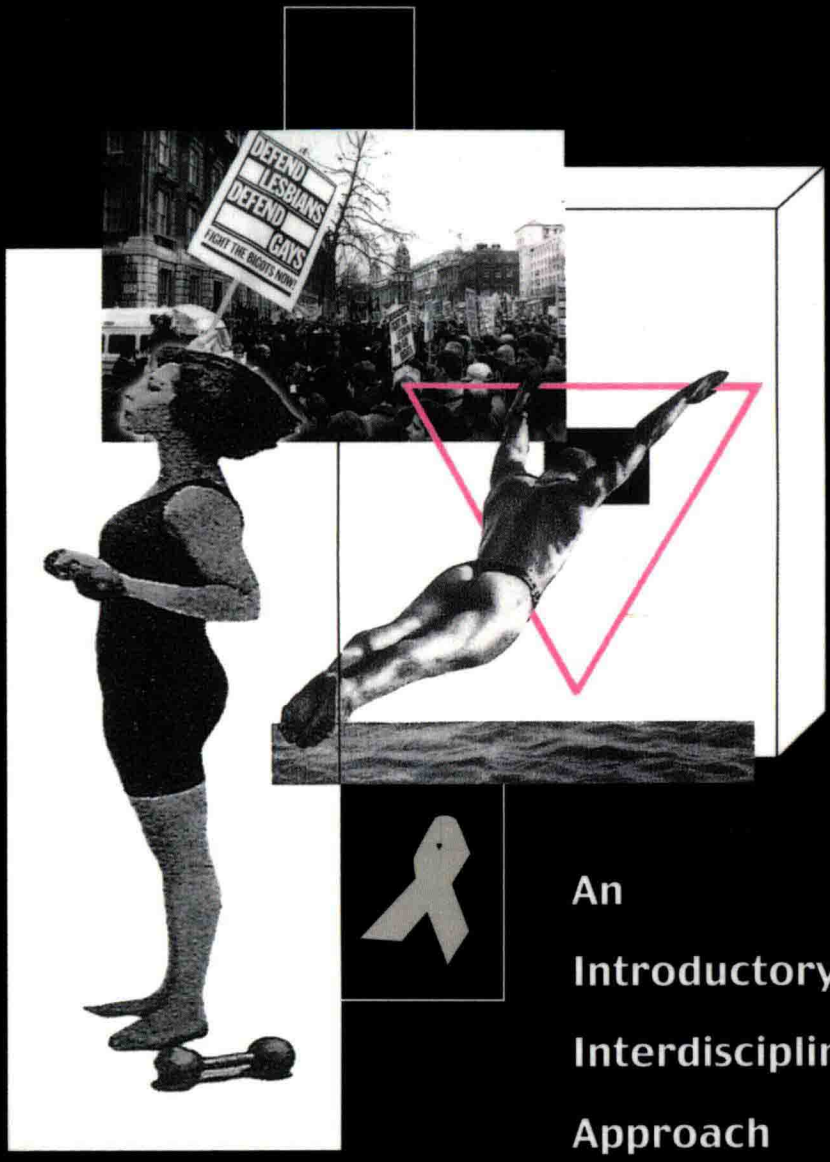
Lesbian and Gay Studies



An Introductory, Interdisciplinary Approach

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Edited by
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Foreword

Mary Mcintosh

I wonder now what I would have thought thirty years ago if I had been told that there would be a whole book, of fourteen chapters no less, on lesbian and gay studies. I would certainly not have believed that we could reach such a degree of acceptance, to be represented in almost every discipline and in the most respected institutions – at least in northern Europe and the English-speaking world, to be published by reputable academic publishers and in international refereed journals. Perhaps I would not have wanted to see this, either. At that time, we wanted above all to challenge heterosexual assumptions, rather than to set up our own stall alongside theirs. We could not imagine having enough strength to sustain that subversive project within the very bastions of respectability. Nor did we think that academia, respectable as it might be, was a seat of power. It was an ivory tower, set beside the main stream, with a good view, perhaps, but little influence. The serious battles lay elsewhere, in the 'real' world. In our most optimistic moments, we would have thought that these battles would have been won and there would be no more distinction between gay and straight and no need for lesbian and gay studies to exist.

As it turns out, the gay/straight divide has become even clearer as each has become naturalized as a way of life rather than a state of moral being and more lesbians and gays have become visible to the straight world. There is much more to study, and more of us to study it. In this, academia is not divided off from the world outside, but is deeply influential and even playing a leading role. Already there can be few professional people, journalists or media workers under 50 who have not been to a university with a student gay society. In the future, all of these people will have glimpsed some form of lesbian or gay studies, at least at the periphery of their vision, and many will have had a closer encounter. In the short term academia may be isolated, but in the longer term and as higher education expands it plays a significant part in shaping social consciousness. At the very least, the media will purvey an understanding that gays and lesbians exist and that they have their own pride, their own perspectives and concerns.

