

Introduction

ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, the world changed. In the months following this late summer day when commercial jetliners flew purposely into both the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the United States perceived itself as vulnerable to international terrorism at home for the first time, these words have been written or spoken thousands of times. This excess of rhetoric regarding a changed world can be forgiven a naïve people accustomed to conflating their nation with the world; still, it is true that for many citizens of the United States their nation would never be the same. But just how the world or the nation has changed or will change as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 2001 is as yet unclear. In the weeks following the attacks, CNN gave its network over to what it called “America’s New War,” and attempts to understand anew international political struggles and the intricacies of foreign policy, diplomacy, and military hardware eclipsed much of what would otherwise be considered newsworthy.

One such example came less than a week after the terrorist attacks: The Pentagon issued a “stop loss order” to all branches of the military, an order that suspended discharges—including those of service members who disclose their homosexuality. On the face of it, this might have seemed an amazing victory for gay rights. After all, less than a decade earlier, the nation’s Democratic president, Bill Clinton, had met with months of angry protestation for

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suggesting that gay men and lesbians should be allowed to serve in the military. As finally implemented, Clinton's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy permitted gay men and lesbians to serve but also continued to leave them subject to discharge for disclosing their gay or lesbian identity. In effect, gay men and lesbians could serve as long as no one knew they were gay or lesbian. Under this policy, predictably, discharges of gay and lesbian service members skyrocketed. But in 2001, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks and under the more socially conservative Republican administration of George W. Bush, gays would be allowed to serve regardless of any declarations of their sexual identity.

That this seemingly momentous change in military policy was adopted by a Republican president is not the most amazing part of this story (indeed, during the Gulf War, the administration of the first George Bush had similarly suspended all discharges, including those for violations of the military's gay ban). More dramatic was the deafening cultural and societal silence surrounding this change in policy. In 1993, the mere idea that lesbians and gay men should be permitted to serve openly in the military had inspired right-wing extremist groups and powerful social conservatives to launch a firestorm of protest that threatened to derail the entire agenda of a newly elected president. How can it be explained, then, that eight short years later the Pentagon's suspension of discharges went largely overlooked and unremarked by political pundits, news organizations, military experts, religious leaders, and gay activists? Was it the sheer gravity of President Bush's declared war against terrorism that made all other news pale by comparison? Was it the newly discovered unity of the U.S. people, content finally to join the armed forces of the world in permitting gay men and lesbians to serve openly in uniform? Or had the perceived threat to morale, order, and discipline—presented with such certainty a decade before—vanished in the presence of a new enemy, one simultaneously outside and inside the United States?

No doubt these explanations help account for some of the lack of fanfare by gay people and straight people alike, but for many

the explanation was somewhat simpler: ignorance. And the importance of this pervasive lack of awareness of changes in military policy lies not in what it tells us about 2001 but rather in what it can teach us about Clinton's failed attempt to lift the ban in 1993 and the general progress of gay rights in the United States.

In 2001, permitting gay men and lesbians to serve openly in the U.S. military was not perceived as an important issue precisely because the military did not want it to be perceived as an important issue. The nation was at war; nations at war take extraordinary measures, and their militaries take even more extraordinary measures. Thousands of reserves were called into active duty as the Pentagon contemplated military strikes, and the National Guard was deployed in all major airports around the country as the nation entered a new era of domestic militarization. Huge budget increases for the U.S. Border Patrol passed Congress with few waves, allowing increased militarization of both the U.S.-Mexican and U.S.-Canadian borders. In this climate of national uncertainty and fear, with dissenting voices in the nation's capital few and far between, it is not surprising that many people found it inappropriate to question the military; in fact, it would not have been surprising even if the change in policy regarding the suspension of gay discharges had been widely known.¹

Still, as many who had been involved in the 1993 debate knew only too well, the military has always curtailed discharges—including those of gay and lesbian service personnel—during times of war. In World War II, in Korea, in Vietnam, and in the Gulf War, U.S. armed forces discharges of gay men and lesbians dropped dramatically or (in the case of the Gulf War) were suspended altogether. Sadly, however, as soon as the nation's conflicts come to an end, so too does the fleeting tolerance of the U.S. military toward its gay and lesbian service members.

