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Holding the Opposition: What women's studies can learn from Piontek's queering of gay and lesbian studies

Thomas Piontek, *Queering Gay and Lesbian Studies*, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 2006 (132pp.) ISBN 0-252-07280-4

In this book Piontek provides a wonderfully clear overview of key tensions that have emerged in the last two decades as queer theory has challenged many of the underpinnings of gay and lesbian studies. Through his analysis of a range of engaging cultural and historical examples Piontek displays the problems that have come to light in both academia and activism following queer interrogations. For this review I will briefly summarise the key ideas and examples presented in the book in order to whet the reader's appetite. Also, given the likely readership of this journal, I would like to pose the question as to what the implications of Piontek's arguments are for women's studies. Piontek himself focuses mainly on gay men's studies and activism (three out of the five chapters), with some analysis of issues that have engaged lesbian studies towards the end of the book. I feel that much of what he says can, and should, be directly applied to the theory and activism of women also.

In chapter 1, Piontek considers the Stonewall riots, which many take as the starting point of the gay and lesbian political movement. In the summer of 1969 police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York. Instead of allowing the 'routine' raid, a crowd gathered and rioted for five days. Piontek uses a queer perspective to challenge the various histories of

this event that have been produced and have passed into popular mythology. Particularly, he points to the burgeoning political movements which preceded Stonewall (another example being the Compton's cafeteria riot in San Francisco in 1966). He questions the possibility of accessing any unified and stable narrative of the past, and he displays how Stonewall has become misrepresented as a white, gay man's rebellion despite the involvement of a diverse group of people in the event itself. This 'homonormativity' is a theme in gay and lesbian theory and activism to the present day: the argument for rights on the 'identity politics' basis that gay and lesbian people are just like heterosexuals in all respects other than their attraction for the opposite sex, and the privileging of the middle-class, white, monogamous, masculine gay male subject which goes along with this.

In chapter 2 Piontek extends this theme of homonormativity. He explores the gay AIDS literature to display the ways in which the monogamous gay man has been held up as the ideal of gay masculinity in writing and activism. He shows how even sex-positive writing draws on 'jeremiad' rhetorical devices (p.45) which attribute the problems of an era to evils of the past and point the way to changes which will bring a better future (although in this case one which sees non-monogamy as radical). Piontek questions the simple binary between monogamy and promiscuity and the discourses that position either of these as better ways of being.

As well as privileging the monogamous white gay man over other queer subjects, gay rights movements have tended to deny any link between gay men and effeminacy in order to deny popular stereotypes by representing gay men as just as masculine as other men

(e.g. the 'clone' image with his facial hair and jeans, and the common recent trend for gay personal ads to ask for 'straight-acting' men only). Piontek points out that this distancing from any kind of effeminacy has allowed the psychiatric Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) to retain the diagnosis of childhood 'Gender Identity Disorder' (GID) despite the removal of 'homosexuality' from the manual in 1973. Homonormativity has allowed the continued pathologisation of children who do not fit current norms of gendered behaviour. Piontek argues that attempts to cure GID represent a continued desire to prevent adult homosexuality.

As can be seen from this brief summary of the first three chapters, homonormativity as well as heteronormativity is based on the construction of dichotomies of both sexuality *and* gender. People are *either* homosexual *or* heterosexual (and homonormativity aims to prove that they are similar in all other respects than their sexual attraction). People are *either* 'feminine' women *or* 'masculine' men (whether gay or straight). Anything outside of these binaries is troubling and needs to be defended against with clear boundaries being drawn (Rubin, 1992). In the remainder of the book Piontek challenges both of these dichotomies. Chapters 4 and 5 are particularly relevant to women's studies since they question the very notion of womanhood inherent in the gender dichotomy (chapter 4) and also revisit one of the key debates of the feminist sex wars: that of sadomasochism (SM) (chapter 5).

In chapter 4 Piontek uses two examples of what Kate Bornstein (1995) calls 'gender defending' to support the claim that people will go to extreme lengths to maintain the

illusion of the mutual exclusivity of the genders. He describes the discomfort of daytime talk show audiences when confronted with drag kings and asked to say whether they are 'really' men or women. He then discusses the rape and murder of the trans man Brandon Teena and the depiction of this in the movie 'Boys Don't Cry'. Particularly, he focuses on a scene where one of his attackers shouts 'where the fuck is *it*?' in their pursuit, supporting Judith Butler's contention that gender is so entrenched that we have to be able to 'read someone as a gendered being to recognise his or her humanness' (p.69). The attackers' attempt to strip Brandon displays the continued supremacy of the body as the way of determining identity (Bornstein, 1995) despite our knowledge of intersex bodies, post-op trans bodies, genderqueer identities which transcend body forms, and the legal recognition (under the UK Gender Recognition Act, 2004) of men with vaginas and women with penises. The discomfort of the drag king audiences in this chapter recall the troubles experienced by some women's groups in defining who must be included and excluded and the continued distancing by many gay and feminist groups of trans and intersex issues despite their obvious relevance.

In chapter 5 Piontek deals with non-normative sexual practices, particularly sadomasochism (SM), comparing the ways in which mainstream gay and lesbian theory and politics have often excluded 'fringe' practices (p.6) for disturbing homonormativity, whilst queer theory has embraced the possibilities of such practices in disrupting both dichotomous sexual and gender identity. A quote from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) is worth repeating in full (although Piontek points out that, even this challenge to the

primacy of gender in sexual attraction, continues to limit sexual activity to genital activity):

Of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of “sexual orientation”. (p.8)

Regarding gender identity, my own research (e.g. Ritchie and Barker, 2005) has explored ways in which SM play can reveal gender roles as socially constructed: by enabling SMers to take on and cast off roles, by taking the emphasis away from genital activity, and by explicitly challenging taken-for-granted connections between femininity and passiveness/submissiveness (e.g. by women taking dominant roles, by being the one to penetrate, rather than be penetrated by, a man). Piontek concludes that the practices of SM communities show that it is possible to have ‘*bodies without orientations* and bodily pleasures that are not predicated on clear-cut sexual identities’ (p.94). I would extend this to argue that they also show the possibility of bodies with differing genders, multiple genders or no genders. However, I am cautious of completely dismissing the concerns of

some feminists that SM practices can reinforce problematic gender divisions and hierarchies.

Throughout the book, Piontek manages to walk the difficult tightrope between ‘those who see queer theory as the bête noire of gay and lesbian studies and those who embrace it without reservation’ (p.1). I would argue that a similar balance needs to be struck when bringing queer theory and women’s studies together: acknowledging the value in studying women’s experiences and campaigning for rights on the basis of this, but also continuing to question the very dichotomies on which such studies are based. The clashes, conflicts and tensions in holding such oppositions are important for the future of gay and lesbian studies, women’s studies and queer theory. I would like to end with a final quote from F. Scott Fitzgerald which Piontek uses in his conclusions and which, I think, says it all: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (p.97).

Meg Barker

Senior Lecturer, London South Bank University, London, UK

megbarker@gmail.com

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