Gay Politics, 
Ethnic Identity: 
The Limits of 
Social Constructionism

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"I seem to be surrounded at all times in all ways by who I am. It goes with me wherever I go... and my life is gay and where I go I take my gay life with me. I don't consciously sit and think while I'm eating soup that I'm eating this 'gayly,' but, you know, it surrounds me."

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"To me, being gay is like having a tan. When you are in a gay relationship, you're gay. When you're not in a gay relationship, you're not gay."

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"As I sit at a concert or engage volubly in a conversation in the office or at home, or as I look up from my newspaper and glance at the people occupying the seats of the bus, my mind will suddenly jump from the words, the thoughts, or the music around me, and with horrible impact I will hear, pounding within myself, the fateful words: I am different. I am different from these people, and I must always be different from them. I do not belong to them, nor they to me."

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"There's nothing in me that is not in everybody else, and nothing in everybody else that is not in me. We're trapped in language, of course. But homosexual is not a noun. A least not in my book."

What does it mean to be gay? Do lesbians and gay men constitute a “deviant subculture”? A “sexual minority”? A privileged “revolutionary subject”? Is homosexuality a “preference” (like a taste for chocolate ice cream)? Or perhaps an “orientation” (a fixed position relative to the points of a compass)? Or maybe it's a “lifestyle,” like being a “yuppie” or a surfer? Is being gay something that has some importance? Or is it a relatively inconsequential difference?

The gay men and women quoted above are undoubtedly not a representative sample, but the range of contradictory opinions certainly testifies to the difficulties involved in answering these questions. And the types of disagreements observed in these quotes are present not only between individuals, but also within them. Most people who identify as gay or practice homosexuality adopt some variety of relatively inconsistent positions regarding their identity over the course of time, often depending on the needs of the moment. These contradictions are paralleled by the attitudes of homophobic opponents of the gay movement, which are typically even less consistent; for example, one frequently hears the belief that homosexuality is an “illness” combined with a simultaneous concern that youngsters can be “seduced” into it. The whole issue, it seems, is a terminological and conceptual minefield. Yet given the startling newness of the idea of there being such a thing as a “gay identity”—neither that term, nor “lesbian identity,” nor “homosexual identity” appeared in writing by or about gays and lesbians before the mid-1970s—the confusion is hardly surprising.

This article does not address the question of what “causes” homosexuality, or what “causes” heterosexuality. Instead, what I seek to explore is how lesbians and gay men, on a day-to-day basis, interpret their sexual desires and practices so as to situate themselves in the world; how these self-understandings relate to social theories about homosexuals; and how both the theories and the self-understandings can shape—or block—different varieties of political activism by gays.* I take as given that power inheres in

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*This analysis does not systematically explore the self-understandings or politics of people who identify as bisexuals, though the category of “bi-
the ability to name, and that what we call ourselves has implications for political practice. An additional assumption is that lesbians and gay men in our society consciously seek, in a wide variety of ways, to legitimate their forms of sexual expression, by developing explanations, strategies, and defenses. These legitimations are articulated both on an individual level ("This is who I am, and this is why I am that way") and on a collective level ("This is what we are, and here is what we should do"). Legitimation strategies play a mediating function between self-understandings and political programs, and between groups and their individual members.

Existing theories of sexuality fail to address these concerns adequately. For some time now, sexual theory has been preoccupied with a debate between "essentialism" and "constructionism"—a debate which, despite its importance in reorienting our thinking about sexuality, may well have outlived its usefulness. "Essentialists" treat sexuality as a biological force and consider sexual identities to be cognitive realizations of genuine, underlying differences; "constructionists," on the other hand, stress that sexuality, and sexual identities, are social constructions, and belong to the world of culture and meaning, not biology. In the first case, there is considered to be some "essence" within homosexuals that makes them homosexual—some gay "core" of their being, or their psyche, or their genetic make-up. In the second case, "homosexual," "gay," and "lesbian" are just labels, created by cultures and applied to the self.

Both essentialist and constructionist views are ingrained in the folk understandings of homosexuality in our society—often in a highly contradictory fashion. In a recent letter to Ann Landers, "Worried in Montana" expresses concern that her fourteen-year-old son may be "seduced" into homosexuality (folk constructionism) by the boy's friend, who she has "no question" is gay, because of his "feminine mannerisms" (folk essentialism). Ann reassures

sexual itself is important to the discussion. For an analysis of bisexuality that touches on many of the issues explored here, see Lisa Orlando's article cited in reference 99.

At times, I will discuss gay men separately from lesbians; at other points, the analysis will refer to both at the same time. While this may be confusing from an analytic standpoint, it seems unavoidable if one wants to avoid simplistic assumptions of parallelism between the experiences of gay men and women.
the mother that the only way her son would turn out to be gay is if “the seeds of homosexuality were already present” (folk essentialism). At the same time, she questions the mother’s certainty about the sexual orientation of the friend, claiming that it is “presumptuous” to label a fourteen-year-old as “gay” (folk constructionism). But if such inconsistent views can at times exist side by side, it is equally true that at other times they clash violently. Homosexuals who are advised to “change” and become straight, for example, might have more than a passing investment in the claim that they’ve “always been that way”—that their gayness is a fundamental part of who they “really are.”

This debate is not restricted to the field of sexuality; it parallels similar ones that have taken place in many other domains, including gender, race, and class. For example, while some feminists have proposed that qualities such as nurturance constitute a feminine “essence,” others have insisted that any differences between men and women, beyond the strictly biological, are the products of culture and history: men and women have no essential “nature.” But while the issues may be generalizable, they have a special salience for contemporary gay politics, because of a peculiar historical irony. With regard to sexuality, the constructionist critique of essentialism has become the received wisdom in left academic circles. And yet, curiously, the historical ascendancy of the new constructionist orthodoxy has paralleled a growing inclination within the gay movement in the United States to understand itself and project an image of itself in ever more “essentialist” terms.

As many observers have noted, gays in the 1970s increasingly came to conceptualize themselves as a legitimate minority group, having a certain quasi-“ethnic” status, and deserving the same protections against discrimination that are claimed by other groups in our society. To be gay, then, became something like being Italian, or black, or Jewish. The “politics of identity” have crystallized around a notion of “gayness” as a real, and not arbitrary, difference. So while constructionist theorists have been preaching the gospel that the hetero/homosexual distinction is a social fiction, gays and lesbians, in everyday life and in political action, have been busy hardening the categories. Theory, it seems, has not been informing practice. Perhaps the practitioners are misguided; or perhaps there is something about the strict constructionist perspective which neither adequately describes the experi-
ences of gays and lesbians nor speaks to their need to understand and legitimate their places in the world.*

To address these questions, my analysis will proceed as follows. First, I will recapitulate the constructionist-essentialist debate and discuss why neither side proves altogether useful in understanding or guiding contemporary gay politics. Then, I will argue that other theoretical perspectives on identity and ethnicity can provide valuable help in understanding recent political trends and in defending some version of an “ethnic/minority group model.” In the process, I will return to the theoretical debate, examine some more subtle expressions of it, and show that the “ethnic” model is congruent with a modified constructionist position. Finally, I will explore the implications of this analysis for the future directions of gay politics.

The Debate

At heart, the theoretical debate is located on the all-too-familiar terrain of nature vs. nurture. As against the essentialist position that sexuality is a biological force seeking expression in ways that are preordained, constructionists treat sexuality as a blank slate, capable of bearing whatever meanings are generated by the society in question. In addition, the debaters line up on opposite sides of an old epistemological argument concerning categorization. Essentialists are “realists” in their insistence that social categories (e.g., “homosexual,” “heterosexual,” “bisexual”) reflect an underlying reality of difference; constructionists are “nominalists” in their contrary assertion that such categories are arbitrary, human-imposed divisions of the continuum of experience—categories create social types, rather than revealing them.

“Essentialism” is often equated with “traditional” views on sexuality in general, but can be linked specifically to the work of nineteenth-century “sexologists,” such as Havelock Ellis and Krafft-Ebing; to certain aspects of Freud’s work; and to deterministic theories such as sociobiology. Essentialist views stress the “natu-

*I do not mean to suggest that constructionism is the only theoretical perspective on homosexuality proposed by left academics. Clearly, feminist theory has played a significant role in informing debates on sexual politics. However, feminism has often been guilty of “gender reductionism” by treating questions of sexual identity as epiphenomena of gender debates. To the extent that there is a coherent theoretical perspective on homosexuality as homosexuality, it is constructionism.*
ral” dimensions of sex; and essentialist conceptions of homosexuality seek to account for such persons on the basis of some core of difference, whether that difference be hormonal, or medical, or a consequence of early child-rearing, or “just the way we are.”

The constructionist critique of sexual essentialism has played an important role in debunking this traditional view. Much like essentialism, though, constructionism should not be thought of as a specific school, but rather as a broader tendency of thinking that has found representations in a number of disciplines. At the risk of oversimplifying, it can be said that recent historical and sociological work on gays and lesbians in Western societies traces its roots to two schools of sociology: symbolic interactionists, particularly the pathbreaking work of John Gagnon and William Simon on “sexual conduct” (1973); and labeling theorists, especially Mary McIntosh’s analysis of the “homosexual role” (1968) and Kenneth Plummer on “sexual stigma” (1975). To a lesser degree, analyses of sexual constructionism in Western societies have also been influenced by the cross-cultural work of constructionist anthropology; these studies of “sex/gender systems” trace a somewhat different history from the mid-century cultural anthropology of Boas, Benedict, and Mead. Finally, in the 1980s, the work of Michel Foucault has become a new rallying point for sexual constructionism, and has served as the impetus for further investigations. I will briefly discuss some of these sources of constructionism, in order to describe the main contours of the perspective as it has evolved.