The history of selective objections to gay and lesbian military participation is interesting from a number of different perspectives. First, it has made a lie of the military's long-standing contention that the presence of homosexuals negatively affects the ability of the armed services to accomplish their mission. If this

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were true, then why in times of war, when the stakes of mission failure are so much higher, would gay men and lesbians be allowed to serve? And why would the presence of gay and lesbian soldiers among the ranks be more threatening to “morale, good order, and discipline” in times of peace than in times of war?

Second, on the surface, the military’s suspension of discharges during times of conflict appears punitive: When bodies are needed to put in harm’s way, what more culturally disposable bodies are there than gay and lesbian bodies (a huge number of which are also bodies of color and working-class bodies, as these groups are overrepresented among the nation’s fighting forces)? While this is no doubt a publicly unacknowledged part of the military justification, there is another reason for the suspension of discharges during wartime. Having created a policy that excludes homosexuals, the military *must* suspend discharges when the need for person power is at its peak. Again never admitted publicly, the military’s own policy that prohibits “out” gay and lesbian personnel from serving in the military functions as a kind of reverse recruitment process in times of war. If discharges were not suspended, some soldiers might be tempted to declare themselves openly gay, regardless of their sexual orientation, to avoid having to go to war. The Pentagon’s fear is familiar to anyone who has ever seen Corporal Klinger in a dress. Not as obvious, however, is the way the Pentagon itself has increased the effectiveness of this strategy for anyone who wishes to deploy it.

During the 1980s and 1990s, simple declarations of gay identity became grounds for removal from the U.S. military, regardless of the existence of sexual contact. Simultaneously, the type of discharge granted to servicepersons who declared they were gay or lesbian was upgraded to “honorable,” which meant that separation from the military for homosexuality would carry neither social stigma nor individual punishment. As a result, the very Pentagon ban that prohibits participation of “out” gay men and lesbians in the military makes wartime suspension of the policy to rid the military of gay men and lesbians absolutely necessary.

Third, and perhaps most interesting of all, is the role that military policy has played in the creation of a “homosexual” identity. In the policies adopted to exclude homosexuals, in the medical justifications for the exclusion of homosexuals, and in both the military and civil court cases given the task of adjudicating disputes that arise from the policies and medical findings, a new kind of person emerges: the gay and lesbian subject. I am not suggesting that military policy is responsible for making people queer (although perhaps); I am simply suggesting that, in the struggle for gay equality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the military has played a central role.

As medical scientists joined forces with the military, and as military courts scrambled to make new rulings that would support the Pentagon’s position, much of the nineteenth-century science of sexology became the basis of twentieth- and twenty-first-century military policy. What emerged from this fusion was a new way of making truth of human sex acts and sexual behaviors long practiced but seldom acknowledged. The new truth to be discerned from these acts was not focused on discovering new techniques for sexual pleasure; its target was more interior. If, as Michel Foucault suggested, in the nineteenth century sex had become the way to tell the truth about oneself, then in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, new techniques and strategies of power would be invented to extract that truth from others less willing to “give it up” freely. In the hands of overzealous medical scientists armed with the power of the State, unapproved sexual acts would be indications of something far more sinister about a person: a degenerative condition, a character flaw, a criminal mind.

Often, changes in the strategies of gay and lesbian activists were in response to these changes in military policy—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Centrally, the military is a place where arguments about what gay men and lesbians *are* could be witnessed often at a decibel level reserved only for those accustomed to making war. These debates about identity frequently

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mirrored debates that would later occur in society, but it was in the military that the question of gay and lesbian identity and the presence of gay and lesbian persons first made an appearance in the official records of the U.S. government.

How did the creation of sexuality as a new category of person bring the “homosexual” into being, not only as a new form of person but also as a new category of social and legal *subject*? It is this process that I explore in the pages that follow. As I have suggested, the U.S. military has played a central role in defining the “homosexual” juridically, presenting authoritatively and *officially* who and what lesbians and gay men *are*, creating a category of identity that would serve both as a new site of regulation and a new form of resistance to regulation. The military forms a constant frame of reference for this exploration, but the arguments here are applicable to all areas of public policy where lesbians and gay men are “put into the law.”

Whenever the law is invoked, whenever debates erupt about rights and equality, differing conceptions of *identity* circulate just below the surface. Are homosexuals people, or is homosexuality a series of sexual *acts* that people engage in? Do they have control over *what* they do and *who* they are, or is sexuality a question simply beyond our control? Finally, are “gay” and “lesbian” nouns, or are they adjectives? The debate about *who* and *what* gay men and lesbians *are* is the subject of Chapter 1.

