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LOCALLY QUEER. A Note on the Feminist Genealogy of Queer Theory

The word queer landed in Sweden in a terminological and theoretical vacuum. It was not that nobody had studied issues and theories relating to sexualities and identities before queer theory were introduced, but the approach of the then new queer theory was slightly different. Above all, it concerned a term that had no history in the Swedish language. Queer is not a Swedish word, and therefore it could signify a bit of this and that. In English the queer word has been associated with homophobic etymological roots that have no linguistic correspondence in Swedish. Therefore, the introduction of the word queer evoked an entirely different debate in the English-speaking countries, where many lesbians, gays and transgender people took umbrage at a word that was so strongly associated with a negatively charged history, than in Sweden, where queer was simply a new and foreign theoretical and activist term.¹

In Sweden, the word queer did not initially gain a foothold, except in a limited academic sphere and in the Swedish gay press where it was greeted with some hesitation. In all other respects, queer was one of many incomprehensible words that did not have any distinct content. Matters got even trickier when it turned out that even those who had helped introduce the term queer both invested the word with different meanings, and also considered that queer should not be hampered with an exact definition. Its purpose was to confuse, disturb and serve as a dissonance in both academic thinking and in discussions on sexual politics. Over the years, however, queer theory has gained momentum as an inter-disciplinary research perspective at Swedish universities. Above all, the queer theory approach has become a valuable analytical instrument for the studies of normative heterosexuality.

¹ As an introduction to Queer Theory see: Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, New York: New York University Press, 1996; Max H. Kirsch, *Queer Theory and Social Change*, London & New York: Routledge, 2000; Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.



In discussions of what queer is or is not, opinions depend to a high degree on how the participants in such a debate relate to the genealogy of queer theory. Political argumentations about concepts are often remarkably streamlined when history is being written. It is as if everyone has been on the same journey. We who teach and write outside the English-speaking sphere are especially apt to feel that “everybody” in the USA is communicating with each other, but of course that is not the case. A contribution to this historical reflection on the feminist genealogies of the word queer is made in a footnote to Teresa de Lauretis’ introduction to the journal *differences*’ theme issue on “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” (1991), in which she points out that she was not aware of the activist group Queer Nation’s existence at the time when she launched the term queer: “The term ‘queer’ was suggested to me by a conference in which I had participated and whose proceedings will be published in the forthcoming volume, ed. by Douglas Crimp and the Bad Object Choices, ‘How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video.’ My ‘queer’ however, had no relation to the Queer Nation group, of whose existence I was ignorant at the time. As the essays will show there is very little common between Queer Nation and this queer theory.”² This is a poignant reminder that a phenomenon that may appear from a non-American perspective as a uniform queer-activist and queer-theory discourse is far from that. The point I wish to make in this article is to shortly reflect on the reception of the word queer in Sweden and underline the strong impact that lesbian-feminist theory has had on queer theory. This cannot be over-emphasised in a discussion on the genealogies of queer theory.

Queer Theory

Queer theory is not a homogeneous or systematic school of thought, but a mixture of studies that focus critically on heteronormativity, i.e., those institutions, structures, relations and acts that support heterosexuality as a uniform, natural and all-embracing primordial sexuality. Queer

² Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction”, in: *differences*, Volume 3, no. 2/ 1991, p. xvii, footnote 2.



theory bases itself on the theoretical discussions within lesbian feminist theory and gay studies relating to the dominant and normative position held by heterosexuality in western society.³

In the early days of queer theory, in the 1990s, scholars and philosophers had a common base in textual analysis and interpretation of visual culture and politics, and most had their starting point in women's studies, feminist theory and lesbian and gay studies. The relationship between queer theory, lesbian and gay studies was initially a bit fraught. The introductory phase of queer theory incorporated a substantial helping of euphoria concerning this new approach, since it was envisioned that old structures would now be disintegrated. However, in the 1990s, and especially in the 2000s, it has grown increasingly obvious that the structural imbalance between heterosexuality and homosexuality is not that easy to abolish, despite the enthusiasm and energy that characterised the early queer-euphoric phase.⁴

