Sexual Revolution and the Politics of Gay Identity

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The dispersion and reconstitution of the self. That's the whole story.
—Baudelaire

The lesbian and gay movements have achieved a recognized presence in American life. There are open communities of lesbians and gay men in many cities. Community organizations and businesses cater specifically to the needs of the homosexual population. Until recently there was a lesbian and gay caucus in the Democratic Party, and there are lesbian and gay political clubs in most major cities. Openly gay men and lesbians have been elected to city councils, state legislatures, and the United States Congress. These remarkable developments have occurred because the lesbian and gay movements have stressed a politics of identity closely modeled on the politics of ethnic and racial minorities.

The homosexual politics of identity successfully married interest-group politics to a radical reinterpretation of the social definitions of gender and sexuality. The original sense of identity was based on people's shared sexual preferences and on similar encounters with homophobia. The fundamental ambivalence of homosexuals originating in their being raised to be heterosexuals made the discursive process of identity formation central to gay and lesbian politics. The “ethnic model” of homosexual identity emerged when

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lesbians and gay men had accumulated enough political and economic resources to contend with other interest groups.

Recently lesbian and gay male communities may have entered a new period in relation to the homosexual identity developed over the past decade. Both lesbians and gay men have created a network of institutions that reaches outside their shared sexual preferences; these have adopted norms of conduct that guide their members, and they have a small degree of power in American society. Within this context other forms of sexual expression (e.g., bisexuality, s/m, or butch/femme role-playing) have provoked intense and highly politicized debates. Most recently the AIDS crisis in the gay male community has aroused a full-scale re-evaluation of sexual behavior and its relationship to gay identity.

These recent developments have put into question the belief in a fixed homosexual identity that has permanent sexual and political significance. Questioning this belief poses problems of great theoretical and political urgency. Should the lesbian and gay movements abandon the politics of identity? Why are sexual identities political? What historical conditions underlie the emergence of the gay and lesbian movements? Before we can address the political and strategic question of whether or not we must abandon a politics of identity we must address the theoretical and historical issues of why and how sexual identities are politicized.

Transformations of the Sex/Gender System

Since World War II various groups dissatisfied with the social relations of sex and gender have become political subjects and mobilized to reorganize the social relations and norms regulating gender and sexuality. It is not possible to understand this history without reference to the ensemble of discourses, practices, and institutions that structure and regulate the social relations of gender as well as the varieties of sexual behavior. This ensemble of discourses, practices, and institutions—called the sex/gender system by Gayle Rubin—codes biological capacities into the symbolic and social patterns that constitute our lives as gendered and sexual human beings. The sex/gender system embodies forms of domination with their concentrations of power (such as the male-headed nuclear family, urban sexual spaces as “back regions,” or segmented labor markets); normative regulations (such as the sexual
double standard, the heterosexual assumption, or the male breadwinner ethic; and symbolic codes (such as the ideology of romantic love, the Christian conception of marriage, the idea of sexual reproduction as an evolutionary responsibility, or the belief in the sexual innocence of children). Sexual identities are the results of struggles among concrete historical actors (for example, between prostitutes and the state) and shaped by the social relations of the sex/gender system. As forms of subjectivity and agency, sexual identities are in the process of formation at any particular moment. They are not uniquely determined by the economic, political, normative, or symbolic aspects of the sex/gender system. Precisely because the formation of sexual identities is the result of social struggles, the outcomes and meanings of this process are reconstituted at each moment of history. Transformations in the sex/gender system are the result of struggles among historical actors with gender and sexual identities. The historical struggles of politicized sexual identities thereby modify the conditions under which they are formed. The sex/gender system is not an isolated system of institutions and practices; it interacts with the economy and the state as well as with other social ensembles such as those devoted to racial formation, class structure, or generations.

The massive mobilization of civilians and armed services during World War II transformed the American sex/gender system beginning in 1940. This transformation is an immense and contradictory process (very much like the “industrial revolution” as a process of long-term historical change) that should not be understood as a coherent or “progressive” process but as one in which antagonistic movements and ideologies contend for their own visions of possible sexual and gender arrangements. This dynamic process of historical change—with its moments of rupture and periods of stability—is what I mean by “sexual revolution.”

I will chart the postwar sexual revolution through three politically and analytically distinct “moments” (which are not meant to be chronological moments). The first moment was the discovery of a gap between sexual norms and sexual behavior. This discovery was made by Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues. On the basis of this discovery Kinsey formulated a critique of sexual norms. The second moment emerged during the highly contradictory period of postwar prosperity brought on by Keynesian economic policies. This period showed marked reactionary tendencies toward gender
roles (the attempt to keep women in the home), sexuality (violent repression of homosexuals), and an extreme pronatalism (the baby boom). The consumption ethos of the period, however, tended to undermine the repressive measures toward women and sexual minorities. In this period a number of intellectuals developed critiques of sexual repression, i.e., of the power to enforce the norms of gender and sexuality. The works of these intellectuals helped give the sexual revolution political subjects. The third moment appeared with the political emergence of the gay liberation movement in the wake of the women’s movement. The women’s movement emerged from both the decline of the paternalistic family and women’s reaction to sexism in the student movement and the new left. The gay movement followed closely on the emergence of the women’s movement. Building on a gay urban subculture that had existed since World War II, gay people were able to forge a collective sexual culture and thus, to some extent, reinterpret the symbolic significance of sexuality and gender.

Before we can examine these developments in the post–World War II period, however, it is necessary to abandon the Reichian model of sexual revolution so effectively criticized by Michel Foucault in his critique of the “repression hypothesis.” The transformation of the sex/gender system not only involves the elimination of repressive strictures on sexual behavior but also entails a constant reconstitution of new forms of gender and sexuality. Moreover these transformations affect economic and political relations, attitudes, and laws and, in turn, the symbolic and imaginative meanings of gender and sexuality.

Historical and anthropological research has shown that homosexual persons (i.e., people who occupy a social position or role as homosexuals) do not exist in many societies while homosexual behavior is found in virtually every society. Therefore we must make a distinction between homosexual behavior and homosexual identity. This distinction refers to the difference between homosexual activity per se (whether casual or regular) and the social definition of oneself as a homosexual person both emotionally and sexually. Such a distinction is consciously rooted in historical and cross-cultural comparisons between homosexuality in advanced industrial societies and homosexuality in other cultures or time periods. For instance, in ancient Greece, homosexual relationships between older men and younger men were commonly accepted. The relationships were viewed as pedagogic. Within the context
of an erotic relation the older man passed on to the younger man military, intellectual, and political skills. But the older men were also often married and the fathers of children. Neither sexual relation excluded the other. Thus although the societies of ancient Greece recognized homosexual activity for men as a valid form of sexuality, the men involved in these relationships rarely defined themselves as primarily “homosexual.”

