

Abstract

Sexual orientation is the idea that everyone is either homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual and that this is a defining characteristic of individuals. Social constructionist approaches, however, have provided a strong challenge to this notion, demonstrating that these categories are historically contingent, produced through human interaction rather than the effect of human essence. The greater debate revolves around how to organise politically in response to the suffering resulting from the processes of categorisation and stigma integral to the everyday production of 'sexual orientation'. Early political responses by women and men with same-sex desires organised around a politics of sameness, that is a politics of identity, largely perceiving sexual orientation to be a characteristic of individuals which could be addressed through claims of equality. Differences of gender, 'race', class and sexuality challenged the possibilities of identity politics by demonstrating that 'sexual orientation' could not be isolated as a singular oppression. Building on these lessons and inspired by French poststructuralism and new developments in sexual activism, queer theory advocated instead a radical politics of difference, suggesting that identity politics can only continue to produce the logic of identity, complicit in the production of oppression. However, a politics of difference is largely inconsistent with the individualism upon which liberal 'democratic' State apparatuses depend. Rather than abandoning the successes of identity politics in achieving political reform through lobbying, some have advocated an intimate or sexual citizenship which attempts to integrate the importance of difference with the obvious practicality of identity and right claims. Instead, I advocate exploration of practical possibilities for a radical politics of difference. In particular, I suggest that anarchism is consistent with the insights of French poststructuralist and queer theories while providing a tradition of practical politics. In order to address questions of political practice, I had to simultaneously develop a better understanding of people's experiences of 'sexual orientation'. I chose to interview people involved in sexual relationships with partners who had a different sexual orientation identity than they did, feeling that people in these situations would have valuable insights due to their necessarily explicit negotiation of the borders of sexual orientation. The narratives produced in interviews with 16 participants supported the development of an anarchist framework of analysis. In these terms, sexual orientation is not a characteristic of individuals, but is produced through State-like practices of representation and policing. To use Deleuze and Guattari's formulation, sexual orientation is a state-form. Despite these pressures to conform, none of the participants were entirely complicit in the ongoing production of sexual orientation; they resisted. Participants' identities, desires and relationships overflowed the containment of state-forms. In resisting orientation, they actively produced alternative realities in conjunction with their partners and other people. In contrast to the representation of the State and sexual orientation, the participants experienced autonomy. This process involved the production of flexible and negotiated boundaries unlike the rigid borders of

state-forms. If, as queer theorists suggest, the hetero/homo division is central to the organisation of social life in the overdeveloped world, then resistance to that division must be very difficult. What enabled the participants to resist in such overt ways was the development of alternative ways of thinking and a sense of emotional entitlement, as advocated in anarchism. The anarchist commitment to the inseparability of ends and means results in forms of practice that are consistent with the desired aim of social organisation without domination, where individuals are highly capable of co-operating to fulfill shared desires and also flexible enough to allow for individual freedom, equally important for intimate relationships and democratic social organisation. Whether in terms of obedience to State authority or to rigid 'truths' of sexual relationships and desires, capacities for resisting orientation must necessarily be the same. In conclusion, this analysis encourages an alternative to both sexual citizenship and queer theory: anarchism as an ethics of relationships. This is consistent with the anarchist tradition as well as another, originating in feminist thought, that connects notions of 'sexual orientation' to wider political systems.