Yet it is often said that we in lesbian and gay studies are remote from the ordinary gay world and from the gay movement because we are aware of the lesbian and gay identities as the product of a particular period or culture, whereas the average lesbian or gay has a folk-essentialist view and, indeed, likes to think that 'we' have always been there, throughout historical and cultural oppression.

Similarly, it is sometimes said that queer theory is threatening and destabilizing to the movement because it challenges identity. I think, on the contrary, that queer theory may be debilitating because it is obscure, elitist and merely fashionable. In fact folk-essentialism and the naturalizing tendency are part of lesbian and gay studies. Whatever theories to the contrary are promulgated within them, the very fact that lesbian and gay studies have taken on an institutional form tends to confirm a naturalized perception of sexualities as ways of life, suggesting a pluralist multicultural mutual tolerance rather than a fundamental challenge to heterosexual hegemony. Just as in day-to-day life outside the academy, the naturalized perception is the one we have to live by and we have built networks, organizations and media and colonized social spaces on that basis.

The opposition between transgression and liberal collusion that has so plagued the gay movement has an obvious relation to contrasting theories within lesbian and gay studies, or better, contrasting moments within lesbian and gay studies. At moments we explore differences between categories that we accept as given, or power relations between groups that we treat as pre-defined. At others, we deconstruct the whole idea of gay and straight, feminine and masculine, and even woman and man. The shift towards culture and away from structure in lesbian and gay studies, as in intellectual life in general, emphasizes the deconstructive moment so that the naturalizing one is seen as old-fashioned, unsophisticated or outdated. But in practice, the two are not mutually exclusive and neither needs to displace the other. The movement, which gains its momentum from identity politics, despite recurrent 'queer' manifestations, needs research that is apparently humanistic to support its equal rights campaigning; as well as research that challenges the whole heterosexual order in which we are identified, showing the straight world how bizarre it seems from a lesbian or gay perspective. And as well as research that explores and problematizes questions of lesbian and/or gay identity, we need research that supports campaigning by presenting positive images and by increasing our understanding of the forces arrayed against us, and we also need research on issues of concern to us as people living lesbian or gay lives in present-day society. In addition, since the seed bed of movement activity is a rich and flourishing gay culture and an imaginable community, lesbian and gay studies needs to support that culture by participating in it and giving it wider currency.

We should be wary of presuming to play a leading role in the long run. An unfortunate imperative of the academic milieu is that we each make our name by saying something new and that we know we have moved forward only when we have discredited something old. We are prey to fashion, in a way that mirrors the succession of styles in dress and music which serve to distinguish generations and set them against each other, rather than representing real progression. Nevertheless, we have much that is important to offer and a considerable responsibility, especially as a growing proportion of the population pass through our classrooms. What, I wonder now, lies in store in the next thirty years?

Contents

1 The Challenge of Lesbian and Gay Studies

Jeffrey Weeks

Bringing scholars together to discuss lesbian and gay studies, whether in a book or in a conference, invites a series of stark questions: as a start, at the very least 'What?' 'Why?' 'How?' 'Where?' In this book we show the range of challenging studies that is now encompassed by the broad title, while in this introduction I will attempt to answer some at least of the questions.

The 'where?' question is the easiest to address, although the answers reveal the ambiguous status of lesbian and gay studies. Since the 1970s a vast amount of work has been produced that can broadly fall under the label. Originally much of this emerging work came from outside the universities, as a grassroots response to the emergence of the lesbian and gay movements after 1970, but increasingly it became part of the university curriculum in universities across Europe, North America and Australasia. Serious study of homosocial and homosexual life is now undertaken in all Western, and many non-Western countries, though often it lacks academic respectability. There are major intellectual achievements. But there is still a sense of vulnerability about the area of work. Lesbian and gay studies still hover on the borders of full respectability.

Yet it is conducted on a wide scale, and seems to have a life of its own, despite vicissitudes in certain countries and institutions: at various times over the past generation particular countries and universities appear to have taken the lead, then faded. Other foci have then emerged. In recent years the American influence has been most obvious, but as this book demonstrates there has been a major and continuing European input, with distinctive intellectual and political implications. Recent collections of work on lesbian and gay studies underline the importance of the two-way flow across cultures and academic traditions, and the major formative influence of European work is obvious (see, for example, Abelove et al., 1993; Medhurst and Munt, 1997; Nardi and Schneider, 1998). If, as we argue, lesbian and gay studies is best seen as a dialogue across disciplines, experiences and differences, then an account of developments in one part of the world is a vital part of understanding the rich tapestry that this field of work has become. Hence the concentration in this book on the specifically European contributions to the development of lesbian and gay studies. The conversation that is lesbian and gay studies requires that all voices are heard fully.

