The homonorm versus « the constructionist controversy » revival: The « gay identity » under crisis
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Introduction
Whatever models and laws they are based on, same-sex partnerships or marriages are a new step further in the process of making homosexuals, or at least homosexual couples, « more normal » in fact, lesbians and gays aim to incorporate in their social life values which used to be strictly heterosexual values: the legalized couple and, no doubt shortly, parenthood (at least in Northern European countries).

From a sociological point of view, this normalization process results more from the progressive and partial transformations of the deviant status of homosexuality, than from a radical shift in the normative organization of sexualities and gender in western societies. Focusing on gay men, my recent research on the « figure of the queen » illustrates these transformations but also points out to some resistance to the gay mainstream civil rights agenda, on the part of minority groups or individuals, self-identified as queers or radical queens and lesbians (Le Talec, 2003 a).

Not surprisingly, these marginal voices raise questions and critics which were the gist of the « constructionist controversy », some twenty years ago (Stein, 1992). At that time, the « Gay community model » was under attack for being organized by and for « white, middle class, gay men », i.e. for being based on cultural, class and gender domination. Today’s queer activists and radical queens use a similar pattern of critics, like feminist lesbians did in the past, and still do (Bourcier, 2000 ; Chetcuti et Michard, 2003).

The « figure of the queen »
The « figure of the queen » used to be the enforced representation of male homosexuality within the normative organization of sexuality and gender in modern western societies. This figure associates homosexuality and effeminacy, producing a double deviance on sexuality and gender.

According to Michel Foucault, a link between social deviance and madness emerged in Europe as soon as the 17th century (Foucault, 1961). Throughout the 18th century, the police and legal medicine produced a derogatory and effeminate representation of men involved in same-sex practices as criminals and social outlaws.

The birth of the concept of « homosexual », in 1870, emphasized this background and strengthened the « figure of the queen », especially through theories like Westphal’s « opposite sexual feeling » or Hirschfeld’s « third sex » (Foucault, 1976).

Psychiatrists took over the debate and when Charcot and Magnan described sexual inversion in 1882, they diagnosed a case of « masculine hysteria », still linking and blending sexuality and gender in their study (Rosario, 1996).

As psychiatry favoured a neurological disorder (innate, natural) mixed with social factors (acquired, cultural), Freud suggested an abnormal development of the personality, which should not be considered as a mental disorder. Nevertheless, most of the psychiatric and psychoanalytic discourses during the 20th century have strengthened the « figure of the queen », associating homosexuality with gender disorder as a global sociopathology,
leading in 1952 to the inclusion of homosexuality as a mental illness in the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. This last step fully inforced the « figure of the queen » as a stigmatized stereotype (Bérubé, 1990; Éribon, 2001).

**Queens and camp**

Although homosexuality has been perceived and described as an abnormality and a mental and social disorder, gay men still had to manage to live their lives at the best. Most of them were closeted, and some possibly open, mostly within their peer networks of friends; only a few privileged or marginal people could be notoriously out.

Against this social background of secrecy, camp has played a key role as the subculture of queens. On the one hand, camp performs the effeminate stereotype, meaning being flamboyant, using feminine nicknames, going out in full drag and so on. On the other hand, as Esther Newton and George Chauncey put it, camp is at the same time a mode of relation to society, a specific language and a way of life (Newton, 1979; Chauncey, 1994).

But camp is also a way to resist domination and many authors have also highlighted the cultural role of gay insiders, for example in Hollywood and the cinema industry, from the 30’s: using camp as a style, they tried to fight back the absolute reign of normalcy and morality set up by the Hays Code (Bergman, 1993; Cleto, 1999; Tinkom, 2002).

**Transformations**

After World War II, the homophile movement, the Gay Liberation and the emergence of structured and visible gay communities triggered successive transformations in western societies.

Starting from the enforced « figure of the queen » as a baseline and a labelled or « spoiled » identity, it slowly moved on to a self-defined gay identity (Altman, 1993). Through this process of appropriation, the double stigma of sexuality and gender has been either hidden, or reclaimed, or normalized. Along with these transformations, camp has sometimes been used as a subversive strategy to overcome social norms and values.

Thus, for example, the homophile movement in the 50’s moderately reclaimed the stigma of homosexuality, arguing in favour of a social role for homosexuals, but still hid the gender stigma (effeminacy, camp and queenness). In the French movement Arcadie, queenness was not at all welcomed and was still perceived as abnormal and harmful to an ideal of discretion and respectability (Sideris, 2000).

Emerging during the Sixties along with other social movements such as the feminist one, the Gay Liberation Movement reclaimed the sexual stigma altogether with the gender stigma. Using camp as a political happening, radical queens and other genderfuckers led the Gay Revolution in the early Seventies. But the following reformist movement set up a new standard, the Clone, based on a reclaimed homosexuality (and sexuality freedom) and the over-affirmation of virility, which might be seen somehow as campy as full drag. (Levine, 1992).

From the early Eighties, the AIDS fighting movement itself underwent such transformations, with a first wave which was moderately gay-identified (partly due to political reasons) followed by a much more affirmative one some years later and, for example, Act Up used camp as a strategy and a political weapon (Crimp and Rolston, 1990).

