

The Sociology of

SEXUALITIES

December 1997

Section Newsletter

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Sociology of Sexualities Prepares Itself for the 1998 ASA meeting

Happy Holidays everyone! 'Tis the season for families, merriment, and putting the finishing touches on abstracts and papers for submission to annual meetings. Within this newsletter you will find a listing of sexuality related sessions for the upcoming annual meetings in San Francisco (ASA and SSSP) to help you find just the right session for your paper.

The past meeting in Toronto was filled with much excitement, both good and bad. The Sociology of Sexualities conducted its first election of officers and council people and prepared for its role in upcoming meetings. At the same time protests went out over the award ASA gave to Charles Moskos for public understanding of sociology. Charles Moskos is known for his role in the development of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy concerning people's sexual orientation within the military. The result of the award led to a silent protest by the GLBT Caucus during the awards ceremony and a statement to be published within a future issue of *Footnotes*.

The incident concerning Charles Moskos as well as similar incidents indicates the continued need for political action. A current topic of debate these days is the role sexual identities play within the world of politics. For some time, scholars have focused on analyzing the historical and sociological formation of sexual identities, which paralleled the development of lesbian, gay, and feminist politics. As we approach the turn of the century, will sexual identity politics remain at the center of sexual politics and should identity remain the focus of our sexual research and theorizing?

A selection of new section officers and council people volunteered to share with us their views on this subject. **We will start of with our current Chair Steven Seidman.**

Sexual identity politics is on the defensive. Friendly critics assail it as marginalizing and exclusionary towards some segments of its own imagined community, as internally policing, as isolating movements from one another, and as forming a fragile and narrow basis for critical knowledges. Less friendly critics have accused identity politics of promoting a mean spirited, uncivil, and fractured political and intellectual culture. I take these criticisms to be compelling.

Yet, we should not forget that sexual identity politics has been and continues to be politically and intellectually productive. Its hard to imagine the formation of lesbian/gay and feminist communities, the gains in civil rights of the past decade, and the affirmative texture of daily life for many who identify as lesbian and gay without identity politics. And lets not forget that sexual identity politics was accompanied by some truly breakthrough scholarship—in particular, the new history and sociology of homosexuality and sexuality.

I do not see the end of sexual identity politics in sight. In part, this reflects the continued normative status of heterosexuality and a male dominated rigid gender binary order. In part, sexual identity politics will be sustained because affirmative lesbian and gay or feminist sexual identities have contributed to individuals fashioning socially and affectively rich personal and collective lives. Such identities will likely not be abandoned even if full

citizenship is achieved. Moreover, the considerable successes of lesbian/gay identity politics have encouraged other marginalized sexual practices (e.g., S/M, bisexuality, butch/fem, transgendered, cross dressing) to claim an affirmative basis of sexual identity. Accompanying these new sexual identities are emergent communities, politics, and knowledges. Paralleling lesbian and gay studies, these new identities make claims for distinctive epistemic standpoints or unique experiential grounds for generating new categories of sexual social analysis. Thus, S/M pushes us to think about sexuality without assuming the primacy of gender preference; it makes the theme of the social making of erotic pleasure into a primary focus of politics and sexual studies.

While the social pattern of these new sexual identities reproduces a somewhat conventionalized pattern of lesbian and gay identity politics—e.g., affirming a hitherto polluted identity, building communities, and pursuing a politic of publicness and inclusion—there are currents within these marginalized sexual cultures that press for a nonidentity based sexual politics and scholarship. For example, some versions of transgendered politics and scholarship direct attention to a social order that normalizes a rigid alignment of the sexed body, gender, and sexuality. Similarly, while some individuals invoke bisexuality as a new basis of identity, for others it challenges identity categories and presses us to analyze the compulsion to mark desires as sexual and social identities.

In short, although identity politics and scholarship remain central to at least contemporary America, the social dynamics of sexualization and normalization have become an object of both politics and theory. Thus, whatever else queer theory and politics might mean, it aims to shift the focus of sexual studies and politics from the making—and legitimation—of sexual identities to the interrelation of homo-and-heterosexuality and, more generally, to the social making of sexual selves and the sexual making of social life. In part, the queer turn is a reaction to the narrowness of sexual identity politics and theory; it endorses a more general or inclusive sexual social studies and politics.