Before turning to the examination of policy debates, legislation, and adjudication in which gay men and lesbians come to be identified and addressed by the State, I examine the discourses and the institutions from which these discourses emanate, creating understandings that circulate still in our modern perception of the gay and lesbian subject. I look at the religious, medical, and psychiatric/psychological models of homosexuality, first from within the respective epistemological institutions that gave birth to them and then by tracing the influences that these institutions of “truth creation” have had on the formal State bureaucracies and policy-makers. The *official* representative of the State adopted, reflected, and codified this sexual “truth” constructed by religious, medical,

and psychiatric discoveries and consolidated the Foucaultian triad of “power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world.”² As official public policy, these epistemological “truths” about sexuality were granted new life, and with this new life heightened levels and increased forms of scrutiny affected/infected the personal and private lives of all human beings, gay and straight alike. Tracing the historical evolution of these epistemological discourses, their originating institutions, and the institutional lobbying for access to the corridors of State power is the subject of Chapter 2.

Chapters 3 through 6 examine the way that the State came to reflect these epistemological models of homosexuality in a single policy area—military policy—and investigate the consequences of these policies for gay men and lesbians. Military service, as one of the primary means for distinguishing between a nation’s citizens and noncitizens, provides an interesting example of the way in which arguments about *who* and *what* lesbians and gay men *are* are deployed to legitimize and legalize discrimination against them. Military service is a natural place to begin to search for the concretization of sexual identities by the State. The massive military mobilization of human resources during both world wars proved to be one of the greatest expansions of governmental bureaucratization of everyday life ever experienced in the history of this country. Clearly seen in military policy are the religious, medical, and psychiatric/psychological models of homosexuality, as the “expertise” of physicians and psychiatrists becomes institutionalized as one of the regulatory arms of the government in this intensifying process of screening, examining, and determining the military fitness of soldiers during wartime.

Chapter 7 expands on this discussion, drawing from various policy areas to illustrate the extent to which these epistemological models of homosexuality have shaped the social and political quests for “liberation” pursued by contemporary gay and lesbian activists. Even more, the question of definition of self—the philosophic, academic, and personal musings about “identity”—although present prior to these modern policy debates, is elevated

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to a new plateau, as gay men and lesbians attempt to control the way in which the government comes to regulate aspects of their lives and their *being*. And finally, the Conclusion, returning to the theme of identity, offers some culminating (though not final) observations about the consequences and possibilities that lesbian and gay identity has created for State regulation and individual liberation.

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What Is an Official Gay Identity?

official: adj. 1. of or relating to an office, position, or trust. 2. holding an office. 3. authoritative, authorized; prescribed or recognized as authorized.

gay: adj. 1. happily excited: merry; keenly alive and exuberant. 2. bright, lively. 3. given to social pleasures; licentious. 4. homosexual, being a socially integrated group oriented toward and concerned with the welfare of the homosexual.

—*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 1987

WHAT DOES it mean to suggest that there is an *official* construction of sexuality? Sexuality, for many people, connotes sexual practices, and we think of sexual practices as a private concern; hidden away and out of view, they are tolerated in a liberal society *because* they are private. Sexuality in the more contemporary sense connotes sexual *identity* and does not, at least on the surface, invite public scrutiny and discourse, for many people live their entire lives without giving a thought to their own sexual identity. Just what does it mean, then, to suggest that there is an official construction of sexuality, and how can it be said to emerge from an analysis of public policy texts?

Before we can begin to answer these questions and simplify the discussion, however, we must first complicate it further. It is clear to virtually everyone that gay and lesbian people exist. Since the 1970s, the struggle for lesbian and gay equality in the United States has achieved ever-increasing levels of recognition, atten-

tion, and understanding. In most major cities today, gay men and lesbians can choose to live freely and openly among other men and women who share their sense of identity. Bars, bookstores, health clubs, and crisis lines that cater specifically to their needs have become commonplace. Hotels, bed-and-breakfasts,¹ libraries, doctors, insurance agents, realtors, even car salespersons frequently advertise in gay and lesbian newspapers, periodicals, and telephone directories.² Gay youth organizations have been created to help adolescents who are struggling with their sexual identity, and even mainstream comic books aimed at a children's market have expanded their universe to include gay superheroes.³

