

Evolution of Homosexuality from Action to Identity in Twentieth-Century America

Pyokyeong Son

Politics of Sexuality

Dr. Rachel Gelfand

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Homosexuality as an institutionalized class, a description of not the actions of but the quality of persons, is an invention of the recent modern era, especially in America. Homosexual acts have been part of human discourse and indeed human social life throughout history, yet the homosexual as an identity is a recent invention of the politico-legal, and socio-linguistic system of our modern era. I argue that it is this transition from homosexuality being treated as an *action*, to an *identity class*, that created the modern definition of homosexuality we are familiar as of today, while the legal apparatus described in Margot Canaday's *Straight State*, as well as behavioral rituals described in Jane Ward's "Not Gay", were the instigator and catalyst of the formation of this identity, with psychology forming a justification for both the unifier (in the case of homosexuality) and separator (in heterosexuality or "heteroflexibility") in both cases.

### I. Homosexuality as Unified Action and Identity

Mainstream heteronormative culture is defined as much by the contents it identifies with as by that which it excludes or activities it circumscribes. Thus, the gatekeeping of *normality*, *respectability*, and, in the case of America, of *economic productivity* is of utmost importance. For the burgeoning middle class in mid-20th century America, "Victorian sexuality and [...] middle-class notions of sexuality" are a core mindset (Peiss, 2004, 14), though the coinage of *heterosexuality*, as a "manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality"—the quality of a normal individual, one's passions and pleasures, in contrast to action—is as recent as 1934 (Ambrosino, 2017). Then on, heterosexuality and its binary complement, homosexuality, are also constructed—though via more circuitous and negative definitions—first by psychiatry and later by the politico-legal system. By the mid-century, it was no longer tightly

bound with the action of homosexuality itself but rather constituted itself as a class, a class “not bound up with [actions] but [...] as a class of person” (Canaday, 2009, 219).

The system of immigration delineates the boundaries of acceptable mainstream behavior and thus is at the forefront of this creation of homosexual identity. Canaday’s illustration of the immigration system in the late 19th- and early 20th-century United States offers a convincing recollection of the formation of this notion. As “homosexuality went from a total nonentity to a commonly understood category,” the United States bureaucratic system “in the same years [...] went from a fledgling to a full-service bureaucracy,” and thus embedded in itself a clear idea of desirable normalcy in its citizenry (Canaday, 258). At its boundaries were immigration officials who “[understood] sexual perversion—whether evidenced in sexual acts, gender presentation, or physical anatomy—as inversely related to one’s desirability for citizenship” (Canaday, 23). Initially with only a “vague idea of what they were looking for,” bodies were scoured as sites where perverted action would manifest as an identity, as “inspectors believed that with just a glance, they could identify the most defective of new arrivals [through] 'an oddity of dress' or 'unusual decoration worn on the clothing' that could identify 'sexual habits and relations’” (Canaday, 23). As the attention refocused from keeping out “perverse acts” onto keeping out “perverse immigrants,” there is broader language about class, first as a “public charge,” and eventually into a “class [...] for which the English language does not supply a polite term” (Canaday, 42). By the mid-century, homosexuality was now a *status charge* and “was not bound up with state criminal laws but vetted the homosexual alien as a class of person,” specifically through the McWalter act that classified homosexuality as a form of psychopathy, evidenced by

the DSM which published it as a mental illness—homosexuality fully formed as a class of undesirable and defective humans, a marker and class to exclude (Canaday, 219).

## II. Heterosexuality as the Separation of Action and Identity

Simultaneously with this circumscription of normalcy, we also observe forms of homosexual actions in mainstream heteronormative culture, actions which are homosexual yet do not constitute an individual as a homosexual person, but rather as an exploration and limitation of the heterosexual identity. It is not the identification of outsiders but of acceptable action through the exploration of its boundaries, of *gender regulation*, that one more firmly establishes and demonstrates one's heterosexual identity.

“Heteroflexible” exploration is at the core of this discussion of contouring the boundaries of heterosexuality; indeed, Ward suggests “that when straight white men approach homosexual sex in the 'right' way [...] doing so functions to bolster not only their heterosexuality but also their masculinity” (Ward, 2015, 5). The navy’s “initiation rituals involving cross-dressing, spanking, simulated oral and anal sex,” as well as a fraternity hazing process, including your “pledges/rooks to eat human shit or do an elephant walk [a process involving anal penetration]” (Ward, 4), are crucial in these instances. For the heterosexual individual, it is crucial to deliberately sever action and identity; one may call it “‘experimentation,' 'accident,' 'friendship,' 'joke,' [or a] 'game,'” and take steps to distinguish “engaging in same-sex sexuality [and] the lesbian and gay” (Ward, 23). It is this participation in *action*, then the later distancing it from one's *identity*, that forms the core of heterosexual, mainstream identity, a ritual “for heterosexuals to compare themselves to their 'homosexual' counterparts,” constructing

homosexual identity as external, a reflection or antithesis for heterosexual identity to construct itself on (Ward, 39).

This circuitous route of heterosexual identity formation also has its justifications—real or imagined—in psychology. For this separation of action and identity, one must contend that identity is fixed, unchanging regardless of action, and indeed modern psychology—as mid-century psychology did in the case of immigration—administers a convenient form: that “people are born with a core sexual orientation that remains the same regardless of periodic and/or situational attractions and desires that fall outside of its boundaries” (Ward, 41). A clear boundary is drawn, and spaces are constructed where one can safely explore and joke about (as in “the United States, where homosexual accidents make for great comedy”), while the distancing of identity from action even more firmly binds their homosexual identity (Ward, 27). Furthermore, Ward’s interpretation that “[homosexual action] itself is a hetero-masculine fetish, one that allows men access to homosexual activity without the stigma of gay identity,” and of the heterosexual man’s internal experience of “disidentifies with these desires, drawing on the power of heteronormative scripts” is a direct analog of how engaging and distancing in preserves and furthers heteronormativity in oneself (Ward, 31). Heterosexuality is fixed, the default, mainstream, and norm—one argues—and may its boundaries be drawn and measured through “aberrations” of homoerotic action, but the identity itself, built again upon negative definitions and circumscription, remains intact.

Ultimately, the mid-20th century consecrations from hetero- and homosexual *actions* to *identity* have not only redefined the American bureaucratic apparatus but have also enforced this

heteronormative framework by delineating and policing the boundaries of acceptable behavior and desirability. The interplay between societal institutions—legal, psychological, and cultural examined in this essay—has been instrumental in shaping and solidifying these identities. This system of classification and identification of self and others, in a wide range of formalities, has implications not only within the queer community who adopt these languages but also for the understanding of human sexuality and identity formation. It is crucial to critically assess these constructs, fully aware of their origins and implications, to recognize these identities for what they are—social constructions conveniently packaged to reify the myriad expressions and actions of human sexuality.

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