Queer theory has not however delivered on its promise to be a general social analysis of sexualities. Queer analysts have remained focused on lesbian/gay identities, even if it is less the “construction” than the deconstruction of such identities that is their preoccupation. Moreover, their almost exclusive reliance on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean poststructuralism has not and, in my view, cannot be the basis for a sexual social studies. Nor is a recycled Marxism, with its reductionism of social life to political economic and class analysis, adequate to effect a “social turn” of queer theory. With its rich tradition of social structural and cultural analysis, sociologists are in a good position to make a significant contribution to developing a sexual social studies.

This will require however a deliberate theoretical engagement with the field of sexualities. American sociologists have often assumed the naturalness of historically produced categories of sexuality. Many of us

have assumed that our task is to chart and survey sexual patterns (premarital, marital, postmarital in the 60s and 70s, the making of sexual identities and communities in the 80s and 90s), without analyzing the social forces that compel sexualization and the ways sexuality intersects with race, nationality, class, and so on. Although sociologists have produced some excellent work, this theoretical neglect has contributed to a dramatic shift in the site of sexual studies away from sociology. The sad truth is that by the late 1980s we’ve basically been marginalized, almost invisible, in at least the key debates around queer theory and “intersectionality” or the interrelation of sexuality, class, race, etc. American sociologists need to engage basic questions about the object or topic of sexuality studies. We need to once again ask what assumptions and categories should guide our social analyses. This involves a serious engagement with queer theory, but also with feminist, psychoanalytic, antiracist, and Marxist theory.

Next we have our current Secretary-Treasurer Melissa S. Herbert

Now, regarding that question on identity politics, etc. Hmm... I suspect that identity will remain central in discussions of sexual politics and that it likely should, though its not without some problems. I struggle with issues of identity v. behavior, penchants for clear-cut categories v. shades of gray, the language we use to describe these “things,” and so on.

I guess at this point in time I believe that there *is* utility in organizing both activism and academic inquiry along the lines of identity. One reason that comes to mind is that we are, I believe, oppressed far more in terms of the identity we claim than in terms of behaviors and that’s important to what we study and how we study it. On the other hand, part of me would prefer that we *aim* for lots of gray (e.g., shifting identities/boundaries) and that we embrace rather than resist the uncertainties to which the “gray” often leads us. So, where does this leave me regarding the question posed above?

I think that identity will continue to be a critical line along which to structure both research and theory. But, I would press for research and theory that address the ways in which identity can be constraining rather than liberating; ways that the “boxes of identity” serve to limit our interactions as human beings with a range of interests and emotions, rather than serving to expand the possibilities. In sum, I guess I’ve not said much except that we need to do more and in different and creative ways. But, that’s why we’re here, no?

We have two regular council members sharing with us their views of identity politics. **We will first hear from Jodi O’Brien.**

What are my thoughts on the question of politics and sexual identities? These reflections from a typical day in my life illustrate how I engage this question. Several

years ago I read a fun fact in the “science” section of the *ECONOMIST*. The reproductive organs in birds and some other species are “opposite” the chromosomal structure that we commonly associate with male and female characteristics. Birds with an XY chromosomal structure lay eggs; birds with an XX structure fertilize the eggs. Does this mean that the “boy” lays and hatches the eggs? Is a girl bird a girl because she lays eggs or because she has an XX? Today I put the question to the students in my Sexual Politics class.

They’re still grumbling about a tribe they read about. Fatherhood in this tribe is a social role enacted by the childbearing woman’s brother or uncle. Biological paternity is indeterminate because the women have nonmonogamous sex with any able male except their brothers and uncles. My students want to know how these people figure out who the “real” father is. They are dissatisfied when I insist that the “father” *is* the social father; there is no connection between biological reproduction and male parenting.

I leave my students to the mysteries of restoring gendered order to their universe and take a coffee break with my pal, author and performance artist, Kate Bornstein. Many years ago Kate was a scientologist named David. At the time she experienced the world through a boy’s body. Now she has a girl’s body. She considers herself a lesbian but is musing about the accuracy of this self assessment given her recent crush on David Duchovny. I offer the observation that he’s just another butch bottom (her type), so maybe she’s still a lesbian after all. She shrugs. Truth be told, she’s more interested in fashion accessories these days. Does this make her a “pomosexual” she wonders? Depends on whether her heels match her scarves we conclude.

