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Putting queer theory into practice

"I don't call myself anything. I am a sexual being. And that's that," says 'Roger', a young man in his early twenties, showing his reluctance to accept the label "gay", which he feels his surroundings would like to ascribe to him. Many observers claim that labels such as lesbian, gay and heterosexual are on the way out. Are these terms relics from the past century's perceptions of gender and sexuality? ¹

Some writers within the tradition that is often called *queer theory* hold such views. The Norwegian literary scholar Nils Axel Nissen claims that during the twentieth century, most people had to accept the fact that a large number of people did not find it natural to share their lives and their love with a person of the opposite sex. But, Nissen continues, no sooner had we become accustomed to the idea that people can be classified as either heterosexual or homosexual, individuals began to emerge who do not feel at home in either of these categories. "Those who currently consider themselves queer, who are adherents of 'sexual style-surfing' or who are bisexual, are merely the harbingers, the avant-garde. We can consider them representatives of the future," he concludes.²

A Norwegian representative of this train of thought, the literary scholar Pål Bjørby, has made a similar observation: "There are those who think queer is sexy, provocative, daring – a generation divide in the spirit of Foucault, in which queer is the final term constructed in the chronology of the past two centuries: sodomite-homosexual-gay-queer".³ This suggests the emergence of something new, the contours of an entirely new sexual landscape coming into view.

Whether or not these claims are accurate, in recent years many young people have been inspired by this way of thinking in their struggles to shape their life projects and, more specifically, in their efforts to establish their sexual identity. In another context we have explored whether there are more widespread indications of the type of changes indicated by queer theoreticians among the population of young adults at large.⁴ In the present article we choose to concentrate on the narrative of an individual life.

Roger is in his early twenties and lives in a major Norwegian city. We do not know how *directly* Roger is influenced by queer ideas. However, his sense of self appears to be consistent with some of the key ideas within queer theory. We present his narrative as a point of departure for a discussion of some of the paradoxes inherent in this body of theory – paradoxes that are not readily evident. Although queer theory may yield fresh perspectives, many of the contributions in this field are rather abstract and not easily accessible.

Words create people

Queer theoreticians have emphasized how the sense of self among those who call themselves gay or lesbian is shaped in part by the production of scientific knowledge about homosexuality. Michel Foucault's seminal work on the history of sexuality, in which he attacks what he calls the *repressive hypothesis*, serves as their point of departure. The underlying premise for this hypothesis is that our sexuality is based on desires and instincts that must be liberated by doing away with constraints and restrictions. The main problem with this view, which characterized the works of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, is that by focusing on *repression* it is easy to lose sight of what Foucault calls the *discursive production* of gender and sexuality. It is in this *production* that power is wielded, and that is what Foucault analyses.

"Words create people," says Nils Axel Nissen, clearly inspired by Foucault and apparently signifying that ways of writing and talking about sexuality produce sexual identities instead of reflecting them. Perhaps this phrase is not meant to be taken literally. Even so, it can be tempting to ask *what sort of* people might be created by the queer torrent of words within gender research and lesbian and gay studies, and within cultural and political circles. What is the nature of a sense of self that arises from queer theory? Or in other words: How is queer theory reflected in the lives of young people today? That is the question we address. But first, some background as to what this is all about.

Queer theory is an umbrella term for various currents within gender and lesbian/gay research. Thus far the discussion in Norway has primarily been conducted in scholarly journals and anthologies. Even so, key ideas have had an impact in popular culture and the mass media. Queer ways of talking about identity and sexuality can be recognised both among adolescents and in gay and lesbian circles.

Queer theory originated in the USA in the early 1990s, with researchers such as Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, David Halperin and Michael Warner making the most important contributions to what has been called "the queer turn".

Rejection of the "homo/hetero" dichotomy

Most variants of queer theory harbour scepticism towards unequivocal categories of identity, such as lesbian and gay. Queer theoreticians maintain that encouraging the use of such categories – as the gay movement has done – tends to reinforce repressive ways of thinking about sexuality and gender. A dominant view in our part of the world during the past century has been that homosexuality and heterosexuality are mutually exclusive. Perhaps this notion is what queer theoreticians and queer activists are most eager to eradicate. Just as each individual in our society is ascribed a male *or* female gender, that same individual is attributed a hetero– *or* homosexual identity; in other words, one of two identities that are mutually exclusive.⁵ Whenever anyone refers to himself or herself as gay or lesbian, it confirms and reinforces this binary cultural model with its inherent ranking system.