In keeping with the central thrust of symbolic interactionism, constructionists propose that sexuality be investigated on the level of subjective meaning. Sexual acts have no inherent meaning, and in fact, no act is inherently sexual. Rather, in the course of interactions and over the course of time, individuals and societies spin webs of significance around the realm designated as “sexual.” People learn to be sexual, Gagnon and Simon stress, in the same way they learn everything else: “Without much reflection, they pick up directions from their social environment.” As actors attribute subjective meanings to their interactions with others, they begin to develop “sexual scripts” which guide them in their future sexual interactions. Unlike “drives,” which are understood as fixed essences destined to seek a particular expression, “scripts” are highly variable and fluid, subject to constant revision and editing.
Central to the constructionist critique of essentialist “drive theory” is a repudiation of the popular imagery of sex. In this view we tend to see sex as

an overpowering, instinctual force, whose characteristics are built into the biology of the human animal, which shapes human institutions and whose will will out, either in the form of direct sexual expression, or if blocked, in the form of perversion or neuroses.15

In this view, which preceded but was popularized by Freud, “society” must restrain “sexuality,” and social order depends on the proper channeling of sexual energy. In the left-wing version of the same ideology, “sex radicals” such as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse have treated sexual repression as the cornerstone of social repression, hailing sex as the liberator from bondage.16 More generally, in the popularizations of this imagery, the sex drive is treated as some sort of magical energy; hence the idea that athletes shouldn’t have sex before the big game, or that masturbation constitutes a waste of one’s potency. In all these views the sex drive is credited “with enormous—almost mystical—power.”17

While symbolic interactionists debunked the notion of a “natural” sexuality, it was labeling theory that first provided the means to challenge essentialist views of “the homosexual” as a natural, transhistorical category. This challenge, which lies at the very crux of the constructionist argument about homosexuality, can be expressed in the following claim: although every known society has examples of homosexual behavior, only recently has there arisen a conception of “the homosexual” as a distinct type of person. In Mary McIntosh’s important essay on the modern “homosexual role,” her immediate target was the medical conception of the homosexual person. McIntosh argued vehemently against the prevailing medical logic:

Many scientists and ordinary people assume that there are two kinds of people in the world: homosexuals and heterosexuals. Some of them recognize that homosexual feelings and behavior are not confined to the persons they would like to call “homosexuals” and that some of these persons do not actually engage in homosexual behavior. This should pose a crucial problem, but they evade the crux by retaining their assumption and puzzling over the question of how to tell whether someone is “really” homosexual or not. Lay people too will discuss whether a certain person is “queer” in much the same way as they might question whether a certain pain indicated cancer. And in much the same
way they will often turn to scientists or to medical men for a surer
diagnosis.\textsuperscript{18}

In place of this essentialism, McIntosh argues that “the homosexual” has come to occupy a distinct “social role” in modern
societies. Since homosexual \textit{practices} are widespread but socially
threatening, a special, stigmatized category of \textit{individuals} is cre-
ated so as to keep the rest of society pure. By this means, a
“clear-cut, publicized and recognizable threshold between permi-
sible and impermissible behaviour” is constructed; anyone who
begins to approach that threshold is immediately threatened with
being labeled a full-fledged deviant: one of “them.”\textsuperscript{19} A homo-
sexual identity, then, is created not so much through homosexual
activity \textit{per se} (what labeling theorists would call “primary devi-
ance”), but through the reactions of the deviant individual to
being so described, and through the internalization of the imposed
categorization (“secondary deviance”).

\textbf{T}\textsc{hese sociological theories} were employed by historians
who, in empirical studies, have traced the genesis of the mod-
ern homosexual.\textsuperscript{20} More recently, the work of Foucault has helped
us to theorize a historical dimension to the constructionist argu-
ments. According to Foucault, sexuality in the modern Western
world has been the site of an explosion of discourses of power and
knowledge; sexual meanings, sexual doctrines, and sexual beings
have been generated incessantly by a culture that has come to be
obsessed with the significance of the sexual, has elevated it to un-
precedented dimensions, and has sought in it “the truth of our
being.”\textsuperscript{21}

Foucault has tried to use this perspective to account for the
origin of “the homosexual.” In Foucault’s view, the transforma-
tion from sexual behavior to sexual personhood is attributable to
three factors: the increasing importance attached to sexuality in
general; a more widespread transformation in structures of social
control, from control that operates through sanctions against spe-
cific acts to control based on highly individualized discipline; and
the growing power of professionals, and especially doctors, to
define social problems and enforce social norms. In an oft-cited
passage, Foucault argues:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a
category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more
than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology... Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed form the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.22

As summarized in this brief sketch, constructionism posed a serious challenge to the prevailing essentialist orthodoxy concerning homosexuality. Where essentialism took for granted that all societies consist of people who are either heterosexuals or homosexuals (with perhaps some bisexuals), constructionists demonstrated that the notion of “the homosexual” is a sociohistorical product, not universally applicable, and worthy of explanation in its own right. And where essentialism would treat the self- attribution of a “homosexual identity” as unproblematic—as simply the conscious recognition of a true, underlying “orientation”—constructionism focused attention on identity as a complex developmental outcome, the consequence of an interactive process of social labeling and self-identification. Finally, by refusing to privilege any particular expression of sexuality as “natural,” constructionism shifted the whole framework of debate on the question of homosexuality: instead of asking, why is there homosexuality? the constructionists took variation for granted and asked, why is there homophobia?23

Unfortunately, while constituting a significant advance in our understanding of sexuality and homosexuality, constructionism also posed some inherent difficulties. However, before attempting a critique of constructionism, it is important to situate the debate within a social and political context. Rather than juxtaposing ideas in the abstract, we need to examine the politics of gay communities during the postwar period and the connection between those politics and the evolving theoretical stances.

**The Political Context**

As Foucault notes, the labeling practices of the nineteenthcentury doctors who invented the term “homosexual” created the possibility for a “reverse affirmation,” by which the stigmatized could gradually begin to organize around their label and
assert the legitimacy of that identity. Foucault, however, neglects the material bases for these practices. As Jeffrey Weeks and John D’Emilio have argued, the medical categorization itself presupposes certain social conditions, including changes in family structure that were linked to the Industrial Revolution, and urbanization, which provided the social space for a homosexual subculture to develop. By mid-century, such subcultures were firmly established in most major cities in the United States.

Homosexual politics of the 1950s and early 1960s preached liberal tolerance and stressed the goal of integration into the larger society. The birth of the gay liberation movement marked a radical break with these accommodationist politics. When American gay liberation burst out of quiescence with the Stonewall riot in Greenwich Village in 1969, the politics that were espoused represented a mixture of new-left ideology and left Freudian arguments that anticipated constructionism. Activists with groups such as the Gay Liberation Front portrayed homosexuals as revolutionary subjects who were uniquely situated to advance the cause of sexual liberation for society as a whole. However, the notion of “the homosexual” as a distinct type of person was specifically repudiated, in favor of a left Freudian view of human sexuality as “polymorphously perverse.” In utopian fashion, activists prophe-sied the disappearance of both “the homosexual” and “the hetero-sexual” through the abolition of constraining categories:

The reason so few of us are bisexual is because society made such a big stink about homosexuality that we got forced into seeing ourselves as either straight or nonstraight....We’ll be gay until everyone has forgotten that it’s an issue. Then we’ll begin to be complete people.

Or in the words of a lesbian activist:

I will tell you what we want, we radical homosexuals: not for you to tolerate us, to accept us, but to understand us. And this you can do only by becoming one of us. We want to reach the homosexuals entombed in you, to liberate our brothers and sisters, locked in the prisons of your skulls. ...We will never go straight until you go gay. As long as you divide yourselves, we will be divided from you—separated by a mirror trick of your mind.

Perhaps the most sophisticated expression of this ideology is Dennis Altman’s, whose *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*
(1971) remains the classic statement of early post-Stonewall gay male politics. In the final chapter, entitled “The End of the Homosexual?,” Altman looks forward to not only the abolition of sexual categorization but also the elimination of “masculinity” and “femininity,” along with the creation of a “new human” for whom such distinctions would simply be irrelevant.\(^{30}\)

While such arguments are not exactly “constructionist”—Gagnon and Simon, after all, would criticize the lingering essentialism of left Freudians such as Marcuse—they resonated fairly closely with the gay and lesbian constructionist history that began to be written soon afterward; this history, in fact, was inspired by the events of the early gay liberation movement, and many of the historians had been active in it from the start. What the liberationist position shared with the constructionist arguments was an insistence that sexual typologies are social, rather than natural facts; that these categories are highly fluid; and that they need to be transcended. Both shared a sense of the openness of historical possibilities that was inspired by the political climate of the day.

**NEEDLESS TO SAY**, the radical liberationist politics did not achieve its goals. However, the greater irony is that, to the extent that the activists did succeed in advancing the situation of gays and lesbians, they undermined the logical supports for their own arguments. That is, simply by advancing the cause of gay liberation, the liberationists helped to further the notion, among both gays and straights, that gays constitute a distinct social group with their own political and social interests. This is a familiar dilemma, and one that is by no means peculiar to the gay movement: How do you protest a socially imposed categorization, except by organizing around the category? Just as blacks cannot fight the arbitrariness of racial classification without organizing as blacks, so gays could not advocate the overthrow of the sexual order without making their gayness the very basis of their claims.

The 1970s witnessed a phenomenal growth in the institutionalization of a gay identity, as “deviant subcultures” gave way to “gay communities.” And contrary to the “proto-constructionist” perspective that had been espoused by the early liberationists, the next generation of gay activists embraced a conception of gay identity that was significantly essentialist. To some extent, these essentialist notions had been around from the start; and in the
political climate of the late 1970s, one can imagine why they would have more appeal than the utopian vision of the early liberationism, with its focus on historical openness. What this meant, however, is that a disjuncture developed between theory and practice: in place of the rough congruence between early gay liberation politics and evolving constructionist theory, we now find a growing tension between an evolving essentialist politics and a constructionist theory that is firmly in place.