This nevertheless pinpoints a paradox at the heart of lesbian and gay studies. Many participants spend a great deal of time on deconstruction, showing differences, divisions, tensions. But the proliferation of monographs, readers, articles,

colloquia and conferences suggest that we need to find a space where certain common themes are discussed. And that same paradox informs what we want to say in this introduction. Because a simultaneous recognition of difference, by gender, nationality, discipline, career, position or whatever, and a search for common ground, may actually constitute what lesbian and gay studies is and can be (Adam et al., 1998). In other words, at the heart of the enterprise is the attempt to find a common language in which we can speak, in different accents.

The diversity of lesbian and gay studies

Lesbian and gay studies means many things to people, at different times, in different countries. In fact, it often seems easier to define what it is not rather than what it is. There is a general agreement that it is not a single discipline with a single object of study. Obviously, there are common themes and there is a lot of coming together at various times. The object of study has to a large extent often been the lives of lesbian and gay people themselves: identities, experience of oppression, struggles for recognition, through history and in literature and so on. But we are also concerned with other things outside that, from legal codes to cultural representation, defining parts of lived life, certainly, but developing modes of interpretation and audiences that are often distinctive, and throw stark light on heterosexuality as much as homosexuality. So it is very difficult to see this area as a single discipline that will lie alongside other disciplines, although sometimes we may want to argue for that. There is something that inherently holds those involved together, but it is not a common disciplinary focus.

Similarly, it is difficult to detect a single theoretical position that unifies lesbian and gay studies. The history of work in lesbian and gay studies over the last twenty-five years has seen a number of major theoretical differences. During the 1980s, most of the debates at conferences and in journals were on the wearisome theme of essentialism versus constructionism, that is the degree to which homosexuality can be seen as the focus of an essential core identity and minority experience consistent across time and place, or as an historically variable and culturally specific phenomenon, a 'historical invention' (Altman et al., 1989; Foucault, 1979; Stein, 1990). More recently, many have been, to a large extent, concerned with the impact of 'queer studies' and what its relationship is to other studies and to politics (for example, Jagose, 1996; Seidman, 1996; Warner, 1993). Queer studies has questioned the fixity of sexual and gender boundaries, and offered a picture of sexual categories as fluid and changeable, in a way that builds on, and consciously radicalizes, constructionist insights. It claims a personal and critical stance which is deliberately subversive and transgressive of taken-for-granted categories of thought and experience. Throughout, feminist controversies have interwoven with lesbian and gay debates, and produced different inflections, for example concerning the complex relationship of male and female homosexuality, and the significance of male power. But though influential, such intellectual and political interventions have never managed to obliterate alternative voices. Different theoretical positions have been put forward and argued for, have informed debates, and raised the

temperature. But it is difficult to find a theoretical position which has become hegemonic, despite the sometimes fevered accusations of polemicists.

That intellectual diversity has been a strength. It is important here to bear in mind that even the arguments that some of us, at least, find profoundly wrong – like the biological arguments announcing the gay gene or the gay brain – are a necessary part of the debate in lesbian and gay studies and cannot be excluded from it, because they have social consequences; they matter to the constituency of lesbian and gay studies and they have to be answered even if many of us disagree fundamentally with them. And there is another key point to make here: it is clearly wrong to read on from any theoretical position, whether it is self-styled as essentialist or constructionist, any single political implication. There is no necessary political belonging to any theoretical position. There are obvious examples of this: the biological essentialist arguments of the first generation of writers on homosexuality were used both to argue for rights for lesbian and gay people, and by the Nazis in the 1930s to argue for the suppression and even extermination of homosexuals (Weeks, 1986). Similarly today, although the lesbian and gay movement (in the United States particularly) has taken up and used the argument for a gay gene or a gay brain – often very enthusiastically – to back the claim for full civil rights, the very same arguments have been used by moral Conservatives to campaign for exactly the opposite. For example, in Britain, the former Chief Rabbi argued that the theory of a gay gene was an important breakthrough because it meant that we could then learn how to eliminate the gene. So a theory which is taken up in one position to argue for a particular case, can be used in exactly the opposite way. It is dangerous to get too trapped on specific theoretical battlefields. The greater priority is to find and articulate the values we can share than the issues that divide.

