Feminism's aftermath: gender today

One of the most remarkable phenomena of recent (Western) history has been feminism's rise and fall. Certainly a fall has been much publicised. In 1998 Time magazine ran a cover story: 'Is Feminism Dead?' which concentrated more on Ally McBeal and the Spice Girls than on Gloria Steinem or Betty Friedan (founders of American feminism), and which obviously thought (hoped?) the answer was 'Yes'. For Time the anti-feminist backlash was sweeping all before it. Yet 'fall' is harsh, since the feminism that emerged so startlingly in the late sixties and early seventies and which, for so many women seemed to change everything, did indeed change if not everything, then at least a great deal. And it is not as though its work is done, as women such as Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf, lashing against the backlash, tirelessly remind us (see Faludi 1992 and 1999; Wolf 1991 and 1997).

In the West women are not subordinated and discriminated against to the degree that they once were. The once widely accepted notion that a 'woman's place is in the home' has been relegated to the political fringe. Most nations have legalised abortion and provide maternity leave. Child care provision is commonplace. Young women often claim to feel more or less as empowered as young men (remember 'girl power'?). Women are, formally at least, equal participants in the education system, in most workplaces and in, say, the dance/rocksy scene (as they were not in the hippie or even punk movements). The media no longer treats women's sexuality as if it were simply passive and private. Dating practices give more agency to women. Sanctions against sexual harassment have become routine. Women's contribution to the cultural heritage has been retrieved from profound neglect, and in particular a whole canon of
women's writing has been returned to literature's memory. Gender is now a core category for social and cultural analysis in a way it was never previously.

On the other hand, positivists of real authority are still dominated by men who monopolize the most senior positions in most institutions. In the home the gender division of labour continues so that, for instance, women still cook more meals than men, men still do the yard work, women take on household chores where both work. Women continue to bear the brunt of child rearing. In the world of sport, women have taken giant strides but men still crowd them out as commercial attraction. In show business, women's careers are shorter and if they are young they are under continual pressure to present themselves in hyper-sexualised styles. In fact commercial culture and marketing is more pleathered with images of hot babes than it was before the feminist movement began. (Ironically feminism seems to have helped further to [hetero] sexualize the culture in this way.) Divorced women struggle economically in ways their male ex-partners do not. And of course beyond a certain strata of Western society, women are still second class citizens and even more so in the non-European world. Feminism has made little headway. Even in affluent countries with a long-standing women's movement, such as Japan, gender relations remain remarkably stable and unequal. In many of the poorest countries as well as under Islam, harsh forms of patriarchy continue (see Buckingham 1997, Narayan 1997).

Given all this, it is surprising that feminism as a movement has all but withered. Feminism is no longer cool. Most young women routinely declare themselves not to be feminists, irritating many of their mother's generation who fought so hard to secure the rights and possibilities that helped make this rejection possible, and who know their work is not complete. The tension between feminism's accomplishments and its current public neglect is often covertly expressed in popular culture. Take the career of an actress such as Julia Roberts, currently Hollywood's biggest woman box-office draw. In the movie Pretty Woman she plays a woman character who is empowered and tinged by feminism but who is also contained by pre-feminist images and values. And in Erin Brockovich her role hangs on a working-class woman's struggle to obtain some job satisfaction and a strategic sexualising of her body to get what she wants. But these themes are treated as if no gender-based political movement - to whom they are key - exists.

The reasons for feminism's withering are various: as we shall see, the movement tore itself apart through internal debates. Its own relative success de-energized it - indeed, logically speaking, one outcome of the movement's utter success would be its redundancy. It was outflanked by less mainstream identity politics, including multiculturalism and the queer movement. It was a victim of popular culture which routinely regarded it as an enemy, reducing it to a bunch of stereotypes. Perhaps, too, feminism brought new stress to bear, particularly on middle-class women among whom its impact has been greatest; namely, the demand that they have careers in an environment where careers are more and more demanding and insecure. Women are having babies later, and increasingly not at all, not simply because that is their choice but because to do otherwise would be to invite real, everyday life pressure. And this is a situation exacerbated by feminism's loss of ideological clout, since these stresses are caused primarily by continuing gender inequalities in the distribution of domestic labour.

Finally the politics of feminism led to strange places, especially when it came to sexuality. In this context, the importance of the Monica Lewinsky case (which had global repercussions) can barely be exaggerated. A majority of women inclined to feminism found themselves taking the side of a president who was on several levels responsible for the parent and women's rights but who was also a sexual predator, if not a rapist. In Australia, the 'Ormond College Affair' became a big news story when a prominent one-time feminist, novelist Helen Garner, defended a university administrator who had harassed students in his care on the grounds that his punishment (dismissal from his prestigious post and permanent ban from the campus) did not fit the crime (getting drunk at a student ball and attempting to grope a group of young women.) And it seemed that many women of Garner's generation, who had been through the liberation movement, agreed. In such cases, it seemed to many as if sexual realities and the feminist ethic clashed in ways that could lead to miscegenation of parties.

