

Queer

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For far too many people, “Queer” is a word that has been spat with violence, often in the context of physical attacks. Originally meaning “out of the ordinary”, it was famously used as a homophobic slur against Oscar Wilde by the Marquis of Queensbury (Queensbury is known for establishing the rules of supposed “fair fighting” in boxing, and was keen to present homosexuality as deviant and odd; especially after learning of Wilde’s affair with his own son).

This usage of the term has persisted, becoming associated with lesbian and gay sex and relationships. Because it is an old term, one might assume that only older adults are aware of its negative associations. Unfortunately, however, homophobia shows no signs of ageing, and “queer” is still used and understood as a slur by many. People of all generations are increasingly impacted by hate crimes, including verbal abuse and threats. Here in the UK, Home Office statistics show that hate crimes in the category of sexual orientation have doubled in the last four years. Younger adults are not strangers to “queer” being used as a violent slur, even today.

Queer is a complex and loaded term. It has gone from being a common form of abuse to being reclaimed as a label of defiance and pride. This reclamation occurred most prominently during the 1980s and 1990s, in the radical activism of American groups such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation. However, the National Archives records an early dictionary of slang which reports that from 1914 queer was a term to describe someone homosexual and was only derogatory when used by those who are not. Identity matters and language is different when used by insiders or outsiders. There is a difference when minority and minoritized communities use commonly understood terms from the mainstream, on their own terms, and even as self-definitions.

When used as a self-descriptor queer can simply mean “not-straight” – as in, outside of mainstream, normative conventions for sexual acts, desires, relationships, and families. On this reading, queer could also include heterosexual sex, desires, relationships, and families where those are outside normative conventions. A married, heterosexual couple may be assumed to be “straight”, but could both be bisexual, or could be in a polyamorous relationship, and thus may consider themselves outside the expected norms – and therefore queer. In fact, to take a queer standpoint, we should ask why heterosexuality is not put under the microscope more often, in the way that other sexual expressions have been. Of course, we already know the answer: it is because of the heterosexist privilege that comes from never being labelled, never being the subject of scrutiny and stigma. Heterosexuality is not “the love that dare not speak its name”, but the love that cannot be bothered to speak its name – because it has never needed to.

Inspired by the earlier direct action of liberation movements like Black Power and Women’s Liberation in the 1960s, Queer Nation formed in New York in 1990. In the same year in London, UK, Outrage formed, co-founded by the stalwart activist Peter Tatchell. Outrage followed similar patterns of civil disobedience such as kiss-ins and citizen’s arrests of

prominent homophobic figures; the group proudly described itself on banners and placards as “queers against homophobia”. Here, the term queer was an unapologetic, bold self-descriptor for lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people. But it went far beyond this.

Because such activism was born out of community work for visibility and survival during the crisis that was AIDS, and, across the Western world, during the criminal reign of the Thatcher/Reagan years, there was a shift away from singular labels like lesbian or gay. Information, support, and mutual aid had to get out to all those who could be affected by AIDS, and, while it is a cliché to say it, the disease did not recognise the borders of identities. Whatever someone labelled themselves, they might be impacted: whether they were a heterosexual married man who sometimes had sex with other men, or a lesbian who worked in prostitution, there was an urgent understanding that people needed information and support, however they identified. It wasn't about what sexuality badge someone wore, but whether they were an ally in supporting the often stigmatised, minoritized communities who were bearing the initial publicised brunt of HIV. This sense of urgency fuelled civil disobedience that outed hypocritical politicians or religious leaders who liked to bleat about family values and morals, condemning others for doing as they did in private.

Unlike earlier, arguably more apologetic, lesbian and gay rights movement, this movement did not aspire to assimilation. Queer activism was not interested in terms like tolerance or acceptance, noting the negative framing of such pleas. Nothing good is tolerated, nobody would talk of tolerating what is pleasant, positive, and desired. Similarly, acceptance is only worthwhile if one respects wherever the acceptance is coming from. Queer activism did not. Drawing much from earlier feminist activism and theory, queer activism was interested in smashing the nuclear family and the state that rewarded it, rather than begging for the crumbs from its table. It was more “in your face”, calling out to anyone and everyone who was against the current status quo, and had no time or motivation to impose strict borders around particular sexual identities.

The aim of reclaiming terms like queer is to remove their power as slurs, and in so doing weaken the status quo of conservative sex and relationship norms. If people use the term as a descriptor for themselves, proudly and defiantly, this can render it meaningless as a slur. This is another meaning of the term queer: as a verb it can be used to describe the act of denorming, or of critiquing and drawing attention to norms that are so common they have been absorbed into our lives without comment. Why is sexuality so policed? Why does sexuality matter? Why are the powerful triads of sex-gender-sexuality so influential, shaping every aspect of our daily reality with the assumption that everyone is either female, feminine, and heterosexual, or male, masculine, and heterosexual?

This is also what Queer Theory seeks to work on in academia. While it is possible to “queer” different disciplines, schools of thoughts, and traditions, Queer Theory is about looking at the world through a lens of sexuality and gender. It means thinking about how different areas are sexed and gendered, or how sex and gender impact upon and shapes those areas.