Each variant of essentialism is based on some sort of legitimation strategy. In some cases, activists have legitimated their claims with reference to the trans-historical unity of homosexuals or their trans-cultural functional role. Perhaps most prominently, Adrienne Rich has proposed the existence of a "lesbian continuum" which links the resisters of heterosexist patriarchy across cultures and throughout history.31* In a somewhat analogous vein, a male activist claimed: "We look forward to regaining our ancient historical role as medicine people, healers, prophets, shamans, and sorcerers."32 Others have sought legitimations of a more "scientific" sort, making reference to a biological or genetic basis for homosexuality. Most typically, and far more usefully, gays and lesbians have adopted what Altman has in recent writings characterized as an "ethnic" identification.33

This "ethnic" self-characterization by gays and lesbians has a clear political utility, for it has permitted a form of group organizing that is particularly suited to the American experience, with its history of civil-rights struggles and ethnic-based, interest-group competition. In fact, an irony that Altman points out is that, by appealing to civil rights, gays as a group have been able to claim a legitimacy that homosexuals as individuals are often denied:

One of the paradoxes of the present situation is that even where the old laws defining homosexual behavior as a major crime remain, there is a growing de facto recognition of a gay minority, deserving of full civil and political rights as a minority. Thus for years the mayor of New York could proclaim an official Gay Pride Week while the very people being honored remained criminals under state law.34

* Other forms of lesbian essentialism are actually gender essentialism, stressing the superiority of the intrinsic qualities of women. For a striking example, see Karla Jay, "No Man's Land," in Jay and Allen Young, eds., Lavender Culture (New York: Jove, 1978), pp. 48-68.
Gay people's sense of themselves as belonging to a "minority group" was not altogether new; this view had been stated publicly at least as early as 1951, when Donald Webster Cory discussed the "invisible minority" in The Homosexual in America.\textsuperscript{35} However, this self-conception could not really take root at a time when the institutional and cultural content of the gay subculture was so relatively impoverished. By the late 1970s, however, the "ethnic" self-understanding truly seemed to correspond to the reality of the burgeoning gay male communities, which had become, at least in New York and San Francisco, wholly contained cities-within-cities (or "ghettos," as they were not infrequently called). Inhabitants of these "urban villages" need never leave them to satisfy their desires, whether those desires be sexual, recreational, cultural, or commercial. There were gay churches, gay banks, gay theaters, gay hiking clubs, gay bookstores, and gay yellow pages listing hundreds of gay-owned businesses. While lesbian communities were neither as visible nor as territorially based, they, too, provided a variety of cultural supports and institutions, fostering a sense of minority-group identity that was furthered by separatist tendencies. Little wonder, then, that lesbians and gay men began to be seen as, and to think of themselves as, almost a distinct type of being, on an ontological par with "Irish-Americans" or "Japanese-Americans."* Gone were the dreams of liberating society by releasing "the homosexual in everyone." Instead, homosexuals concentrated their energies on social advancement as homosexuals.

It should be noted that the "ethnic" self-understanding is a much looser form of essentialism than, say, a strict genetic or hormonal theory of homosexuality. Based on an analogy that is not necessarily intended literally, this form of group identification is peculiarly vague about where the essential "core" of gayness resides. Nonetheless, the notion does tend toward a reification of the category "homosexual," implying that lesbians and gay men

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*Granted, the majority of self-identified gays and lesbians did not live in these communities, but many of them did make their pilgrimages to the "Gay Mecca" or were exposed to it through the mass media. And beyond that, to use a different religious metaphor, San Francisco came to symbolize for gays around the United States what Israel represents for Jews around the world: a focal point for cultural identity, that functions even for those who are not firmly integrated into the culture.

It should be clear, of course, that there is no single gay or lesbian "culture," but rather a variety of them that are loosely integrated.
are in some fundamental sense different from heterosexuals. Such viewpoints can be quite dangerous: they can lend support to eugenicist arguments and are also disturbingly compatible with the contemporary understanding of AIDS as a "gay disease."

Moreover, there are a number of questions that can be raised, from a progressive standpoint, about the political manifestations of "ethnicity." It would be unfortunate to reduce the politics of gay liberation to nothing more than the self-interested actions of an interest group, in competition with other such groups for various resources; such a model would imply that gays have no interests in common with other oppressed groups, and would almost entirely abandon any notion of a broader role for the gay movement in radical politics. In addition, such a move would further separate gay men from gay women, by questioning whether even they have sufficient common interests to overcome their senses of difference. Finally, as many critics have noted, the politics of gay "ethnicity" have tended to foster the hegemonic role in community-building played by white males within the gay movement, and have been articulated to an uncomfortable extent through capitalist enterprise and the commodification of sexual desire.

Given the problems posed by "ethnic" essentialism, one might think that the role of gay and lesbian theorists should be to continue promoting a constructionist critique. In a certain sense, I think this is true; but it is a project that needs some rethinking. Is constructionism to be defended unproblematically? If so, the defenders must grapple with the problem that their theoretical perspective is "out of sync" with the self-understandings of many gay people. From the standpoint of the defenders of constructionism, lesbians and gay men must be seen as victims of "false consciousness," unaware of the constructedness of their identities. Moreover, we might predict that constructionists would experience considerable difficulties in leading the gay masses to a state of "true consciousness," given that constructionism poses a real and direct threat to the ethnic legitimation: people who base their claims to social rights on the basis of a group identity will not appreciate being told that that identity is just a social construct; and people who see their sexual desires as fixed—as "just the way we are"—are unlikely to adopt a viewpoint that presents "sexual scripting" as a fluid, changeable process open to intentional redefinition. Altman has recognized this dilemma:
Few arguments have caused as much controversy among gay audiences as the assertion of a universal bisexual potential. I was once interrupted during the taping of a gay radio program in Los Angeles by a producer very concerned by this position, which he said justified Anita Bryant’s claim that all homosexuals could be “cured.” He was only partially mollified by my pointing out that the reverse was equally true.38

While it is important to challenge essentialism, particularly in its most insidious forms, we need not do so by reverting to a dogmatic constructionism. A strict constructionist position of the kind outlined above not only poses a threat to contemporary legitimations of lesbians and gay men: it is also theoretically unsound and analytically incomplete. Having situated the essentialist-constructionist debate within contemporary politics, I would now like to return to the examination of constructionism and spell out its shortcomings.

Constructionist Pitfalls

For all its radical potential, constructionism has trapped itself in the basic dualisms of classic liberalism. Liberal discourse goes back and forth between two extreme views of the relation between the individual and society: either it asserts that individuals are free to create themselves, rise above their environments, and take control over their lives; or it sees individuals as simply the product of their environment (or their genes, or what have you), molded like clay into various shapes.39 Similarly, constructionism vacillates between a certain type of libertarian individualism (the left Freudian variant is the best example here)40 in which sexual categories may be appropriated, transcended, and deconstructed at will; and just the opposite conception of the individual’s sexual identity as created for him or her by the social and historical context (a strand of thinking best represented by Foucault). In either case, the “individual” is pitted against “Society”; and what is missing is any dynamic sense of how society comes to dwell within individuals or how individuality comes to be socially constituted.

Put more simply, constructionism is unable to theorize the issue of determination. This is true both on the societal level and on the level of individual lives. As Jeffrey Weeks has acknowledged, though constructionism would predict an infinite variety of sexual
identities, sexual acts, and sexual scripts, practical experience indicates that only the tiniest fraction of these possibilities are realized.\textsuperscript{41} Stephen Murray points out that if we take the constructionist assumption that gender identity, gender roles, sexual identity, sex roles, and object choice can all vary independently of one another, and if we assume that each feature might take on one of three possible values (e.g., "masculine," "feminine," and neither/both), then there are 243 potential permutations of sexual beings. Needless to say, even if we combed through the entire history of human civilization, we would not find anywhere near that many variations.\textsuperscript{42} Each society seems to have a limited range of potential storylines for its sexual scripts—and constructionists have surprisingly little to say about how that limiting process takes place. Moreover, strict constructionism implies a lack of determination in the sexual histories of individuals as well: their scripts are assumed to be in a constant state of revision. While this is no doubt true to a point, it would seem to belie most people's experiences of a relatively fixed sexual identity. It may be that we're all acting out scripts—but most of us seem to be typecast.

It is precisely this perceived non-voluntary component of identity that cannot be accounted for within a strict constructionist perspective. Constructionism has no theory of the intrapsychic; it is unable to specify the ways in which desire comes to be structured over the course of people’s lives. While it asserts that people are social products, it has no way of explaining how it is that social meanings come to resonate with the core of who people are.* Falling into the dualistic traps of liberal theory, constructionism then lends itself to further misunderstanding on the part of those who encounter the theory. A “folk constructionism” comes to be disseminated: the view that sexual identities are willful self-creations. And in reaction against this folk constructionism, which denies the experience of a non-voluntary component to identity, lesbians and gays operating within the liberal discourse slide to the

* In a more recent revision that deserves attention, Gagnon and Simon speak of three levels of scripting: "cultural scenarios," "interpersonal scripts," and "intrapsychic scripts." While this is a drastic improvement over the original definition of scripts, it still does not go far enough. The intrapsychic is conceptualized primarily as the realm in which the self "rehearses" for interpersonal experience; there is no real dynamic theory of intrapsychic processes in relation to actions in the external world. Also, a conception of unconscious mental processes, as opposed to conscious ones, is missing from their version of intrapsychic scripts. See Simon and Gagnon (ref. 55), pp. 53-60.
opposite extreme: they assert that there is something “real” about their identity, and then try to locate that felt reality in their genes, or their earliest experiences, or their mystical nature. In this way, constructionism becomes its own worst enemy, driving its potential converts into the enemy camp.