In this situation one way we might begin to restore a sense of feminism's importance is through an overview of its longer history, that is, its causes and motivations.

Feminism's past

Although traditional, pre-industrial societies are routinely thought of as 'patriarchal', that is as dominated by men, it seems that modernising capitalism, if anything, has intensified women's subordination, especially among the middle class. Outside capitalism, aristocratic women could acquire considerable independence and power, and even under industrialisation working-class women often worked outside the family. Not so middle-class women - they were exposed to new forms of submission. So it is not surprising that it was a middle-class woman who presented the first modern feminist arguments. During the early years of the Industrial Revolution and inspired by the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft applied an Enlightenment account of human nature and Enlightenment principles of justice and equity to gender divisions. Her primary targets were the kind of femininity that reduced women's rationality: the emphasis on sexual attractiveness, on 'sensibility' (something like modern sentimentalism), and on meaningless tasks and domestic chores.

Her book, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), quickly became notorious but had little immediate impact. It was addressed to a society in which patriarchy - thought of simply as men's domination over women - was almost inevitable, albeit uneven. Invisible and unequal? In the country, working men and women had different...
roles but they also shared tasks, including heavy outdoor labour. Workplace and home were not usually separated, which drew men and women together into familial productive units. But with urbanisation and the spread of wage labour, things changed. By and large, it was men who sold their labour into offices and factories, and women who were required to carry out the tasks back home that sustained the household. Where women did work for wages, they were excluded from the more skilled jobs. There were, however, regional and industry variations in this process: jobs such as coal mining were entirely male whereas weaving in the factories was largely carried out by women, with men often employed on their wages. This helped to politicise some women workers. Thus – to use a phrase from eighteenth-century Lancashire, where the weaving industry was concentrated, women were well organised industrially, and at the turn of the eighteenth century became active in the suffragist movement which politicised women's demands for the first time (Maney 1994).

By the 1820s and 30s, working-class women who worked for wages, and who acquired the status and power of breadwinners, were under sustained attack from social managers and theorists. The main reason for this was not mere prejudice, although sexism played its part: men and women were seen to be in competition for wages, and middle-class and ruling-class men took the side of working men against women. Middle-class women's worldly goods normally belonged to their husbands. There can be no doubt either that the Victorian home – the woman's sphere – was often maintained as much by male violence. No women were permitted to vote. They were prevented from joining the professions (save teaching) or from going to university. Bourgeois women were educated 'in accomplishments', singing, piano-playing, drawing, flower-arranging, maybe a little French and Italian. ..designed to increase their appeal as spouses. Few had any classical or scientific education. (This was one of Woolf's most heartfelt complaints.)

In more general terms, the will to harder gender divisions between work and domesticity belonged to the women who counted (as he wrote on the late eighteenth century, and which attempted first to restrict public drunkenness, prostitution and gambling, and second, to improve hygiene and individuals' sense of civil participation and responsibility. This movement had its basis in Protestant churches, where women were often relatively empowered. And of course many public spaces had long been barred for women, who courted insult and violence on the streets unless accompanied by men. The argument was that ordered domestic environments, each under the subordinated control of a wife and mother, were the most effective seedbeds for a reformed society. In sum, for almost a century the new industrial and professional workplaces, male solidarity and violence, along with the ideology of civil reform, marginalised the kind of feminisms that Woolf contested (Caine 1997).

Sixty years after Woolstoncraft, in the late nineteenth century, the 'woman question' re-emerged, with renewed efforts to award women the vote and to allow them access to divorce and to the higher education system, but thence to the professional workforce. But perhaps the most significant contribution to what is sometimes called 'second-wave' feminism, was Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (1927), an innovative polemic very different from Woolf's earlier Bloomsbury elitism. Here culture and society are seen to be divided between men and women, in such a way as to impede women's libera-
tion. Woolf contends that men have continually written and talked about women but that their occasional idealisation of them merely masks women's actual subordination. In the end, hers is a materialist argument: women do not have freedom of expression because they do not have access to property, which has been monopolised by men. For women to participate productively in culture they need access and money - a 'room of one's own'.

If this were to happen cultural values and imagery would be revolutionised. Furthermore, for Woolf, male-dominated culture is saturated in values and styles with which women feel uncomfortable. It represses the basic humanity of human nature, an ambiguity which functions in women's interests as both an ideological and, more conservatively, as a lost totality (Mulhern 2000).