Just as there is no common theoretical core, lesbian and gay studies does not have a single methodology. Although some people have argued for a stronger methodological purity, it should surely be axiomatic that various approaches, whether quantitative or qualitative methodologies, can be used. Large- or small-scale quantifiable and comparative surveys have their uses, just as personal narratives have theirs (Plummer, 1995). They can complement each other, and which one we use has to be a pragmatic decision and not one made a priori. But that does not mean that the thinking about methodologies is irrelevant. For example, within lesbian and gay studies, borrowing to a large extent from the debates of feminists, the emphasis on the reflexive approach, which involves listening to, engaging with, and responding to the people we are researching, has been crucial because it relates us as actors to the participants in our research. At the same time, the development of 'objective knowledge', based on the models of traditional social scientific empirical research, can often prove an effective weapon in engaging with public authorities, as studies relating to AIDS have demonstrated (for example, Hubert et al., 1998).

If there is diversity in theoretical and methodological approaches, lesbian and gay studies is not, either, unified by a common politics in the sense that participants can possibly agree on everything, or sometimes, anything. Lesbian and gay politics is always to a certain extent inflected by the wider politics that individuals feel they

belong to, whether it is left or right, radical, liberal or conservative. Lesbians and gays are divided by arguments, and experiences, around gender, around class, around race and ethnicity, around nationality. And of course there is significant differentiation by age and generation. Queer studies and queer activism, more transparently, have spent an enormous amount of energy rejecting the pioneers of the 1970s as if they had achieved little: what Gayle Rubin describes as a theoretical 'erasure' (Rubin and Butler, 1994: 82), whereas in fact there are strong continuities in themes, tone and content: you do not build a house without a strong base.

But there is a common political root to lesbian and gay studies. Its origins lie in the new lesbian and gay movements as they emerged in the early 1970s. All those involved would claim some affinity in a commitment to sexual justice, greater legal and social equality for non-heterosexual people, and in a willingness to be identified as lesbian and gay in the academy. Without that, lesbian and gay studies would lack defining characteristics. But this raises questions about the validity of the work conducted under that description. Just as women's studies has often been criticized for speaking from one standpoint, and therefore opening itself to the charge of 'bias' or 'subjectivity', so lesbian and gay studies is open to the same charge. Both are involved in what Epstein (1996) calls 'credibility struggles', in which the nature of knowledge is contested, and where the boundaries are being redrawn on who is allowed to speak with authority and credibility on a particular subject. One of the issues this raises is to what extent lesbian and gay studies can be 'scientific' in its approach. There is a problem of language here. In Britain, when using the word 'science', people tend to think of the natural sciences or a particular form of social sciences. On the continent of Europe it is used much more in relation to higher levels of scholarship. Whatever the value of the term 'scientific', there can be little disagreement that if it is to be credible, lesbian and gay studies should certainly be scholarly – which does not mean that it has to be abstract, or esoteric. Again, there is a problem in the different ways disciplines are expressed, but we should not abandon the protocols of the discipline that we work within, unless we can criticize them appropriately. And the work we do must be good work, not shoddy. However, lurking in lesbian and gay studies is the question of whom its practitioners are speaking for. Awareness of audience requires that 'science' or 'scholarship' is balanced by accessibility, precisely because of the underlying broad political stance which can alone give lesbian and gay studies meaning.

What lesbian and gay studies is – or could be

So what is lesbian and gay studies? We can offer broad descriptions. It is clearly pluralist; it is disputatious; it is often full of tensions and divisions. Yet, it follows from the existence of books like this that there are enough shared values and perspectives to keep us plugging on together and that is very important. So what do we have in common?

First of all, lesbian and gay studies must be about the recognition of the need to learn to live with differences and to find ways of resolving differences in dialogue with one another in an open and democratic fashion. Easier said than

done, but that is surely a prerequisite of living in a pluralist society, and coming to terms with sexual diversity. It is the fundamental challenge in the wider political world too. It is not easy, as we know, to find what we have in common as well as recognizing what differentiates us. Nevertheless, that seems to be the supreme challenge in the postmodern world.

Secondly, although there cannot be a single political position, lesbian and gay studies is rooted in a specific if broad political and cultural stance, one claiming sexual justice. The changing social contexts and influences have shaped what can be said at particular times, and it is essential to remember here how some of the key and most influential works in lesbian and gay studies emerged in the context of specific political debates.