These changes include increasing levels of political activity. Nonprofit organizations such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign Fund lobby Congress, while Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and the National Gay Rights Advocates press for reform in the nation's courts. Openly gay and lesbian candidates have won election to local city councils, state legislatures, and the U.S. Congress. In the latter part of the twentieth century, gay men and lesbians created a culture, a politics, and a sense of community based on a shared sense of self. A number of scholars see the strategies and techniques that are employed by the gay and lesbian community to realize increased levels of societal recognition and political mobilization as patterned after the politics of racial and ethnic minorities.⁴

To complicate matters, however, unlike racial and ethnic minorities, the gay and lesbian communities lack many of the common secondary characteristics that demographers employ to describe group similarities. Gay men and lesbians come from every religious, ethnic, and racial background. They come from widely divergent classes, reflect diverse levels of educational and occupational achievement, and have no primary nation of origin. They are Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals. They assume no predictable "gay" or "lesbian" position with regard to most policy issues, and many have lived decades of their lives without defining themselves as gay or lesbian.

For all the material evidence that gay men and lesbians do indeed exist, there has been great disagreement over the true meaning of sexual identity. There is little agreement over *why* a person is gay, and debates have erupted over what the categories “gay” and “lesbian” actually describe. Are these terms descriptive of something natural, something fixed, something immutable? Or are sexual identities more fluid, malleable, and hence open to social influences? Are they historical categories that come into existence at a certain time and place? Are there anthropological similarities between the sexual identities and practices of gay and lesbian people today and the sexual identities and practices of people from different cultures both ancient and modern, or do these terms really signal a late Western identity that appeared only in the past 125 years? If newly emergent, then are modern sexual identities tied to certain levels of economic development? Finally, are gay and lesbian identities fixed and unchangeable, or do they include some element of personal choice?

These questions are not simply academic. How we answer them will help determine what kind of public policies nations may wish to pursue. For example, polling data for the years between 1993 and 2001 have been remarkably consistent on the issue of the believed fluidity of gay sexual identity. In 1993, 44 percent of those who responded to a *New York Times*/CBS News poll believed that gay men and lesbians choose to be gay, whereas 43 percent believed that being gay or lesbian is something that individuals cannot change.⁵ Almost a decade later, the results of a second poll were nearly identical, with 42 percent of respondents believing that gay men and lesbians can change their sexual orientation and 45 percent believing that sexual identity cannot be changed.⁶

Although equally divided on this issue, polls further reveal that this question of identity is central to how people feel about whether gay men and lesbians are deserving of social and political equality. For example, as Table 1 indicates, although 78 percent of respondents support equal job opportunities for gay men and lesbians, how we perceive sexual orientation clearly influences

TABLE 1 Jobs and Rights

Total % of Respondents	Response	Perception of Homosexuality	
		It Is a Choice (%)	It Cannot Be Changed (%)
78	Homosexuals should have equal rights in terms of job opportunities.	69	90
42	It is necessary to pass laws to ensure that homosexuals have equal rights.	30	58
49	It is objectionable to have a doctor who is homosexual.	64	34
55	It is objectionable to have a homosexual as an elementary school teacher.	71	39
46	Homosexual relations between consenting adults should be legal.	32	62
55	Homosexual relations between adults are morally wrong.	78	30
43	Homosexuals should be permitted to serve in the military.	32	54

Source: Data from the *New York Times*/CBS News poll, February 9–11, 1993.

this support. To illustrate, 90 percent of those who believed that sexual identity is unchangeable also believed that homosexuals should have equal employment opportunities, whereas only 69 percent of those who believed that gay men and lesbians can choose their sexual orientation supported equal job opportunity for gay men and lesbians. This gap widens to nearly 50 percent when respondents are asked whether, in their personal judgment, homosexual relations between adults are morally wrong.