This is where the term *queer* enters in: queer is claimed to be a more open and inclusive category than gay or lesbian. It also denotes other groups that do not observe society's norms for "normal" heterosexuality. The category queer comprises everyone who questions heterosexuality's claim to be the purpose and the meaning of life.⁶

Affirmation of inclusive openness

Hence queer theory has – rightly or wrongly – been perceived as a sort of anti-identity theory. Does this scepticism towards lesbian and gay identity mean that people should quit using these terms when describing themselves and their own sexuality? Most queer theoreticians would respond with a qualified no, as they recognise the political value of such identity labels. Rather than attempting to eradicate categories such as lesbian and gay from the language of sexual identity politics, queer theory at its best has exercised a sort of internal censure of normalising, excluding currents within gay and lesbian circles and organisations. In his book *The Trouble With Normal*, Michael Warner criticises lesbian and gay proponents of *same-sex marriages* in the USA for contributing to the increased stigmatisation and ostracisation of single persons and those with a non-monogamous or experimental sexual practice. He aims his criticism at what can be called lesbian and gay *respectability* rather than lesbian and gay *identity*. When they describe themselves and their sexuality as queer, many of those who in other contexts would call themselves lesbian or gay wish to signal a more open, inclusive attitude.

Other queer theoreticians draw attention to the lack of acceptance with which bisexuals, transgenderists, sadomasochists and fetishists have been met, both by the women's movement and by more conventional (and more conventionally looking) lesbians and gays. Likewise, the gay and lesbian liberation movement has been criticised by queer theoreticians for ignoring the diversity of non-heterosexual identities that actually exists.⁷ This movement has also been criticised for having abandoned the goal of sexual liberation *for all* in their struggle for minority rights. In fact, it appears as though embracing an identity – for instance by coming out as lesbian or gay – is not necessarily liberating. Such identities are also disciplining and governing structures that exclude other possible ways of organising the self, one's body, desire, behaviour and social relations.⁸ Again, we discern Foucault in the background.

The call to abandon identity categories

Many observers have pointed out that despite these ambitions, the term queer has gradually become more or less synonymous with lesbian or gay and hence can no longer be used in the critical, inclusive sense it was intended to have.⁹ They claim that the expropriation of "queer" by gay activists and researchers has rendered the term useless for referring to others than lesbians and gays. An illustration from Norway might be the cinema advertisement for "*Oslo Queer pride week*", which showed a man who couldn't manage to parallel park – obviously a gay man – and a woman parallel parking with the greatest of ease – clearly a lesbian. The advertisement uses humour to play with gender stereotypes, but it confirms that "queer" *equals* "gay or lesbian". What about transgenderists, how do they parallel park? Not to mention bisexuals or fetishists? The critical, inclusive potential inherent in the term queer can be said to have been exhausted. Some observers claim that this new term has become so firmly established as a designation for lesbians and gays that it can no longer be used in the inclusive sense it was originally intended to have.

The more militant queer activists – such as those within what is known as queer punk – have fought against this "homosexualisation" of the term queer. They claim that not only is it possible to be queer without being lesbian or gay, but that many lesbians and gays by no means qualify for the term queer. These activists, who are rather hostile to lesbian or gay identity and lifestyle, consider being queer as in opposition to being lesbian or gay. They argue that lesbians

and gays from the middle class who choose to live in monogamous partnerships and exhibit conventional gender roles *no longer* challenge the norm or are outside the "mainstream". Thus they can no longer be regarded as queer.

It is within this context these queer punk groups must be understood when they declare "war on lesbians and gays".¹⁰ From their perspective lesbians and gays are part of the repressive (heteronormative) system, based on the notion that organisations and individuals who promote greater social legitimacy for lesbian and gay individuals and lifestyles – e.g., by championing equal rights to marriage/partnership and adoption – reinforce and confirm normative patterns of thought and classification systems. This perspective finds support among queer theoreticians such as Judith Butler, who writes that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of progressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression".¹¹ "Queer" refers to people who are outside "the mainstream" of social norms because of their sexual or political practice. Making specific categories of identity the basis for community and the politics of identity, as the lesbian and gay liberation movement has done, is a deficient strategy for challenging society's established norms of sexuality.¹²

Thus it is not without reason that queer theory can be perceived as a call to abandon the categories lesbian, gay and heterosexual. Who would not rather join the ranks of "the people of the future"? Roger is an illustration of just that.