We turn to the task at hand. Impatient with the prattlings about a “gay gene” we have taken it upon ourselves to write on the topic. I am an avowed social constructionist with a degree in biology. I follow Cassirer’s dictum that physical reality recedes in proportion to symbolic activity. I do not discount the physical body as a source of stimulus and experience regarding self comprehension. But we are a symbolic species who achieves self-awareness through social constructs. Given this, it is poor science to look for a single biological determinant of a something as complex as the social manifestations of gender and sexuality. Geneticists are among the first to suggest that even if there were a sexuality gene - an assertion for which no factual basis exists - “nurture” would play a significant role in determining the expression of the “characteristic” (this is the case with most genetic signatures). In short, nature hints, it doesn’t determine. So why are social scientists who should know better jumping into the gene pool, so to speak? Kate grimaces at my poor pun. “You’ll lose your camp stripes for that one,” she warns. She wants to write a sidebar. Her angle: “If they found a ‘gay gene’, what would it be a gene for? What characteristics would it invoke? A flair for finding designer curtains? The ability to recognize a well-cut suit?” We chortle together, happy in the unity that we’re not weighted down with the burden of

proving the “rightfulness” of heterosexuality.

Later I join a group of lesbians and gay men, most of them attorneys, activists and academics, to watch election returns. The state of Washington has an initiative on the ballot that would make it illegal to discriminate against homosexuals in the workplace solely on the grounds of sexuality. The initiative is simply worded and includes a clause stating specifically that this would not require an employer to provide benefits. The ad campaigns have been very straightforward attempts to educate viewers of the fact that it is currently legal to fire someone from their job just for being homosexual. A majority of state organizations and publications, including the Catholic Diocese and several conservative newspapers, have endorsed the initiative as a fair and equitable proposition. We are therefore stunned as we watch the returns come in overwhelmingly against the initiative. The initiative fails by a large margin. Quietly, heads bowed, we disperse. I walk home pondering my shock and disappointment. Was it reasonable to have been so hopeful? I think about my status as an out lesbian at a Jesuit University. I am touted as a role model and my colleagues seem generally supportive of me. The vote has confused me and left me uncertain how to behave. How much of myself should I really share? How much should I give to this community that seems so willing to compromise my rights to belong? Alongside the depression I feel anger smoldering. Suddenly I find myself wondering if everyone that I encounter has just voted to limit my civil rights? I’m sullen and weary. I’m angry at “Ellen” for making it seem so easy to overcome centuries of homophobic oppression.

The questions that interest me most are those that explore the relationship between a gender binary and sexualities. Theoretically, if we accept the fact that gender is a social construct, then we must figure out ways to theorize expressions of sexuality that transcend a gender binary. This is paradoxical in that it implies that we may have to let go of commitments to “lesbian” and “gay” identities, per se. I’m moving in this direction in my own research. At the same time, the cultural political economy of compulsory heterosexuality and privilege forges my embodied reasoning. I am marked by the politics of my sexual identity every moment of every single day. What do I see? I see that even our attempts to think our way out to the cutting edge are shaped by the obstacles we encounter in our daily struggle to simply exist. In making my own way toward the “pomosexual” frontier, I hope to not neglect the experiences of those who raised our consciousness to the reality that “the personal is always political.”

Our other Councilperson is Julia Ericksen.

Will sexual identity politics remain central?

I do believe identity politics will continue to be a central issue in sexual research if only because there are so many unresolved questions. And it is these questions which will come to the fore. At least I hope so. Much of the existing research, for example, focusses on sexual identity formation at the institutional level, but very little work has focussed on how individuals actually form their sexual identities. The few attempts to discuss this, such as that by

Jeffrey Weeks in *Sexuality and its Discontents* rely on psychoanalytic theory or the sexual scripting theory of Gagnon and Simon. While I think the latter holds great promise as the beginning of a theory of sexual identity, there is little work building on this. The process of identity formation by actual individuals needs specifying in much more detail. Furthermore, the work at the macro level on the historical change in identities needs complementary research at the micro level.

Heterosexual identity politics have been largely ignored. This is beginning to change, and I believe it will grow as a research field quite rapidly. If we wish to make the point about the social construction of sexual identity, we must consider the identity which is least problematized in our culture. Since the current research on heterosexual identity is the work of feminist scholars, it revolves largely around women. This is important work, but we must bring heterosexual men into the picture also.

One other area which I believe will receive attention (as with the rest of this essay, I am not sure if this is not simply wish fulfillment) remains the last forbidden topic of discussion. This is the sexual socialization of children. There is a contradiction in our society between the commercial exploitation of children as sexual objects and the insistence that childhood is a time of sexual innocence.