Queer studies have primarily been related to gender variation and non-heterosexual practices where other possible aspects such as ethnicity, class and also disabilities have begun to be acknowledged. There is also, however, an intra-categorical problem that has become increasingly apparent over the queer 1990s and early 2000s. Just as the gender perspective was missing for many years in gay studies, gender studies likewise lacked a queer perspective. One could also query the fruitfulness of studying lesbians, homosexual men and transgender people as *a* group, since these categories show significant differences in their composition. Queer scholar Judith Halberstam points out that when it comes to queer historiography and queer biographies, it is rather pointless to study lesbians and homosexual men as a group. Even though there are similarities, their histories are different in many relevant aspects. With regard to

³ 1990 was a symbolic year for the re-launch of the word queer. This was when Queer Nation distributed its manifesto "Queers Read This", Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published *Epistemology of the Closet*. It was Teresa de Lauretis, however, who launched the theoretic term *queer* in 1990 at a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The queer word was first discussed in 1991 in the feminist journal *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in a special edition that consisted of papers presented at the conference. The historian George Chauncey discusses the use of the word queer in the early 20th century in *The Gay New York.: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books, 1994.

⁴ Rosenberg (2002), pp. 13-14.



lesbian and transsexual people, similarities can be found in gender variation, but again Halberstam claims that their respective histories are different.⁵

A central aspect of queer studies is that they did not focus simply on heteronormativity, but, like post-colonial studies, also maintained a tradition from lesbian and gay studies of supporting continued research in the field of LGBTQI.⁶ However, the gay male norm in this field of research has often been criticised, and Halberstam poses the intriguing question of whether the new interdisciplinary studies in fields such as gender studies will also enrich queer studies.⁷

Compulsory heterosexuality

In feminist discussions on political concepts, sexuality has a very special place. Sexuality can be regarded as a physiological/biological, psychological and/or cultural and social issue. The biological perspective emphasises sexuality as something we are born with, “natural”, and by nature primarily heterosexual and penetration-oriented, with reproduction as its main purpose. This attitude was represented, above all, by the sexology that emerged in the late 1800s and which principally focused on sexual behaviour. In 21st century gender studies, sexuality is discussed as representation, discourse, narrative and/or identity, rather than as physiology and biology.

⁵ Judith Halberstam, *Queer Studies, A Companion to Gender Studies*, in Philomena Essed, David Theo Goldberg & Audrey Kobayashi (eds.), Blackwell, 2005, pp. 62-70.

⁶ The term heteronormativity was established as a theoretical concept in gender-orientated feminist and queer studies in the 1990s. In the early 1990s, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler had previously used terms such as heterosexism (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 30-32) and heterosexual matrix (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 151: footnote 6) or heterosexual hegemony (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 4-12). Monique Wittig in the 1980s used the heterosexual contract (Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, pp. 40-43), while Adrienne Rich launched the term compulsory heterosexuality (Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, *Signs* no. 5/1980). The first use of the term heteronormativity is usually attributed to Michael Warner in his introduction to the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet* (pp. vii-xxx). Already in 1991, Warner had discussed similar issues in an article, “Fear of a Queer Planet” in *Social text* no. 29/1991. Another early reference to the term heteronormativity is found in Chris Brickell, who quotes an article by Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, “Putting the Heterosexual Order in Crisis” from 1992 (*Mediations*, 16 [2], pp. 17-23). In the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet* the term heteronormativity was used by Steven Seidman (p. 130) and Diane Richardson discussed the term in her introduction to *Theorising Heterosexuality* (1996).

⁷ Halberstam (2005), pp. 62-70.