Another institutionalized form of homosexuality took place in many American Indian societies. In these societies girls and boys could refuse initiation into their adult gender roles and instead adopt the social role of the other gender. For example, men who dressed and performed the adult female role were known as “berdache” — originally the French term for these Indians. The berdache often married Indian men. Yet the partners in these marriages did not define themselves, nor were they recognized by their societies, as homosexuals, although their marital sex life consisted of homosexual sexual relations.

The theoretical distinction between behavior and identity has been important in histories of homosexuality, and in a number of histories of the gay and lesbian emancipation movements.

**Kinsey and the Liberal Imagination**

The mobilization for World War II profoundly rocked the social relations of gender and sexuality in the United States. Young men and women left the haven of their families and lived for four years among other young people far from parental guidance.

Recognition of sexual revolution dawned slowly after the war. The publication of Alfred Kinsey’s two pathbreaking volumes on human sexuality in 1948 (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*) and 1953 (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*) probably exerted greater influence on modern conceptions of sexuality than any work since Freud’s. Kinsey’s work represented the detailed mapping of a submerged continent known only from the archipelagos of exposed mountaintops. Moral outrage and a great deal of professional hypocrisy greeted the report, but few Americans remained immune to a new awareness of the gap between public attitudes toward sexual behavior and daily sexual activities.

In his critical review of the first volume, the conservative cul-
tural critic Lionel Trilling saw the Kinsey report as a symptomatic failure of the liberal imagination. "The Report has the intention of habituating its readers to sexuality in all its manifestations: it wants to establish as it were, a democratic pluralism of sexuality. . . . That this generosity of mind is much to be admired goes without saying. . . . [But] it goes with a nearly conscious aversion from making intellectual distinctions, almost as if out of the belief that an intellectual distinction must inevitably lead to a social discrimination or exclusion." 9

While many of Kinsey's analyses and assumptions can be criticized, both volumes offer sophisticated and often subtle discussions of many aspects of sexual life. Nevertheless, many intellectuals and readers expressed moral objections to Kinsey's project for its empirical, materialistic, and ostensibly value-free investigation into the subject of human sexuality. Although he never saw it as a moral position, Kinsey's fundamental ethical tenet throughout his work was tolerance; in both volumes he stressed "sympathetic acceptance of people as they are" and repeatedly noted the limits of a person's ability to modify his or her sexual behavior. 10 Kinsey was so struck by the extraordinary extent of individual variation in sexual behavior that he argued that any attempt to establish uniform standards of sexual behavior was both impracticable and unjust. Kinsey supplemented this theme of individual variation by stressing what Paul Robinson has called "our common deviance." 11 He believed that his discovery of the widespread deviation from accepted sexual standards showed that attempts to regulate sexual behavior were doomed to failure and "the only proper sexual policy was no policy at all." 12 As texts Kinsey's studies united a positivistic-empirical investigation of sexual behavior and a moral attitude of tolerance. This harmonization was achieved partly by virtue of Kinsey's radical materialism which led him to measure sexual experience in quantitative terms as orgasms and by tabulating the number of orgasms. This resulted in the demotion of heterosexual intercourse to only one of six possible forms of "sexual outlet" that also included masturbation, nocturnal emission, heterosexual petting, homosexual relations, and intercourse with animals. Kinsey's tolerance was a statistical concept. From this perspective the sole distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals is that the former are sexually attracted to people of the other gender while the latter are attracted to those of the same gender. Wherever Kinsey discusses the religious and moral atti-
tudes that regulate sexual behavior, the behavior is valorized and the norms are characterized as naïve, mystifying, and ideological.

One of the major shortcomings of Kinsey's volumes is the absence of any historical perspective. While the actual collection of Kinsey's statistical material was stretched out over a decade (1938–1947), the analysis in the published volumes collapses any possible diachronic dimension into cross-sections. The historical dimension survives only in the analysis of sexual behavior by age, but even then age as a stage of life cycle is given analytical priority over cohort differences. Kinsey's blindness toward history obscured the political horizon within which the Kinsey volumes were published. While the Kinsey reports were published at the beginning of a second wave of modern "sexual revolution" (a first wave took place in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century—1890–1919), Kinsey's data reflected the sexual behavior of the generations that came to adulthood between 1920 and 1940, a period which evidenced little sexual change.

Kinsey's data did show traces of the earlier wave of "sexual revolution," but these data were not published in either of the two reports. An earlier survey of sexual behavior had already revealed that the proportion of women born between 1890 and 1899 (and therefore reaching maturity between 1910 and 1920) who had pre-marital intercourse had increased by 100 per cent over those born before 1890. While the Kinsey reports did not capture the post-war sexual revolution (partly because they studied the interwar generations and partly because they assumed that sexuality as physiological activity did not have a history), they did come to symbolize it in the popular consciousness and in the history of ideas. For American liberals, the Kinsey reports unified heterogeneous intellectual and political elements. They offered an interpretation of sexual acts that was empirically grounded, embedded in a critique of accepted sexual norms and politically held together by an ethics of tolerance. The Kinsey reports served as the basis of the liberal theory of sexual liberation (all orgasms were equally valid!)

Kinsey's findings on homosexuality were among the most controversial and widely publicized. His volume on male sexuality concluded that 37 per cent of the male population of the United States had had at least one homosexual experience to orgasm between adolescence and old age. The data also seemed to suggest
that many adults were neither permanently nor exclusively homosexual or heterosexual but evidenced a fluid continuum of sexual behavior. Kinsey measured this fluidity along the "Kinsey scale" of hetero- to homosexual behavior and fantasy which ranged from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) through 6 (exclusively homosexual). While Kinsey's findings clearly encouraged him to reject homosexuality as a pathological syndrome, the range and fluidity of many Americans' sexual behavior also led him to reject the idea of a sexual identity; he believed that there were no homosexual persons, only homosexual acts.

Kinsey's emphasis on acts and the number of orgasms ideologically closed off his analysis from its political and historical meaning. If his synchronic analysis of sexual outlets obscured the emergence of "sexual revolution," his ontology of acts obscured the emergence of political subjects—such as youth, women, and homosexuals—who would make the postwar sexual revolution. While the Kinseyan paradigm had an enormous emancipatory impact on American society (another major contribution was its recognition of female sexuality), its positivistic methodology and even its "liberal" presupposition of tolerance had the effect of suppressing the significance of gay cultural developments in the early fifties.

Homosexuals themselves were divided over the significance of the emerging sense of "group consciousness." The Mattachine Society, founded in Los Angeles in 1951, marked the beginning of an unbroken history of homosexual emancipation movements in the United States. Many of the founders of the Mattachine Society had extensive political experience before they turned their energies to organizing among homosexuals. Most of the founders' earlier political experience had been in the Communist Party or on the left. The parallels between the experience of Communist Party members and homosexuals in the late forties and early fifties led the early leaders of the Mattachine to model their new organization on the Communist Party, emphasizing secrecy, centralized leadership, and a hierarchy of "cells." Marxist analysis also helped the early leaders of Mattachine develop a political analysis of homosexual oppression that emphasized its "socially determined pattern." From their early group discussions, these Mattachine members concluded that homosexuals were an oppressed cultural minority. They believed the rigid definitions of gender behavior led men and women to accept unquestioningly social
roles which equated “male, masculine, man only with husband and Father...and which [equated] female, feminine, women only with wife and Mother.” Thus for these early homosexual emancipationists, homosexual women and men were victimized by a “language and culture that did not admit the existence of a Homosexual Minority.” For those activists homosexuals constituted “a social minority imprisoned within a dominant culture” and largely they were “a minority unaware.”

