Sharpe, 1989.

Queer and Classed: Class in LGBTQ movements and organizations
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Introduction
The discourse surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities in the cultural and political life of the United States has taken many forms. One discourse emerging around LGBTQ persons is that of class. Particularly, LGBTQ individuals and communities are sometimes referenced as being necessarily or predominantly middle class. LGBTQ identities are sometimes tied to or judged against a normative ideal based on middle class values. In this paper, I will investigate how this normative ideal functions within LGBTQ communities, as well as how this perception of class has influenced LGBTQ organizations and movements. In addition to looking at the interaction between LGBTQ identities and class identity, I will explore the intersection of race and age with class and queer identities. This paper questions how class/race and class/age distinctions are perceived and how these perceptions may allow LGBTQ organizations and movements to (perhaps unconsciously) propagate the continued marginalization of working and lower class LGBTQ individuals. In order to understand the function of class in LGBTQ organizations and movements, I will investigate what discourse of class exists in LGBT communities and how LGBT individuals are implicitly classed through this discourse.

In order to understand the overall discourse regarding class in LGBTQ movements and organizations, it is useful to examine the class standing of LGBTQ in comparison to non-queer individuals in the United States. According to Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor’s “Demographics of the Gay and Lesbian Population in the United States: Evidence from Available Systematic Data Sources,” gay men and lesbians in the United States are more likely to have achieved higher education than their straight counterparts (85). Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor’s study also indicates that lesbians have significantly higher incomes than straight women (87), and that both gay men and lesbians have increased household wealth (87) in
comparison with straight individuals of the same age. Initially, this data may suggest that gay men and lesbians in the United States are comfortably placed in a higher social class than others. In actuality, this data also raises questions about the nature of LGBTQ identities as categories and the ability of researchers to measure social class.

Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor question the validity of these conclusions, partially because the methods used to obtain these numbers were based on how a person self-reported his or her identity. To measure wealth, the surveys looked only at partnered individuals (69), while in other instances homosexuality was judged based on the individuals’ answers to questions about their sexual pasts. Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor suggest that much of the results may have been skewed by lower class individuals’ unwillingness to indicate homosexual identity, activity, or unmarried partnerships on a form (85). Therefore, these results may be indicating that people who are comfortable indicating their homosexuality in a survey are more likely to be upper or middle class than others rather than gay men and lesbians having a higher socio-economic class. Other studies suggest that any indication of higher income on the part of gay men may be a result of forms of occupational discrimination that prevents them from occupying traditionally male-dominated fields (Gluckman and Reed, 7).

According to Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor, it can be difficult to assess exactly who is a gay man or lesbian. This is also true for those who may identify as bisexual, queer, or transgender. As a result, it can be difficult to place LGBTQ individuals as members of fixed demographic categories, and to analyze them in terms of race, age, or other identities. Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor’s study also raise questions about the ability of researches to accurately quantify social class. In this study, information on education, earnings, and homeownership (86) were equated with class. Information on individuals’ socialization and personal identity are harder to obtain and objectively analyze. When available, Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor took into account parents’ educational status. However, this information was not always available, and would not necessarily reflect the way in which individuals were raised. Furthermore, Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor suggest that less educated parents will also likely be lower income, and less likely to appear in the surveys (86). Information on parents’ earnings and homeownership was not available. Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor’s results suggest that LGBTQ individuals of upper and middle classes may be overrepresented by surveys that seek to analyze the intersection of social categories. This study also illustrates why it is difficult to analyze LGBTQ individuals in terms of social class.

The Definition of Normalcy

In “From Polluted Homosexual to the Normal Gay: Changing Patterns of Sexual Regulation in America,” Steven Seidman contrasts two archetypes of male homosexuality in the United States. The first archetype is represented in the media as confused, tormented by his sexuality, and ultimately a dangerous burden on society (43). This homosexual male battles with the idea of being gay, and is portrayed as alternating his effeminacy and likewise fighting it (44). While Seidman does not directly address class status in his descriptions of the “polluted homosexual,” it is implicit in the examples he uses. The “polluted homosexuals” (both male and female) are characterized by their deviance from normal, mainstream life. This includes being associated with crime and the working class (43). In contrast to the working class, deviant homosexual, Seidman presents what he describes as the emerging “Normal Gay” (45). According to Seidman, the “Normal Gay” is viewed as being the “psychological and moral equal of the heterosexual” (45). While homosexuals fitting into this image are viewed more favorably by heterosexuals, Seidman argues that the “Normal Gay” category is constructed around a narrow set of social norms: This figure is associated with specific personal and social behaviors. The normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride (45).

