

Some Notes on Queer Theory

Based on the assigned readings,

Hall, excerpt from *Queer Theories* (2003)

Sedgwick, "Axiom 2" from *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990)

"Queer" is a term with many meanings in regards to sexuality and politics.

Originally, the word meant "odd" or "eccentric" (as early as the 16th century), but by the mid-20th century it was a derogatory slur for homosexual people.

The term was reappropriated by lesbian/gay/bisexual people in the United States in the 1980s, largely popularized by the direct-action political movement called "Queer Nation." This group was formed in large part as a reaction to the virulent, often religiously conservative homophobia that marked the era of the emergence of HIV/AIDS and the Reagan/Bush administration. While gay men and lesbians had organized separately (politically and socially) for the most part in the 1970s and early 1980s, the AIDS crisis drew the groups together under the reclaimed umbrella term "queer."

"Queer Theory" is a diverse field of academic theory that followed the lead of Queer Nation activism. As Hall explains, "queer theoreticians worked only to make sense of an already deeply entrenched set of questionings and abrasions of normality" (54).

Queer theory is part of a larger postmodern and poststructuralist term in academic theory, which seeks to replace the unified narratives and essentialist identities of modernity with terminology that is more fluid. In the words of Sue-Ellen Case, "The queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny" (Hall 55).

Anyone can be queer, anything can be deployed for a queer goal or in a queer manner.
David Halperin helpfully delineates modernist gay-and-lesbian identity and politics from postmodernist queer identity and politics:

"(Homo)sexual identity can now be constituted not substantively but oppositionally, not by *what* it is but by *where* it is and *how* it operates. Those who knowingly occupy such a marginal location, who assume a de-essentialized identity that is purely positional in character, are properly speaking not gay but *queer*.

...queer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable reality... it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence." (Hall 67)

As part of a larger postmodern intellectual turn, queer theory is indebted to such French post-structuralist thinkers as

Jacques Lacan

Jacques Derrida (the name most associated with "deconstruction")

François Lyotard

Michel Foucault (Hall 61-67)

Foucault is especially important for his work on two topics that are especially important to queer theory:

- the social construction of sexual identity (in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*)
- insights into the ways in which social structures cause individuals to control themselves and each other, even in the absence of direct, centralized disciplinary institutions (*Discipline and Punish*) (Hall 65-67)

Many scholars and activists (including yours truly, in a book titled *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*, 2001) have pointed out that the seeds of queer theory and politics were present in earlier grassroots movements and theories in the U.S. This is especially notable in lesbian feminism, especially as articulated by lesbian-of-color and/or working-class lesbian theorists, who were unlikely to be working in academic institutions.

Influential queer theorists are too numerous for a brief introduction, but two that must be mentioned are the U.S. literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and the U.S. philosopher Judith Butler (Hall 68-76).

Sedgwick's primary contributions:

- Queering the canon through a reexamination of the homosexual tensions/anxieties running through mainstream Euro-American literature (*Between Men*)
- Interrogating how categories (particularly but not only for sexuality) are used, and what that says about the socially contingent and instable natures of categories and identities that are frequently considered "natural" (*Epistemology of the Closet*).

Judith Butler is primarily associated with theorizing and popularizing the concept of "performativity" ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination, 1991; *Gender Trouble*, 1990):

- Gender is created through a series of endlessly repeated performances of heterosexual social norms.
- There is no "original" or "authentic" masculinity, femininity, or heterosexuality that these performances copy: "what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity"
- The repetition is necessary because it cannot ever successfully solidify the reality of heterosexuality's ideal image
- "Compulsory heterosexual identity, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of 'man' and 'woman,' are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real."
- Because they are not grounded in an immutable reality, performed normative genders and sexualities are constantly at risk of failure, and of revealing their contingent status
- Thus drag, and other parodies of the norm, are important disruptive political practices

Butler is aware of the existence of non-political uses of drag, performance, and queer.

**She also points out the value of theory: "No political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one's notion of the possible and the real" (*Gender Trouble*; Hall 75).

“Queer” as a subversive force runs into a few distinct problems:

- As articulated in the academy, it is largely inaccessible to non-specialists, sharply limiting its political impact
- Queer theory has become commonplace in many academic disciplines, allowing it to be treated as just another critical school among many rather than a disruptor of the whole academic project
- The term “queer” has been widely appropriated for commercial use (“Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” etc.)
- Many people still use “queer” as a homophobic slur
- Many people use “queer,” positively or neutrally, as an umbrella term for LGBTQIA, not as an oppositional or abrasive challenge to the socially normative

Queer theory has also been criticized for inattention to its various actual constituents, whether they be people of color, all women, disabled people, etc.

“Queer” has especially been criticized as a false-generic term that erases the specific mention of transgender people, bisexuals, women, etc., much like the earlier false generic use of “gay” – although others feel that “queer” allows space for transgender and bisexual people and theories that are definitionally left out of the term “gay and lesbian” (Hall 88-98)