Although this analysis seemed consistent with the experience of many gay women and men at the time as well as with subsequent history, other homosexuals in the Mattachine Society argued that the cultural and social characteristics of gay life were the results of ostracism and oppression itself. And against the “cultural minority” thesis these critics often adopted the Kinseyan argument that homosexuals and heterosexuals differed only in their sexual preferences.

Each line of argument conceptualized the homosexual self differently and each implied alternative political strategies. The cultural-minority thesis argued that homosexuals had developed differently because they had been excluded from dominant heterosexual culture. The “secondary socialization” of homosexuals into a distinct subculture helped them to develop appropriate new values, relationships, and cultural forms because homosexual life “did not fit the patterns of heterosexual love, marriage, children, etc. upon which the dominant culture rests.” While the proponents of the cultural-minority thesis recognized that homosexuals also internalized the dominant culture’s view of themselves as aberrant and were often forced by social stigma to lead lives of secrecy, hypocrisy, and emotional stress, they emphasized the need for a critique of this internalized self-oppression and the development of “an ethical homosexual culture.”

The alternative “assimilationist” position sought to open the way to acceptance of homosexuals by emphasizing the similarities between homosexuals and heterosexuals. Because the “secondary socialization” of homosexuals resulted from a life given over to hiding, isolation, and internalized self-hatred, homosexuals should adopt a “pattern of behavior that is acceptable to society in general and compatible with [the] recognized institutions...of home, church and state,” rather than creating an “ethical homosexual culture,” which would only accentuate the perceived differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals and provoke continued hos-
tility. The "cultural minority" analysis was hotly debated in the early years of the Mattachine Society but after many battles, marked also by anti-communism, the assimilationist thesis prevailed and served as the ideological basis for the homosexual rights movement during the fifties and sixties.

Thus throughout the fifties and sixties the Kinseyan paradigm permeated the political discourses of sexual emancipation. We find its marks on homosexual politics, on popular conceptions of female sexuality, on the sociological analysis of the premarital sexual activities of young men and women, and on the "philosophy" of Playboy magazine. The Kinsey paradigm validated sexual activity (lots of orgasms) and criticized the normative regulation of sexual behavior. But the Kinseyan approach offered no theory of sexual coding (i.e., the symbolic and cultural significance of sexual acts). Not only did it therefore ignore the mundane importance of "romantic love" but it also played down the social construction of sexuality and the role of subcultures and secondary socialization in an individual's sexual development. In a corresponding fashion the assimilation position of the Mattachine Society suffered from blindness to the possible significance of sexual culture. This made it not only difficult to conceive of homosexuals as political subjects but also impossible to imagine the gay subculture as a community that had resources to mobilize and could organize politically.

The Kinsey reports' lack of a historical perspective on sexuality also made it difficult to interpret the radical transformation of the sex/gender system that in the wake of World War II began to modify the everyday significance of family life, gender roles, and sexual behavior. Both the cultural-minority thesis and the assimilation argument also suffered from their lack of historical perspective. While the cultural minority thesis could easily have accommodated an account of the historical development of a homosexual minority, it did not find the ideological space to do so. The assimilationist perspective implied a history of sexual oppression (since no difference "really" existed between homosexuals and heterosexuals, history alone could explain the peculiar reasons and means heterosexuals had for repressing homosexuality), but such a history was not articulated. Both kinds of history would have been useful but neither developed during the late fifties and early sixties.
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Both the liberal imagination and the homophile movement (as the homosexual emancipation movement of that time called itself in order to play down the “sexual”) conceptualized sexual emancipation as a critique of ideological and unrealistic sexual norms in favor of people's actual sexual behavior. Neither perspective emphasized the family as a form of dominance nor criticized sexual repression for its impact on the culture and institutions of American society. A critique of sexual repression in American society eventually emerged from a left analysis of the economic role of sexual repression.

The Sexual Contradictions of Keynesianism

All through the war years most economists, politicians, and the general public had no doubt that the most important postwar economic and political problem was that of providing full employment. Many people feared a return to the grim economic realities of the thirties. Among policy-makers other postwar economic and social policies were subordinated to the goal of full employment. In addition the labor movement also pushed hard for full-employment legislation.

Even if the weakened version of the Employment Act that eventually passed in 1946 only established the principle of the federal government maintaining “maximum employment, production and purchasing power,” additional legislation bolstered the rather vague guidelines of the act, creating unemployment compensation, minimum-wage legislation, and old-age and survivor insurance. If the 1946 Employment Act provided the Keynesian rationale in the postwar period, the military budget supplied the bulk of federal spending that sustained high levels of aggregate demand throughout the fifties and sixties.

Through a series of important pieces of labor legislation (the Wagner Act of 1935, the Social Security Act of 1935 and the postwar Taft-Hartley and McCarran acts), the Employment Act became the centerpiece of postwar capital-labor relations. In conjunction with the restrictive immigration legislation of the 1920s and the decline of the United States birth rate through the 1920s and 1930s, the Employment Act helped to alter the historical relations between labor demand and labor supply. Consequently the high level of aggregate demand and the tight labor markets of the
1940s and 1950s provided the economic resources that helped spur on the postwar baby boom.\textsuperscript{23}

Through these long-term modifications in labor relations and macroeconomic policy, the Keynesian-welfare state exercised a considerable impact on the relations of autonomy and dependence (of men, women, and children) within the family. Other aspects of the immediate postwar economic situation also helped to destabilize relations within the family. The effect of reconversion (toward a peacetime economy) on the labor market led to a temporary drop in the labor-force participation of women. By January 1946, four million fewer women were in the labor force than at the 1944 wartime employment peak, while at the same time total civilian employment increased from 52.8 million to 57.8 million as soldiers were released from the armed services and civilian workers (mostly women) were laid off from wartime jobs.\textsuperscript{24}

Throughout the immediate postwar period there was a concerted effort to re-establish "traditional values." The male-headed family had not only been disrupted by the war but the "male breadwinner role" had already been severely undermined by the depression.\textsuperscript{25} The social upheavals, the unprecedented migration and breakup of families, and the entry of women into the industrial labor force during the war years were counteracted in the postwar period with a barrage of publicity. For instance, many sociologists argued that if women continued to work, children would be neglected and the home would be endangered. They argued for restoring the paternalistic family.\textsuperscript{26} The postwar ideological campaigns that portrayed women's place in the home, and postwar federal economic policies as well as private industry's personnel policies, were all intended to revitalize the male-headed nuclear family and re-establish the pre-depression relations of autonomy and dependence in the family.

