ADULT LEARNING IN THE QUEER NATION: A FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

Adult education for social change can occur within social movements, and the fight for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer (LGBTQ) rights has included educational strategies designed to challenge heterosexist and homophobic systems of power. This article explores how the Queer Nation movement of the early 1990s deployed a Foucauldian (1976/1990) reading of power-relations to create educational interventions that allowed relatively small numbers of activists to affect powerful social change. By analyzing how power functioned within American society, queer activists designed specific interventions, which, while often humorous, sarcastic, and lighthearted, were nonetheless effective in disrupting prejudices because they demonstrated the absurdity of heterosexist beliefs. In making the theoretical move from object of hatred to subject who resists oppression, activists in the Queer Nation movement changed American culture and contributed to the social and legal gains made by LGBTQ people over the next two decades.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people are one group that has faced profound legal and social discrimination and exclusion in the United States. This oppression is based upon the politics of disgust and contagion (Eskridge, 2008) and homophobic discourse that positions heterosexuality as the "central gender and sexual category in the generation of power, authority, and social domination" (Hill, 1996, p. 275). As LGBT people we have adopted "a trajectory of active and passive resistance to the dominant group's attempts to colonise their lifeworlds" (Hill, 1996, p. 256); we have resisted by answering questions about group identity and our place in society. We created the queer, "taking back" a term historically used to denigrate us and adding a "Q" to the LGBT acronym. When asked who we are, some of us now say that we are queer.

The term "queer" is intentionally ambiguous. It has been "employed as an umbrella term for the indeterminate array of identities and differences that characterize persons in relation to sex, sexuality, gender, desire and expression" (Grace & Hill, 2004, p. 167). But the word can be used both as a single signifier for the entire LGBT movement and as a signifier for some inherent indeterminacy. When a person refuses to be positioned within the heterosexual/homosexual binary but maintains "identities [that] are always multiple, fluid, mobile, contingent, unstable (labile), and fragmented" (Hill, 2006, p. 4), that person is properly understood as queer. Today the term has become accepted in some academic discourse and has been expanded to encompass an entire theoretical perspective, Queer Theory (Dilley, 1999; Sullivan, 2003). In adult

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education, it has been utilized to conceptualize queer activism as a practice that is both critical and postmodern, simultaneously advocating "for empowerment and development of voice" and refusing "to be positioned as solitary and intact. Queer is a category that no one can ever fully own or possess because it requires shifting identity to practice" (Hill, 2004, p. 87).

But before "queer" was widely accepted in academic discourse, the term was deployed on the streets, as a part of a cultural and educational movement to empower oppressed LGBT people in the face of blatant discrimination and exclusion. In the early 1990s, "queer" was used as part of the "indigenous gay discourse [that] emerged at the intersection of private spaces and the public sphere [used to] challenge and trespass across the boundaries of the dominant culture" (Hill, 1996, p. 256). The term was employed with its double meaning intact, as both a single word for all sexual minorities and as a word for an unusual LGBT person, one who was willing to stand up, eschew the closet, and confront oppression directly. It was used to describe the Queer Nation (QN), an activist movement for social change that erupted simultaneously in cities across America as queer folk, sick of suffering oppression in silence, insisted on speaking out and against discrimination. Adult education is a discipline with a longstanding commitment to education for social justice for oppressed minority groups (Grace & Hill, 2004).

Historical Context of the Queer Nation Movement

In 1990, there were virtually no "out" celebrities; there were no effective treatments for HIV/AIDS; gay bashing was common, with no public outcry, and consensual private adult homosexual activity was illegal in many states. Anti-gay sentiment was open and loud, and bigots felt free to condemn gay men and lesbians personally and in the press or at public events. What has now come to be labeled as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer (LGBTQ) community responded with a national groundswell, including the formation of dispersed chapters of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), which focused on HIV-related issues, and of QN, which focused on LGBTQ civil rights, empowerment in the face of oppression, and visibility. These groups' educational interventions, based upon a Foucauldian reading of power-relations (Halperin, 1995), allowed a relatively small number of activists to challenge dominant discourses and to facilitate rapid social change.