The depression of the thirties, World War II and the immediate post-war 'reconstruc-
tion' period put the feminist agenda on hold, but in the late sixties it re-emerged as the women's liberation movement. Influenced by the social theory of the time, it attached three new elements to the old demands for more participation by women in the economy, the workforce, the education system and the formal political system.

The first was a critique of representation: women, so the claim went, were dismissed by being represented, especially in the commercialised public sphere, as primarily sexual objects for the male gaze. More than that, 'femininity' and the femi-
nine ideal were ideological constructs, circulated within patriarchy, which now came to mean not a particular social structure associated with pre-modernity but the cultural formation within which men remained dominant and which prevented women from being who they wanted to be. In the movement of 'social reproduction' it was first separated from 'sex'. Women, so the argument went, were biologically different from men, that is to say they were of a different sex, but that didn't commit them to a particu-
lar way of being feminine, to a particular gender. To put this slightly differently: sex is a biological structure, gender a social and ideological one, and there is no natural rela-
tion between the fact that women bear children, for instance, by virtue of their sex, and the insistence that they are, say, supposed to be relatively demure in public and have a particular role in the private/domestic sphere by virtue of their gender.

Nonetheless many women had internalised their femininity under capitalist patri-
archy, so that 'consciousness raising' (which in this context meant a learning about the history of female subordination, acquiring basic skills of ideology critique and under-
standing how history and women's image today affected you personally) became a key tool of early 'third-wave' feminisms in undoing the power of conventional gender roles (as they now began to be called). Consciousness raising, which quickly became a media
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joke, was in fact an important moment in the early history of a cultural studies approach to the contemporary world: an engaged analysis of current cultural forms, designed to change both you and the world.

The third innovation of third-wave feminism was a rethinking of the public/private division. One problem with Woolf's 'room of one's own' approach and its ethic of retreat and autonomy was that it did not sufficiently contexualise what the sixties was seen to be a central strut in women's subordination: the gendering of the division between the public and the private, through which women were restricted to the private realm. As Carol Pateman put it, the dichotomy between the private and the public 'is, ultimately when the feminist movement is all about' (Pateman 1989, 135).

That kind of thinking, in which the domestication of women was open to contestation, led (especially when tied to consciousness-raising) to the famous aphorism, 'the personal is political.' That phrase was to become a central strut of identity politics as a whole.

As we have already noted, feminism fell apart at least in part because it split into various schools. This is not surprising since its programme pointed in a number of different directions. Most importantly it was split between, on the one hand, the objectives of Wolfson's earlier feminism - the attainment of equality between men and women, which concentrated primarily on questions of social and political access and participation - and, on the other, the implications of new identity politics by which women asserted their difference from men, and which focussed on cultural expression and personal self-fashioning.

The second split within feminism concerned sexuality itself. The issue can be put this way: to what degree was heterosexuality itself part of the problem? To what degree was feminism a politics of sexual desire? And more concretely, was moving beyond heterosexual norms the answer to the universalising of the male gaze, the sexualising objectification of women's bodies and women's entrapment in passive, privatised, hetero-versions of femininity? Anti-heterosexual politics, in its weak form, would attempt to downgrade sexuality's role in women's lives (in a move which seemed to repeat old Puritanism) and in its radical form, would insist upon the political efficacy of same-sex sexuality between women. But of course many women could not accept either of these programmes.

The third split, closely linked to both the above, was in relation to feminism. Did feminists need to reject conventional feminism or could they inhabit and enjoy it? At issue, then, was whether or not the problem of sex - in relation to pornography: an issue where pro-sex feminism looks most fragile, yet over which it has basically won out, if at some cost to the movement's coherence.

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The question now is what does feminism want? Feminism's early forms had clear visions: equality of rights and opportunities; an end to the dominance of the male gaze; the unfoldong of a woman's culture on its own terms. The rights and opportunities agenda is (albeit slowly) being met, and the claim that women's culture is a different culture has been transformed since the advent of feminism, although not in ways that the early feminists would have foreseen or for the most part approved. But what now?

One of the problems in answering this question is that, as post-structuralists have long suggested, 'women' is too large a grouping to be analytically useful, and this becomes even more obvious as globalisation proceeds. Women of different races, places and classes live under different conditions; and it is impossible to generalise across these. While it is obviously true that women share a body that menstruates, is capable of bearing children, goes through menopause and (in the case of heterosexuality) draws them sexually towards men, it is no less true that white, middle-class, white, American/European women, for instance, are closer culturally and economically to their male equivalents than they are to poor, South Asian, peasant women. Across cultures, ethnicities and classes, solidarity between women, which is the foundation of a feminist politics, has something of a strained and abstract character unless it
5 The psychoanalytic analysis of female pleasure and psychic structurations: here woman is conceived to be 'other' to masculinity, and, hence, not under control of patriarchal ideology. Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalytic and Feminism* (1975) pioneered this mode of feminism.