During the depression the high level of male unemployment and the economic difficulties experienced by most households had begun to alter the relations of autonomy and dependence within the family. Many married women and children entered the labor market in order to compensate for the decline of the male breadwinner's earnings.\textsuperscript{27} Children took on adult responsibilities at an early age. Girls were drawn into the domestic management of the household, while boys were forced to take on breadwinning responsibilities. Following on this the war experience offered un-
precedent personal autonomy and economic independence to the generation reared in the thirties. Because of this many men and women found it difficult to return to more traditional gender roles when the war ended. Many married women re-entered the labor force soon after the demobilization was complete. By 1952 some 10.4 million wives held jobs—two million more than at the height of World War II. Substantial numbers of these women were the middle-aged wives who first found it respectable to be employed outside the home during the war.

A significant development in heterosexual behavior during the postwar period was the baby boom. It temporarily reversed the steady decline in marital fertility rates that had been going on since 1800. The baby boom resulted from a higher proportion of women who were born in the 1920s and 1930s marrying, marrying at earlier ages, and having children more quickly. The extended postwar prosperity may have had a lot to do with encouraging marriage and childbearing by its implicit promise of an economic future that differed considerably from the childhood experience of most people during the thirties. This period also saw unprecedented attention paid to sexual pleasure in marriage, while the National Fertility Studies of 1965 and 1970 revealed a great deal of unwanted fertility in the 1950s. The postwar ideological and attitudinal shifts towards home, family, and children also were affected by the process of suburbanization, which established new communities on the fringes of large cities from which husbands made a long commute in to work while community life centered on the activities of children and mothers.

These demographic trends merge with certain political developments that surfaced in the period immediately after the war (1945-1955). For example, the pronatalism and the attempted restoration of the “patriarchal” family also coincided with the postwar “moral panic” about the “homosexual menace” and the “sexual offender.” Throughout the period, many states and cities launched campaigns to control sexual psychopaths and “deviants.” The McCarthy witchhunts focused on homosexuals in government employment as “security risks” and morally-politically suspect.

The Keynesian prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s created a double bind for the postwar family. The baby boom household—with the exploding cost of raising children and its members’ rising con-
sumer expectations—eventually rendered the family wage (based on the earnings of the male breadwinner) insufficient to attain the new postwar standard of living without a supplemental income. While a wife’s earnings were usually below even her own subsistence level, nevertheless they were high enough to affect the family’s standard of living. This Keynesian double bind is what Daniel Bell has called the “cultural contradictions of capitalism”—the tension between work, accumulation, and production as ends in themselves and work as a means to consumption and hedonistic gratification.

As married women increasingly entered the labor force, gender roles within the family were under pressure to change. Thus women’s labor-force participation has continued to undermine the male-dominated family in the postwar sex/gender system. This type of family’s normative regulations—“the breadwinner ethic” and “woman’s place is in the home”—have had less and less relevance to most people’s behavior. Wage and job discrimination against women and single men as well as the segmented labor market do perpetuate some of the economic imbalances in power and resources. But the steady increase in individuals living outside family households has fueled a host of cultural revolts and urban subcultures since the late fifties.

Throughout this period (1950–1964) there were frequent skirmishes against the norms of gender and sex by men. Even with the economic support of Keynesian full-employment policies, many men resisted the strenuous burden of the primary breadwinner, as Barbara Ehrenreich has recently shown in her book The Hearts of Men. Failure to sustain the breadwinner role implied immaturity and was considered symptomatic of latent homosexuality or mother-fixation. These minor revolts ranged from “the Gray Flannel dissidents” and the Beat generation to the readers of Playboy magazine. The male rebellions of the fifties took place within the context of the attempted revival of male-dominated sex/gender arrangements. Men’s resentments were often directed against the women and children for whom a man had to commit himself to a boring and unsatisfactory job, while female resentments were often displaced onto their fellow prisoners in the home, their children.

Moreover, as the fifties wore on, postwar affluence did not allay these frustrations and anxieties. Many workers were dissatisfied with the meaninglessness of their work and their feelings of power-
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lessness to affect the course of production. Family responsibilities also bore heavily on many male workers, while increasingly many wives went to work in order to maintain the family standard of living. Increasingly the problems of labor and the discontents of workers received public attention.\(^{37}\)

By 1960 three books had been published which became extremely influential in the sixties: Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959), and Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1960). While substantial differences exist among these authors, all three articulated a critique of what Marcuse called the "performance principle" in the name of erotic and sensual gratification. All three examined the consequences of the social repression of "instinctual" erotic needs. Although each work explored different aspects, they all questioned the organization of work (particularly Goodman and Marcuse) and the role of family in the repression of sexual desire. In recognition of American society's display of economic abundance, Marcuse claimed that there was "surplus repression," i.e., repression above the minimum necessary for society to function. Marcuse and Goodman also identified possible sources of political and historical change; in other words, they named political subjects.

Marcuse saw the "perversions" as the champions of the pleasure principle; they upheld sexuality as an end in itself. He claimed that "they thus place themselves outside the domination of the performance principle and challenge its very foundation."\(^{38}\) He gave "narcissism" and "homosexuality" as examples of revolutionary sexualities which resisted the restriction of eros to procreative sexuality. Both Marcuse and Brown championed "polymorphous perversity," a sexuality not narrowly focused on any specific object or activity.

Paul Goodman's argument rested on a more orthodox Reichian foundation. In an essay published right after the war he had argued that "the repression of infantile and adolescent sexuality is the direct cause of submissiveness of the people to present political rule of whatever kind."\(^{39}\) Thus in *Growing Up Absurd* he identified youth as the political subject who must rebel against meaningless work and sensual repression.

In some form or another, all three writers managed to capture the tangled web of sexuality and economics that marked the fifties.
All assumed the possibility of economic abundance as a necessary condition for eliminating any "surplus repression." All criticized the repressive expectations of work life and family life, the tight linking of procreation and work and the denial of pleasure in work and sexuality.

In identifying the homosexual as a champion of pleasure and eros, Marcuse named one of the moral bogeymen of the fifties as a figure of liberation. But both Brown and Marcuse resisted identification of sex with Kinsey's notion of outlets—that is orgasm. They both criticized the "tyranny of the orgasm" as a form of repressed sexuality. Instead they argued for the primeval innocence of polymorphous perversity. And Goodman argued that youth was the group most likely to break the stranglehold of repression. And indeed it was this postwar generation who really made the sexual revolution in all its aspects.

While the radical critique of sexual repression may have encouraged politically conscious youth to effectively challenge the norms of sexual and gender behavior, the affluence and the consumption ethic of "permissive" Keynesianism probably had a larger impact by undermining the disciplinary effect of the breadwinner ethic on the cohesiveness of the paternalistic family. But the radical critique did offer a more effective basis for sexual politics than the Kinsey critique, which restricted itself merely to a critique of sexual norms. Neither a critique of norms nor a critique of repression, however, could help change the symbolic significance of sex. For that we need to turn to a third "moment"—the creation of a collective sexual culture.