Our Graduate Student Council Member Sharon Preves will conclude our discussion of sexual identities.

As we approach the turn of the century, sociologists and other scholars of human sexuality are merely beginning to understand the importance of sexual identity. We have focused much of our energies on theorizing and researching the socio-political elements of groups of people historically categorized as "sexual minorities." Prior work in this area has focused primarily upon identity formation and experience at a macro level; namely being concerned with articulating the boundaries which distinguish gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, and intersexuals, for example, from one another and from heteronormative sexual space. Now that we have critical insight into the sexual politics of reclaiming stigmatized identities, it is time to learn more about the experiences of sexual identities at a micro-level within specific socio-cultural contexts.

In the 20th century, we have been witness to several social movements which have challenged normative conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality. As lived experiences continue to blur sexual categorizations, it is imperative that sexual identities remain at the fore of our consciousness in theory, research, and practice.

Anybody wishing to comment on any of these statements or just want to make a statement of their own can send them to Emilio Lombardi via the address on the first page.

Researcher Database Being Developed

It has been proposed that this section create a resource list that can be utilized by ASA and the Sociology of Sexualities section itself to make people aware of the research being conducted on sexuality related topics. Such a resource can be used to help students and other sociologists find mentors, departments, and/or projects that are doing work within areas students are interested in.

At the same time the Committee on the Status of GLBT Sociologists are also interested in how people's Institutional Review Boards (IRB's) react to studies involving sexuality. Such information would help bring to the committee's attention potential hurdles being placed within the scientific study of sexualities. So if you are doing any sexualities related research please take the time answer the following questions. Responses can be mailed to me (Emilio Lombardi) at elomb@earthlink.net, or DARC-UCLA, 1100 Glendon Ave. Suite 763, L.A., CA 90024. Please tell us your:

1. Name
2. Organization/University
3. Office Address
4. Office Phone
5. E-mail Address
6. Research areas
7. Current Research Projects (Chronological order, most recent first)
8. Have you had any of the following problems with your Institutional Review Board in getting Human Subjects Approval for sexuality related research?
 - a. Have you been asked to implement a more complex informed consent process because of the sexuality related areas within your study?
 - b. Have you been asked to change your research design because of the sexuality related areas within your study?
 - c. Did your IRB not approve any study because of the sexuality related areas?

If you experienced any problem such as these or any other problem with your IRB concerning Human Subjects Approval please explain what happened.

ASA Annual Meeting Call For Papers. Submissions are due Jan. 10th.

Cross-Cultural Sexualities: National and Global Practices
(Sponsored by the Sociology of Sexualities Section)

Peter M. Nardi
Department of Sociology
Pitzer College
1050 N. Mills Avenue
Claremont, CA 91711
909-607-3824
peter_nardi@pitzer.edu

Gay and Lesbian Studies
Leon E. Pettway
Department of Criminal Justice
Sycamore Hall 302
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405
812-855-9325
pettiway@indiana.edu

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Movements
(Sponsored by the Section on Collective Behavior and
Social Movements)

Verta Taylor
Department of Sociology
Ohio State University
300 Bricker Hall
190 N. Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210
614-263-2654
vat@ohstsoca.sbs.ohio-state.edu

Sexuality in the Military
(Sponsored by the Sociology of
Sex and Gender Section)
Lynda J. Ames
Department of Sociology
SUNY-Plattsburgh
101 Broad Street
Plattsburgh, NY 12901
518-564-3303
ameslj@splava.cc.plattsburgh.edu

SSSP Annual Meeting Call For Papers. Submissions are due Jan. 30th.

I. AIDS and Public Policy
II. Issues in Sexual Behavior
Lloyd Klein
Social and Behavioral Sciences Dept.
Medgar Evers College
1650 Bedford Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11225
718-270-4960
likme@cunyvm.cuny.edu

Bisexual and Transgender Issues: Sex/Gender/Desire
Identities and Social Change-Thematic

P.J. McGann
Sociology Dept.
St. Lawrence University
Canton, NY 13617
315-229-5215
FAX: 315-229-5803
pmcg@music.stlawu.edu

Rockefeller Humanities Fellowships Program for the Study of Sexuality, Gender, Health, and Human Rights at Columbia University

The Program for the Study of Sexuality, Gender, Health
and Human Rights invites applications from scholars, ad-
vocates, and activists conducting innovative interdiscipli-
nary work on the intersecting themes of sexuality, gender,
health and human rights in U.S. and international contexts.
Our focus is on examining and expanding traditional defini-
tions and boundaries, while acknowledging conditions of
inequality, marginality, and post-coloniality.