6 The reclamation of women's genes - melodrama, soap opera, weepies, romance - as indirectly acknowledging women's oppression, or at any rate as expressing women's fantasies and emotions as oppressed subjects. This was probably the moment at which women's studies and cultural studies intersected most specifically.

Feminist post-structuralist anti-essentialism (aka French Feminism): the argument that the category of 'woman' is not a natural or essential one and that it is important to resist using it as if it were, even in resistance to patriarchy, since to do that only fixes the identity more firmly. This argument, which was put forward in various forms by thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, cannot, by its very nature, ground a movement based on identity. So it leads to the queer movement that theorised a politics of sexuality outside of essentialism. Retrospectively at least it can be seen as a moment in the dissolution of women's studies proper (Oliver 2000).

The broadening out from women's studies to gender studies. The women's liberation movement had successfully decoupled sex from gender and one of the least anticipated consequences of this was that it became possible to devote considerable analytic and critical attention to masculinity as a gender as well as to think more carefully about the processes of identification through which individuals became gendered. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) was particularly important to this. Butler theorised gender not so much as a social position externally imposed by ideology or as able simply to be chosen, but as found and improvised in embodied social action by individuals and mediated through sexual desires which were not themselves simply biological.

**Masculinity**

As I stated above, masculinity appeared as a topic of academic analysis from within the logic that transformed women studies into gender studies. But the next step was for it to form a field of its own - masculinity studies. Within masculinity studies, the white body has been particularly important, not just because the academic movement has been predominantly Western (more so even than feminism), but because white masculinity has been so hegemonic as to constitute a universal norm. Although women's liberation has been primarily a first-world movement, feminism does have a global reach and women's issues are firmly on the agenda of many international NGOs, human rights agencies and so on. This is much less the case for masculinity. As a very rough indication of this, googling 'third world feminism' results in almost 2,000

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1 The analysis of women's docility and its contemporary conceptual underpinnings. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) remains the classic of this moment.

2 The attack on widely distributed images of conventional femininity which were produced for men from men's point of view, and the simultaneous de-stigmatisation of unattractive or otherwise negative images of women as seen from that point of view. Robin Morgan's anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) helped popularise both this and the following movement.

3 The critical analysis of patriarchal ideology as an overarching symbolic structure through which identities are granted to both men and women and in which social norms are organised in the interest of maintaining male domination. Key to this move was the insistence on the sex/gender distinction.

4 The development of Marxist feminism which regarded the modern subordination of women as a function of capitalist social relations, and concentrated on women's material inequities and struggles, especially in the workplace, rather than on issues such as femininity. Juliet Mitchell's *Women's Estate* (1971) was an important contribution to this form of feminism.
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him, whereas 'third world' masculinity results in only one. Let's hope this situation changes; certainly there is a lot of work to do. But it does mean that to work it out the history and specificity of the white male body has an immediate political energy.

Historically body has been relatively invisible, as if the power attached to whiteness and maleness would be as critical as the actual flesh to be presented as public. Characteristically, up until the sixties (and despite the popular 'physical culture' movement which stressed fitness and masculinity from the early 1800s), white men normally appeared in publicly clothed. It was young women and men of colour who could be presented dressed more nude. Even male clothing has been relatively unsexualised (but is, not presented to attracted-actual attention).

The growing of male attire happiness in a process known by hillarists of fashion as the 'great revolution', which began in England in the 1820s when modern stove crested and the dark sport began its career as a uniform for middle-class men. This marked the effective end of the aristocratic display of power and prestige through male clothing, and the emergence of a de-individualized style of dress which signalled and performed an extended franchise of power: the power not of families and individuals but of a gendered collective, that is, of men. It also represented the aesthetic ethics of wage, restraint and carelessness associated with the Puritan tradition and then with professionalism, both being tied to a gender regime in which men increasingly were required to control their emotions, especially their spontaneous feelings of suffering and empathy. The late eighteenth-century man of feeling who cried when he saw animals and children in pain, in the next century became the efficient and composed professional. Or he became the competitive participant in the public world, selling upon his masculine toughness to jockey for success in the cruel marketplace, and trained into that role at school and on the sports field (Miller 2001). Women were assigned the work of sympathy and feeling as a kind of gender specialization. And this form of masculinity marked the white man out from the mass of colour, who was under less— or so—injunction to compete, to remain stoical, to button up his emotions or to adhere to asocial norms and practices of self.

This structure began to change during the 1970s, partly as a result of feminism but also because of the increased engagement of the gay movement in public culture. At this point, one level men became, as they say, increasingly 'not feticised', sparking off what was widely represented as a crisis of masculinity. This too was a stimulus for the emergence of masculinity studies, which appeared not just at a time when gender was disconnected from sex, but at the same time as a white male's privilege was being brought into question.