A final point can be made about the theoretical inadequacies of constructionism as well as essentialism. If such theories are to be politically useful, then they should provide some means of evaluating concrete political strategies. In fact, the debate can at times appear quite beside the point, for there are many gay political strategies which cannot be cleanly conceptualized as either “essentialist” or “constructionist.” For example, consider the situation of “political lesbians” living in separatist communities of women. Such women have consolidated an (essentialist) conception of group difference to a significant extent—but the emphasis on identity as a conscious political choice would seem to place them squarely within the constructionist camp. Alternately, we might examine the politics of the pre-Stonewall homophile movement in the United States in the 1950s and ’60s. The leaders of this integrationist movement stressed in no uncertain terms that homosexuality was not a consequential difference, and that homosexuals were really just the same as straights and wanted to be treated as such. But this more-or-less constructionist viewpoint was mixed with an equally rigid essentialist insistence that homosexuals could not help being the way they were, and should therefore not be asked or forced to “change.”

It seems that when we scrutinize the essentialist-constructionist debate closely, it immediately unravels into two underlying dualisms: “sameness” vs. “difference,” and “choice” vs. “constraint.” Constructionism insists that homosexuals and heterosexuals are basically the same, and not fundamentally distinct types of beings; and it emphasizes the possibilities for the self-conscious creation of sexual identities (“choice”). Essentialism, conversely, stresses the politics of difference and presumes the existence of constraint on one’s sexual identity: sexual desires are not a “preference” but a fixed “orientation.”

However, when we separate out the two dimensions, we find that there are four logical possibilities (chart 1), rather than the two presumed by the constructionist-essentialist debate. First, there is
### Chart 1: Political Embodiments of a Deconstructed Debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Constraint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-Stonewall (transformative) gay liberation</td>
<td>Integrationism (e.g., 1950s–60s homophile movements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil libertarianism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political lesbians</td>
<td>Civil rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural radicalism</td>
<td>Minority/ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural radicalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chart 2: Corresponding Legitimation Strategies and Delegitimating Threats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Constraint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategies</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free expression</td>
<td>Liberal tolerance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social liberation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threats</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin; criminality</td>
<td>Curable illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategies</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppositional culture</td>
<td>Civil rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural pluralism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threats</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviant group</td>
<td>Degenerate group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Incurable illness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sameness-choice, which is exemplified by the early 1970s gay liberationist perspective, as well as by certain civil-libertarian arguments. Gay liberationists of the early seventies, for example, thought that all people were bisexual and hence fundamentally similar; and they stressed the role of volition in identity-formation. Next, there is sameness-constraint, the position of the pre-Stonewall homophile movements. Then, there is difference-constraint, best exemplified by the ethnic/civil rights model. Actors within such a model possess a strong sense of group difference and a notion of sexual identity as a fixed orientation. Finally, there is difference-choice, which would characterize “political lesbians” as well as certain expressions of cultural radicalism within the gay male community.* Each box, then, has its political embodiments, and each box also implies specific legitimating strategies which would need to confront specific ideological challenges (chart 2). The problem, though, is that the politics of only two of the boxes (sameness-choice and difference-constraint) are explicable within the context of the constructionist-essentialist debate. That is, sameness-choice can be seen as pure constructionist, while difference-constraint is pure essentialist. The other two boxes would seem to indiscriminately criss-cross the bounds of the argument—and yet they are no less logically defensible or worthy of theoretical attention. It follows that to explore systematically the essentialist-constructionist debate, we really need to delve more deeply into these two oppositions—choice vs. constraint, and sameness vs. difference—and see if they are really so opposing.

In order to build up a stronger constructionist position, my strategy will be as follows. First, I will examine more closely the idea of a gay “ethnic identity,” exploring, from the standpoint of theories of identity and of ethnicity, the historical conjuncture in which this idea appeared. I will argue that the debates on identity and ethnicity have been bogged down by certain polar oppositions that parallel the essentialism-constructionism divide. By staking out an alternative position in these debates, I will further argue that it is reasonable, with certain qualifications, to accept the “ethnic” model—both as a relatively accurate characterization of contemporary gay identity formation, and as a politically defensible starting point from which the gay movement can evolve in a pro-

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*It should be clear that groups or individuals can be “located” within these boxes only in a highly ideal-typical fashion. In the real world, at some point or another, most of us are all over the map.
gressive direction. In the course of this analysis, I will return to the oppositions that undergird the essentialism-constructionism debate—choice vs. constraint, and sameness vs. difference—and once again seek some way of transcending the dualisms, in a way that helps sexual theory to resonate more closely with the politics of gay “ethnic” identity.

Identity

The concept of “homosexual identity,” as mentioned earlier, is a surprisingly new one; though the term is now ubiquitous, it first appeared in the relevant literature little more than a decade ago.44 Perhaps it is not so surprising, then, that the term has been used in a consistently haphazard fashion. In her survey of the literature on homosexual identity, Vivienne Cass has found that in these articles it is possible to infer diverse meanings such as (1) defining oneself as gay, (2) a sense of self as gay, (3) image of self as homosexual, (4) the way a homosexual person is, and (5) consistent behavior in relation to homosexual-related activity.45

General definitions of identity are equally problematic. In an interesting “semantic history” of the term, Philip Gleason notes that it, too, is a new concept, having entered the general social-science literature only in the 1950s. Popularized initially by psycho-analyst Erik Erikson, “identity” then wound its way through various sociological “feeder streams,” including role theory, reference-group theory, and symbolic interactionism. By the mid-1960s, the term “was used so widely and so loosely that to determine its provenance in every context would be impossible.”46

Nevertheless, Gleason observes that most definitions tend to fall toward one or the other pole of an opposition between two conceptions of identity, one a psychological reductionism, the other a sociological reductionism. The first conception of identity—which might be called “intrapsychic”—treats identity as a relatively fixed and stable characteristic of a person, which, from a developmental standpoint, more or less unwinds from within. In a word, this sense of identity is essentialist: it is the type of “identity” that we mean when we speak of identity as describing who someone really is. Quite distinct is the sense of “identity” which I will call “acquired” (although the term “constructionist” would not be inappropriate). In this sense, identity is the internalization or conscious
adoption of socially imposed or socially constructed labels or roles. According to the "acquired" definition, identity is not so deeply entrenched in the psyche of the individual, and can vary considerably over the course of one's life. This is the type of "identity" that we have in mind when we say that someone "identifies as" a such-and-such.47

It should be clear that not all psychologists adopt a simplistic intrapsychic definition, nor do all sociologists see identity as purely acquired. Eriksen, for example, was quite specific on the point that identity emerged through an interactive developmental process between self and others.48 Conversely, the symbolic interactionists Berger and Luckmann argue that "identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society."49 Nonetheless, these two polar senses have each become prevalent, and it is not uncommon to encounter fairly pure expression of either type. *

Mediating between the poles of intrapsychic and acquired identity is Habermas's useful discussion of identity:

[Ego] identity is produced through socialization, that is, through the fact that the growing child first of all integrates itself into a specific social system by appropriating symbolic generalities; it is later secured and developed through individuation, that is, precisely through a growing independence in relation to social systems.50

Ego identity, then, is a socialized sense of individuality, an internal organization of self-perceptions concerning one's relationship to social categories, that also incorporates views of the self perceived to be held by others. At its core, identity is constituted relationally, through involvement with—and incorporation of—significant others and integration into communities. The relationship of ego

*Lee Rainwater, for example, has used a definition of identity as something completely acquired, treating identities as things that people "try on," like hats: "Individuals are led to announce a particular identity when they feel it is congruent with their needs, and the society influences these needs by its willingness to validate such announcements by a congruent placement.... Each individual tries on identities that emerge from the cultural material available to him and tests them by making appropriate announcements." See Lee Rainwater, Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), p. 375; quoted in Laud Humphreys, "Exodus and Identity: The Emerging Gay Culture," in Martin P. Levine, ed., Gay Men: The Sociology of Male Homosexuality (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 144.
identity to subsidiary identities (such as occupational, class, racial, gender, or sexual identities) is an interactive one, in which all subsidiary identities are integrated into a relatively coherent and unique life history.\textsuperscript{51}

Where then do these subsidiary identities come from, and in what circumstances can they be appropriated and incorporated? As Berger and Luckmann maintain, it is important to recognize that such identities are, at the same time, both human self-creations and constraining structures. To paraphrase Marx, people make their own identities, but they do not make them just as they please. Identities are phenomena that permit people to become acting "subjects" who define who they are in the world, but at the same time identities "subject" those people to the controlling power of external categorization.\textsuperscript{52}

In this regard, it is vital to note that identity has increasingly come to be seen as something quite important. In modern, fluid, "mass" society, the relationship of the individual to the social whole is rendered problematic; as part of a continual "quest for identity," we go through "identity crises"; we seek to "find ourselves." It is not surprising that group identities—occupational, racial, ethnic, sexual—become increasingly attractive, since they provide an intermediate link between the individual and the mass.\textsuperscript{53} As we accept more and more identities, it does indeed begin to seem that they are all somewhat arbitrary, tried on like hats and discarded for next year's style. And yet the fundamental irony of this apparent freedom to define ourselves is that in a world where identity has been transformed into a problem—where identity "crises" must be resolved, and where we all search for our identities—external cues and definitions become increasingly authoritative. The more we feel impelled to discover our "true" identity, the more we are likely to grasp at the reassurance provided by the adoption of available identity types.