The Sex/Gender Code

While the Kinsey reports helped homosexuals recognize that a large number of Americans had had homosexual experiences, recognizing the gap between sexual norms and behavior did not provide an adequate ideological basis for mobilizing the homosexual population. The quantitative empiricism of the Kinsey perspective excluded a vigorous conception of the homosexual identity. The behavioral continuum of the Kinsey scale created uncertainty about the validity of a collective subjectivity that primarily seemed to be a response to social stigma. The contemporary sense of "homosexual identity" did not first appear in the period after 1945; it had been in process of elaboration at least since the end of
the nineteenth century. In the United States the theoretical problem of homosexual persons was first posed as a problem in medical discourse.\textsuperscript{40}

Nineteenth-century physicians were puzzled by a broad range of deviant gender behavior, such as expressions of lust by women, dressing in clothes of the other gender (i.e., some women chose to dress as men in order to work and travel), women who could "whistle admirably," men who "never smoked and never married [and were] entirely adverse to outdoor games," and women who drank, smoked, and were very independent in their ways.\textsuperscript{41} The term "sexual inversion" was applied to a whole spectrum of gender-role reversals only one of which was the sexual desire for someone of the same gender. Inverts were men and women who did not conform to accepted norms of gender behavior. But the theory of sexual inversion was not able to explain the traditionally "feminine" partners of female inverts or the "masculine" partners of male inverts. Thus, increasingly physicians began to distinguish homosexual desire (or sexual perversion in nineteenth-century terms) from gender-role nonconformity (or inversion).

Once homosexual desire became analytically distinct from gender behavior physicians attempted to explain homosexuality by arguing that homosexuals were in fact hermaphrodites—incorporating the biological traits of both genders. While medical research in this period often claimed to find evidence of hermaphroditism (i.e., lesbians with large clitorises or male homosexuals with feminine bodily characteristics), concepts of somatic hermaphroditism gave way to psychic hermaphroditism in which a person had the anatomical characteristics of his or her own gender but the "soul" of the other gender.

The need to clarify these issues was important to homosexual intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Karl Ulrichs, a German writer who first envisioned a homosexual emancipation movement in the 1860s, represented the male homosexual as a "woman's spirit in a man's body."\textsuperscript{42} In the early twentieth century, political homosexuals Magnus Hirschfield and Edward Carpenter proposed a version of this, characterizing homosexuals as an "intermediate sex," which incorporates psychological qualities of both males and females.\textsuperscript{43}

In all these theories homosexuality is explained in relation to the biological or behavioral definitions of gender. This remained the
case up until the late 1960s. The psychoanalytic tradition and especially the work of Irving Bieber continued to rely on the assumption that there is a necessary relationship between the development of masculinity and femininity and heterosexuality or homosexuality.44

UNDERLYING ALL THESE attempts to formulate theories of homosexuality whether by physicians or homosexuals themselves is a deeply held "code" that has historically shaped our interpretation of the sex/gender system. In a pathbreaking formulation, Barbara Ponse has called this master code "the principle of consistency."45 The principle of consistency ideologically links social roles of the sex/gender system into what Gagnon and Simon have called "the gender identity—sexual identity—family formation—reproduction pattern."

The principle of consistency ideologically links genetic assignment (i.e., whether a person has XX or XY chromosomes) to anatomy (there are in fact syndromes where this link does not hold) to a gender identity which is usually based on the gender assignment at birth.46 Gender identity is the privately held awareness of oneself as male or female. The principle of consistency then projects the gender role as a function of gender identity. Gender role is learned behavior, and while usually related to one's genetic assignment and gender identity, is not necessarily determined by them, i.e., in reality to be born female does not guarantee femininity; women are not biologically nurturant. For the next step in the principle of consistency's coding of the sex/gender system, gender roles imply sexual object choice. The principle of consistency assumes that one's gender role determines the gender of those one finds sexually attractive. The principle of consistency ideologically ties all these elements together and portrays them as "natural."

The principle of consistency as a master code for interpreting the sex/gender system expains why any reversal or "inversion" of one element suggests that the other elements must be consistently inverted as well. A woman who wears men's clothes (or indeed chooses to pass as a man) must be a man either biologically or psychologically ("a man's spirit in a female body") and also a lesbian.

In recent years, the emergence of lesbian and gay identities has led to modifications in some versions of the principle of consis-
tency. Ponse herself includes sexual identity (whether a person is homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual) as an element, and this can be further elaborated by adding sexual role which allows for active/passive, top/bottom, butch/ femme. But these amendments already imply a weaker interpretation of the principle in which the rigid categorization of sex/gender behavior into male/female/heterosexual no longer holds with the force of earlier interpretations.

If the principle of consistency ideologically holds together the ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions of the sex/gender system, then the emergence of the homosexual as a subject and particularly as a political subject can only take place on the basis of reinterpreting the meaning of sexuality and gender. Otherwise, as long as homosexuals remain within the discourses of “consistency,” most aspects of homosexual life will be interpreted and treated as anomalous and unnatural.

Cultural Politics in the City of Night

HOW POWERFUL is the principle of consistency as an interpretative scheme in our culture? Everyday social interactions are shaped by the principle in the form of the heterosexual assumption. This is the common presumption made by most people that everyone is heterosexual. While the assumption has been weakened in certain cities with large homosexual populations and in certain occupational or cultural milieus, most social interactions are still governed by it. In the years before the rebirth of the gay movement in 1969, the heterosexual assumption was reinforced by the social stigma attached to homosexuality. Together the heterosexual assumption and the stigma against homosexuality forced most lesbians and gay men to keep their homosexual feelings or activities secret. The force of stigma and the heterosexual assumption established the political horizon for all homosexual acts—they were physical and symbolic acts at the same time.

In the period after the end of World War II, most homosexuals were in the closet. Most of them sought to “pass” as heterosexual in public settings such as the workplace or even within their families. Nevertheless, a vigorous underground subculture emerged in cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. The urban homosexual subculture was created by
the routine activities of women and men in search of sexual partners. Unlike ethnic or racial subcultures, the homosexual subculture was not transmitted and shared by families. Most women and men with homosexual desires had been raised in heterosexual families that reared them with the expectation that they would adopt heterosexual roles in adult life. Thus homosexuals often adopted and shared those heterosexual expectations and social values for many years of their lives. But outside of lucky accidents (which are often important in crystallizing one's sexual desires), most homosexual women or men had to go outside their social circles to seek out partners who shared their sexual desires. How was this possible when there were no public or explicit avowals of homosexuality? When there were no publicly acknowledged social spaces where lesbians or gay men could meet each other? When the heterosexual assumption or the stigma on homosexuality enforced silence, invisibility, and hostility?