Back in 2017, philosopher and theorist Judith Butler faced violent protests in Brazil when attending and organising an academic conference on democracy. Effigies of Butler, and placards printed with the Professor's face embellished with devil-like horns, were utilised by

large crowds to protest what they called “gender theory”. A public petition before the conference demanded that Butler be “cancelled” on the grounds that they represented a dangerous threat to the heterosexual nuclear family. Indeed, in many circles, not just the conservative right-wing, Butler is often credited with popularising Queer Theory. However, like any academic theory that travels out of academia, Butler’s ideas have been infamously, wilfully misrepresented, misread, and oversimplified. Butler’s *Gender Trouble* was first published in 1990, both riding on and riling up the queer explosion of the time. This book utilised earlier poststructuralist theory from thinkers like Michel Foucault, alongside radical feminist theory and lesbian feminist theory from thinkers like Monique Wittig and Adrienne Rich. Importantly, however, the term “queer” was being put to use by scholars before this, for example by the Chicana poet, writer, and feminist theorist Gloria E Anzaldua in her 1987 book *Borderlands* (itself such a profoundly queer title).

In another historical moment for the development of Queer Theory, in 1991 Teresa de Lauretis edited a special issue of the academic journal *Differences*, titled: “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities”. This moment is something of an origin story for Queer Theory, but it was motivated by an ongoing troubling of the notion that lesbian and gay communities were one community, and homogenous and thus could be a focus of academic study under the rubric of Lesbian and Gay Studies. This journal sought to queer Lesbian and Gay Studies, by pointing out that these were, in fact, different communities and cultures; and often these terms may not even adequately describe, let alone speak or mobilise for, all those diverse identities, desires and relationships that may make a home in Lesbian and Gay spaces. The Queer Theory advocated by de Lauretis sought to deconstruct previous assumptions in Lesbian and Gay Studies in academia, highlighting how too often the scholarly and political concerns of this field revolved around wealthy, White, gay men assimilated into the mainstream, and thus took on causes like equal marriage, military service or pension rights, eclipsing concerns for homelessness amongst gay youth, refugee rights for those facing a death sentence due to their sexuality, or custody battles for lesbians denied access to their children. Not all minority sexualities are therefore equal, there are power relationships within these supposed communities, just as there are outside. So queer theory tries to “queer” sexuality”. It studies how certain practices come to be labelled, or named at all, how and why people take on singular identities, how sexualities are contained and constrained. It was happy to look at all the weird, wonderful and strange sexualities – even heterosexuality.

It is especially important to attend to our use of the term “queer” at a time when conspiracy theories about Queer Theory, queer activism, and queer academics are widespread and are contributing to a rising conservative backlash against LGBTQ+ rights and progress, particularly trans rights. Trans and transgender identities are held under the broader umbrella label of Queer, as trans men, trans women, and transgender and non-binary or gender non-conforming people, for example, are outside the conventional norms for sex, gender and sexuality, which is the definition of queer. The attacks on the progress of trans rights are being uncovered and documented by important groups such as Trans Safety Network, who have followed the usage of anti-gender discourse growing and moving into the mainstream, to the point where the UK press, including broadsheets and the BBC, routinely use loaded

terms like “gender theory”, “gender ideology”, and “the trans question”. The mainstreaming of such discourse has fuelled ever more vocal and threatening forms of anti-LGBTQ+ protest. This summer in the UK, an ethno-nationalist group, Patriotic Alternative, targeted Drag Queen Story Hour in English libraries, filming themselves in front of parents and toddlers calling library staff and organisers “groomers” and “paedophiles”, and urging a citizen’s arrest of the drag performer scheduled to read a storybook to children.

During the ongoing battle (at the time of writing!) for the Conservative party leadership, both Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss promised to crack down on “woke nonsense”, urging the rolling back of already meagre trans rights. Sunak even promised to repeal the Equality Act 2010 so that he can protect words like “woman” and “mother” from “erasure” (something he presumably imagines might happen). Truss has spoken at the far-right Heritage Foundation in America, as did former Tory Chairman Oliver Dowden only a few weeks before Russian troops invaded Ukraine. Dowden declared that it was no wonder that stronger countries like Russia and China were attacking the West, as the UK is too busy worrying about things like pronouns. The current UK government has given its blessing to conversion therapy for young trans and transgender people, and put its energies into fighting unisex toilet cubicles at a time when presumably they have more important things to worry about, such as poverty and food shortages. Evangelical Christian organisations such as the Family Education Trust are targeting inclusive Relationships and Sex Education in Schools because they include lesbian and gay relationships, as well as trans identities. All of this has been a long time in the making, of course, and now extreme homophobic and transphobic moral panic is a staple of mainstream British media.

At such a fraught political moment, it is worth reflecting on the fact that to be queer is to be strange and difficult to categorise – and it is only by looking at normative mainstream practices from the point of view of those estranged by them that we can begin to understand them (and maybe ourselves) better.

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