The discussion on sexual politics concerning lesbianism versus heterosexuality has been going on for many years within feminism. The division into lesbian and heterosexual feminists has always entailed a clear dividing line in the feminist movement and also in feminist theory. When sexuality was politicised in the 1970s, lesbianism could no longer be regarded merely as an alternative lifestyle or a sexual practice, but also constituted a critique of the compulsory heterosexuality and of heterosexuality as a social institution. Sexuality was not a matter of inborn, natural inclination; instead, the analyses began increasingly to focus on the social and cultural organisation of sexuality that clearly denounced same-sex sexuality.

In the foreword of the Swedish translation of the essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, Adrienne Rich states that this essay was written to challenge the exclusion of lesbian existence in a large part of feminist academic literature. She experienced this to be anti-feminist in its consequences. The essay was also written to change the perspective of heterosexual women. Not to fire the antagonism between lesbians and heterosexuals, but to encourage heterosexual feminists to explore and change heterosexuality as a political institution that makes women powerless. Rich also hoped that other lesbians would experience the depth and width of female identification and the sense of community between women that has been forever present, albeit periodically suppressed, in the heterosexual experience.⁸

Out of all the radical feminist writing, Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” and Monique Wittig’s “The Straight Mind” have been the most influential publications prior to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* with regard to heterosexuality. Even if these texts differ greatly, especially in their approach to lesbianism, both Rich and Wittig regard heterosexuality as something prescribed. Rich writes of compulsory heterosexuality, and Wittig of the compulsory social relationship (the heterosexual contract) between “woman” and “man”. Rich identifies a variety of ways in which women are forced into heterosexuality. If heterosexuality had been natural, these forceful measures would hardly be

⁸ Adrienne Rich, Foreword to the Swedish translation of “Compulsory heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” by Pia Laskar: “Obligatorisk heterosexualitet och lesbisk existens”, Stockholm: MATRIX, 1986, p. 1.



necessary. And the threats and punishments against the rebels who fled compulsory heterosexuality would be even more superfluous.⁹

Adrienne Rich explains oppression of women through compulsory heterosexuality as a social system where wedlock is particularly emblematic of the repressive institution. Not only does compulsory heterosexuality tie heterosexual women to men and male institutions, it also serves as an effective obstacle to contact between women. Heterosexuality is not a natural or free choice, but a multifaceted weave of normative practices. By virtue of its privileged position, heterosexuality is able to maintain its status as being natural and a matter of course.

This matter-of-courseness is the power that maintains heterosexuality; or rather, the matter-of-courseness of heterosexuality lies at the core of its cultural dominance, what the feminist scholar Iris Marion Young identifies as one of the forms of oppression. She uses the term oppression as a collective noun for a whole family of terms and social conditions, which she divides into five categories: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural dominance and violence.¹⁰ In this extended structural definition, the term oppression refers to those social injustices that afflict certain groups on account of frequently unconscious preconceptions and behaviour patterns among ordinary, decent fellow-beings in everyday encounters, in the media and cultural stereotypes, in contacts with bureaucratic structures and hierarchies and in various “markets”. That is, in everyday life. Structural oppression cannot, according to Young, be abolished by replacing certain people in power or by adopting new laws, since the oppression is systematically produced and reproduced in society’s fundamental economic and cultural institutions.¹¹

Compulsory heterosexuality is one such form of oppression. Compulsory heterosexuality operates on all levels, both in private and in public. In line with Adrienne Rich’s analysis of motherhood as a political institution in her book *Of Woman Born*, she proposes in her essay on

⁹ Tiina Rosenberg, *Queerfeministisk agenda (Queerfeminist Agenda)*, Stockholm: Atlas, 2002, pp. 84-87; Tiina Rosenberg, *L-ordet: Vart tog alla lesbiska vägen? (The L-Word: Where Have All the Lesbians Gone?)*, Stockholm: Normal, 2006, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression”, in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 39-65.

