

Capitalism and Gay Identity

John D'Emilio

Possible Applications:

Ontology
Social Ontology
Social Construction

Readability: Easy

Complimentary Texts/Resources:

Sally Haslanger "*Ontology and Social Construction*"

This is a good introduction to some basic ideas and distinctions that may be useful.

Foucault selections from *Discipline and Punish* or *The History of Sexuality*

[Kate carved out a nice selection from these for her Intro Ethics class that I'm sure she'd be willing to share.]

Thesis:

"Capitalism required a system of labor based on wages, rather than on either a largely self-sufficient household or slavery; and wages gave individuals a relative autonomy, which was the necessary material condition for the making of lesbianism and gayness."

Summary:

Main Target: the myth of the 'eternal homosexual'; there always were and always will be gay men and women.

"...gay men and lesbians have *not* always existed. Instead, they are a product of history, and have come into existence in a specific historical era."

The emergence of a stable gay identity was made possible by the rise of capitalism, the nuclear family, and WWII.

PART I

How it Works:

1. Prior to the rise of capitalism the *household economy* ruled. These were independent family units that were self-sufficient and patriarchal. The family is an economic unit whose members depend on one another to contribute to the production of the goods they all consume.
2. The rise of capitalism made wage labor more common. Family members are drawn out of the household and into the capitalist system of free labor.
3. The family transitions from an *economic* unit to an *affective* unit, "an institution that produced not goods but emotional satisfaction and happiness": the nuclear family.
4. This results in a changed understanding of *heterosexuality*. Sex is no longer linked *exclusively* to procreation (creating additional economic contributors to the family), but to happiness, intimacy, pleasure.
5. "In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on a sexual identity."
6. Though a gay identity and subculture had at this point emerged, it remained "rudimentary, unstable, and difficult to find". But WWII created a "new erotic situation conducive to homosexual expression."

“It plucked millions of young men and women, whose sexual identities were just forming, out of their homes, out of towns and small cities, out of the heterosexual environment of the family, and dropped them into sex-segregated situations—as GIs, as WACs and WAVEs, in same-sex rooming houses for women workers who relocated to seek employment. The war freed millions of men and women from the settings where heterosexuality was normally imposed. For men and women already gay, it provided an opportunity to meet people like themselves. Others could become gay because of the temporary freedom to explore sexuality that the war provided.”

PART II

The Gay Identity, Family, and Capitalism

Capitalism has weakened the *material* (or economic) bonds of the family, creating growing instability in the place that is supposed to be the source of happiness and emotional security. Yet the family remains the main reproductive structure in capitalism (one necessary for generating more workers and sustaining capitalism)

Conclusion:

“On the one hand, capitalism continually weakens the material foundation of family life, making it possible for individuals to live outside the family, and for a lesbian and gay male identity to develop. On the other, it needs to push men and women into families, at least long enough to reproduce the next generation of workers. **The elevation of the family to ideological preeminence guarantees that capitalist society will reproduce not just children, but heterosexism and homophobia. In the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem.**”

Class Activities:

D’Emilio is open about the fact that this history of the emergence of a gay identity is part of a larger strategy. It may be worthwhile to discuss the ‘strategic’ choices he makes, why he makes them, and whether there may be tension between these choices and his claims that this is an “accurate” theory of gay history. What is the relationship between accuracy and breadth?

This strategy is ostensibly for advancing a “sound lesbian/gay politics”, but is there something else to which he may be equally committed?

D’Emilio distinguishes between homosexual behavior and homosexual identities:

“Evidence from colonial New England court records and church sermons indicates that male and female homosexual behavior existed in the seventeenth century. Homosexual *behavior*, however, is different from homosexual *identity*.”

What are things that today may just be considered ‘behaviors’, which are separable and distinct from an individual’s identity or self?

D’Emilio several times emphasizes that gay men and women maintain an ‘outsider’ status to the *heterosexual* family, which he seems to equate with the nuclear family. In fact this is an important claim that is required for him to reach his final conclusions regarding the connection between capitalism and homophobia and heterosexism. This was published in 1993 (and the ideas were formulated much earlier - 1979 to 1980), how has his opposition between the family unit and the gay identity held up?