Special tactics devised by lesbians and gay men were necessary in order to identify sexual partners. The tactics originated in the need to coordinate sexual activities without much explicit discussion. In a study of oppositional social practices in everyday life, Michel de Certeau has emphasized that “tactics” are ways of using imposed cultural systems to achieve one’s own desires. They introduce alternative or heterogeneous meanings into the dominant cultural system. Tactics are an art of the weak; they make use of cracks in the system. Like wit, tactics require the seizing of opportunities, or timing.48

Communication with a desired partner (but of unknown sexual preference) requires great “tact” and must use the language of innuendo, well-placed pauses, carefully worded jokes, or ambiguous expression. For example, in John Rechy’s novel City of Night, the narrator is propositioned on his first night in New York City at a YMCA by another resident:

“They dont call this Y the French Embassy for nothing,” the merchant marine laughs. He has sized me up slyly: broke and green in the big city—and he said: “You wouldnt believe if youd been at Mary’s last night—thatts a place in the Village and everything goes.” He watches me evenly for some reaction, determining, Im sure, how far he can go how quickly. “So I spot this cute kid there”—Hes still studying me carefully, and when I dont say anything, he continues with more assurance: “So I spot him and I want him—yeah sure Im queer—whatya expect?” he challenges. He pauses
longer this time, watching me still calculatingly. He goes on: “And the kid’s looking for maybe a pad to flop in and breakfast—hes not queer himself. I dont like em queer: If I did Id go with a woman—why fuck around with substitutes? . . . So this kid goes with me—Im feeling Good, just off the ship flush—I lay 50 bucks on him.”

Rechy’s account captures the ambiguities: “a place in the Village and everything goes”; the well-placed pauses and innuendos like “So I spot this cute kid. . . .” He doesn’t say anything about the kid’s gender, somehow it’s understood but not yet explicit until after the pause he continues, “So I spot him and I want him” and then after a momentary pause “Yeah, sure Im queer, whatya expect.”

The tactical uses of language were central to the lesbian and gay experience of the forties, fifties, and sixties. But sexual coordination problems often required “tactical” elaborations on a larger scale. Sacha Lewis quotes from one such account:

When I was in high school I didn’t even know the word lesbian, much less how to be one. I just knew I wanted to be with women. I wanted to go steady, date and have a woman to share intimate sexual feelings with. So I looked very carefully at how the boys in school got girls to date, go steady, neck and the rest. What I saw was that boys had short hair. What I saw was that boys wore shirts and pants. And what I saw at the time was that the most desirable boys were into leather jackets and chains and these huge silver rings that were kind of like brass knuckles—a real ’40’s thing. “Okay,” I said, “that must be how you get girls.” So that’s what I did. . . . I must have looked pretty funny, but it [was a] very serious thing with me at the time because it worked. There were other girls who were gay and I guess I was so obvious that they had an easy time following me.”

This woman’s solution to the problem of satisfying her homosexual desires was to reinterpret the principle of consistency. She wanted to attract women, so she modeled herself on males. Thus she created a code that communicated a desire to establish sexual relations with women by adopting male role behavior. By adopting that tactic she became “obvious,” thus attracting other women with homosexual preferences who chose to maintain their female role behavior. The woman in this anecdote became a “butch.” Others chose to relate to a butch lesbian in the traditional female role; these women were called “femme.” Butch/femme roles were
common (though certainly not universal) in the lesbian culture of the 1950s.

Because butch/femme roles appeared to be imitations of heterosexual roles, they were later denigrated in the early days of lesbian feminism. But butch/femme roles reinterpreted male/female roles and because both roles were adopted by women, they were in fact different. Butch/femme dynamics became what John Gagnon and William Simon have called a “sexual script.” Butch and femme lesbians elaborated a mutually shared interpretative scheme that orchestrated their desires with a person of the preferred gender and integrated their biological capacities for arousal, climax, and resolution into sexually significant events. Joan Nestle saw her butch/femme relationships as “complex erotic statements.” Butch women were “tabooed women who were willing to identify their passion for other women by wearing clothes that symbolized the taking of responsibility. Part of this responsibility was sexual expertise. In the 1950s this courage to feel comfortable with arousing another woman became a political act.”

Butch and femme lesbian roles involved neither a repudiation of gender role nor an exaltation of it. For example, while the lesbian butch may have adopted masculine behavior for its “initiatory” or “managerial” qualities, her primary preoccupation in sex was to please the femme rather than macho behavior of pleasing oneself first. Both roles allowed women to play with and to extend the range of possible behavior within a firm personal sense of female gender identity.

There was similar playfulness among gay men on the gender “inversion” theme, in gay slang called “camping it up.” Camping involved men adopting feminine mannerisms and playing on the male homosexual’s “incongruous” behavior as a man having sex with another man. Camp was built on the assumption that gender behavior is a role, something that can be adopted, changed, or dropped. It was a style of humor that allowed homosexuals to laugh at their situation rather than despair over it. Camp as an aesthetic philosophy received public recognition in Susan Sontag’s famous essay “Notes on Camp,” published in Partisan Review in 1964. Sontag acknowledged its roots in the homosexual community—“The peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality has to be explained. While it’s not true that Camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap.
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But homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard—and most articulate audience—of Camp." But she ignored that camp grew out of the gay culture’s process of recoding the sexual significance of the dominant definitions of gender and of the principle of consistency. Thus although the camp sensibility, like butch/femme, cannot be attributed to all gay men and lesbians, it offered a counter-hegemonic challenge to the sex/gender system. Both butch/femme role-playing and the camp sensibility were reinter-pretations of the relationship of sexual preference and sexual behavior to gender. Thus, homosexuals drove a wedge between gender and sexuality by their wit and role-playing. The everyday sexual practices, the butch/femme role-playing, and the camp sensibility significantly modified the symbolic meaning of the dominant culture’s notions of gender/sex for lesbians and gay men. Camp was the ideology of the homosexual subculture in the 1950s which promulgated the view of gender roles as performances with a sense of bitter irony.

In a predominantly hostile world, one way that homosexuals limited their vulnerability was to keep their social and sexual transactions as invisible as possible. Many homosexuals joined highly closeted social circles in the hope of meeting other homosexuals in a relatively safe social setting. The homosexual stigma kept homosexual social spaces in “back regions” hidden from public view, but therefore vulnerable to illegal intrusions like criminal activity (many cities had and have Mafia-controlled bars) and police brutality and corruption (gay sexual activity often “hides” in red-light districts). Nevertheless, homosexuals (more often male, because public space has been traditionally dominated by men) established physical and social spaces within urban areas—bars, hotel lobbies, Y’s, bathhouses, street corners, men’s rooms, and gyms. They appropriated space from its uses by the dominant culture (gay bars often evolved from bohemian or artists’ bars) by introducing heterogeneous practices (e.g., certain men’s rooms become sites of sexual activities). Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s urban police departments all over the United States attempted to close gay bars and other homosexual meetingplaces. While these drives severely disrupted the lives of homosexuals, they provoked political responses over and over again.