The pressure to define oneself sexually is particularly keenly felt. This is true in part because labels such as "homosexual" are powerfully charged, carrying with them the risk of strong social disapproval. But beyond that, a Foucaultian argument can be made about the increasing importance of sex, in general, to the constitution of identity. As Dennis Altman notes,
sex remains one of the few areas of life where we feel able to be more than passive spectators. It is a feature of modern society that we increasingly define achievement in terms of immediate gratification, and the move to burden sexuality with greater expectations is closely related to the stress on ideas of “self-fulfillment” and “personal actualization.”

In a similar vein, Jeffrey Weeks observes:

As divorce rates rise, fertility declines, and the distinction between married and unmarried tends to blur, “the couple” rather than marriage emerges as the one seeming constant of western life. But sex becomes even more central to its success. . . . Sex has become the cement that binds people together.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities must be understood as arising out of this historical conjuncture. Their emergence reflects a world in which group identity has assumed paramount importance, and where sexuality has become a central dimension of identity formation in general. In addition, as already suggested, these identities constitute “reverse affirmations” of social labels, adoptive contestations of imposed stigma categories. As labeling theory indicates, deviant identities are particularly likely to assume totalizing dimensions: all behavior of persons so categorized becomes interpreted by others through the prism of the perceived difference: “One will be identified as a deviant first, before other identifications are made.” And as Erving Goffman points out, the need for the stigmatized to “manage” their stigma in social situations—to tell or not to tell, to confront or to excuse—causes the stigma-identity to assume substantial proportions within the overall ego identity—to become, in some cases, an all-consuming preoccupation. Attempts to assert the legitimacy of one’s position and claim that one’s stigma is not grounds for social exclusion tend to have the ironic effect, also noted by Goffman, of furthering the process by which the particular identity consumes the overall ego.

Finally, the emergence of various types of sexual identity as important components of ego identity presumes the existence of individuals who are in some loose sense qualified to fill the categories—people who are capable of interpreting their erotic and emotional desires and actions as corresponding to their understanding of the meaning of these social terms. This is the point at
which both labeling theory and symbolic interactionism falter, for they have nothing to say about how such people come to exist. The rigid temporal sequence laid down by labeling theory is particularly inadequate. In that model, the individual commits an act of "primary" deviance (in this case, a homosexual act), is in consequence met with a stigmatizing label ("You're a queer"), and by internalizing this label becomes fixed in a "secondary" deviant identity ("I'm a homosexual"). But in the real world, the developmental sequences vary tremendously. Interview data suggest, in fact, the relationship among the processes of engaging in homosexual activity, being labeled a homosexual, and having suspicions that one is a homosexual can come in various orders; typical patterns seem to include "engaged, suspicious, labeled," "engaged, labeled," "suspicious, engaged, labeled," and "suspicious, labeled, engaged." As Plummer has pointed out in his review of several studies, some gay men and lesbians report a fixity and clarity of sexual preferences dating to early childhood; others experience several shifts in sexual identity and the structure of desire over the course of their lives. Research into the lives of homosexuals increasingly suggests that there is no "homosexuality," but rather "homosexualities."

A theory of sexual identity formation, therefore, must be able to identify a wide range of potential developmental strategies by which individuals, in relation with significant others, compare (or fail to compare) their experiences and feelings against their comprehension (or lack of comprehension) of existing sexual and gender typologies. As a result of these processes, individuals arrive (or fail to arrive) at consistent or variable interpretations of their sexual identity. This is a complex and never-ending activity, involving both conscious and unconscious dimensions. Consciously, people perform what Barbara Pone has called "identity work": they actively seek to organize into a coherent whole their thoughts, motivations, and experiences with others—to create a consistent

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* A notable exception to this presumption of a standard sequence of deviant identity-formation is Goffman's discussion of the "moral career" of the stigmatized individual, which can unfold in several distinctive fashions, depending upon the relative timing of (1) developing a stigma and (2) learning that the world considers this to be a "stigma." Goffman (ref. 58), pp. 32-34.

† To complicate the above discussion even further, it should probably be added that, to the extent that sexual identity and gender identity are ideologically linked, the individual's perception of his or her relationship to the gender categories (e.g., gender "conformity" or "nonconformity") can influence the developmental understanding of sexual identity.
biography which legitimates their places in the world. Critical phases, such as the "coming out" process, may represent cognitive strategies for handling breaks and discontinuities in these biographies. To the extent that such processes remain unconscious, people are often subject to constraints that they but dimly perceive; their needs, desires, actions, cognitions and self-concepts may all be out of sync with one another, and a consistent biography may not be achieved.

This discussion sheds new light on the polarity between "choice" and "constraint," which was observed to be one dimension underlying the essentialist-constructionist debate. If the question is, Are sexual identities the outcome of choice or constraint?, then the whole thrust of the preceding argument is to suggest that the only possible answer is "neither and both." Choice and constraint constitute a false opposition; and the way to transcend this dualism, I think, is with some form of psychoanalytic theory. Such a perspective can account for the ways that sexual and emotional desires can be structured, developmentally, into relatively well-defined directions. In particular, the "object relations" school of psychoanalysis, with its focus on relational experience, and with its theory of the ego as possessing a "relational core," might be usefully applied to an analysis of sexual identity. Object relations theory describes, in a vivid way, how from a child's earliest moments onward a sense of self is constituted through "introjections" of significant others. The child's needs and desires, which can only be satisfied externally, come to be mediated and shaped through these encounters; while aspects of these desires may remain highly fluid and subject to what constructionists want to call scripting, other dimensions may be sharply structured and come to comprise fundamental parts of the ego core.* Without

*It may even be useful to reintroduce a concept of "drives"—stripped of its essentialist Freudian baggage. Rather than treat drives as pre-social and biological, Chodorow (following Edith Jacobson) suggests that "the infant is born with undifferentiated drive potentials, which are transformed and used in the process of development, in the interest of internal and external relationships, to become aggressive and libidinal drives." Chodorow, "Beyond Drive Theory" (ref. 40), p. 308. From this perspective, it might be possible to conceptualize a developmental organization of drives that results in a homosexual "object choice." However, it could be argued that the term "drive" has been so contaminated by Freud's biologist, ahistoricism, prescriptive claims about "normality," and assumptions that drives serve to "channel" sexuality in order to stabilize the moral and social order, that it would be best to avoid the term altogether.
displacing the symbolic interactionist focus on conscious, adult experience, psychoanalysis also permits us to conceptualize the unconscious and to appreciate the formative element of early childhood experiences. From such a perspective, identity becomes more than just a serial enactment of roles; it takes on a socially constituted reality.

In light of this discussion, the organization of the gay community around the “politics of identity” would seem to have strong social roots. Once we abandon both the strict essentialist notion of identity as forever fixed within the psyche, as well as the strict constructionist conception of identity as an arbitrary acquisition, we can recognize that a gay or lesbian identity might have a clear resonance for individuals without necessarily binding them to any specific definition of what that identity “means.” An intermediate position between the poles of intrapsychic and acquired identity allows us to recognize that these sexual identities are both inescapable and transformable, and are capable of giving rise to a variety of political expressions. The question that must now be asked is why the contemporary gay identity in the United States has particularly assumed an “ethnic” dimension, and what this implies for gay politics.

Ethnicity

**How can we speak** seriously of gays and lesbians as an “ethnic” group—or even a minority group? After all, there would seem to be some rather fundamental differences between gays and the other groups that we normally associate with these terms. In the first place, ethnic or racial identifications are normally conferred at birth and transmitted through the family. In place of this “primary socialization” into a racial or ethnic identity, the entrance into a gay community constitutes a “secondary socialization,” occurring later in life.

A process of secondary socialization is typically seen as less formative than primary socialization, because “it must deal with an already formed self and an already internalized world. It cannot construct subjective reality *ex nihilo*.” In particular, it is unclear what sort of coherent cultural content can be transmitted through a secondary socialization into a gay community, and whether this cultural distinctiveness corresponds with the kinds of
cultural differences that we normally consider to be ethnic. Ethnic culture is presumed to be handed down through the generations; gay "culture" lacks both the historical roots and the standard transmission devices. This problem is compounded by the fact that individuals being socialized into a gay community will already possess a variety of cross-cutting identities—ethnic, racial, class, gender, religious, occupational, and so on—which may claim much greater allegiance and inhibit the secondary socialization process.68

The treatment of these objections rests ultimately on the particular definition of "ethnicity" that is adopted. And once again, an investigation into the existing definitional possibilities reveals a debate between two polar opposite conceptions. Lining up on one side are the "primordialists," who treat ethnicity as an inescapable given, an absolute ascription. And in opposition to this traditional view has arisen the "optionalist" (a.k.a. "circumstantialist") critique, which in its most vulgar manifestations argues that "ethnicity may be shed, resurrected, or adopted as the situation warrants."69 It should be clear that a "primordialist" conception of ethnicity implies an "intrapsychic" notion of ethnic identity; while conversely, an understanding of ethnicity in the "optionalist" sense is quite compatible with a definition of ethnic identity as "acquired."70

Once again, we need to transcend a false dualism: on the one hand, it seems ridiculous to claim that we can shed or adopt ethnicities as we please. Clearly, there are major constraints on this process. But on the other hand, it is quite true that racial and ethnic categories are historical products that are subject to extensive redefinition over time. Omi and Winant give an interesting example of the definitional crisis surrounding the influx of Mexicans and Chinese into the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Confused over what sort of racial/legal status to accord these groups, courts eventually ruled that Mexicans were "white" but that Chinese were "Indian."71 Even in the lives of individuals, racial designations can change. In South Africa, where race, of course, is of paramount importance, there is a special government agency responsible for adjudicating claims about one's racial classification; and each year many people officially "upgrade" their racial identity.72

Donald Horowitz strikes a good intermediate note between primordialism and optionalism:
Ascription is, of course, the key characteristic that distinguishes ethnicity from voluntary affiliation. *Ethnic identity is generally acquired at birth. But this is a matter of degree.* In the first place, in greater or lesser measure, there are possibilities for changing individual identity. Linguistic or religious conversion will suffice in some cases, but in others the changes may require a generation or more to accomplish by means of intermarriage and procreation. In the second place, collective action, in the sense of conscious modification of group behavior and identification, may effect shifts of boundaries. ... It is, therefore, a putative ascription, rather than an absolute one, that we are dealing with. ... Ethnicity thus differs from voluntary affiliation, not because the two are dichotomous, but because they occupy *different positions on a continuum.*

This definition brings us a step closer to feeling comfortable with the idea that the ethnic analogy is a reasonable one for gays and lesbians. If ethnicity does not necessarily begin at birth, and if ethnicity involves some combination of external ascription and chosen affiliation, then a gay identity as described above seems not wholly unlike an ethnic identity. But we can better understand the adoption of the ethnic model by gays and lesbians if we spell out the particular ways in which ethnicity has come to be understood in the contemporary United States.