Each year, the Program will award residential fellowships
of varying lengths (for one year, one term, and shorter resi-
dencies from 26 months). Fellows will participate in inter-
disciplinary forums and seminars which bring together schol-
ars, researchers, and advocates. Fellows will receive a
stipend, access to libraries, computer facilities, office space
and equipment, as well as health insurance. Applicants
should have the Ph.D. or an equivalent level of
professional achievement, experience, and publication at
time of application. Application deadline: February 15, 1998

For further information and application materials, contact:
Program for the Study of Sexuality, Gender, Health and
Human Rights,
Division of Sociomedical Sciences,
Columbia University School of Public Health,
600 West 168 Street - 7th floor,
New York, N.Y. 10032
Tel: 212 305 5656 Fax: 212 305 0315
E mail: rock-sms-sph@columbia.edu
<http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/gender>

Call for Papers: Sex on the Edge an Interdisciplinary Symposium on Sexuality and Marginality

Friday to Sunday,
9-11 October 1998
Concordia University
Montreal, Canada
Sponsored by The Concordia Sexuality Research Project

Sex on the Edge, an interdisciplinary symposium, welcomes proposals in English for individual papers, panels, and workshops in the humanities, social sciences and cultural fields. Submit a 300-word abstract (along with your affiliation, address, E-mail, fax and telephone) related to such topics as:

- *bodies/organs/orifices
 - *censorship & the law
 - *gaylesbianbitransqueer cultures
 - *genders/boundaries
 - *histories/archives
 - *identity and representation
 - *marginalities/outlaws
 - *nation/ethnicity/race
 - *pedagogies/ethics
 - *re/production
 - *space & geographies
 - *technology & virtuality
 - *theories of performance & performativity
 - *virus/disease/illness/pandemic
- send your proposals by mail or E-mail to:

Dr. Chantal Nadeau
Department of Communication Studies,
Concordia University
7141 Sherbrooke W., L-BR-111
Montreal, Qc H4B 1R6 Canada
tel: (514) 848-2560
nadch@vax2.concordia.ca
For additional information contact: Katarina Soukup at
soukup@alcor.concordia
DEADLINE: MARCH 15 1998

Call For Papers
Graduate Student Paper Competition
Sponsored by the Sexual Behavior, Politics,
and Communities Division of the SSSP

The Sexual Behavior, Politics, and Communities Division of the Society of the Study of Social Problems announces its 1998 graduate Student paper competition. Papers may be empirical and/or theoretical, and they may be on any aspect of sexuality, including sexual behavior, sexual identity, sexual politics, sex law, political activism, or sexual communities.

The winner will receive a stipend of \$100 plus payment of the winner's SSSP fee for the 1998 SSSP meetings to help the winner attend the meetings. The winner will be offered an opportunity to present their paper at the 1998 SSSP meeting. To be eligible, a paper must meet the following criteria:

- 1) The paper must have been written between January 1997 and March 1998;
- 2) The paper may not have been submitted or accepted for publication (papers that have been presented at a professional meeting or that have been submitted for presentation at a professional meeting are eligible);

- 3) The paper must be authored by one or more students, and not co-authored with a faculty member or colleague who is not a student;
- 4) The paper must be 25 pages or less, including notes, references, and tables;
- 5) The paper must be accompanied by a letter from a faculty member at the student's college or university nominating the paper for the Sexual Behavior, Politics, and Communities Division Student Paper Competition.

Students should send five copies of their paper, accompanied by a letter of nomination from a faculty member to:

Dr. P.J. McGann
Department of Sociology
St. Lawrence University
Canton, NY 13617

Entries must be postmarked by March 31st, 1998. The winner will be announced during the Spring of 1998.

Important Dates

January 10th
ASA Submission Deadline

January 30th
SSSP Submission Deadline

April 15th
Copies of abstract and paper submitted to Sociological Abstracts.

May 29th
Deadline for article submissions for the next Sociology of Sexualities Newsletter

May 31st
Deadline for presenters to preregister for the meeting

June 25th
Deadline for early meeting registration

August 23rd
Sociology of Sexualities session day. Council/business meetings will also be held this day.