These developments in gay life since the end of World War II—the increasingly elaborate cultural expressions, the proliferation of
gay spaces, and the numerous, if minor, political mobilizations—created a sense of social identity. Almost all gay life required role-playing; that is, playing a straight man or woman to many people, which gay cultural expressions such as camp generalized into a fundamental challenge to the notions of gender, sexual preference, and sexual identity as natural.

The Search for a Gay Identity

In the United States, the debate between the homosexual assimilationist perspective and the cultural-minority thesis resurfaced in the mid-sixties. An important contribution to this debate both here and in Britain was made in 1968 by Mary McIntosh, a lesbian sociologist long active on the British left. She wrote her seminal article “The Homosexual Role” as a direct response to the narrowly civil-libertarian approach of the homophile movement in England. Her article helped to revive the debate that had taken place during the 1950s in the Mattachine Society between the assimilation approach and the cultural-minority thesis. McIntosh argued that the homosexual role did not simply describe a “sexual behavior pattern” but a whole pattern of feelings, expectations, and strategies that emerged in response to the stigmatized labeling of homosexuals as pathological outcasts. McIntosh’s analysis of the distinction between sexual behavior and role or “identity” (as later theorists have called it) was amplified by her historical account of the development of the homosexual role in England.

Only one year later, hustlers, drag queens, and gay-bar patrons fought against police when they raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Several days of demonstrations followed. Established homosexual leaders from the Mattachine Society of New York and the lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis responded cautiously. Mattachine leaders still held that “demonstrations which define the homosexual as a unique minority defeat the very cause for which the homosexual strives—to be an integral part of society.” A new group, modeled on new-left organizations, was founded—the Gay Liberation Front. Many of its members had been participants in the anti-war movement and the counterculture. But GLF leaders broke with the “old line” homosexuals.

The explosion of gay liberation (as the wave of homosexual emancipation that emerged after the 1969 Stonewall riots is called)
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was produced by a clash of two cultures and two generations—the homosexual subculture of the fifties and sixties and the new-left counterculture of 1960s youth. Ideologically, the camp of the fifties and early sixties had served as a strategy of containment; it balanced its scorn for the principle of consistency with a bitter consciousness of oppression in a framework that offered no vision of historical change (like the Kinseyan paradigm). The gay liberationists, who rarely had much appreciation for traditional gay life, proposed a radical cultural revolution. Instead of protecting the right to privacy, gay-liberation radicals insisted on “coming out”—the public disclosure of one’s homosexuality—which then became the centerpiece of gay political strategy. For the gay movement coming out was what Gramsci called a “catharsis” which occurs when a “structure ceases to be an external force which causes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethno-political form and a source of new initiatives.” Coming “out of the closet” (originally a phrase of gay slang) was to do the very thing most feared in the gay culture of the fifties and early sixties.

The most sophisticated theoretical elaboration of the new gay politics was made by Dennis Altman in his book Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation, published in 1971. The process of “coming out” is at the center of his analysis. A frequently difficult and painful process, it is both a personal and a political one. The process could involve years of coming to terms with the specific cultural or religious beliefs that stigmatize homosexual behavior. The gay liberation movement gave a political meaning to this by extending the psychological-personal process into public life by encouraging lesbians and gay men to publicly acknowledge their homosexuality. Coming out thus became praxis. Altman interpreted this extended process of coming out as a search for identity, an already existing identity, not one to be self-consciously or politically constructed.

Altman linked his analysis of the gay search for identity to the views of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown that sexual liberation involved “a resurrection of our original impulse to take enjoyment from the total body” and that with liberation homosexuality and heterosexuality would cease to be viewed as separate sexualities.
Like Marcuse and Brown, Altman analyzed the repression of polymorphous perversity by the removal of the erotic from all areas of life and the denial of our inherent bisexuality by the polarization of gender roles. He went on to argue, "How far sexual freedom can be conceived without coming to grips with the basic features of our society is a key ideological concern of both the women's and gay movements. Yet there is a sense in which we should be suspicious of attempts to deny the centrality of sexuality in any discussion of liberation." 68

In his synthesis Altman attempted to bridge the "old line" gay culture of the fifties and sixties and the countercultural gay movement of the late sixties and early seventies.69 The gay identity of the fifties and sixties would be politicized through coming out. But Altman situated both the "old" gay culture and the "new" gay identity within the framework of the utopian sexual theory of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown. In his concluding chapter, "The End of the Homosexual?" Altman saw gay liberation as "part of a much wider movement that is challenging the basic cultural norms of our advanced industrial, capitalist, and bureaucratic individual consciousness and new identities and life styles. He concluded that "one hopes that the answer lies in the creation of a new human for whom such distinctions no longer are necessary for the establishment of identity. The creation of this new human demands the acceptance of new definitions of man- and womanhood such as are being urged by gay and women's liberation." 70

While many gay activists shared Altman's utopian sexual hopes, their political activities crystallized a strategy of encouraging and supporting the decision to come out. The focus on coming out created an altogether new type of gay politics. The public announcement of one's homosexuality became a signal act of self-acceptance, and as vast numbers of homosexuals felt encouraged to emerge from their closets the movement grew until it achieved a political impact that the homophile movement never attained.

Coming out achieved two important effects. First was the creation of a network of formal institutions serving a range of previously unsatisfied needs—religious, educational, political, recreational, professional; the publication of newspapers and periodicals, social service institutions (e.g., counseling services) and mutual-aid societies. Second, the mobilization of those who came out and
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the availability of community institutions helped to create a well-defined public identity for homosexuals.

Visibility was the precondition for the establishment of lesbian and gay communities that resembled the urban neighborhoods of the immigrant groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Visible homosexuals created gay residential neighborhoods, political groups that influenced elections, and gay-owned or -serving businesses that thrived. Many homosexuals left their communities, their families, and jobs and careers that conflicted with their being openly gay, and migrated to those cities with visible lesbian and gay communities.

In the mid-seventies among gay intellectuals, particularly those who had been active in the anti-war movement and the new left, there was a movement to explore the “gay experience” in a way modeled on black intellectuals’ recovery of black culture and history in order to reclaim the historical and cultural experience of homosexuals. In addition, gay historians soon discovered the sources of homosexual emancipation on the political left. Many lesbians and gay men had only a vague awareness that a homophile movement had existed before the 1969 Stonewall riots, and most were completely surprised to discover that homosexual emancipation movements had antedated World War II.

Probably the most important book to explore the American gay experience was Gay American History by Jonathan Katz. Published in 1975, this documentary history of homosexuality in the United States included material from 1528 through to the mid-seventies. Katz’s definition of homosexuals was framed by the cathartic experience of the gay movement in the early seventies. In his introduction, Katz wrote that “we were a people perceived out of time and out of place—socially unsituated, without a history... That time is over. The people of the shadows have seen the light; Gay People are coming out—and moving on—to organized action against an oppressive society.”