Right or wrong, the question of identity clearly affects public opinion about gay rights. Unfortunately, students of public policy have dismissed these very questions of beliefs and values as unscientific or inapplicable to the “science” of policy studies. Failing to recognize the interrelationship of facts and values has led to both a theoretical bankruptcy on the part of most policy analysts

and a gulf between policy studies and political theory. Most policy analysts “take the view that values must be accepted as an arbitrary decision posited by the will or by passion, while ‘factual’ premises are grounded in reality. There is therefore a gulf between goals and value judgments, on the one hand, and the universe of facts which can be arranged and ordered in an objective, scientific, rational and coherent fashion on the other.”⁷ Most studies of public policy look toward purely technical considerations, as “on all sides theoretical requirements are abandoned, by considering inputs or outputs alone.”⁸

But what is public policy if not a snapshot of the values, beliefs, and preferences of a culture at a given point in history? Today one would hardly advocate the segregation of African Americans or the forced sterilization of the poor and the mentally challenged, although both represented official government policy at particular times in this country’s history and both were widely accepted and supported among large segments of the general population. This is not to suggest that all public policy decisions are doomed to be judged as unenlightened mistakes by the generations that follow. However, it is clear that federal policy texts are interesting “stuff” for theoretical investigation, as the privileges, convictions, predispositions, and prejudices of a culture are all too present in the “rational” outcomes of the policy process. Rather than reprehend these values and beliefs as “soft,” as many policy analysts do, I suggest that, *because* of their softness, these decisions reveal much about the political climate and the culture that produce them. Policy decisions do not function unidirectionally; in other words, they do not flow simply from the institutions of government to the people. Indeed, much of what government representatives do is carefully crafted to meet with the approval of the people, to embody their desires and opinions. In this sense, the policy-making process is interactive, permeable, and subject to change—not at all the reasoned and studied decision-making process that some policy analysts describe.

Initiating as well as reflecting beliefs and values, the decisions of public policy help shape the values of a culture and are in turn shaped by them, creating *official* meanings and accepted under-

standing while granting legitimacy and recognition. When striking the perfect balance between representing cultural values and helping to authorize and legitimate new ones, the policy process can often appear objective, rational, and scientific, so completely have we been implicated in the framing of the questions during the policy-making process. Kathy Ferguson's description of framing is relevant here, as public policy questions are often framed in such a way that the answers become obvious the moment the question is asked. Ferguson writes, "The questions we can ask about the world are enabled, and other questions disabled, by the frame that orders the questioning. When we are busy arguing about the questions that appear within a certain frame, the frame itself becomes invisible; we become *enframed* within it."⁹

The power of undertaking a theoretical analysis of policy texts comes in its ability to (re)move the frame or to decenter the object of study and to reveal the epistemological systems and cultural values cross-dressing as a kind of "rational objectivity" known as positivism. An examination of the public construction of sexuality seeks to explain how homosexuality has been imagined and defined in such a way as to make possible various forms of scrutiny and invasion, regulation and prohibition. Using military policy texts as a constant *frame* for investigation, I aim to reveal the epistemological systems at work that authorize and legitimate the policies that exclude lesbians and gay men from participation in the U.S. armed forces.

At the philosophic level, this understanding of an official sexuality has implications beyond its effect on the study of military policy or of policy making in general. The implications of revealing the way that sexuality is politically constructed extend even beyond the scholarly research into homosexuality. The question of sexual identity is central to thousands, if not millions, of men and women, who seek to justify, legitimate, and promote understanding of their existence and to explain and defend their struggles for equal protection and fundamental civil rights guaranteed to citizens by the Constitution of the United States. Identity, then, is *being*. It is who we *are* and how we wish others to see, perceive,

and respond to us. But where does it come from? People do not choose to remake their identities totally, although the Western emphasis on individualism and freedom of choice attempts to convince us that they do. To do so would be to create an identity that would be unintelligible to anyone else. As Erik Erikson—the man who helped popularize the word “identity” in the 1950s through his psychological term “identity crisis”—suggests, identity concerns “a process ‘located’ *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of these two identities.”¹⁰ Erikson’s psychological approach can be contrasted with the sociological tradition in which role theory and reference group theory understand identification as the “process by which a person comes to realize what groups are significant for him, what attitudes concerning them he should form, and what kind of behavior is appropriate.”¹¹ In both of these early understandings of identity, cultural structures play a role in the making of identity, though in very different ways. In both examples, individuals play a role in producing their own identity, but Erikson’s process is a negotiation between an individual and the larger culture to determine an identity in which the individual plays a more active role, reconciling his or her individuality with a knowledge of communal practices and preexisting identities.

