

“BIG IDEA: Queer Politics”

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The United States Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage on 27 June, 2015, striking down bans on same-sex marriage in 14 states. In a 2012 essay titled “Beyond Marriage”, queer theorist Lisa Duggan wrote that same-sex marriage is a “very narrow and utterly inadequate solution for the problems that most queer people face.” Duggan’s queer critique of same-sex marriage is a reflection of queer theory and politics, a way of thinking about and organizing for social change emerging in the 1990s. This short lecture explains queer critiques of marriage as an example of queer politics. How do queer politics differ from a lesbian and gay rights approach, such as movements for marriage equality that dominated the lesbian and gay rights movement for nearly two decades? While queer politics is the “big idea”, understanding queer politics involves defining two other terms: homonormativity and queer intersectionality.

First, we will consider the movement for marriage equality as an example of a lesbian and gay rights approach, so that we can contrast this with queer politics. For many gay and lesbian couples, the legal recognition afforded by marriage is life-changing. Duggan explains, for example, of her realization amidst the tragedy of September 11th, 2001, of the importance of legal recognition that she is her former partner’s ‘next of kin’. Yet, as someone who has rejected the nuclear family model and a “one-size fits all” approach to relationships, Duggan is perplexed at the focus on marriage equality as “the singularly representative issue for the mainstream LGBT rights movement.” She explains that marriage equality is not the be-all-and-end-all for all queer people, even though marriage equality “has consistently garnered the lion’s share of movement energy and ideological push”.

Queer critics of marriage reject arguments in favour of marriage that emphasize how their lives, and their love, are no different than the norm -- arguments that go something like: “our love and our family is just the same as yours”. Arguments about lesbian, gay, and queer relationships which emphasize that they are *just like any other* are **homonormative**. In contrast with heteronormativity, which presumes that heterosexuality is normal and natural, **homonormativity** describes representations of lesbian and gay people as “just like you and me” -- people who are members of the middle-class, live in the suburbs, have children, drive an SUV, and vacation to the mountains, for example. Homonormativity describes a ‘traditional’ gay and lesbian lifestyle. This description demonstrates that only certain gay and lesbian couples have access to this traditional, lifestyle attainable only if one is not marginalized by race, class, colonialism, disability, and gender. Whiteness and class privilege enable access to homonormativity.

Queer critics of the emphasis on marriage and homonormativity advocate for an expansion of the movement based on a “broad vision of economic and social justice”. Debates about

marriage equality are reflective of the division between lesbian and gay rights approaches, on one hand, and **queer politics**, on the other. The term 'queer' has traditionally been used as a pejorative or epithet to label those deemed socially or morally 'deviant' and 'abnormal'. LGBT folks began reclaiming the term 'queer' in the 1990s, owning their so-called 'deviancy' and 'abnormality' and refusing to conform to traditional expectations about 'normal' sex, love, desire, relationships, and expression. The label 'queer' rejects attempts to fit complex sexual and gender identities into neatly defined categories, like 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'bisexual', acknowledging that sexuality is fluid, changing, and flexible. Whereas categories like 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'bisexual' tend to imply that there is a common experience among gay men and lesbian women, for example, the label 'queer' avoids easy categorization.

Queer theory emerging in the 1990s, by scholars like Judith Butler and Eve Sedwick, provided the theoretical framework for this approach, rejecting rigid categorizations of identity which presume that sex and gendered identities are *stable*, as opposed to *fluid*. Queer theory is the basis for queer politics. The following quotation from Cathy J. Cohen explains the relationship between queer identity and queer politics, as a movement against marginalization:

“For many of us, the label ‘queer’ symbolizes an acknowledgment that through our existence and everyday survival we embody sustained and multisited resistance to systems (based on dominant constructions of race and gender) that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labour, and constrain our visibility. At the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics” (440)

Breaking this quotation down can help us define queer politics. Queer politics are about:

- First, the ways in which, by living out their day-to-day lives, queer and trans people are always engaging in forms of resistance to multiple systems of oppression
- Second, resisting power structures -- including race and class power structures -- that try to force people to conform to 'normal' forms of desire and sexual expression
- Third, a belief in the idea that “queerness” can be liberating for those marginalized by systems like: heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, and racism.

To identify as *queer*, Cathy J. Cohen explains in her chapter, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”, is not just about being '*not* straight'. That is, the label 'queer' is **not** an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans. Rather, being queer is an orientation to the world which seeks to disrupt “normalizing power” -- meaning social, cultural, and political ideas and behaviour that seek to encourage everyone to 'fit in'. Queer politics, Cathy J. Cohen, argues, are not just about rejecting heteronormativity, though this is certainly part of the queer political project. Rather, Cohen argues for resisting a simple binary dichotomy that says one is either *queer*, or they are *straight*, a binary reduces oppression to a single category: **sexuality**, when in fact, race, class, gender, and disability also impact people's access to privilege. Some folks who are not straight still experience class, racial, and gender privilege, while some folks who are straight are marginalized because of racism, poverty, gender, or disability. For Cohen, queer politics should be “inclusive of all those who

stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality” (441).

In her essay “Developing Intersectional Solidarities: A Plea for Queer Intersectionality”, Sirma Bilge argues that queer theory and politics can learn from Black feminist theorizing on intersectionality by combining analyses of sexual and gender queerness with analyses of race power structures. Queer intersectional approaches adopt the kind of broad vision of economic and social justice described by Cohen, prioritizing questions of housing, homelessness, healthcare, settler-colonial land theft, transphobic and racialized violence, police violence, incarceration, and demilitarization. Whereas lesbian and gay rights approaches emphasize the need to enshrine human rights, such that human rights might ‘trickle down’ to those who are marginalized, queer intersectional politics work from the *bottom up*.