Let us choose a few at random. Mary McIntosh's article on the homosexual role (McIntosh, 1981; see also Weeks, 1998a), a key document in the new historical approach to homosexuality, and in providing insights into the significance of changing identities, was written before gay liberation in a specific political context in Britain: the campaign to change the law. It has been enormously influential because it both reflected the debates of the late 1960s and offered an alternative way of analysing lesbian and gay history and the nature of homosexuality. It challenged the idea of homosexuality as a specific 'condition', and instead suggested it was a complex social creation. It opened up crucial new avenues for exploration and debate. But as McIntosh makes clear (1981) the history of its publication was tempered by political caution – a reluctance on her part to undermine the arguments of law reformers, in a difficult climate, that homosexuality was an unfortunate condition for which individuals should not be punished – just as its subsequent impact was shaped by the emergence of gay liberation.

Another quite different but extremely influential body of work is that of the American historian, John Boswell (1980, 1994). One of the interesting features of Boswell's work is that it again, covertly at least, is engaged in a political struggle in a particular political context, this time on the role of the Christian Church in shaping homophobia. He not only offers major new insights into lesbian and gay history, but also fundamentally challenges the protocols of the faith that he belonged to (the Roman Catholic Church). His work is emotionally geared, it appears, to the argument that the Roman Catholic Church has abandoned its tolerant origins and early history, and that it has gone wrong on sexual and moral issues. And from his book on homosexuality and Christian toleration in ancient and early medieval times to his last book on same sex partnerships and 'marriage', you can see this dialogue going on all the time with the traditions of Roman Catholicism.

A further example is provided by the French gay theorist, Guy Hocquenghem. His early work on 'homosexual desire' (published in France in 1972, English edition 1978) represented a juncture of certain French theoretical debates, strongly influenced by the delirium of 1968, and gay liberation. The flavour of that book cannot be divorced from the political and cultural conjuncture in which he wrote. His subsequent writings, not least on paedophilia, remained on the controversial cutting edge of sexual debate, and embroiled him in ongoing scandal. But what survives is the sense of the moral case for homosexual emancipation battling

against an intractable social categorization and normalization, which necessarily shapes the terms of the intervention (see Marshall, 1996).

So politics in a broad sense is inescapably part of lesbian and gay studies, but impacts in different ways at different times. In this lesbian and gay studies is in principle the same as other specialized fields (and perhaps the same as knowledge in general). But lesbian and gay studies has had to engage with societal assumptions about the nature of sexuality, which has given research on the erotic a tinge of 'danger'.

Thirdly, this very sense of danger has provided a more specific unifying standpoint: at the core of all the best work that has been undertaken is a questioning of the sexual orthodoxy, and a fundamental critique of the heterosexual norm. The claim to lesbian and gay rights, for equality and justice, demands a basic challenge to the historical privileging of heterosexuality. So lesbian and gay studies cannot simply be about what lesbians and gays do. It must also be about the way societies have structured sexuality throughout time and the impact of that structuring on the very existence of non-heterosexual ways of life.

It follows that lesbian and gay studies is rooted in a distinctive form of politics that has developed around this understanding – identity politics – which simultaneously affirms the validity of homosexual life choices and confronts the various forms of power which deny lesbian and gay life chances. It could hardly be anything else. At the core is a sense of rooted belonging that comes from identity and forms of community (although these vary greatly, and are often problematic). We cannot escape the way identity is constructed as a means of political mobilization and political legitimization in the contemporary world. Whether that form of identity is around nationalism, or around race, or even just around the construction of a Conservative or Social Democratic political position, what politics is about is the construction of an identity. Lesbian and gay identity formation, identity politics, therefore offers a particular stance on the nature of modern society, about the possibilities of a pluralistic and democratic society. Even that position which has challenged the traditions of lesbian and gay politics over the last few years – the queer insurgency – is simultaneously about identity and the construction of identity (Weeks, 1995). It is in part about the rejection of the way lesbian and gay politics has gone, but nevertheless it is also about forming an identity – not so much around sexual orientation, but about style, about stance, about choice. It appears that however much we might reject the notion of a fixed identity, we cannot easily escape the fact that lesbian and gay studies is rooted in identity politics.

Within that identity politics there is an interesting tension, between what has been described as a moment of transgression and the moment of citizenship (Weeks, 1995). There have been periods in the history of all the new social movements since the 1960s when there has been an emphasis on confronting the status quo through subversion and transgression (by defiantly flaunting sexual difference; the way we dress; the way we want to live together, the way we want to challenge the dominant codes). But at times there has also been a strong stress on claiming full equality, the moment of citizenship, where we campaign for rights; where we fight for changes in the law on sex; when we claim partnership recognition, as many in Europe have done. The interesting point about these two