"I don't call myself anything"

As mentioned, Roger is in his early twenties. He is still living with his father and is probably perceived by his surroundings as "gay". But this is how he responded when he was asked what label he uses when talking about his sexuality. (Our question was: Do you call yourself homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual?) Roger replied:

I don't really think it's all that complicated, for I don't consider myself any of those things. I see myself as an individual who so far has had experience only with males. But I am not consistent or set on anything. So I think it would be more harmful than useful to categorise myself. So I don't call myself anything, y'see. I am a sexual being. And that's that [brief laughter].

Roger reported that by the age of ten he felt sexually attracted to other boys, and at that time he began to experiment with friends of the same age. So far he has had sex exclusively with other males, and he has not fallen in love with or felt sexually attracted to women. Roger has been involved in several fleeting relationships, but at the time of the interview he reported that he was single. Yet he seemed to hesitate a bit: "Right now I'm not in any relationship. Or am I? No, I'm not." The reason for his uncertainty was a current somewhat ambiguous friendship–sweetheart relationship with a young man named 'Dag', who considers himself heterosexual. Roger thinks he sees a recurring pattern:

I have a tendency to sort of just fall in love with insecure, heterosexual young men [fleeting laughter]. That's the way it's been all along, I think. So actually I'm rather sick and tired of them.

Let us present the conclusion to this article at once, as a key to the reasoning behind it: it is our impression that Roger's dismissal of the conventional categories of sexual identity is a politically and theoretically motivated project, rather than being intrinsically related to his actual experience. Roger cannot be presented as a spokesman for queer theory, yet we feel that the paradoxes that emerge in his narrative are relevant for the views on identity expressed by leading queer theoreticians. His narrative provides a suitable framework for a discussion of the potential and the limitations inherent in a queer sense of self.

"No, I won't answer that question"

The first paradox that emerges from Roger's attempt to escape the influence of categories is that he appears to end up in what we can call situations of denial. In other words, these are situations in which he refuses to accept labels such as homosexual or gay and as a result he is perceived as trying to "pass himself off" as heterosexual. He himself provided the following example:

It's like when people come over to me when I'm out on the town: "Hi, are you gay?" I remember a bloke came over to me. It was sorta like this: "Why do you want to know, huh?" "Well, are you, or aren't you?" "Hey, why do you want to know?" "No, it's nothing [...] but why can't you say whether you are or not?" So I said: "No, I won't answer that question." "Well, why not? Are you afraid to admit it?" "No, I'm not afraid to admit anything at all, but I can't be bothered to answer your question. [...] If you're planning to make a pass at me, just give it a try. But I'm not going to answer your question, because the only reason for me to do so is so that you can pigeon-hole me somewhere or other up in your brain, and that doesn't interest me."

In this instance it may appear as though Roger's wish to remain indeterminate and undefined leads him to deny his inclusion in the category "homosexual", a category that is somewhat stigmatised. Later it comes to light that the bloke Roger is talking to is asking on behalf of a gay friend who wants to know if Roger is "available". This bloke interprets Roger's unwillingness to accept the label gay as a sign of fear or cowardice. What is for Roger a self-reflexive, politically motivated rejection of the dichotomy homo/hetero is interpreted by the other as a manifestation of lacking self-acceptance or fear of coming out. Refusing to be categorised, refusing to accommodate to the dichotomy homo/hetero, is perceived as an attempt to retain the position of a "normal", heterosexual man.

What Roger talks about elsewhere in the interview – for instance that he makes out with young men in public places – bears witness that he by no means wants to "pass himself off" as heterosexual. Perhaps the problem is that in his endeavour to avoid the power of words, Roger pays too little attention to their meaning. Linguistic categories always have two dimensions: they are imbued with both power and meaning. One of the problems inherent in queer theory's suspicion of labels such as lesbian and gay is that the dimension of meaning can be eclipsed by the power dimension. The desire to be indeterminate can make a person incomprehensible. As another interview subject (21-year-old 'Stian') responded when we asked him if he uses the word gay to describe himself: "You have to use it, otherwise people don't understand what you mean". The danger that some people have pointed out – i.e., by breaking down

categories of identity, queer theory leads to greater invisibility – is quite real.¹³