Probably the key contribution to the emergence of masculinity studies was the work of the Australian sociologist Bob Connell, who used a version of Gramsci's theory of hegemony to argue that white masculinity had played a crucial role in the West's global dominance and its continuing conflict to its imperialism (Connell 1987 and 1995). At the same time,Connell drew attention to the relations between masculinity and homossexuality. This is a topic which will be dealt with in more detail in section 6.2—it is enough to say here that homosexuality played a key function in Western straight masculinity. A man was really a man to the degree that he wasn't gay (even more so than he wasn't feminine), gyneness being as it were the zero degree of masculinity, further down the scale than being an asshole, a prick, a cunt, a wimp, a pussy, a wuss, etc. So modern masculinity was established by opposing homosexuality in a process that was all the more intense because, as the literary critic Eve Sedgwick neat, highly demonstrated, masculinity required forms of homossexuality (bonding between men in segregated places such as the sports field, club, workplace, school, etc.) in which affects could easily take a sexual turn (Sedgwick 1985 and 1990). The argument is: because homossexuality and same-sex desire are so closely bound, the latter has to be repressed all the more violently.

As I say, the repressive shift in society and culture that somewhat awakened the heterosexual white man's privileged position also transformed his masculinity itself. There had always been many ways of being a man, but from the fifties onwards, in the West, styles of sexualit1y proliferated. Examples include: the house-husband, happy to keep home fires burning while his spouse worked; in Seinon, working-class dandyism emerged in subcultures from the fifties onwards, first with the mods and then with the Mods (although both were associated with violence); hippie masculinity went down a particular path of mellowness. Meanwhile, in Australia a style derivatively (if sometimes also affectionately) called the 'straight posser' emerged: heterosexual man who had all the manners of stereomated gayness. And remember the sensitive new-age, the right-prayer, or so it was supposed, for an assertive but also sensitive new-age woman? Perhaps the most important aspect of masculinity's transformation has happened in relation to emotion. Post-war Western masculinity began the process of re-attaching itself to emotion, as figures in popular culture such as James Dean, Kurt Cobain and even Elvis demonstrate in their particular ways. What seems to have happened is that adolescent styles were becoming mainstreamed on the back of new media genres, notably rock music and the teen movie. At the same time, however, and in reaction to this, forms of hyper-masculinity began to develop—whether in the post-Schwarzeneggger pump-up body (which was by no means simply heterosexual) or in those movements in which heterosexual men were encouraged to reconnect to their masculinity in reaction to a modern, feminized society that was supposed to prevent the reproduction of male strengths and masculinities. Robert Belk's book Iron John: A Book About Men, which appeared, tellingly enough, in 1990, the same year as Judith Butler's Gender Trouble, helped inspire that movement, giving talk to thousands of men's groups. Men could now consciousness raise too.

Masculinity studies has been especially engaged, then, in analysing the trajectory of maleness and its various modes in the post-feminist epoch. Hence to give one example
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of work in the field, in a subtle essay, Sean Nixon has argued that maleness is especially important to old-style working men, men involved in strenuous physical labour (Nixon 2001). The economic and cultural value of this labour has decreased: those kinds of jobs have largely been taken over by machines and migrants. But this has intensified the investment in masculinity: masculinity here becomes less a crypto-norm and more a marked signifier of identity. According to Nixon the softer new masculinity is a response to this; it highlights masculinity, it is self-conscious about it, but it creates an alternative masculinity, a stylised one which is both different from the tough, old-style masculinity of the labouring body and draws something from it. This is a masculinity for the young service classes, which has severed its hard alliance with heterosexuality.

As I asked above, what does femininity want? Can the same question be put to men? What does masculinity want? In one sense it cannot, since the study of masculinity is disconnected from efforts to secure further rights and opportunities. On the contrary, it wants to marginalise men somewhat, to see them as limited and historically fo-maled, as a gender-marked social identity amongst other social identities. But since there are still many men who do not regard their masculinity as specifically gendered but as a norm, the study of masculinity continues to have real political meaning.

Yet the politics of masculinity also revolves around the same question that split femininity — Do we want more or less gender difference? On this my own view is: the ultimate, rather utopian objective of gender studies is to help produce a future where less subjectivity is organised around gender. This is not to support ‘androgyne’ like Virginia Woolf, or ‘bicausality’, or even those ‘queer’ identities where forms of masculinity or femininity are unevolved or made ironic or hybridised (more on this in section 6.2). Rather it is to work for modes of selfhood that don’t attach to gender at all: to increase the parts of oneself that aren’t either masculine or feminine or any mix of the two or any relation to either. Of course there are limits to this project since most of us are committed to sex, and sex is linked to gender in fact if not in theory. So thinking about sexuality in order to reduce the role of gender, if taken to its endpoint, would lead us to demand forms of sex that aren’t gendered. To what degree is that possible?