One actor central to this process of identification is the State. In this battle over “naming names” the State’s actions will determine who receives rights and benefits, what activities are legal, and which identities constitute citizenship. The State will depend on other instruments of truth production to justify and legitimate its decisions, making an analysis of the way that gay men and lesbians are treated by the State dependent on a knowledge of other, sometimes older, discourses of truth production. In other words, in its interrogation of gay and lesbian subjects, the State will often turn to other arenas—tradition, religion, medicine, science—to help it decide what gay and lesbian identity *is*.

In this context, this philosophic discussion takes on a political hue. If sexual expression is medicalized, criminalized, or anath-

ematized, then individuals and groups that attempt to secure rights of citizenship by positing a social and political identity based on this problematized sexual expression will encounter deeply ingrained prejudice and stiff resistance at best and moral outrage, hatred, and violence at worst. Answers to the questions “What are we?” “Why are we?” and “Why do we do what we do?” become the ideological battleground, the disputed epistemological territory, as individuals and institutions, authors and authorities struggle for control over the most basic political power: the power to name, to classify, to tell the “truth”; the taxonomic power to determine self and other. Louis Althusser’s famous description of interpellation, found in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” is a helpful lens through which to frame this discussion of an *official* sexuality:

Ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it recruits subjects among the individuals . . . or “transforms” the individuals into subjects . . . by the very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there.”

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, that hailed individual will turn around. By the mere hundred and eighty degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he recognized that the hail was “really addressed to him and that ‘it was really him who was hailed’” (and not someone else).¹²

Althusser’s description of interpellation, which describes the making of a subject, one who knows and understands that it is he (or she) who is addressed, is a helpful way to think about the process embedded in the making an *official* construction of identity.

But there is another somewhat different definition that is equally interesting and important to the analysis that I undertake. The 1987 *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (second edition) defines “interpellation” as “a process in some legislative bodies of asking a government official to explain an act or policy, sometimes leading, in parliamentary government, to a vote of confidence of the dissolution of government.” “Interpellation” in

this definition is not simply the calling into being or the making of a subject but also the interrogation of that subject, the calling of the subject to account before the official administrators of the State. For gay men and lesbians, this State accounting asks *who* they are, *what* they are, and even *why* they are. The State asks in order to know *how* they can be put into the law and how the law will account for them. These two different definitions of “interpellation”—the conversion of undifferentiated individuals into subjects as these individuals come to understand that it is they who are summoned and the interrogation or calling to account of these individuals by officials of the State—are the two processes that contribute to the constitution of an *official* gay identity.

Most, although not all, of the policy texts that I have examined depend on deployments of discursive productions of homosexual identity that treat gay men and lesbians as evil, unnatural, physiologically deviant, medically ill, mentally disturbed, or immoral. Yet many of these policymakers, as well as many in the general population, know gay and lesbian individuals and find little resemblance between these people and the culturally constructed gay and lesbian Other. Indeed, the remarkable thing is how many of those who express homophobic views about the evil and immorality of homosexuality have perfectly civil, perhaps even warm, relationships with lesbian and gay family members and friends. Perhaps the explanation for the inconsistency found among many social critics of homosexuality is that the lesbians and gay men they know personally are exempted from vituperation because they are perceived to be just like everyone else and simply want to be treated equally by law and society. This view that gay men and lesbians are just like everyone else can also be dangerous, as it builds acceptance of lesbians and gay men through an erasure of some very real differences. The danger for gay men and lesbians occurs as it adversely affects our desire to combine “what we regard as the better parts of the alternative; we want equality without its compelling us to accept identity; but also difference without its degenerating into superiority/inferiority.”¹³

What, then, do gay men and lesbians share? What are the elements that bring otherwise disassociated individuals together to form a community? To answer sexuality, or sexual difference, might at first seem to be stating the obvious, but beyond this simplistic rejoinder there is little agreement. Indeed, even this answer refracts into more questions. Is this sexual difference a deviance, a form of perverse sexuality? Is it an illness, a sexuality gone awry? Is “homosexual” a noun or a verb? Is being gay an orientation, a preference, a lifestyle? Do gay men and lesbians *choose* to be the way they are, or does sexuality reside outside the realm of choice, a matter of “genetic predetermination”? Are there any theoretical possibilities between these two extremes? In sum, upon what does lesbian and gay “identity” depend?