"It's not that important"

The episode described above sheds light on a second paradoxical aspect of Roger's queer sense of self. By rejecting categories of identity, he is in danger of making his own and others' sexuality and love lives inessential, almost trivial. The only reason he can see for identifying himself as gay is in order to communicate to another person that he would like to have sex with him. The question of sexual identity is reduced to a question of personal taste or sexual preference. Thus Roger and other "queer" young people invert a familiar slogan from gay politics: "Gay is just something you *do*, not something you *are*". Here is another example from the interview:

Among my friends it's not even an issue, right, it's not something we talk about. If somebody were to walk into a room and say: "Oh, I'm gay" [...] I'd probably make some sarcastic remark. It'd be like this: "Oh, is that right. So you are. Well, well, I ate sushi yesterday, you see" [fleeting laughter]. That's just as important to me – I mean, it isn't all that important. At least not for me. And I have the philosophy that if more people thought the same way, in a way we would have a lot less instances of ghetto formation and all the bad things that go with that – for example in the gay community. If only people would quit paying so much attention to who you sleep with and start being more interested in who you are as a person.

Again, it is easy to sympathise with Roger's reasoning on the advantages of living in a society where with whom, where, how, and with how many you have sex is not more essential to who you are as a person than what you eat for dinner. However, the philosopher Charles Taylor claims that our identity is the horizon of what matters to us and that we use to define ourselves. Knowing who you are means finding your bearings in a moral landscape, a place where questions are asked about what is good and what is bad, what is worth doing and what is not, what is meaningful and significant and what is merely trivial and secondary.¹⁴ To us this seems intuitively correct, which makes Roger's way of thinking problematic. For what does he actually mean when he says that his own and others' sexual identity and preferences are not important?

It may be easier to grasp the point if we step outside his narrative for a moment. Young people who come out as lesbians, gays or bisexuals in Norway today know that they are likely to cause a minor earthquake in the social landscape they belong to. In particular, their relationship with their parents – who in most cases have expectations related to the course of their children's (hetero-) sexual lives – will be put to the test. When they nevertheless decide to come out that must mean that they consider being lesbian, being gay or being bisexual something they are willing to pay a price for. They would probably never find the moral strength to take such a step if their sexual identity was not *essential* to them. The other alternative, *not* coming out, is perceived as incompatible with their desired identity. Questions such as what-am-I-going-to-have-for-dinner (sushi or meat pie) do not reflect the same level of value standards.

An identity as a lesbian, gay or bisexual person becomes a point of orientation in life, a guide both for one self and one's surroundings. A number of writers

have criticised queer theory for disregarding this aspect of sexual identities, which are not merely restrictive, but also provide direction and enabling.¹⁵ The point is not that being gay, lesbian or bisexual is the whole truth about who or what a person is, but for many people it is an *essential* aspect. As long as being heterosexual is taken for granted and is important to most people today, it is difficult to see how Roger's friend Dag, for instance, could achieve a less problematic self-image by considering his own sexuality unimportant. Perhaps categories such as lesbian and gay can be replaced by inclusive categories such as queer – and perhaps that will be beneficial. But that can hardly happen through a process that trivialises sexual identification, regardless of one's views on the question of whether individuals have an innate sexual orientation.

"I find that lifestyle utterly nauseating"

A third distinguishing feature of Roger's attempt to avoid the dichotomy homo/hetero is his negative characterisation of gay circles – an environment he wishes to give a wide berth. His portrayal of both the gay scene and what he calls a "gay lifestyle" is sharply critical.

Being gay has become such an identity thing, in a way [it has] become a lifestyle. And it's a lifestyle I find utterly nauseating, because it's just about who has the most money and things like that and [who is] craziest and who is most superficial. That's who wins. [...] Well, I hung around in gay circles for a while, but I don't fit in there at all. Like I said, I don't call myself anything really. Of course I have a sex life, y'know, but if I want sex I can always get it. [...] I don't have to go to a gay place to find it. Sometimes I go to gay hangouts, but that's to listen to music, and I'm a person who is a lot more than my sexuality in a way. So what I get from going to those places is like very little. I don't have anything in common with the people there. I don't share the political views of many of them to say the least, and I don't agree with their philosophy of life and their obsession with fashion and their fixation on physique and working out and fancy cars and all that stuff that dominates the gay scene. What matters is to be good looking and to have the most money and the coolest designer clothes, and that's sort of what I despise really. And they are so conservative politically, and they're racist and they're sexist.