For a number of reasons, 1990 was a turning point. *The Advocate*, a national gay rights magazine, declared 1990 "The Year of the Queer," as the gay civil rights movement erupted in protest all over the nation (Shilts, 1991). The great and beloved gay gadfly, Larry Kramer (1989), had for years urged LGBTQ people to become activists, but the movement was galvanized at last by an anonymous pamphlet circulated at gay pride in New York city in June of 1990 (Anonymous, 1990). A new type of activism emerged that Shilts (1991), writing contemporaneously, described as one that

> … struck suddenly and tumultuously after a dolorous and drowsy decade in which the homosexual rights agenda was overwhelmed by the preoccupation with morbidity and mortality. Its tenor is both humorous and insolent; its rhetoric careens between the trenchant and the fatuous. Its purpose is to be, beyond all else, insurgent, even menacing. (p. 32)

I experienced firsthand this groundswell and many of the events that led to great cultural and legal breakthroughs in the 1990s, after which overt expression of homophobia and heterosexism became, in many circles, less acceptable. The world changed in the middle 1990s. People living with HIV stopped dying as rapidly because there were finally more effective treatments. Many of the more blatant expressions of heterosexist privilege were mitigated, as most Americans, confronted with their prejudice, seemed to learn that it was not okay, for examples, to openly gloat over the deaths of people with AIDS or to claim that God wanted gay people to die horrible deaths.

I was not an educator then, but was rather an anthropologist (Walker, 1993). I cannot pretend any sort of objectivity on that period in American history because I was involved in many activist protests and events in my home territories of Atlanta, Augusta, and especially Athens, Georgia. I am now a witness to a history that was never written down, quite intentionally, because activists in the early 1990s genuinely believed that straight people would and could kill, imprison, or otherwise harm those that could be identified as Queer Nationalists, even if we never did anything illegal in any of our protests-- which, for most activists such as myself, was true. In the words of Anonymous (1990),

> How can I tell you. How can I convince you, brother, sister that your life is in danger: That everyday you wake up alive, relatively happy, and a functioning human being, you are committing a rebellious act. You as an alive and functioning queer are a revolutionary.
>
> There is nothing on this planet that validates, protects or encourages your existence. It is a miracle you are standing here reading these words. You should by all rights be dead. Don't be fooled, straight people own the world and the only reason you have been spared is you're smart, lucky or a fighter. (p. 1)

The wave of activism that shook the nation in the early 1990s was singularly effective in the history of the movement for full civil rights for LGBTQ people. The goals of QN— more visibility, repeal of the sodomy laws, out LGBTQ celebrities, and more nuanced portrayals of gay peoples' lives in the media—have all, to some degree, since been achieved. Something barely dared imagined in 1990, gay marriage, has appeared in three U.S. states and several foreign nations. As both a witness and an adult educator, I am now prepared to theoretically unpack the reasons that this period of activism was so effective. This article examines how Foucault's (1976/1990) notions of power and social change, filtered from the academy and into the street, informed QN activities and allowed a relatively small number of activists to affect striking social change. LGBTQ academics did the analysis, and the people on the street took "high theory" ideas and made them into potent instruments for social change.

Foucauldian Theory and Analysis of Heterosexist Power

Foucault's (1976/1990) notion of power is very different from traditional analyses of power relations, in which one group has one power and the other does not. Foucault posited power as omnipresent, and as found only in its application:

> Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitatrian and mobile relations…. There is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and the ruled at the root of power relations and serving as a general matrix… (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 94)

Thus, under a Foucauldian reading of power, power exists not in hypothetical structures but in concrete applications. "[F]or Foucault, unlike liberationists, resistance is inseparable from power rather than being opposed to it" (Sullivan, 2003, p. 42). The proper question for an advocate of social change is not "What is the nature of power?" but rather "How does power function to maintain these oppressive circumstances?" Understanding power, and the manner in which power functions, can inform activists, who can act within their own spheres of life and experience, because power is everywhere. "Between techniques of knowledge and strategies of power, there is no exteriority…." (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 98).

If social power, including the power that oppresses and the power that resists, are found in their application, the expressions of power can be described in terms of streams of discourse or, more simply, discourses. There was and is a heterosexist discourse that proclaims, through its various speakers, artifacts, and channels, that only relationships between biologically-defined men and women are socially acceptable. But there are discourses opposed to that heterosexism, in which LGBTQ people live their lives and resist in their speech and behavior, and which Hill (1996) has characterized as "fugitive knowledge" or discourse which "since it is constructed outside of the dominant social discourse… escapes the control of privileged spectators" (p. 254). Social power, then, expresses itself in specific and conflicting discourses, which Foucault labeled tactically polyvalent:

> [W]e must conceive discourse as a series of discontinous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable.... [W]e must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies…. (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 100)

In Marxist theory, there is often a singular oppressor, a bourgeois class that dictates how the world will be. For Foucault, there is no single speaker, and, because discourse arises in contested relations, the statements within a stream of discourse are less coherent. A careful Foucauldian reading of a discourse, such as the discourse of heterosexism, can allow those who understand the contested power relations to effectively challenge that discourse, by targeting points of weakness within oppressive discourses.