More recently, queer activists have stressed the importance of gender relations, still using camp subculture as a strategy. On the other hand, the queer theory has explored gender performativity and questioned the very concepts of categories, identities and norms (Butler, 1999).

But, during the 90’s, despite this queer theoretical breakthrough, the mainstream gay and lesbian agenda stayed definitely focused on discriminations based on sexual identity, and on Civil Rights equality: marriage or same-sex partnership were, and still are, claim number one everywhere in western countries. Interestingly enough, AIDS has been the
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What’s happening today?
The « figure of the queen » was historically enforced to ensure the supremacy of heterosexuality and the gender hierarchy in western societies. Based on a double stigma and the idea of abnormality (innate as well as acquired), this figure may also be used as a model to understand the sociological dynamic of gay identity and culture. According to the results of recent researches, gay men are still influenced in many ways by this « figure of the queen » model, mostly because it remains the main basis for, and most visible effect of homophobia. The successive transformations of this figure are cumulative, by which I mean that different theoretical approaches can be mixed in order to produce an infinite number of self-defined gay identity patterns. One individual may refer to the « mental illness stigma », and/or to an « essential gay character », and/or to a pro-feminist position, and/or to a queer perspective, etc. (Le Talec, 2003 a).

Three modes of social relations can be identified for today’s gay men:
- one based on mainstream hetero-normative standards, to be used in everyday life, work, etc.; this mode is to be « closeted », or gender-normalized and asexual, according to the level of local « tolerance » to visible homosexuality;
- one based on camp and queerness, as a subcultural language, to be used within peer networks, private situations, community based groups;
- one based on the exhibition of virility, to be almost obligatorily used in the context of sexual encounters, within the « sexual network » (Bozon, 2001).

These last two modes function as a « gender switch »: gay men may well enjoy a chat together with campy mannerism in a bar, but as soon as they enter a darkroom, they must behave as « real men ». The long-lasting sexual stereotype of the queen, based on a « feminine » attitude and a (sexual) passivity, is still perceived negatively and avoided, whatever sexual practices the partners actually choose to engage in.

Nonetheless, research results also indicate that a strong majority of gay men are favourable to, or willing to engage in, couple life and parenthood (Le Talec, 2003 b). These mainly heterosexual values are now part of an emerging « homonorm ». This ongoing process has produced opposition from gay or lesbian individuals, possibly belonging to minority groups, such as radical queens, queer activists and even barebackers, who criticize the « normativity » of this new gay model, based on an imitation of heterosexuality and an ethnicity/class/gender supremacy – white middle class supposedly sero-negative gay male as a consumerist standard (Le Talec, 2003 a).

These current oppositions towards homonormativity can be compared to a previous debate, known as « the constructionist controversy », which was opened in the early Eighties by « non-male non-white » gays and lesbians, but was interrupted by the emerging AIDS crisis. In the present so-called « post-AIDS era », this controversy could be revived through new arguments, inspired by queer theory and lead to the re-emergence of a radically transformed « figure of the queen » as a reclaimed identity and a subversive strategy.

What may be different today is the evolution of sexual and gender identities. Even if gender relations are still strongly rooted in western culture, masculinity is less strictly defined. Recently, advertising and marketing specialists have targeted a new category of young urban upper-middle-class straight men, defined as « metrosexuals », and very close to the homo-normative image of gay men. This convergence creates a new and trendy profile based on common social values, including marriage or partnership, in which sexual choice and practices become strictly private and in which lifestyle replaces sexual politics (Adam, 2001).

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Consequently, the « figure of the queen » could only remain a derogatory labelling of abnormality or social disorder only for those among gay people who do not share these common normative values, namely sexual outlaws, transgenders, and any other campy activists...

Conclusion
Whatever happens, from a sociological perspective, gay identity is under crisis (according the definition of Claude Dubar, 2001), and it is interesting to analyse the tensions about the alternative futures of « normalization » or « dissolution of identity » or the re-creation of various forms of « subversion ».

To conclude and summarize, the legalisation of same-sex partnership or marriage at least raises questions, which have been already debated some twenty years ago in the gay and lesbian community:

The first one is about signification: What does homosexuality exactly mean, from a historical and sociological point of view? What are the parts of essence and construction expressed through its understanding?

The second one is about social norms: Does homosexual visibility - through marriage or legalized partnership - change heterosexual norms in any way at all? Does it change gender relations? Are we dealing with an emerging new model or just « extended heterosexual values » adapted to the inclusion of lesbians and gays?

The third one is about categories: Through marriage or partnership, are gays and lesbians entering a new category or « profile », which would be more acceptable in western societies? And what about those who do not fit in (culturally or economically) or do not want to fit in (politically or sexually)? Are they going to be looked at as modern deviants, belonging to a new category of abnormality?

On this last open question, I just want to mention the campaign against « public sex » (multi-partners sex, outdoor sex, commercial sex…) which took place in the US and was sustained within the gay and lesbian community by the very advocates of homosexual marriage (Warner, 2001). And I also want to mention, in France, the strong campaign against barebackers, accused by other gays of being either criminal, mentally disturbed, or unresponsible persons… Which they are not, or at least no more than any other person who would engage in risky sexual behavior (Le Talec, 2003 b).

References


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Same-sex couples, same-sex partnerships, and homosexual marriages
A Focus on cross-national differentials