Although his experience in gay bars may be part of the explanation, there are strong indications that Roger's eagerness to dissociate himself from the gay scene should be understood in light of his rejection of the notion of a gay identity. "I am much more than my sexuality", he states emphatically, pointing out that a common taste in music, philosophy of life and political views is more important to him when choosing friends.

Roger exhibits a striking contempt for what he sees as a prevailing materialism and racism, as well as a fixation on fashion and physique, in gay circles. Of course he is right that it is possible to encounter class chauvinism as well as sexist and racist attitudes in this environment, despite the fact that many – or perhaps most – gay men and lesbian women have themselves experienced discrimination, harassment or exclusion in some shape or form. Yet what is paradoxical about Roger's dissociation is the fact that the category "homosexual" appears to be a purely negative reference group. "The gay scene" becomes a representation of what he does not want to be. While Roger

shrinks from explicit categorisation and description of *himself*, he homogenises the gay environment, portraying it as far more uniform and biased than it is in reality.

Voice of the future or echo of the past?

Why the hell should other people be interested in your innermost private life, particularly as regards sexuality, whether it be one way or the other. That is something we should be allowed to keep to ourselves, I find myself thinking. But it seems to be terribly interesting for ever so many people to pry into.

This is not Roger speaking, but a homosexual man in his seventies. We draw attention to this statement because it struck us – while analysing the interview with Roger – that Roger's perception of himself had some clear similarities with what we found among many of the older homosexual men studied by one of the authors of this article. These men were Roger's age in the 1950s. We consider their story important in part because our contemporary horizon tends to be shaped by the lesbians and gays who were inspired by the gay liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s to "come out". For men of the older generation, on the contrary, *discretion* was the key concern. Another man in his seventies told us that his homosexuality was something he chose *not* to tell others about: "I mean, that is something I keep to myself. Because things aren't so bad that you can't find someone." These men's motivation for hesitating to being identified as gays is unlike Roger's. However, it has struck us that the words these two groups use to express themselves are rather similar. Hence we pose the following question: Could the desertion of identity categories by queer young people today have some of the same consequences as the older generation's culture of discretion?

We began by drawing attention to the work that has been seminal for queer theory: Michel Foucault's unfinished *History of Sexuality*. Foucault was one of the past century's leading intellectuals, and his influence is still growing. At the same time, he was a product of his day who dealt with his own homosexuality as a member of the generation of discretion.

Foucault was born in 1926. If he were alive today, he would have been in his late seventies. In 1950, when a Norwegian chapter of the Danish homophile organisation the Association of 1948 was founded, he was in his twenties. Two decades later, when the Stonewall riots marked the beginning of the radical lesbian and gay liberation movement, both he and the Norwegian men described above were approaching middle age. Could this have had greater significance for Foucault's thinking than we normally take into account? Or are such thoughts speculative reductionism? It must be said that this idea is not ours alone. Didier Eribon, who is probably Foucault's most recognised biographer, recently pointed out that *The History of Sexuality* appears to be influenced by the prevailing mentality and concept of self among homosexual men in France in the 1950s and the early 1960s, in other words in the time before the Stonewall riots.¹⁶ Could it be that queer theory has some scarcely visible roots back to the culture of discretion of the 1950s? Rather than providing clear answers, our interpretation of Roger's narrative seems to have given rise to new questions. The most important of them is this: Will "deserting" the categories of sexual identity, such as lesbian and gay, extract a price, also for the deserters? If so, does it concern more than identity politics and the struggle for rights? In other words, do we detect old and familiar

pitfalls on the path to the multi–sexual utopia that queer theoreticians have been envisaging for us? Could it be that one queer step forward takes us two steps backwards?

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- ¹ This article has been written within the framework of a broader research project on sexuality headed by Willy Pedersen, from the University of Oslo and the institute of Norwegian Social Research, NOVA. The research project has been financed by the Research Council of Norway. We also draw on interviews conducted by Hans W. Kristiansen as part of his doctoral research in Social Anthropology which has resulted in the dissertation *Kjærlighetskarusellen. Eldre homoseksuelle menns livsfortellinger og livsløp i Norge* (University of Oslo, 2004).
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