Further reading


6.2

Queer culture

The term ‘queer’ has often puzzled outsiders. Why call yourself that? This too has its story. For a long time ‘queer’ was, of course, a derogatory term for male homosexuals. That began to change when it began to be widely used in a new, affirmative sense among activist organisations that confronted politicians and the media in relation to the AIDS epidemic. In particular, it emerged in the USA out of ACT UP, which was established in 1987 to respond to the safe-sex movement. The safe-sex movement had attempted to close down on sodomy as an unsafe practice, in a strategy that risked echoing old-fashioned homophobia. ACT UP argued that the HIV virus should not be confused with the sex that spread it (‘Fight AIDS, not sex’) and that the solution to the epidemic was a medical one, which need not in any way encourage gay-bashing. Driven by this programme, it came to distinguish itself from the discourses and objectives of the gay and lesbian liberation movement that had appeared in the seventies dedicated to strengthening and winning acceptance for gay and lesbian identities (see Berlant and Freeman 1993). ACT UP quickly internationalised itself, and formed the institutional nucleus for what became queer politics and a collectivity sometimes known as ‘queer nation’. While it would be wrong to think of queer politics as globalised (it has made little or no headway in Africa or in nations with Islamic traditions, which have remained severely homophobic), queer movements have appeared in parts of Asia, Latin America and the old Soviet bloc (see Patton and Sánchez-Epple 2000).

It is important to distinguish queer culture from the various sexual liberation movements that preceded it, and which have now developed into the GLBT (Gay Lesbian Bii and Transgender community) — of which the gay liberation movement was the first, and has had the widest cultural impact. Along with the feminist movement described in the last chapter, one of the most stunning transformations in late twentieth-century
were. Until now, in mainstream society but not only in mainstream society, male homosexuality had been associated with female masculinity stereotypes of limp wrists, aestheticism, a predilection for the colour pink, and so on. After Stonewall, in the seventies a new style of gayness came to public attention: an assertively macho style, with cowboy hats, pencil moustaches and blue jeans. It was a style that simultaneously went up and joyfully embraced conventional Marlboro man masculinity as well as defiantly overturning old stereotypes. Post-seventies gayness has opened itself up to a plethora of styles.

Homosexuality itself was not an old concept; it was invented during the last decades of the nineteenth century from an amalgam of academic medicine and social science which has come to be known as sexology. For its first theorems, homosexuality was a form of social pathology, which was also conceived as being a form of 'deviance'. It was in this context that Michel Foucault's revisionary history of sexuality made such an impact in the seventies. Famously Foucault argued that what he called the 'repressive hypotheses' needed to be turned inside out (Foucault 1978). He contended that sexuality should not be regarded as a force of nature that our ancestors censored and distorted, and which needs to be liberated within us. Instead sexuality (like all concepts) is produced in discourse, in 'talk about sex' -- and, he boldly argued, the increasing public attention given to sexuality across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially the emergence of a science of sexuality in the late nineteenth century, in fact produces modern sexuality: in these terms there was more rather than less sexuality under the repressive Victorian regime because, for instance, masturba
tion; adolescent sex and commercial sex were more strenuously inhibited. And, for Foucault, there is no sexual life-force in human beings awaiting liberation from social bonds: once again there are just various 'discursive practices' in the 'truth' about sex is formed and connected to social practices, interests and power structures. And (in a conceptual move we can recognize as post-Marxist), because the various compo
nent of sexuality pleasures, desires, drives, objects are so elusive, 'truth about sex' proliferates in search of a disappearing object.

These lines of thought led to Foucault's second main argument: from the late eighteenth-century onwards the status of sexual desire and practices between men changed. They became not only in psychological acts (albeit ones with relations to sin and crime) but central signifiers of identity. By around 1900, if a man preferred sex with other men to sex with women that now made him a 'homosexual' (and not just, for instance, someone who had sex with other men more or less often). It did no to such a degree that anything else he might be -- a member of this or that nation, class, locality, profession and so on -- was secondary compared to his sexual orientation in marking his identity. Foucault argued against the sexualising of identity at all: for him what was important was not public recognition, official sanction for desires and personhood, but rather the capacity to nurture and experiment with sexual styles and
pleasures outside of the constraints of normalising or inspec toral pressures. And the invention of homosexuality intensifie d homophobia. Hatred of men who committed sodomy had long formed part of popular culture (men convicted of the crime had often been hounded by women prostitutes in particular, who saw them as competitors), but now homophobia acquired new social functions. Indeed its intensification during the last decades of the nineteenth century is linked to similar shifts in sexism and racism. All these modes of thought represent some human beings (women, people of colour, homosexuals) as less than fully human, and all emerge in their modern form alongside democracy as a way of maintaining those social hierarchies under threat by means of formally egalitarian policies and practices.