Ultimately, Seidman argues that the normalization of homosexuality creates a new set of norms that adhere more strongly to middle-class ideals than the image of the polluted homosexual. The Normal Gay is able to fit into...
a middle class society, but only if he is willing to follow its rules very strictly. Using examples from the film Philadelphia and others, Seidman illustrates how the construction of a Normal Gay archetype implicitly condemns homosexuals who do not fit into a middle class normative ideal. In order for a gay person to be considered morally acceptable, they must display certain characteristics such as middle class employment, economic stability, long term partnering, and gender normativity. LGBTQ individuals who do not adhere to these ideas are considered deviant, and in a society that accepts the Normal Gay, those “deviant homosexuals” are condemned for deviancy as opposed to being condemned explicitly for their homosexuality. In this way, LGBTQ working class persons can be considered “deviant” for not being middle class LGBTQ persons.

Organizing the “Normal Gay”

The tension between the “normal”, middle class homosexual and the “deviant”, working class homosexual is developed further by Cathy Cohen in “What is this Movement Doing to My Politics?” Cohen argues that the LGBTQ equal rights movements have accepted a policy of assimilation into heteronormative ideals in order to further their goals of equal rights. These heteronormative ideals mirror the ideals of Seidman’s “Normal Gay.” Unlike Seidman, Cohen turns her attention from media perceptions and portrayals of gay men and women to the way in which LGBTQ organizations themselves adopt cultural archetypes in order to further their causes. She believes that the image of the “normal” queer person is used by LGBTQ rights activists in order to gain power and privilege. This adoption of middle class privilege is then used to attempt to gain rights such as marriage or domestic partnerships, which fit into a hetero-normative middle class ideal. However, Cohen believes that using these normative ideals, the LGBT movement is requiring queer-identified individuals to work within a system that actively marginalizes them. Cohen questions the usefulness of the LGBTQ rights movement’s construction of class.

She argues that while organizers should continue to meet with corporations to discuss domestic partner benefits, they also need to fight for workplace safety, a living wage, and other issues relevant to working class individuals. Cohen believes these and other issues have been kept from the forefront because they do not represent needs of “ideal” middle class gay men and lesbians.
In order for LGBTQ rights movements to truly be fighting for a “just and equal society,” Cohen says they must consider the needs of members of the community who come from varying places of power and privilege, and who occupy many identity categories at once (116). As illustrated by Cohen, when marginalized movements align themselves with privileged identities in order to gain power, they potentially further marginalize some members of their own communities. Cohen’s arguments point to the need for an approach to LGBTQ equality that takes class into account.

Like Cohen, Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed discuss how the classing of LGBTQ subjects as middle and upper class affects the way in which equal rights movements are formed. For them, LGBTQ subjects are classed through marketing campaigns (such as those by Absolut, Dewar’s, and Miller) that propagate the notion of an inherently middle class gay male consumer. This type of marketing presents a “stylish, widely palatable vision of gay life” (4) in which gay men and a few lesbian women live in childless, dual-income households with ample money to spend. In these situations, the perceived class status of LGBTQ individuals subsumes the perceived deviancy of their gender identity and/or sexuality. Their class status, therefore, makes LGBTQ identity more palatable to organizations looking to make money. While there are some members of queer communities who fit this wealthy image, Gluckman and Reed assert that it does not reflect the majority of the community, and that in some ways it can be harmful for LGBTQ rights movements (5).

As suggested by Seidman’s analysis of Philadelphia, Gluckman and Reed claim that some LGBTQ activists have appropriated the image of the normalized gay. By adopting this normative and middle class gay image, activists are able to also adopt the political and cultural privilege associated with being middle class (as opposed to working class). They are also able to adopt the goals of capitalism when arguing for equal rights; for instance, a pro-marriage equality argument can be based around the expenses associated with weddings. If gay or queer couples are allowed to marry in a specific state, they will significantly increase the amount of money put into that state’s economy (5).

Activists have also used the morals of the middle class to argue for equality. If gay couples are “just like you” (8), then they will naturally desire the same lifestyle of non-gay couples. Since their ultimate goals of family and middle class status are the same as straight couples, this vision of gay life may be seen as less threatening than one associated with a non-middle class deviancy.