¹¹ Young, *ibid.*



compulsory heterosexuality that heterosexuality must be regarded and analysed as a political institution.¹²

Like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Rich claims that violence has always been used to uphold heterosexuality. Society invests heavily in heterosexuality. Rich discusses two basic concepts: lesbian existence and lesbian continuum. Lesbian existence is, she writes, the lesbian presence in history, whereas lesbian continuum is “to include a range – through each woman’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman.”¹³ Lesbian existence entails, according to Rich, to both break a taboo and to eschew a life under compulsion. It is also a direct or indirect attack on men’s right of access to women. Above all, however, lesbian existence involves saying “No thank you” to the patriarchy, and thus serves as an act of resistance.

If Rich primarily discusses the situation of women, Wittig discusses the way in which heteronormativity is built into the western conscious. She writes that the straight mind is based on universalism and thinking in differences. The heteronormative mind perceives and constructs all difference as something unlike heterosexuality: “To constitute a difference and to control it is an ‘act of power, since it is essentially a normative act. Everybody tries to show the other as different. But not everybody succeeds in doing so. One has to be socially dominant to succeed in it.’”¹⁴

Gender and/or sexuality?

The institutional framework for LGBTQI studies has consisted/consists of the traditional disciplines and institutions for women’s and gender studies, and, where they exist, a small number of institutions of lesbian and gay studies (not in Sweden, however, where this tradition

¹² Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale & David M Halperin (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 227-254.

¹³ Rich in Abelove, p. 239.

¹⁴ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1980, p.29. (Wittig is referring here to Claude Faugeron and Philippe Robert, *La justice et son public et les représentations sociales du système pénal*, Paris: Masson, 1978).



is very limited). These continue to be vital centres of research and studies in the field, but it is obvious that queer studies are increasingly being integrated with gender studies, thanks mainly to Judith Butler's gender theory.¹⁵

This was far from the anticipated outcome. The question of whether gender and sexuality should be studied as separate and mutually independent categories has been fiercely debated. In the introduction to the seminal anthology *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* the subject of the research field is defined: "Lesbian/gay studies are to sex and sexuality what women's studies are to sex/gender."¹⁶ The discussion gathered momentum in Gayle Rubin's classic essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Politics of Sexuality" (1982), in which she distinguishes between sex and sexuality. Rubin analyses the social construction of sexual hierarchies and the consistent demonising of non-normative sexualities. Her conclusion is that gender influences sexual systems and that sexual systems have a gender-specific expression. But even if gender and sexuality are related phenomena, they are not the same thing but constitute two separate social practices. According to Rubin, feminist theory has developed tools for analysing gender hierarchies. The extent to which these categories are interlinked is a question that feminist theory has not been able to answer, she claims. As for sexuality, feminist analyses can be not only misleading but often irrelevant. Feminists, according to Rubin, lack the perspective and tools to fully comprehend the social organisation of sexuality.¹⁷

For the purposes of queer theory, Rubin's ideas are developed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, where she claims that sexuality has a form of non-definability that gender does not have. Sedgwick writes that practically all people are bound to either of the genders, whereas sexuality, in its ambiguity, is a more adequate object for deconstruction.¹⁸ Biddy Martin argues against Kosofsky Sedgwick in the essay "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias" where she takes a positive attitude to queer theory but cautions against dismissing gender too lightly as a meaningful category for analysis.¹⁹ In an

¹⁵ Rosenberg (2002), pp. 71-73.

¹⁶ Abelove et.al., p. xv.

¹⁷ Gayle Rubin: "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", in Abelove et. al., pp. 3-44.

¹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990, p. 34.