*In the 1970s, social scientists announced that the United States was in the throes of an “ethnic revival”—a “resurgence” of ethnicity.* Though heavily influenced by the cultural and political assertiveness of racial minorities in the late 1960s, the revival was essentially a phenomenon of white European ethnic groups, manifesting a rediscovered pride in their heritage.* It was quickly observed that, despite the implications of a turn toward the past, there was something quite new about this form of ethnicity. As Frank Parkin notes,

the nature of collective action mounted by ethnic groups has undergone a significant change in recent times. Originally dedicated to fighting rearguard actions of cultural preservation, they

*This occurrence posed a bit of a puzzle to social scientists, many of whom had previously adopted the assumptions of the “melting pot” theory, or who, following the predictions of classical social theorists such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, had assumed that “irrational,” “communal” ties such as ethnicity would be progressively swept away by the advance of capitalism and the inexorable processes of rationalization.*
have now adopted more combative forms of activity expressly
designed to alter the distribution of rewards in their members' 

counterparts. First, as Daniel Bell points out, the new ethnicity
combines an affective tie with the pursuit of explicitly sociopolitical
goals in “interest group” form: ethnic groups become “instruments”
and not just “expressive.”
Second, the new ethnicity
places ethnic-group activity firmly on the terrain of the state.
Third, and as a corollary to the preceding arguments, the new
ethnicity is “forward-looking,” seeking to expand the group’s social
position, while the old ethnicity was “backward-looking,” aimed
at “preserv[ing] the past against the encroachments of centralization
and ‘modernization.”
Fourth, as a reaction against “mass
society,” the new ethnicity is not so much a new form of aggregation
as a “disaggregation” or “de-assimilation” from the mass.
Fifth, lacking the type of structural power possessed by subordinate 
social classes (i.e., the ability to disrupt production), the
new ethnic groups are increasingly inclined to press their demands
by appealing to, and manipulating, hegemonic ideologies (such as “equal rights”).
And finally, nation-ethnic politics frequently
take on a localist character, organized around a specific geographic space or community, leading to a distinctively ethnic involvement in urban political affairs.
While to some extent a general feature of contemporary Western politics, the “new ethnicity” manifested itself most prominently in the United States, where the political possibilities for organizing around ethnicity were the greatest (and, conversely, class-based organizing had proven relatively ineffective).

Of course, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the changes that
have occurred and ignore either the continuities between the “old”
and the “new” ethnicity, or the extent to which both varieties have
always been present. Nonetheless, it seems that a somewhat new
understanding of what ethnicity is all about emerged in the United
States in the 1970s—that is to say, at the very same time that gay

* Other countries that have gay political movements have failed to develop gay “ethnicity.” French activist Guy Hocquenghem, for example, has commented that France does not have a “gay community.” Mark Blasius, “Interview with Guy Hocquenghem,” *Christopher Street*, April 1980, p. 36. This
identity seems increasingly comprehensible and plausible. Like the archetypal "new ethnicity," gay ethnicity is a "future-oriented" identity linking an affective bond with an instrumental goal of influencing state policy and securing social rewards on behalf of the group. Like the other ethnic groups, gay ethnicity functions typically through appeals to the professed beliefs of the dominant culture, emphasizing traditional American values such as equality, fairness, and freedom from persecution. And finally, in neo-ethnic fashion, gay identity (in this case, gay male identity in particular) operates by using the control of a specific geographic space to influence urban political decision-making.84

The final question that must be addressed, to understand and assess the gay community's adoption of an ethnic self-understanding, has to do with the issue of culture and tradition. No matter how much ethnicity may now be articulated in the sociopolitical realm, most conceptions of ethnicity would certainly still include some sense of a unique ethnic culture heritage; indeed, one manifestation of the new ethnicity that was frequently alluded to in the 1970s was the resurgence of pride in one's ethnic cuisine, ethnic costume, and so on. And no matter how much ethnic groups may now be "forward looking," many of the legitimations for group allegiance are focused on the past and argue for the preservation of traditional forms. Can the lesbian and gay communities claim to be ethnic, given these considerations?

The answer is that the analogy holds. On the one hand, gay communities have developed a variety of cultural forms which, despite the considerable internal variation, serve to unify those communities.85 And on the other hand, the cultural potency of at least the European ethnic groups would seem to be much less than it's often cracked up to be. In an interesting twist on the "new ethnicity" argument, Stephen Steinberg has characterized the recent "ethnic fever" as sort of a Freudian reaction-formation: an assertion that ethnicity is still culturally and psychologically meaningful, voiced with such rigid insistence as to imply that even the proponents themselves are not convinced. He quotes Irving Howe to this effect:

would tend to support the argument that the United States has structural spaces for "ethnic" organizing that other countries lack.
These ethnic groups now turn back—and as they nervously insist, "with pride"—to look for fragments of a racial or national or religious identity that moves them to the extent that it is no longer available. Perhaps, also, because it is no longer available.86

Because ethnicity no longer provides the institutional supports capable of integrating individuals into the community and providing them with a sense of belonging, individuals futilely attempt to re-create that sense of belonging by grasping at a psychological affiliation. In the process, they fail to observe that the ground has fallen away beneath their feet:

Indeed, it is precisely because the real and objective basis for ethnic culture is rapidly disappearing that identity has been elevated to a "symbolic" plane and a premium is placed on the subjective dimensions of ethnicity. People desperately wish to "feel" ethnic precisely because they have all but lost the pre-requisites for "being" ethnic.87

Steinberg's analysis would lead one to characterize the gay community's adoption of an ethnic identity as profoundly ironic. It would seem to be precisely the fact that ethnic culture has been evacuated of content that has permitted the transposition of the category of "ethnicity" onto a group that, in the traditional sense of the term, clearly would not qualify for the designation. Thus it is true that lesbians and gay men don't really fit the original definition of what an ethnic group is: but then, neither really, do contemporary Jews, or Italian-Americans, or anyone else. In this way, the decline of the old ethnicity permits and encourages new groups to adopt the mantle and revive the phenomenon. Indeed, to the extent that the gay community has succeeded in creating new institutional supports that link individuals into the community and provide their lives with a sense of meaning, gays may now be more "ethnic" than the original ethnic groups.* And in any event, as the term progressively loses its original significations and acquires a more future-oriented, sociopolitical connotation, there is a diminishing tendency to assume that an ethnic group needs to provide those original functions anyway.

Now that we have explored the historical conjuncture in which the idea of a "gay ethnicity" made its appearance, we can see that

*This process is limited, of course, by the extensive variation within and among gay communities and the fact that integration of individuals into those "communities" is often extremely partial.
the term is more than a simple catch-phrase, as it appears in Altman's analysis. Rather, it is at the very least a compelling analogy, and perhaps even the most accurate designation we can come up with.*

This discussion of the particular sense in which "gay identity" has come to resemble an "ethnic" identity also sheds light on the "sameness-difference" dichotomy that underlies the essentialism-constructionism debate. Just as "choice" and "constraint" proved to be a false polarity with regard to gay identity, so are "sameness" and "difference" an unhelpful analytical distinction with regard to gay ethnicity: it makes little sense to quarrel over whether homosexuals and heterosexuals are fundamentally the same or fundamentally different. First, we need to rethink what we mean by the terms, and escape a sense of "sameness" as meaning a coercive uniformity, or "difference" as the clash of opposites. As Chodorow argues in the analogous case of gender difference, a rigid assertion of differentness reflects a defensive need to separate: it stems from anxieties about one's sense of self that are manifested in a refusal to recognize the other as also a "self"—as an active subject. It is possible to be differentiated, she argues, "without turning the cognitive fact into an emotional, moral, or political one."88

In this regard, it may be useful to talk about the relationship between gay "ethnic" communities and the larger society in terms of varying combinations of "sameness-in-difference," or "difference-in-sameness." This is true in several senses. First, the adoption of a neo-ethnic form of social closure combined with a civil rights political strategy implies that gays are asserting their difference partly as a way of gaining entry into the system. By consolidating as a group, they are essentially following the rules of the modern American pluralist myth, which portrays a harmonious competition among distinct social groups. Neither "sameness" nor "difference" would seem to capture the peculiar ambiguity of this political expression.

*Purists who wish to preserve a more conventional sense of the term "ethnicity" that would be applicable outside of the contemporary American context might instead prefer to call the gay community a "status group" of a "communal" character, organized around sexual expression.