But Katz’s pioneering work also unintentionally undermined the definition of homosexual identity that the movement had assumed. The section on “Native Americans/Gay Americans” showed homosexual behavior embedded in societies that had institutionalized social relations for men and women who wished to trade gender roles. While homosexuality followed from trading
gender roles, the sexual partner who had not traded gender roles was not stigmatized or labeled. Katz also categorized some passionate male-male or female-female relations as homosexual which may not have had any homoerotic component at all—for instance a passionate correspondence between Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens. The long history of coding homosexual feelings as "friendship" makes Katz's decision to include such material plausible but not necessarily always valid. Katz's research also unearthed an important new category of deviants—women who chose to pass as men in order to work for good wages or to travel. No doubt some of these were lesbians but certainly many were not. In his Gay American History, Katz had intended to offer the history of homosexuals, but instead rediscovered the history of gender non-conformity and of homosexual behavior. Katz was torn between a history of homosexuals as a distinct and fixed minority and the radical historicism that "all homosexuality is situational."

Finally a history of the homosexual identity was articulated by a group of activists and historians associated with a British journal called Gay Left (1975–1980). Among this group, Jeffrey Weeks explored the implications of Mary McIntosh's 1968 essay on the "homosexual role" in a series of essays and in his history of homosexual politics in Britain, Coming Out. The Gay Left approach combined symbolic interactionism with Marxist analysis. Jeffrey Weeks, Kenneth Plummer, and other gay left historians identified the specific social and economic conditions that permitted the growth of a homosexual subculture and its psychological-political outgrowth—the modern lesbian and gay-male identity. They saw sexual identity as the result of a historical process, not a natural process. John D'Emilio, in a theoretical essay, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," and in his history of the pre-Stonewall gay movement, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, has also contributed to this tradition of analysis.

This search for a theory of gay identity originated among gay left intellectuals. Starting out from an "ethnic model" of history which assumed an already existing identity or social group, they discovered that homosexuals were historically constructed subjects. Both for these leftists, as well as for many other lesbian and gay activists, the theory of a lesbian or gay identity is believed to be a description of reality and a normative basis for politics.

The lesbian and gay movements certify—politically and socially—
the existence of the homosexual identity. The lesbian and gay contribution to the transformation of the sex/gender system was to split sexual object preference from gender, and by challenging the heterosexual assumption, legitimate the social construction of sexual identity. These developments seriously weakened the grip of the principle of consistency.

Identity and Transgression: A Conclusion

LESBIAN AND GAY IDENTITIES emerged from the political mobilization of a subculture which has started to recode the sexual significance of gender and sexual preference. Today the existence of large visible communities of lesbians and gay men has helped to institutionalize homosexual identities. The extension of the principle of consistency to include “sexual identity” is an uneasy form of incorporation of homosexuality into the principle of consistency. But its incorporation has seriously weakened the symbolic significance of the “natural” relationship between gender identity, family formation, and reproduction that the principle of consistency signifies.

The cumulative modifications in the American postwar sex/gender system—the increased independence of adolescent youth from parental control, the growing equality of women, and the political emergence of homosexuals—have threatened the beliefs and privileges of many Americans who, for religious or other reasons, are committed to traditional family patterns. The new right as a political movement has mobilized the resentments generated by the postwar transformation of the sex/gender system. The political mobilization of women and homosexuals during the seventies has threatened the economic and social status of the lower middle class and white Christian working class. Thus the new right is the most recent political subject to emerge from the turmoil of the sexual revolution.75 But the new right is attempting to restore the principle of consistency as a natural law. Conservative critics of gay rights have argued that “the case for homosexuality is a vulgarization of a philosophical anarchism which denies the existence of nature,” which also denies the “overwhelmingly obvious fact that human bodies are better designed for heterosexual intercourse than homosexual.”76 But the principle of consistency as symbolic order or master code works only as long as it is taken for granted. The political mobilization of the new right can only
succeed in defending a particular sex/gender subculture. It cannot restore the heterosexual and paternalistic family form to its position of dominance.

The sex/gender arrangements that held in American society in 1940 have been radically modified—by the mobilization of World War II; by the contradictory postwar demands for family discipline and mass consumption; and by the series of grassroots political mobilizations by youth, women, and the new right. Each of these mobilizations has, like the gay movement, created a particular form of political subjectivity. And each form of political identity is vulnerable to recodings due to shifts in age, social context, and political developments. In the early stages of creating a collective subjectivity, politically mobilized homosexuals (or women, for example) adopted norms and codes of conduct that served as “recipes for an appropriate attitude regarding the self.” 77 These norms, often articulated in opposition to homophobia, provided a platform for politics and social criticism. But they also addressed the personal distress and thematized the experience of humiliation that homosexuals had suffered. Thus the personal became the political. While the initial political mobilization drew on these feelings of oppression, the political distance that the lesbian and gay communities had been able to go was fueled by the process by which an individual lesbian or gay man modified her or his behavior and feelings according to these “recipes for being.” The mobilization of homosexuals as collective subjects emphasized our shared experiences of oppression. It therefore was a militant affirmation of all that is the same among us.*

But every form of political subjectivity is only a relay that gets us from one point to another. The affirmation of the shared experience within any group soon encounters limits and differences. Everyone’s identity exists at the nexus of a web of opposing, contradictory, or merely different group affiliations and personal

* The breakdown of the sex/gender system organized along the principle of consistency into a plurality of autonomous practices and identities around age, gender, sexuality, and form of family suggests the rise of a new sex/gender code which could be called the combinatorial principle—in which the social relations of gender and sex will be more fluid. Thus distinct sexualities would emerge based on permutations of the “elements” (not necessarily immutable elements) of the sex/gender system—for example butch heterosexual women and femme heterosexual men. The combinatorial principle of the sex/gender system would offer an ideological framework for these permutations of diverse components of sexualities and genders.
commitments. In gay politics not only has the affirmation of shared experience resulted in the consolidation of homosexual differentness, but in the lesbian and gay-male communities' drive for affirmation differences have emerged among the members of both communities that cannot be eradicated. Political action eventually provokes internal conflict or splits political movements along the most significant social fault lines of a historical period—such as class, religion, race, or generation. But not even an individual's identity is ever completely harmonious or unified with itself. This is the transgressive experience through which we discover the limits of our membership, our real heterogeneity. Thus the politics of identity must also be a politics of difference. The politics of identity is a totalizing drive that attempts to universalize its norms and conduct; the politics of difference affirms limited, partial being. Thus the emergence of intense and controversial differences about sexuality within the lesbian and gay-male communities. New forms of sexual politics are emerging throughout American society.

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3 Anthony Giddens' analysis specifies these three dimensions (domination, normative regulation, and coding) as aspects of social reproduction. See


Ibid.


D’Emilio, Sexual Politics, pp. 57-91.

The quotations from and material about the Mattachine Society are from ibid., pp. 65, 77-91.


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41 Ibid., p. 120.
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66 Altman, Homosexual, pp. 13-41.
67 Ibid., p. 98.
68 Ibid., p. 94.
69 Ibid., pp. 108-151.
70 Ibid., pp. 234, 237.