Over the past decade, those interested in the study of sexuality have been embroiled in a debate aimed at addressing just this overall question. According to some, the debate has “outlived its usefulness,”¹⁴ creating an “impasse predicated on the difficulty of theorizing the social in relation to the natural,”¹⁵ thereby paralyzing the study of homosexuality in the disciplines of history and the social sciences.¹⁶ Nevertheless, even critics agree that this debate has reoriented our thinking about sexuality, calling into question some of the general assumptions of the twentieth century regarding homosexuality.¹⁷ At the center of this debate stand political actors, scientists, and public policymakers, who have helped shape the way that we think about sex and sexual identity in the contemporary United States.

This debate, first coming into its modern expression in the study of feminist theory, was adopted quickly by scholars and activists interested in creating an academic field committed to the study of gay men and lesbians. Known as the essentialist/constructivist controversy, this debate has fueled the fire of speculation about the causes of homosexuality and its recognition as a lesbian or gay identity. The word “identity” as used in the expressions “homosexual identity,” “gay identity,” or “lesbian identity” is of relatively recent origin. Vivienne Cass has noted that “a perusal of the pages and indices of early bibliographies clearly

shows the lack of reference to, and interest in, the construct [identity] prior to [the 1970s].”¹⁸ But the roots of this debate have a genealogy that is traceable both to the twentieth-century development of the academic fields of psychology and sociology and to the search for self-definition and self-understanding pursued by early gay and lesbian political organizations.

Eriksonian psychology and U.S. sociology illustrated an academic interest in the concept of personal identity—what makes a person who he or she is—that would resurface again in the form of academic debates regarding essentialism and social constructivism during the 1970s and 1980s. But psychologists and sociologists were not the only people interested in issues of identity in the 1950s.

In fact, it would be a mistake to conclude that because *identity* has only recently become the focus of medical or scientific understandings of homosexuality or that because the word “identity” does not appear in the academic literature on homosexuality before the 1970s, the *concept* of identity, as a way of understanding who and what one is, was not an issue for gay men and lesbians in their lives before then. For decades before “homosexual identity” came into common usage in the academic communities, homosexuals had been battling the stigmatizing effects of this medical classification, just as, before them, sodomites had fought their legal/moral classification attributed by church and State. It was these struggles that led to the birth of organizations that aimed to foster understanding and acceptance of homosexuals. It was in the arguments put forward by these organizations that the idea of identity first approached the meaning that Erikson assigned to it: a deeply internal structure located within an individual’s psyche.

In the United States, one of the first of these organizations, the Mattachine Society, originated in Los Angeles in the early 1950s. Making use of the name of a secret medieval society of unmarried French men who conducted rituals and dances during festivals, members of the modern Mattachine Society organized themselves into secret cells reminiscent of those of the communist party, in which the founders had been active.¹⁹ In its mission

statement, the Mattachine Society proposed to foster an “ethical homosexual culture” comparable to “the merging cultures of our fellow-minorities—the Negro, Mexican and Jewish Peoples.” Stressing the importance of education, unification, and consciousness-raising, the society also called for its members to engage in “political action to erase from our law books the discriminatory and oppressive legislation presently directed at the homosexual minority.”²⁰

The members of this early gay rights organization claimed that a hidden homosexual minority existed and, by implication, had always existed. It was only the oppression of the heterosexual majority’s culture, language, and legal strictures that had prevented gay men and lesbians from discovering their common heritage and their shared essentialism. As Jeffrey Escoffier writes, “This analysis seemed consistent with the experience of many gay women and men at the time as well as with subsequent history.” This minority, they argued, could be discovered, united, and led to emancipation through education, political activity, and the creation of an “ethical homosexual culture.”²¹ This group clearly had an understanding of gay and lesbian identity that mirrored Erikson’s presentation of identity as an “internal” part of an individual, although academicians would not apply this conceptualization of identity to gay men and lesbians for two decades. Still, not everyone in the Mattachine Society agreed with this assessment of gay and lesbian identity. Others in the Mattachine Society, called “middle class” and “status quo types” by founder Henry Hay, believed that the “the cultural and social characteristics of gay life” were “the result of ostracism and oppression”²² rather than a reflection of essential differences realized and then projected outward into the creation of a specialized culture.

Arguing from a sociological/interactionist perspective and relying on the pioneering works of Alfred Kinsey (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953) and the position developed by writers such as Donald Webster Corey in his 1951 publication *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*, these activists claimed that the only “real” dif-