While Parkin does not discuss sexual minorities, it would not be hard to incorporate them into his neo-Weberian argument on "communal" forms of usurpationary social closure. See Parkin (ref. 75), p. 67, and Almaguer (ref. 23).
Second, as many commentators have noted, the more coherent an ethnic group in the United States becomes, the greater its cultural influence upon the larger society. That is, at the times when Jews, or blacks, have been most "separatist," the diffusion of those cultures has also been the greatest. In the areas of sexual practices and urban lifestyles, lesbians and gays have indeed had an influence on the general culture in opening up possibilities for new forms of sexual and aesthetic expressions.89

This leads to another point, which is that the "lifestyles" of homosexuals and heterosexuals (at least among the white middle class) would seem in some ways to be moving closer together, even as the identity categories congeal. Once again, neither "sameness" nor "difference" seems to adequately characterize the phenomenon. As D'Emilio indicates, the conventional nuclear family is less and less the norm; the variety of living arrangements has multiplied; and sexuality has been increasingly divorced from a procreative intent: "As the life cycle of heterosexuals exhibits greater variety and less predictability, they have come to face many of the choices and experiences that gay men and women confront."90 And conversely, D'Emilio argues that homosexuals are moving closer to heterosexuals:

The gay liberation movement allowed many lesbians and homosexuals to break out of the ideological prison that confined them to a sexual self-definition. It also began the transformation of a sexual subculture into an urban community. The group life of gay men and women came to encompass not only erotic interaction but also political, religious, and cultural activity. Homosexuality and lesbianism have become less of a sexual category and more of a human identity.91

D'Emilio would seem to be exaggerating somewhat the convergence that has taken place; moreover, his endorsement of a "de-sexualized" lesbian and gay identity is certainly controversial.*

*Much of the early panic surrounding AIDS within the gay male community would seem to cast doubts on the viability of a "de-sexualized" notion of gay identity. The view was frequently expressed that if gay men couldn't have sex with each other, they would lose their identity altogether and the community would fall apart. Clearly, sex is unlikely ever to become an incidental part of a gay male identity.

Conversely, the general public seems unprepared to grant gays a "de-sexualized" gay identity, even if gays want that. Here again, AIDS is a good example: much of the "moral panic" surrounding AIDS can be interpreted as an attempt to "re-sexualize" gay (male) identity, by asserting that "the
Nonetheless, to the extent that there is some truth in the argument, it would seem that gays are becoming "the same" as straights to the extent that they are "different."

A final point in this regard relates to the potency of sexual classification itself. Jeffrey Weeks points out that the consolidation of typologies of sexual "persons" can have the paradoxical effect of challenging the whole system of categorization. Initially, labels such as "homosexual" were applied by doctors and sex researchers to describe deviations from a presumed norm. But once the people so labeled, in a "reverse" affirmation, began to assert the legitimacy of their sexual identity—and once that legitimacy began to be more widely recognized—then the whole classificatory schema began to lose its cultural force:

For the elaborate taxonomies and distinctions existed in the end only to explain the variations in relationship to an assumed norm. Once the norm itself was challenged, then the category of the perverse became redundant, and with them the whole elaborate edifice of "sexuality"—the belief that the erotic is a unified domain, governed by its own laws, organised around a norm and its variations—began to crumble.92

Weeks's argument is misleading because it presumes that categorization can be abolished—that the elimination of one set of norms somehow precludes the installation of others. In fact, as Weeks himself has noted elsewhere, not only is categorization a never-ending process, but gays and lesbians have increasingly become the new categorizers, subdividing and stratifying their communities into a variety of new types.93 But clearly Weeks has a point. By consolidating their sense of difference and asserting their legitimacy, lesbians and gays may be helping to usher in a world where they no longer seem so different. But neither an essentialist claim of basic difference, nor a constructionist insistence on fundamental similitude, alone seems adequate to capture this ambiguous process.

homosexual" (as a person) is inherently diseased, due to the diseased nature of his sexuality.

Similarly, for lesbians, the issue of a "desexualized" identity has been controversial. While some lesbian-feminists have proposed "desexualized" definitions of "lesbian" that would be more inclusive of feminists in general, others have protested against these "'women-loving-women' definitions, which too often hide the genital homophobia of an otherwise purified and cleansed reconstruction of the term." Jacquelyn N. Zita (ref. 93), p. 173.
Conclusion

In making sense of the notion of "gay 'ethnic' identity," I have deliberately steered clear of both the strict essentialist and the strict constructionist understandings of ethnicity as well as identity. The constitution of a gay identity is not something that simply unwinds from within, nor is it just an amalgam of roles that proceed according to scripts; only an intermediate, and dialectical, definition makes sense in this case. Similarly, if "ethnicity" is to serve even as an analogy for comprehending gay and lesbian group identity, then ethnicity must be understood as something that is neither an absolutely inescapable ascription nor something chosen and discarded at will; as something neither there from birth, nor something one joins like a club; as something that makes one neither fundamentally different from others, nor fundamentally the same. It is in the dialectics between choice and constraint, and between the individual, the group, and the larger society, that "identities," "ethnic identities," and "gay and lesbian identities" emerge.

Neither strict constructionism nor strict essentialism are capable of explaining what it means to be gay. The fact that contemporary gay self-understandings and political expressions are inexplicable within the bounds of these theoretical perspectives therefore should come as no surprise. No sexual theory can inform sexual practice without transcending the limitations imposed by aligning oneself on either fringe of a bootless philosophical argument between "nature" and "society." This whole discussion so far has really been a series of variations on that theme, since all the oppositions that have been described can be located at one or the other pole of what is basically the same debate:

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The fact that, in seeking to transcend these oppositions, I have ended up quoting the arguments of many constructionists, is not
incidental. Constructionists have become increasingly aware of the complexities of these debates, and have continued to provide the most insightful analyses of the changing character of the gay community and gay identity. But what constructionists have failed to acknowledge are the ways in which their own observations are increasingly at odds with the basic premises of the theoretical perspective. Plummer, in an interesting article aimed at a "synthetic" position, has gone so far as to embrace the possibility of the existence of fixed sexual "orientations"—while carefully skirting the question of how such a concept accords with his general theoretical stance. Altman, one of the most subtle chroniclers of the gay ethnic experience, can never seem to quite escape his own suspicion that ethnicity rests on an illusion that is also a trap. Weeks, who is perhaps the most sensitive to the theoretical limitations of strict constructionism, and who provides the most insightful discussions of both the limitations and the possibilities inherent in gay identities, is also capable of lapsing into the most utopian constructionist arguments about the abolition of sexual categories. The hold of strict constructionism remains tenacious; and its expositors seem unwilling to clarify their relationship to the doctrine.

Clarification would require a number of modifications to strict constructionism, yet would in no way amount to an endorsement of essentialism. First, there is a need to understand the issue of determination: out of the range of potential forms of sexual expression, how are limitations created on that expression, both socially and within the individual psyche? On the individual level, this implies the systematic introduction of psychoanalytic conceptions of needs and desires and of the development of the self in relation to others. On the social level, it implies a more comprehensive understanding of power, and of the dialectical relationship between identities as self-expressions and identities as ascriptive impositions. Anthropological analyses of "sex/gender systems" in kinship-based societies have something to offer here. As Harriet Whitehead has pointed out, "To say that gender definitions and concepts pertaining to sex and gender are culturally variable is not necessarily to say that they can vary infinitely or along any old axis." Analyses such as hers have attempted to connect cultural meanings about gender and sexuality with specific social-structural relations, so as to show how culture can structure the possibilities for personhood in distinctive ways.
An example of how such an analysis might proceed for Western societies is offered by Michael Omi and Howard Winant's analysis of a different domain, "racial formation."

Racial formation...should be understood as a process: (1) through which an unstable and contradictory set of social practices and beliefs are articulated in an ideology based fundamentally on race; (2) through which the particular ideology thus generated is enforced by a system of racial subjection having both institutional and individual means of reproduction at its disposal; and (3) through which new instabilities and contradictions emerge at a subsequent historical point and challenge the pre-existing system once more.77

Substitute "sexuality" for "race" in the above quote, and its relevance to the present discussion would be apparent. It is important to note, however, that Omi and Winant also intend "subjection" to be understood in the dual sense discussed earlier: both the creation of political subjects, and their simultaneous subjection to structural and ideological controls. For as Omi and Winant point out in their evaluation of the black movement:

Probably the greatest triumph of the movement was not its legislative accomplishments or even the extent of its mass mobilization. The social movement for racial equality had its greatest success in its ability to create new racial "subjects," in its ability to redefine the meaning of racial identity, and consequently, of race itself, in American society.98

Similarly, the creation of a positive identity, and the simultaneous redefinition of legitimate sexual and affectional possibilities, is the overriding accomplishment of the lesbian and gay movements to date.

Beyond the issue of determination, a second requirement for the reinvigoration of constructionism is a better understanding of the "collectivization of subjectivity." We must be able to speak of sexually based group identities without assuming either that the group has some mystical or biological unity, or that the "group" doesn't exist and that its "members" are indulging in a dangerous mystification. "Ethnicity" is a metaphor; but the relationships that it entails can come to be internalized as a fundamental part of the self. To the extent that this is consciously recognized—to the extent that "ethnicity" can be seen as both strategy and reality—
then the dangers of it being misunderstood in a rigidly essentialist sense become greatly reduced. Furthermore, this sense of what it means to be part of a distinctive community can rescue us from investing “difference” with moral implications. Rather than reifying difference into a defensive separatism or dissolving it into a false vision of homogeneity, we need to acquire an appreciation for difference as harmless, perhaps synergistic.

A modified constructionist perspective of this sort would address the deficiencies of constructionism that were noted earlier in this paper. Not only would it permit a fuller description of the complex experiences of being homosexual, but it might also permit lesbians and gay men to feel that constructionism described the world and themselves as they experience it, rather than inducing them to flee from constructionism and into the arms of essentialism.

