Understanding Same-Sex Histories

The Marxist tradition has always included a political dimension as well as a method of historical and social analysis. The introduction to this book focused on the political dimension, arguing for the relevance of anti-capitalism and of Marxism to a radical sexual politics today. This section stakes a claim for the usefulness, in fact indispensability, of the historical materialist method in making sense of sexual histories.

In this book, I invent and use a new central category to understand same-sex histories: ‘same-sex formation’. A same-sex formation is a specific hierarchy of different same-sex patterns (like the transgender, intergenerational and lesbian/gay patterns) in which one pattern is culturally dominant (if not necessarily most prevalent). Each same-sex formation (or regime) occupies a specific place in a particular mode of production (like feudalism) or capitalist regime of accumulation (like classical imperialism). Using this category we can see that lesbian/gay identity, far from being eternal, only acquired hegemony over other same-sex patterns (in what I call the ‘gay-dominant formation’) when it took its place in the global Fordist regime of capitalist accumulation, from roughly the 1940s to the 1970s. The same-sex regime that preceded the gay-dominant formation was different in many ways; the regime we are living with today (which I call ‘homonormative-dominant’), under neoliberalism, has been undermining the centrality of lesbian/gay identity. After the historical development of these successive same-sex formations is sketched out in Part 1 of the book, the concept of the homonormative-dominant same-sex formation underpins a critical dissection of today’s gay normality in Part 2 and the elaboration of a queer anti-capitalist alternative in Part 3.

In putting together the concept of a same-sex formation, I have drawn on other historical materialist concepts that people have applied to sexual life before me. By contrast with the weak (if popular) arguments of biological determinists, this section shows how historical materialism offers several concepts that are valuable in understanding sexual histories. The concept of ‘reification’, for example, helps us understand the commodification of sex and the homo/hetero binary, both of which have been increasingly central to each successive same-sex formation under capitalism. The concept of ‘social totality’ can be used to explain how a same-sex formation fits into coherent though contradiction-ridden modes of production, and imperial, racial and gender orders. Correctly understood, a materialist conception of social totality also makes clear that no same-sex formation is uniform. Each formation takes different forms in different regions, as part of what I call the ‘combined and uneven
social construction’ of sexuality. These four ideas – same-sex formation, reification, social totality, and combined and uneven social construction – are the gist of what this section explains and explores.

A Paradigm, Not a General Theory

Sexual life, once a largely unexplored continent for historical materialism, has long since ceased to be so. In the 1970s and early 1980s, lesbian/gay historians, using Marxist and feminist analytical tools among others, began to chart the emergence of lesbian/gay identities.¹ In Gayle Rubin’s recollection, in fact, from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s Marxism in various forms was the ‘dominant paradigm’ among progressive intellectuals.² Historical materialist categories have been supplemented and then to a large extent supplanted in queer studies by Foucauldian approaches since the 1980s and queer theory since the 1990s. But elements of the contributions of the first, Marxist-influenced generation of historians and theorists still survive to some extent within a broad range of social constructionist perspectives.³ Most historians and theorists – if not necessarily most LGBT laypeople – still agree that the lesbian/gay identities that emerged by the 1970s were unique, clearly distinguishable from any of the same-sex sexual patterns that existed before the last century or so, and from many that still exist in various parts of the world.

Since the 1980s, however, parallel with the retreat from Marxism in politics, scholarly approaches to sexual history have increasingly been divorced from

¹ For example, Fernbach 1981; D’Emilio 1983a and 1983b.
² Rubin 2011, p. 276.
³ To cite one example, David Halperin recalled his bemusement in 1990 in finding his work described as Foucauldian, while to his mind Foucault had at the time less influence on him than New Historicists, French structuralists, radical sociologists, cultural anthropologists, feminist theorists – and Marxists (2002, pp. 7–8). I use the term ‘social constructionism’ simply as the opposite of ‘essentialism’: a view of sexual identities as biologically determined or otherwise transhistorical. Social constructionism, by contrast, starts from the premise that ‘sexual identities are not “given” by nature but are culturally constituted or produced’ (Halperin 1990, p. 10). Thus, I do not think of social constructionism as a specific school of thought contrary to Marxism or any other. Although ‘social constructionism’ as a term has fallen out of fashion over the past twenty years, the essentialist-constructionist debate remains relevant (Halperin 2002, p. 12). Like John D’Emilio, I have the impression that, ironically, in the same years that social constructionism has virtually ‘swept essentialism from the [academic] playing field’, essentialism has strengthened its hold as the routine assumption of most LGBT people, except for a queer-identified minority (2002, p. 222).