¹⁹ Biddy Martin, "Sexualities Without Genders and Other Utopias", in *Femininity Played Straight. The Significance of Being Lesbian*, New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 71-96.



article of a later date, “Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary”, Martin stresses that queer theorists will end up in a dead end if they assume that gender identities and sexual identities are either so uncertain or fluctuating that they are irrelevant, or so definite and repressive that they must be avoided. It is by making the variations visible that queer theory can stretch the boundaries for what is culturally comprehensible.²⁰

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler settles the accounts with the aspects of feminist theory that she finds irritating. The political message of *Gender Trouble* was the refutation of essentialist identity politics in the women’s movement, regardless of whether the objective was to favour the policies of white heterosexual women or, for that matter, to represent lesbian separatist policies. “The writing of *Gender Trouble* was perhaps the acerbic culmination of that history of unease and anger within feminism,” Butler writes.²¹ A large portion of this unease stemmed from the binary division into “women” and “men” that appeared to form the constant precondition for feminist thinking. Not only was this dichotomy annoying in itself. Its elevation to veritably theological status, as something “teleological” in some schools of French feminism, was more than Butler could stomach. Added to this was the tacit and obligatory supposition regarding the all-encompassing heterosexuality that was supported by the binary gender categorisation. This binarism, Butler argues, places complementary relationships or asymmetries between the gender categories in a way that simply reinforces, without marking out, the heterosexist conditions of the paradigm. Marking gender and sexuality as two separate fields, Butler claims, initially felt consistent for many scholars of lesbian and gay studies, in view of heterosexism on the whole, but also as a means of allowing and discovering dissonances between different sex/gender understandings and sexualities.²² But can gender and sexuality really be separated from one another? Butler asks. The question is rhetorical. She realises that such a separation always comes at a price and that gender would nevertheless make a ghostlike comeback if it were excluded as an analytical category.²³

²⁰ Bidy Martin, “Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary”, in *Femininity Played Straight. The Significance of Being Lesbian*, pp. 45-70.

²¹ Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects, in Elizabeth Weed & Naomi Schor (eds.), in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 2.

²² Butler, (1997), p. 3.

²³ Butler (1997), pp. 4-9.



What does the term queer signify today?

There are theoretical vogues in academia. Some theorists, terms, ideas appear at a given point in time to be more relevant than others. By using specific terms, we mark out our theoretic belonging, but the meaning of the terms varies depending on how they are used. Concept politics are about current definition battles, while concept history looks at the long-term structures in which the ideas have been expressed and the political events that have taken place. Concept history searches for climaxes and turning points that make it possible to study the idiomatic landscape in a new light. The idiomatic landscape has been strongly focused in social sciences and the humanities over the past decades, when poststructuralist theorists have wanted to explain all human experience in terms of language. Almost everything has been about discourse, nothing seem to have existed outside language and any comprehensive description that took a stand suddenly appeared so terribly naïve.

Both feminist research and queer studies have underlined that sexuality should be regarded as a construct produced by differences and power relationships. The question is where the emancipatory effort that was so essential to feminist theory and politics disappeared in the queer project? The history of the term emancipation harbours centuries of experiences and expectations. This aspect has always been central in feminist studies and even for the more classical variety of lesbian and gay studies. Around 1800, when the term emancipation came into common usage, it could summarise a historic process by which groups, not to say humanity as a whole, liberated itself from its oppressors and come of age. Thus, it is a revolutionary and promising term. The idea of emancipation should be seen as a process, a historic-philosophical movement concept that indicated entire processes and helped to solve them.

The idea of emancipation is closely associated with political activism, but academic accounts of queer theory have not always taken into consideration the activist roots of the word queer. “Historians who chronicle political movements rarely address parallel developments in academic writing, and academic theorists are none-too-consistent about acknowledging the



influence of direct-action politics on their scholars”, feminist scholar Linda Garber writes in *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*.²⁴ She also points out that only with a few exceptions, queer theorists have obscured the activist genealogy by emphasizing their academic predecessors, among them Continental postmodern philosophies, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and cultural studies.²⁵ Garber emphasizes that poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism all took place within academic in the U.S. after the literature, theory, and activism of lesbian-feminist / working-class / women of colour had established difference as the unavoidable, integral topic of U.S. feminism on all levels.²⁶