A modified constructionism could also allow theory to play a more helpful role in the analysis of the contemporary political expressions of gays and lesbians. In fact, the preceding analysis of the complexities and ironies of gay identity and ethnicity raises several important political dilemmas. The first of these has to do with the political manifestations of ethnicity. As I indicated, the gay movement’s (and in this case, particularly the gay male movement’s) subscription to the tenets of pluralism—its attempt to simply get its “piece of the pie” by appealing to hegemonic ideologies—raises questions about its potential (or desire) to mount a serious challenge to the structural roots of inequality—whether that be sexual inequality or any other kind. However, we might be better off avoiding facile distinctions between “reformist” and “revolutionary” strategies. As Omi and Winant note, civil-rights movements have an inherently radical dimension:

By asserting that society denied minorities their rights as groups, they challenged the overall legitimacy of a hegemonic social order whose political logic and cultural coherence was based fundamentally in ideologies of competitive individualism.

Moreover, rights movements that are organized around the politics of identity tend, by their nature, to imbue political actors with the capacity to make radical demands that they may not even intend. When the leader of the New York Gay Men’s Chorus proclaims: “We show the straight community that we’re just as normal as they are,” this would seem on the face of it to be a rather
conservative proposition, reminiscent of the accommodationist politics of the 1950s homophile movements. And yet in fact the comparison is inappropriate. When the members of homophile organizations stressed their “normality,” they meant: We’re the same as you, so please stop excluding us. But the sense of the above quote is quite different; it is saying: We’re different from you, and that doesn’t make us any less human. In this sense, it would seem that the modern adherents of identity politics are engaged, willy-nilly, in a process of changing the very bounds of the normal.

Gay “ethnic” politics, therefore, certainly have capacities for moving in a more radical direction. Part of what would be required, however, is a recognition that the freedom from discrimination of homosexual persons is an insufficient goal, if homosexuality as a practice retains its inferior status. The disjuncture that Altman has noted between “homosexuality” and “the homosexual”—whereby the former remains stigmatized while the latter increasingly is awarded civil rights and civil liberties—presents an opportunity, in the short run, and a hurdle to be leaped, in the long run. Overcoming this obstacle would entail the adoption of political methods beyond those appropriate for electoral and established institutional politics.

But part of what may determine the political direction in which gays move is the particular model of minority-group organizing and political consciousness that is employed. Despite the adoption of a goal of civil rights, gay collective identity is at present closer in form to that of the white ethnic groups than to those of racial minorities. Movement away from a political consciousness based on white “ethnicity” and toward a “sexual minority” self-understanding might increase the gay movement’s capacity to pose a more fundamental challenge to the socio-sexual order.

This, however, raises other dilemmas, regarding both the internal composition of the gay movement and its leadership, and the relationship of the gay movement to other social movements. The adoption of a “white ethnic” model, in other words, is not unexpected in a movement dominated by white, middle-class males. An adequate discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this essay; however, it seems clear enough that the gay movement will never be able to forge effective alliances with other
social movements unless it can address the inequalities that plague its internal organization. In this light it is worth noting a peculiar paradox of identity politics: while affirming a distinctive group identity that legitimately differs from the larger society, this form of political expression simultaneously imposes a “totalizing” same-ness within the group: it says, this is who we “really are.” A greater appreciation for internal diversity—on racial, gender, class, and even sexual dimensions—is a prerequisite if the gay movement is to move beyond “ethnic” insularity and join with other progressive causes. The obvious first step in that direction would be improved understandings between lesbians and gay men—and a better articulation of feminist theory with theoretical perspectives on sexuality.

Finally, in considering the political dilemmas confronting lesbians and gays, it is vital to discuss the most serious crisis that the movement has yet faced, namely, AIDS. The “moral panic” surrounding AIDS demonstrates some of the inherent fragility of identity politics. By hardening a notion of group difference, identity politics present a highly visible target. Those social groups who see their understandings of the world as called into question by changing conceptions of sexuality, gender, and morality more broadly defined, have found in the consolidated notion of “gayness” a potent and available symbol upon which they can easily discharge their anxieties—and vent their wrath. And if there is perceived to be such a thing as a “homosexual person,” then it is only a small step to the conclusion that there is such a thing as a “homosexual disease,” itself the peculiar consequence of the “homosexual lifestyle.”

Thus the ideological and practical consequences of a complete solidification of identity into a reified notion of “the gay person” would seem to be quite grave. But to reiterate, this is not an argument for the maintenance of a strict-constructionist pose; for both the “politics of constructionism” and the “politics of essentialism” present legitimating possibilities as well as dangers of delegitimation. The task of melding theory with practice will involve creatively capitalizing on the most effective legitimations of the moment, while still remaining true both to theoretical insights and to the contemporary self-understandings of the women and men who populate the movement.
REFERENCES


5 See, in particular, Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).


other examples could be added. In the bibliography to Coming Out, Weeks identifies the main influences on his thinking as Plummer, McIntosh, and Gagnon and Simon (p., 239); in later essays, he has testified to the importance of Foucault. D’Emilio (p. 41) cites the same cast of characters, with a few additions, such as Jonathan Katz and Estelle Freedman.


14 Gagnon and Simon, Sexual Conduct, p. 19.


18 McIntosh, “Homosexual Role,” p. 182.

19 Ibid., pp. 183–184.

20 The first and most influential of these was Weeks’s study of Britain, Coming Out.

21 Foucault, History of Sexuality.

22 Ibid., p. 43.


27 The most influential of the left Freudians was Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization.


29 Quoted in Pons, Identities, p. 95.
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31 Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality."
33 This is one of the prime arguments made by Altman in *Homosexualization of America*, written a decade after his earlier "liberationist" book.
34 Altman, *Homosexualization of America*, p. 9.
35 Cory, *The Homosexual in America*. It is interesting to note that while the term "minority" is indexed frequently, "identity" does not appear.
38 Altman, *Homosexualization of America*, p. 45.
39 On the dualisms of liberal thought, see Roberto M. Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1975), esp. chapter 5. I want to thank Steve McMahon for pointing out this argument to me.
43 On the politics of the homophile movement, see D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, chapters 5-7; and Escoffier, "Sexual Revolution."
45 Cass, "Homosexual Identity," p. 108
47 Ibid., pp. 918-919.
48 Ibid.
53 Kenneth Plummer, "Homosexual Categories: Some Research Problems

54 Altman, Homosexualization of America, p. 82.


56 In a somewhat different, though clearly related sense, the notion of “straight” identity emerges out of the same historical conjuncture. The idea of a “heterosexual” person is also quite new, and has been created in some sense by its opposite. cf. Omi and Winant’s discussion of the changing conceptions of “white” identity through redefinition of “black” identity: Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “By the Rivers of Babylon: Race in the United States (Part 2),” Socialist Review, no. 72 (November–December 1983), p. 45.


59 Ibid., p. 114.


61 See, for example, Becker, Outsiders.

62 Plummer, “Homosexual Categories,” pp. 66–72. See also the critique of the “stages” in labeling theory, as applied to homosexual identity development, in Murray, Social Theory,” p. 17.


64 I would like to thank Ellyn Kestnbaum for substantially helping me to clarify and rethink the discussion that follows.

65 Ponse, Identities. This much underrated book may be the best symbolic interactionist study of identity and legitimacy; the discussion of methods of biographical reconstruction, drawing on Berger and Luckmann, is particularly excellent. Still, the notion of identity never really sneaks beneath the level of “roles”; Ponse has no conception of the intra-psychic, or of unconscious processes. Also, she focuses almost exclusively on adult life, to the exclusion of childhood.

66 See Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); also Chodorow, “Feminism and Difference,” pp. 54–60. For differences between the object-relations school and the appropriation of Freud by Marcuse that has influenced gay liberation so far, see Chodorow, “Beyond Drive Theory.”


68 Almaguer, “Conceptualizing Sexual Stratification,” p. 27.


70 This point is made by Gleason, “Identifying Identity,” pp. 919–920.
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72 Ibid., p. 47.
73 Donald L. Horowitz, "Ethnic Identity," in Glazer and Moynihan, eds., Ethnicity, pp. 113-114; emphasis added.
74 Glazer and Moynihan, Ethnicity.
76 Parkin, Marxism and Class Theory, pp. 33-34.
78 Glazer and Moynihan, Ethnicity, pp. 9-10; Parkin, Marxism and Class Theory, p. 95.
79 Eisenger, "Ethnicity as a Strategic Option," p. 90. The quote is from Altman, Homosexualization of America, p. 223.
81 Parkin, Marxism and Class Theory, pp. 85-86.
83 Ibid.
84 On this last point, see Manuel Castells, The City and the Grassroots (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), chapter 14.
87 Steinberg, Ethnic Myth, p. 63.
88 Chodorow, "Feminism and Difference," p. 57.
89 Altman, Homosexualization of America, pp. 223-224.
90 D'Emilio, Sexual Politics, p. 248.
91 Ibid.
92 Weeks, Sexuality and Its Discontents, p. 244.
95 And on the other side of the divide are scholars such as John Boswell, who rightly claim the need to develop some sort of middle ground, but continue to conceive of "gay history" in fundamentally essentialist terms. See Boswell, "Revolutions."
97 Omi and Winant, "By the Rivers of Babylon (Part 1)," p. 50. See also their Racial Formation.
98 Omi and Winant, "By the Rivers of Babylon (Part 2)," p. 35; emphasis in the original.
100 Omi and Winant, "By the Rivers of Babylon (Part 2)," p. 53.
101 Altman, Homosexualization of America, p. viii.
103 On sexual intolerance within the gay community, see Rubin, "Thinking Sex."