Halperin (1995) provided a succinct analysis of the sort of Foucauldian reading of heterosexist discourse that QN activists undertook. First, activists looked at how LGBTQ people are described by heterosexist speakers: "The homosexual" is simultaneously "(1) a social misfit, (2) an unnatural monster or freak, (3) a moral failure, and (4) a sexual pervert" (Halperin, 1995, p. 46). This analysis is useful, if only to provide categories for refuting the dominant discourse and for describing inconsistencies in such statements of prejudice. An activist might introduce him or herself as queer in order to refute these descriptions within specific sets of power

relations, under the theory that it is easier to demonize gay people if one believes one has never met a gay person. It is harder to imagine that gay people are social misfits and freaks when one's co-worker or brother or mail carrier or social worker is out and proud of LGBTQ culture.

The real meat of the analysis is found, however, not in the analysis of the categories that oppress, but in the analysis of the categories that empower. Halperin (1995) described the "crucially *empowering* incoherence" of the category "heterosexual" (p. 46) and defined heterosexuality as follows:

> (1) a social norm, (2) a perfectly natural condition into which everyone is born and everyone grows up, if no catastrophic accident interferes with normal, healthy development, (3) a highly laudable accomplishment that one is entitled to take pride in and for which one deserves no small amount of personal and social credit, and (4) a frighteningly unstable and precarious state that can easily be overthrown—by such contingent events as coming into contact with a gay or lesbian role model, being seduced by a member of the same sex during adolescence, hearing homosexuality spoken of too often, or having a gay man as a primary school teacher…. (Halperin, 1995, p. 46)

This last factor is a key for understanding how social activists can change the culture for the better. This is the point of leverage that allows a few activists to change the world: do the hard work of social theory, figure out the way that the oppressive discourses function, and target their most absurd aspect. When heterosexism is violent, this violence is based upon fear, and at least part of that fear is that if LGBTQ people are not stopped, everyone will become gay.

The proposition is ludicrous. If homosexuality were contagious, we would all be already gay. And, while the most prejudiced in any society are not well known for their intelligence, oppressive discourses that are so incoherent, irrational, and absurd are easily challenged and overthrown if a few activists are willing to take the calculated risk of the possible violent incoherence of bigots. The strategy is simple: Identify the discursive fault line; engage in educational activities that prove to anybody willing to think that, for example, talking with a gay person or seeing two men kiss will not make you gay; win over the thinking majority, and then the speakers of prejudice will be the marginalized actors—not for what they are, but for what they do and say that is socially unacceptable and wrong.

Educational Strategies in the Queer Nation

The QN movement was the move from object to subject—LGBTQ people moved from being objects of derision, hatred, and oppressions to subjects who defied their oppressors and described their own lives, intentionally and often theatrically. In locating the "Pressure points, the fault lines, the most advantageous sites within the political economy of heterosexist/homophobic discourses for disrupting and resisting it" (Halperin, 1995, p. 48), street activists and academics alike deployed strategies including appropriation, resignfication, exposure, and demystification. That is, QN activists engaged in planned "actions" informed by strategies that included:

Shop Ins - Under slogans including “Don’t revolutionize, accessorize,” activists wearing QN t-shirts and holding hands would descend upon the “apotheosis of heterosexual culture, the suburban shopping mall” (Shilts, 1991) to, quite simply, go shopping. The money used might be stamped with “you have just interacted with a lesbian,” but, other than the t-shirts, buttons, and the large groups of lesbians communally sorting through lingerie, these events were simply an opportunity to go shopping with friends.

Queer Ins - Sometimes, an action involved simply showing up, en masse, at some place where queer folk were generally not out. A bar that catered primarily to heterosexuals might, for example, find that virtually all of its patrons on a certain night were wearing QN t-shirts and pink triangles.

Letters to the Editor - When a speaker of prejudice was outspoken against LGBTQ people and rights, QN activists convened and wrote letters. Because QN activists were generally quite literate and willing to be sarcastic and funny, these letters were often published.

Picketing - When a local newspaper published an editorial urging, say, the “reeducation” of LGBTQ people into heterosexuals, various chapters of QN, often joined by ACT-UP and even local gay churches, would march. Offenders received the chant of “Shame! Shame! Shame!” from hundreds of voices. The media covered these events because we usually invited them.

