment will be a passing one. Common sense will reassert itself." Perhaps. "Most of those in the academy are cowed rather than converted," it is argued, which is true enough but may be beside the point. Waiting for an outbreak of civil courage among academics is (as Irving Howe wrote in another context) "steady work." In the meantime, normative understandings of sexuality that cannot be articulated cannot be transmitted. If heterosexual marriage based upon the culturally guided direction of desire is not merely an arbitrary construct but is grounded upon vital understandings of the bases of trans-generational common life, then the inability to transmit that understanding will have profound costs.<sup>[7]</sup>

\* In the special double issue of *Salmagundi* referred to above ("Homosexuality: Sacrilege, Vision, and Politics," Fall 1982-Winter 1983), the subject was still somewhat exotic and outré, and the issue was a valuable source of memoirs, reflections, and reportage, much of it on a high intellectual level. Looking back at the volume, one is struck by the fact that while over half the articles favored homosexuality, a significant minority were critical either of homosexuality as such or of current homosexual ideology and academic practice. Today it would probably be impossible to put together such a volume. Few writers would be brave enough to publish pieces fundamentally critical of homosexual ideology, and the editors of *Salmagundi* would probably not dare to commission such articles in the first place. That is what power/knowledge means in the present homosexual moment in American academic culture.