 Foucault's intervention (itself heavily dependent on the gay liberation movement) helped the gay movement repudiate 'homosexuality' as a paradigm. It helped develop the notion of 'compulsive heterosexuality' through which it became clear that the total heterosexual domination of the social and cultural order was not a fact of nature or biology but of history and convention. Very similarly, Foucault's intervention lay behind the concept of 'heteronormativity.' This pointed to the way that, in our society, concepts of the normal and the heterosexual are almost impossible to separate. But it also indicated how heteronormativity almost invisibly supports a number of other norms — it is (or at any rate has been) the key to social acceptance, and remains one of the mainstays of family values. That is, heteronormativity as a concept makes it clear that compulsory heterosexuality is socially invisible because it has embedded itself into the culture's sense of the normal across so many registers and formations that alternatives look like pathologies rather than viable alternatives. And it helps show how dependent the regime of compulsory heterosexuality is on its 'other': what normalises heterosexuality is continual differentiation of itself from, and management of, what is not 'normal'. But this works the other way too: homosexuality, or any sexual practice or orientation, cannot be pulled out of the system within which it exists. There is an important sense, so the argument goes, in which to transgress or critique heteronormativity is to do so in terms which, in part, belong to it. This need not be regarded as limiting critique, but it does mean that notions of radical autonomy and difference, and any politics founded on them, have a phantasmal quality.

Leaving these rather reductive arguments behind, we can summarise: after Foucault, sexuality was taken out of the realm of nature and placed at the very heart of modern history, society and politics, allowing new relations between sex, society and politics to become imaginable, and with them, some claimed, new kinds of sex. In particular, after Foucault, in arguments developed by Leo Bersani, sex no longer had to be primarily conceived of as connected to love, joy and expressiveness, or even pleasure (as it is for dominant post-repressive ideology). It is just as connected to loss of control, disorder, aggression and shame (Bersani 1990). And obviously no less reductive (or obessional) for that.

These lines of thought, however, exacerbated internal divisions within the gay and lesbian liberation movements. In their basic form these divisions repeated those that had already appeared within feminism and, in this context, can be boiled down to the question: did gays and lesbians want to be accepted as 'normal', to be granted the same rights and to embrace the same values and styles as any other citizens? Or did they want to maintain their difference and, specifically, their transgressive relation to heteronormativity? The movement for difference institutionalised itself, as we have seen, around the response to the AIDS epidemic, since it was then that a conservative, normalising wing of the gay liberation movement was able to enter into negotiations with government authorities. On the other side, cultural studies intellectuals such as Paul Taylor, Cindy Patton and John Erni critically examined the discourses and politics of the AIDS response. In one important contribution Erni, using a methodology derived from Foucault, showed how the search for a 'cure for AIDS', although on the face of it a medical project, was in reality a set of discourses and power relations with which one had to express traditional homophobia (Erni 1994). Taking a more utopian standpoint, drawing on Eve Sedgwick's work, and moving towards queer theory, Cindy Patton argued that the gay body is 'written by science' (Patton 1990, 129) and that the official response to the HIV virus was a 'culturization of the scientificised gay body'. Now medical science was essentialising the relationship between homosexuality and a disease, as though the first simply caused, and was expressive of, the second. Her answer 'To take advantage of gaps and fissures in science's hegemonic discourse and find new forms of identity in the spaces that remained invisible to public surveillance and outside of official sexual identities — queer identities' in other words.

In a later intervention in the debate, Michael Warner has suggested that what differentiates the conservative and the radical movements are their relation to the state. The gay and lesbian movement is happy to present itself as an interest group representing a constituency of citizens lobbying for policies meant to improve the welfare of its constituency; the queer movement is suspicious of the politics of representation and of the state welfare that such politics presupposes (Warner 1999). Indeed, at least from one side of the spectrum, queer covers a wider range of sexual acts and identities than GLBT, since, in the wake of Foucault and post-structuralism, it rejects identity politics as such. It is even possible to be interested only in sex with people of the opposite gender and queer, which is not the case for those who identify as gay or lesbian. The queer movement has met with a great deal of resistance within the gay and lesbian movement. In the USA the anti-queer case was put most popularly by Andrew Sullivan in his book Virtually Normal (1995), but based on a 1993 Week Republic essay. As we might expect, Sullivan argued that most gay people want to be normal like everyone else and that the linkage between sexuality and 'cultural subversion' has alienated not only the wider society but most gay people too. Indeed, from within the more consumerist and conformist side of the gay community there is a sense that we
have already entered the 'post-gay' moment, which is to say the gay community has effectively been de-politicised (Warner 1999, 62–64).