Targeted Protests - Some acts of prejudice required specific, recurring counter-discourse. When a local restaurant chain in Georgia fired employees for being gay and lesbian, large numbers of QN activists converged, over many months, to sit in booths together, order one order of communal French fries, pray, and sing “We shall overcome.”

Kiss-Ins - If a heterosexist speaker really distinguished themselves with their anti-gay rhetoric, that speaker might have to watch a dozen or so same-sex couples kiss one another on their doorstep.

Protective Patrols - Gay bashing resulted in patrols of “brothers and sisters” who would call the police at the first sign of trouble on their walkie-talkies. While these were not vigilante groups, many QN members did undertake martial arts training, and patrol members were dressed to intimidate—often in the usual QN black t-shirt and combat boots, which were a sort of uniform.

In addition to these concrete sorts of “actions,” the theoretical move from object (of hatred) to subject (who builds community, who protects “brothers and sisters”) also entailed a willingness to resist oppression directly. This, too, was a theoretical move. If power is diffused and is found in its application, it is deployed by specific actors. It is therefore possible to trace hate back to its source and to challenge that actor directly. Many LGBTQ people in the days before 1990 had been socialized to accept oppression, even violent oppression, without complaint. A story from Anonymous (1990) is illustrative:

> Tompkins Square Park, Labor Day. At an annual outdoor concert/drag show, a group of gay men were harassed by teens carrying sticks. In the midst of thousands of gay men and lesbians, these straight boys beat two gay men to the ground, then stood around triumphantly laughing amongst themselves. The emcee was alerted and warned the crowd from the stage, "You girls be careful. When you dress up it drives the boys crazy," as if it were a practical joke inspired by what the victims were wearing rather than a pointed attack on anyone and everyone at that event. (p. 9)

After QN, LGBTQ people were less likely to stand passively by, and more likely to defend themselves. But what if the oppressor was actually an LGBTQ person? Closeted homosexuals were in many instances the worst of the oppressors, as they channeled their apparent self-loathing into acts that damaged the LGBTQ community. Closeted news anchors who followed every gay-positive story with a "counterpoint" from an extremist conservative and closeted politicians who worked against the community's interests were numbered among the worst offenders. For some QN activists, who had read the many stories about high suicide rates among LGBTQ youth and attributed that mortality rate to the fact that most such youths thought they were alone in the world, privileged celebrities who remained closeted despite their fortune and success were also oppressors of a more silent sort.

Two other types of actions by QN grew out of this new unwillingness to accept oppression from closeted homosexuals. The first was a new refusal to accept such people at community events or functions. If you worked against gay and lesbian interests as a politician on Capitol Hill and then went to your regular gay bar in the evening, after 1990 somebody would probably throw a drink on you. If you were a celebrity who denied in the press that you were gay and you then showed up at an LGBTQ venue, you would be told that you were not welcome.

The second—and the more controversial activity—was "outing." In "outing," homosexuals who worked actively against LGBTQ interests in politics had their sexuality openly discussed in the queer press. This was a sort of atomic bomb of activism, threatened far more often than delivered because of the resulting collateral damage and social fallout. Ironically, "outing" has often been used to characterized the entire QN movement, even though the practice was never designed to be used against, say, small town closeted lesbians or gay men who might lose their livelihood if exposed. The few "outings" that occurred were, more properly, educational events aimed at a select few individuals with money and power: if you had political power, and you were a closeted homosexual, you could no longer advocate for anti-gay laws and policies without risking exposure.

Conclusion: "AN ARMY OF LOVERS CANNOT LOSE"

(from Anonymous, 1990, p. 2)

The QN movement represented a decentralized, national groundswell of resistance against heterosexism and oppression of LGBTQ peoples. Anger and loss motivated activists to take risks and to agitate for social change. After QN, the prophecy of the sisters in the section titled "Anger" of "Queers Read This" (Anonymous, 1990) proved true:

> The strong sisters told the brothers that there were two important things to remember about the coming revolutions, the first is that we will get our asses kicked. The second, is that we will win. (p. 3)

If the world has changed, it is at least in part because Foucauldian (1976/1990) theory worked. Power is immanent, and resistance is possible at every level, from the most individual to the most social. QN vanished in the middle 1990s as many of its activists perished of AIDS and, as society became more accepting, queer rage cooled. But that's okay: all movement demands were, to some degree, met. Many LGBTQ celebrities are out now. There is less violence. The U.S. sodomy laws are no more. In a few places, queer folk can actually get married. The world is a little less oppressive. Adult education for social change worked. We won.

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