

FOREWORD

WHEN PARALLELS MEET: THE FAMILY OF SEX AND THE SEXUALISATION OF THE FAMILY

Not so long ago, in the social sciences, there were two fields of research that never seemed to intersect: on the one hand, family studies; on the other, sexuality studies. As if to eschew some kind of incestuous peril, sex and family then belonged in parallel worlds. Think of Claude Lévi-Strauss' 1949 *Elementary Structures of Kinship*: strangely enough, the structuralist exploration of matrimonial rules in no way encountered the reality of sexuality. Indeed, the prohibition of incest, which was the foundation of the anthropologist's argument, had nothing to do, as far as he was concerned, with sex itself. It only affected kinship: the exchange of women only mattered in so far as it defined marriage.

It might be tempting to interpret such sexual blindness as a reflection of the child's anxious paradox: "My parents don't have sex, do they? They can't, since they're my parents!" But the denial also served to reinforce a sexual, and thus a social order: on the one hand, families were implicitly defined by heterosexuality; on the other, sexuality studies tended to focus not on the heterosexual norm, but on those who had been cast aside, outside the norm - *i.e.* queers. The history of sexuality is a case in point: especially in English-language research, it has often proved to be a history of *homosexuality*. Such was the division of the world that prevailed until recently: queers have sex, while straight folks have families.

At first, AIDS just seemed to reinforce this partition. What was first perceived as a "gay disease" not only identified sexuality with homosexuality; it also reduced gays to their sexuality. However, the epidemic was soon to undermine such a division in two distinct ways. First, while the virulent reaction of some parents who rejected their sons afflicted with the disease only proved that homophobia excludes gays from the family (not that lesbians fare much better, though), the everyday realities of care in dire times also revealed the vital importance of an alternative kinship - not the family of origin, but the family of destination, defined by choice.

This was made visible in the wake of the early years of the epidemic by Kath Weston in her 1991 ethnographic study of *Families we choose* – *i.e.* Bay Area families that comprised not only lovers, but also former lovers, and simply friends (girlfriends as well as boyfriends): the boundary between kith and kin was erased to mix all those who proved their love by being there when they were needed. Children were included of course; but they were not necessarily the cornerstones of these families of choice. Instead, sexuality played a central role in creating ties. This was not, however, the old reduction of gays (more than lesbians) to their sexual lives, as pure (hedonistic) individuals. On the contrary: sex turned out to be the foundation of queer social lives – precisely when it seemed to desert some of these men’s lives. Sexuality was thus the paradigm that helped think how new, alternative families are created – premised on choice, not blood.

But AIDS not only revealed the obvious importance of what might be called “the family of sex”; it also raised the question of the surviving partner whose very existence was all too often denied – from visiting rights in the hospital to inheritance rights in case of death. This is the second way in which the epidemic eventually did undermine the division between sexualised gay individuals and desexualised straight families. The end of the 1980s is the time when the issue of same-sex marriage came to the surface – in particular in Scandinavia, but also simultaneously in the United States and in France. Thus, the point was not only kinship norms, but also family laws.

The reality that ensued was quite different from that of families of choice, which provided an alternative to traditional kinship based on blood ties. In fact, in the same way that same-sex marriage simply meant opening (implicitly heterosexual) marriage to gays and lesbians, the lesbian (and gay) baby-boom seemed to offer a mere variation to be included in the norm – *i.e.* the “normal” family with a slight difference. French anthropologist Anne Cadoret’s 2002 monograph about gay and lesbian families is significantly entitled: *Des parents comme les autres*. At a time when traditional family norms seem to belong to the past, lesbian moms, first studied in 1993 by American anthropologist Ellen Lewin, before shifting to gay fathers in 2009, are truly parents like all other parents. Indeed, they too discover the dirty secret of parenthood: sex is not what their lives or even their couples are about any longer...

Does this imply the normalisation, not only of gays and lesbians, but even of queer families? The fear expressed by those who nostalgically mourn the heyday of countercultural sex may be exaggerated after all.

First, it is worth bearing in mind that homophobia has certainly not vanished – even around San Francisco or New York. Queer families still look queer to many. But there is more to this. Or rather: even homophobia needs explaining. The problem with gay and lesbian families is that, regardless of the intentions of the individuals at stake, they question the norm. Quite simply, they threaten the barrier that separates straight families from gay individuals.

A personal anecdote will illustrate this. When in 1997 I first intervened in the French public debate in support not only of equal marriage and family rights (including access to adoption and reproductive technologies), I immediately received a long letter from a colleague whose irritation was summarised in a colloquial phrase: “*Les homosexuels veulent le beurre et l’argent du beurre*” – which could translate roughly (though at the cost of ignoring some of the connotations involved): “they want to have their cake and eat it too.” What this meant was that queers want to enjoy sex and still benefit from the recognition of the State through marriage. Or, to put it bluntly: they want to have (asocial) fun, and they still want to reap (social) rewards.

Of course, what becomes apparent in this instance is that homophobia signals an anxiety that pertains less to homosexuality itself than to heterosexuality. What would become of the straight norm if it were not the norm any longer – *i.e.* would heterosexuality fall apart if society stopped to institutionalise heterosexuality through marriage laws and norms? Or to put it differently: is heterosexuality going to lose its seduction if and when it loses its State privilege? Worse: why should anyone desire to be straight if heterosexuality is not compulsory any longer? And, in response to such anxiety, what is it that could still hold together both straight and gay worlds?

Thus, lesbian and gay families still make many uncomfortable – and actually, they themselves may also feel some sort of “trouble”. The reason is rather obvious: they do not correspond to the heterosexual norm. Not that “same-sex” families necessarily undermine gender roles (Maureen Sullivan’s *Family of Woman*), nor conversely inevitably reiterate them (Christopher Carrington’s *No Place Like Home*). More fundamentally still, queer families are confronted with the experience of questioning obvious norms – the obviousness of norms: they reveal that the world of family has been naturalised; they contribute to its denaturalisation. Family life is supposed to be obvious, *i.e.* natural; queer families cannot quite feel like that.

This could be described in negative terms: they are an object of discrimination. But this new minority can also be apprehended in positive terms. Gay and lesbian families cannot ignore the democratic condition in which we all live: social norms are not given, once and for all. We define them, and redefine them. To put it simply – and in sexual terms: we make our own beds. For this is ultimately what queer families teach all of us: sexuality and family do not exist in separate worlds; the parallels finally meet. Families are never just asexual; queer families make us rethink other families as straight. In that sense, while the “family of sex” may have lost some of its visibility in current discussions, the new importance of queer families as a minority can be understood as a signal, at a time when some lament (while others celebrate) the desexualisation of homosexuality, of a paradoxical sexualisation of the family. The normalisation of homosexuality and the queering of the family may thus go hand in hand. Strange bedfellows, indeed.

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