

## Material Differences: Sexualities and Genders Beyond Class

Cris Mayo

*West Virginia University*

Marxists have written about sex education for a long time and it is good to see that conversation restarting in educational philosophy. My first introduction to that conversation was reading Dennis Carlson, whose early work on sex education, like that of Linda Gordon, Jeffrey Weeks, and Stephen Seidman, to name a few, noted the economic context of curricula and social policy, and argued for the need to see sexuality through a materialist analysis.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Foucault did a lot of this too.<sup>2</sup> While I'm sympathetic to the idea that critique is a good starting point, a deeper exploration materialist writing on sexuality would have better informed this paper. The links between material concerns and sexuality have been broadly addressed for decades now in Black and intersectional materialist feminism and materialist queer theory and that work should have an impact on how we think, teach, and theorize about sexuality education.<sup>3</sup>

Wheeler-Bell and Howlett start by arguing that too much work on sexuality education has neglected to look at the relationship between sexuality and power. That assertion is unpersuasive, given how much work has done just that. But because their analysis roots this power in capitalism alone, I'm going to focus on the historical and contemporary dissatisfactions with Marxism (unmodified) and suggest alternative ways to wind materialist and other concerns into thinking about sexuality education. To start with a classic, Emma Goldman's materialist critique of love, for instance, recognized that gender and sexualities were related to class, albeit discontinuously:

Marriage is primarily an economic arrangement, an insurance pact. It differs from the ordinary life insurance agreement only in that it is more binding, more exacting ... a woman's premium is a husband, she pays for it with her name, her privacy, her self-respect, her very life, "until death doth part."

Moreover, the marriage insurance condemns her to life-long dependency, to parasitism, to complete uselessness, individual as well as social. Man, too, pays his toll, but as his sphere is wider, marriage does not limit him as much as woman. He feels his chains more in an economic sense.<sup>4</sup>

Since her focus is on marriage, she doesn't address other sexual difference. Even so, she cites Edward Carpenter, a sexologist who advocated for understanding sexual and gender diversities, and thus at least opens the possibility that her analysis could be extended beyond heterosexuality.

So, were I to pursue a discussion of materialist-inflected sex education, I would tie in the relationship between social class and the formation of urban gay, queer, and gender non-normative communities. Historians John D'Emilio, George Chauncey, and Susan Stryker explore the material and discursive histories of dissident sexualities, helping to show that alienation may also spark innovation, resistance, and social organization.<sup>5</sup> Dissident subject positions and communities can help us to engage in a radical rethinking of social hierarchy, drawing on multiple vectors of difference. Such conversations can upset even well-entrenched social categories. For instance, Monique Wittig argued that lesbians, because they are not economically dependent on men were not women and thus offer a critical position from which to push against patriarchy and capitalism.<sup>6</sup> But materialist feminism, and in many ways the study of sexuality education, has to part ways from Marxism.

The roots of this dissatisfaction are explored in detail by Marxist feminists. Heidi Hartmann, for instance, argues that too much of Marxist theorizing underestimates how gender differences and biases are entrenched in economic practices and Marxist theory.<sup>7</sup> Hartmann notes that Marxism requires that women become wage workers like men in order to work in revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Further, Marxism neglects to examine how the nonwage work of women enables not only capitalism but patriarchy. I appreciate the extended references to sex work in Wheeler-Bell and Howlett's essay and the attention to some sexual identities that exacerbate class distinction. But still, there is more to be said, starting with the Marxist feminist characterization of

marriage as akin to prostitution in a capitalist patriarchy or looking at the intra-class rates of sexual assault that make the Greek system a dangerous place for relatively-elite women.

Class analysis does provide some purchase on sexuality, but it is not enough. Gayle Rubin examines this limitation, simultaneously showing the economic impact of sexual dissidence for gender nonconforming people, for visibly queer people, for fetishists, for transpeople, and so on, but also demonstrating that other forces have been crucial in maintaining the hierarchy of sexual normativity.<sup>8</sup> Religion, sexism, racism, and so on, have all contributed to the formation of normative sexuality. What might look like liberal responses to the multiple vectors pushing this sexual normativity, too, is sometimes just grim pragmatism that worries about the limitations of law and policy. As Kathy Franke notes, laws potentially entrench assimilationist formations and yet they also provide necessary protection.<sup>9</sup> Franke and Cathy Cohen each explore how racialization affects how sexuality is defined, how sexual legitimacy is unavailable to Black people, and why radical queer politics needs an analysis of the operations of race/class in the U. S.<sup>10</sup> Analysis of sex, sexuality, gender, and sexuality education must take these complications into account.

Finally, there is a place for positive argumentation and connection across movements. Myself, I'm interested in how even some Marxist theorists wind up making recourse to authenticity as an antidote to oppression and interested, too, in how an analysis of contradiction can help impel the formation of oppositional communities and movements. Class is wrapped up in much of queer theories and histories. Wheeler-Bell and Howlett might well argue that class is a different sort of difference and that conversation, too, is worth returning to. Those are discussions that have happened before, too, of course. But if we're interested in organizing and learning, we need to tease apart critique, insufficiencies, and points of connection. Much of queer organizing has been about this sense of limitation and possibility. I hate to waste words on this, but nowhere do I reproduce the myth of gay affluence or stabilize queer identity, quite the contrary. Repeating such assertions does not constitute an argument. Not taking up your topic does not indicate an embrace of classism. Starting

critical conversations between even divergent theories can be generative. But to do so requires engaging the histories, movements, and theories that have already tried to learn from alienated and dissident subjectivities, which is to say, all subjectivities. I look forward to seeing where this work goes as it recognizes more of the labor that has already been undertaken on the topic.

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1 Dennis Carlson, "Conflict and Change in the Discourse on Sexuality Education," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 4 (1991): 343-359; see also, for a discussion of distribution and sexuality, Joseph A. Diorio, "Sex, Love, and Justice: A Problem in Moral Education," *Educational Theory* 31, no. 3 and 4 (1981): 225-235. For more historical discussion, see Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America* (New York: Grossman, 1976); Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1991); Stephen Seidman, *The Social Construction of Sexuality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

2 Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

3 See, for instance, Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, but Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, eds. Barbara Smith, Patricia B. Scott, and Gloria T. Hull (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982), 13-22; Evelyn Hammonds, "Missing Persons: African American Women, AIDS, and the History of Disease," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: Norton, 1995), 434-449. See also Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (London: Pandora, 1984), 267-319; and Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2004).

4 Emma Goldman, "Marriage and Love," (1914), *Marxists*, [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/goldman/works/1914/marriage-love.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/goldman/works/1914/marriage-love.htm).

5 John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Susan Stryker, "The Compton Cafeteria Riots: Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," *Radical History Review* 100, no. 1 (Winter, 2008): 145-157.

6 Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," *Feminist Issues* 1, no. 2 (1981): 1-20.

7 Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Lydia Sargent, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 1-42.

8 Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (London: Pandora, 1984), 267-319.

9 Katherine M. Franke, "The Domesticated Liberty of *Lawrence v. Texas*," *Columbia Law Review*, 104, no. 5 (2 June 2004): 1399-1426.

10 Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437-465.