At any rate, for Sullivan the gay movement should be overwhelmingly concerned with two issues: in particular, gay marriages and the right to join the military. Leaving aside the fact that there are issues which raise negative passions (to the degree that they do raise passions outside of the world of formal politics and the mass media) mainly in the USA, this kind of thinking has led to a quite widespread feeling that the gay liberation movement has only a small number of goals to meet and therefore can soon be disbanded. Against that expectation, many take a queer position to argue that, were gay and lesbian marriages to be legally recognised, this would cast an invidious distinction between married and non-married couples within the same-sex community itself. Marriage legitimizes sexual relations, and by the same stroke de-legitimizes other—extra-marital—relations. And same-sex marriage would make increasingly precarious queer intimacies that don't involve the kind of love which sanctifies marriage. Do queers need this? That question faces the strong liberal riposte: Even so, if we want to get married who are you to stand in our way? Or the more radical riposte: wouldn’t same-sex marriage change and widen the institution of marriage by de-coupling it from traditional gender roles? The difficult politics of this issue, which have had the effect of further radicalising the queer movement, have not, as a matter of fact, helped energise the queer cause in the USA (see Warner 1999).

Against this background, the radical queer movement has moved into increasingly utopian politics. In one of its moves, drawing on Leo Bersani’s work mentioned above (itself dependent on Lacanian psychoanalysis), it has embraced sex as abjection. It is in these terms that Michael Warner can write: ‘In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn’t pretend to be above the indignity of sex’ (Warner 1999, 35, original emphasis). And then in response to the movement against public sex (the cleaning up of porno shops, clubs where sex takes place, cruising haunts, etc.) which has been supported by some in the normalizing gay movement, it has argued for a rethinking of the public/private division. In doing so it rebukes that long Western history in which sexual acts are the most private of all. Indeed, it can be argued, in which they form the rub of privacy as such. Here is Michael Warner:

As it happens, an understanding of queerness has been developing in recent decades that is suited to just this necessity: a culture is developing in which intimate relations and the sexual body can in fact be understood as projects for transformation among strangers. (At the same time, a lesbian and gay public has been reconstituted so as to ignore or refuse the counter-public character that has marked its history.) So too in youth culture, coolness both mediates a difference from dominant publics and constitutes that difference as the subjective form of stranger sociability.

(Warner 2002, 122)

This is an attempt to affirm, on political grounds, casual sex between strangers (more common among same-sex partners than of heterosexual ones) by aligning it to edgy styles—here ‘cool’—where strangers recognize themselves as alike and thereby connect. Warner hopes for a connection between the kinds of solidarities formed around such styles and the queer movement as such. But to what degree do forms of ‘stranger sociability’ have to be organized effectively to differ from ‘dominant publics’? And anyway (if one wants to engage in this kind of utopian political calculation), isn’t it as rebellious to be uncouth as to be cool; even if the uncouth don’t form any kind of social association?

In a nutshell: what queer theory teaches us is that nothing is certain about sex and sexuality and that the social categories we have to organise, use and police are contingent (they might be different and indeed are always in the process of becoming different). And the same is true, at the level of individuals and their bodies, for the pleasures and other intensities we take from sex, which although they may be offered to us as mediated through sex’s social categories, are also open to modification by new ways of incorporating and acting out (or performing) gender as well as sexual drives.

This mode of analysis—which emphasizes the contingency and performative nature of gender roles and which was pioneered by Judith Butler—owes a great deal to post-structuralism and often seems more appealing as a theoretical model than useful for the analysis or enactment of actual, existing, sexual cultures and politics (Butler 1989).

What queer theory has not been absorbed easily into cultural studies proper as we have been thinking of it here. In literary studies, queer theory has generally involved a re-reading of the heritage so as to uncover previously neglected moments of same-sex desire, sometimes, it has to be said, on a pretty flimsy basis. It has, as it were, ousted the canon. Some cultural studies work has taken the same tack: thus Richard Dyer in one essay in his The Culture of Queers focuses on our uncertainty about whether certain film noir movies, which like so many American fictions involve close relations between ‘buddies’, are to be read as representing erotic flows between these buddies or not. He argues that this uncertainty is itself a generic feature of noir, one of the ways in which it unsettles and destabilizes the status quo (Dyer 2002).

But the step beyond textual interpretation and theory-production has yet to be fully taken in queer cultural studies despite groundbreaking work by figures such as Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner and others. That remains a task for cultural studies’ future; but one made all the harder because it is apparent that in the ebbs and flows of academic fashion, the tide is going out for queer thought and practice, however much political work remains to be done.

Further reading