When the term queer was established in the Swedish academic and political vocabulary, it came to encompass a duality that characterises the Swedish local version of queer. While queer in the USA was largely an anti-identity project, queer in Sweden became identity politics. The most important thing queer has accomplished in Sweden is the introduction and establishment of the term heteronormativity.²⁷ The identity-political angling of the term queer in Sweden must reasonably be linked to the fact that there was an obvious need to formulate issues of identity politics in a new way. Borrowed words can never be simply imported from one culture to another since the context is entirely decisive to the use of the term. One of my most powerful memories from many long lecture tours on the theme of queer theory is that the marginalisation, outsidership and foreignness that queer theory formulated had relevance to very many groups of individuals. One of the most common questions concerned who was entitled to call themselves queer, even though the term never actually denoted a position of identity.

²⁴ Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*, 2001, pp. 176-177.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The word *heteronormativity* was established as a theoretical term in Gender and Queer Studies during the 1990's. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler did not initially use the term heteronormativity, they used terms *heterosexism* (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 30-32) and *the heterosexual matrix* (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 151: foot note 6) or *heterosexual hegemony* (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, pp. 4-12). Monique Wittig used in the 1980's the term *the heterosexual contract* (Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, s. 40-43), and Adrienne Rich introduced the term *the compulsory heterosexuality* (Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, *Signs* Nr. 5/1980). Michael Warner used the term *heteronormativity* in his introduction to the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet* (pp. vii-xxx). Warner had already 1991 discussed heteronormativity in *Social Text* Nr. 29/1991 (“Fear of a Queer Planet”) Another early reference to heteronormativity as a term is in Chris Brickell's quotation of Rosemary Hennessy's and Chrys Ingraham's articlel "Putting the Heterosexual Order in Crisis" from 1992 (*Mediations*, 16 [2], p. 17-23). In the anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet* the term *heteronormativity* was also used by Steven Seidman (p. 130). Diane Richardsson discussed the term *heteronormativity* in her introduction to *Theorising Heterosexuality* (1996).

It is impossible to know in advance how a new term will land and what impact it will have. Swedish feminist scholar Pia Laskar writes “that the enormous tension that has arisen between different camps could be resolved by sorting out the misunderstandings and improving knowledge about the oppression that queer theory specifically pinpoints.”²⁸ As usual, however, the development of the new field is celebrated on the grave of the old field. Since the new field cannot immediately take over its predecessor’s far-reaching territory, it proceeds in some directions, not all, as the sociologist Leslie McCall points out.²⁹ This is the case with the term queer, a term that is actively used in Sweden and currently has three main meanings: firstly, as an umbrella for the LGBTQI group (lesbian/gay/bi/trans/queer/intersex) and studies focusing on this group; secondly as an expression for a militant form of LGBTQI activism, summarised by the term queer activism, and characterised by an uncompromising in-your-face attitude; and thirdly, as a political and theoretical critique of heteronormativity.

The hardest history lesson appears to be to give honour where it is due. When the term queer was introduced by AIDS activists in the late 1980s and by academics in 1990, they had different purposes for using the term. The AIDS activists in ACT UP and Queer Nation were fighting for their own group, while the academics wanted to problematise lesbian and gay identities and associated studies. In an Americanised discourse, which several Western nations adopt, the division in queer studies has circled around the “gay pride” motto of the former identity politics movement, i.e. proud of being homosexual. Its queer correspondence is “gay shame”, which instead focuses on shame as the most determining component in the definition of queer as something despised, marginalised and excluded.

We need not discard the word queer, however, even though it often these days serve as a mainstream term and not as a fully critical phenomenon. We will have to live with the fact that queer has already become a link in our conceptual history. The institutionalisation of queer theory has meant that it has not entirely been able to stick to its original critical content. But we should not lose sight of the term queer, but instead remind ourselves constantly that even if it has become a conventional element, it nevertheless still has a critical potential.

²⁸ Pia Laskar, “Queert dilemma”, *Arena*, no. 3/2003, p. 19.

²⁹ Leslie McCall, “Intersektionalitetens komplexitet”, *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* no. 2-3/2005, p. 39.



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