Gluckman and Reed question whether these arguments for class-contingent queer equality hold up when the reality of the diversity of queer communities is taken into account (4). One way in which it may fail is that by claiming to be representatives of the privileged and normal middle class (but with one minor difference), “normal” gay activists distance themselves from the very disenfranchisement they are trying to rectify. One such example of how the claim to middle class privilege has been detrimental to LGBTQ working class communities is the failing of the Gay Community News. The Gay Community News was a Boston publication that represented LGBTQ activists who focused on issues such as workers’ and prisoners’ rights. Unlike other more mainstream publications which focused more on consumerism and middle class issues, the Gay Community News did not receive advertising money from companies such as Dewar’s, Miller beer, or Absolut (6) and eventually was unable to sustain itself. The argument for class-contingent queer equality has also been adopted and subverted by anti-LGBTQ organizations.

For example, the Colorado for Family Values group has claimed that LGBTQ individuals are rich, undeserving, and asking for “special treatment,” as opposed to equal rights (6). This type of campaigning is particularly troubling to LGBTQ organizations when the reality of LGBTQ economics is considered (Gluckman and Reed 6, Blacks et al 87). For instance, LGBTQ individuals are disproportionally represented in the United States’ homeless population (Youth OUTReach), and there are no federal laws protecting employees from discrimination based on their gender identity or sexual orientation (HRC | Equal Oppurtunity).

The “Normal Gay” as White

Gluckman and Reed argue that beyond simply not reflecting the reality of LGBTQ...
communities, the adoption of a middle-class identity leads to alienation for “lesbians and gay men who do not see themselves in Ikea TV spots or Dewar’s ads” (7). They also suggest that the image of the middle class gay community is an inherently white one, and that by using it as a political tool, LGBTQ organizations are increasing tensions along racial as well as class lines. These tensions are exacerbated by the failure of LGBTQ organizations to recognize the presence of black gay communities (8).

In “White Normativity: The Cultural Dimensions of Whiteness in a Racially Diverse LGBT Organization," Jane Ward investigates the function of race and whiteness in a racially diverse LGBT center in Los Angeles. To Ward, the middle-class, normative gay archetype is one that is inherently white. This is evident in the way the LGBT community center in Los Angeles is racialized by its constituents. While half of the staff at the center identified as people of color, the organization was viewed as a “white” center by members of the larger Los Angeles LGBT community. Ward argues that the perceived “whiteness” of the center was a result of an institutionalized form of white normalcy that privileged white experiences, and made staff and patrons of color as “the other”. Ward also suggests that these white normative practices are the result of a “corporate” model of diversity which features events such as a “Diversity Day” and “Diversity Initiatives” (567). These events, Ward says, suggested that diversity was not simply a byproduct of having many types of experiences present in the organization, but rather a “means to an institutional end” (573).

Diversity Day at the center was criticized as being a practice that mostly benefited white employees, validated the experiences of white employees over those of color, and made inaccurate generalizations about the cultures of non-white employees (573). More critically, Ward suggests that this type of programming emphasized the need for a rationale for diversity, implying that diversity alone has no “intrinsic moral value.” While Ward does not speak at length on class specifically, the corporate model she describes carries classed connotations. While this corporate model of diversity validates white experiences, it also validates the experience of the powerful and privileged over the oppressed. By adopting corporate practices that are associated with whiteness and the privileged middle class, the organization links itself to the “Normal Gay” described by Seidman. While this Normal Gay image can be useful in legitimizing the center as an institution, it also creates class and race alienation even within organizations that are racially diverse.

Youth and the “Normal Gay”

The normalization of homosexual identities within organizations and movements leaves divisions along class and race lines unexamined. Similarly, some LGBTQ communities normalize and privilege certain age groups over others. Studies have found that queer youth make up somewhere between 20-40% of all homeless adolescents in the United States (Youth OUTReach), yet few LGBTQ organizations have youth-oriented resources or programming. One reason for this division may be LGBTQ organizations’ attempts to adhere to the normative ideals of the middle class. Adhering to these ideals requires avoiding the label of the “polluted homosexual” as detailed by Seidman. Joseph Wardenski suggests that one way organizations avoid the label of polluted homosexual is by avoiding association with any and all youth, including financially disadvantaged and otherwise vulnerable queer-identified youth (1377.) Wardenski explains how the existence and overturning of Lawrence v. Texas (which criminalized sodomy) effected LGBT youth. Wardenski uses Lawrence v. Texas and other historic cases as a framework to detail the creation of lesbian and gay as specific identity categories, as opposed to individual deviant actions (1372). In this article, Wardenski provides information on how LGBT youth and their concerns (such as homelessness) are underplayed in many LGBT organizations, which focus primarily on adults. Wardenski suggests that LGBT adults do not focus on the needs of LGBT youth for fear of being associated with sexual perversity or “recruiting” (1378). In this article, Wardenski implicitly suggests that other identity categories (such as age) are privileged over class status, leading to the class-based needs of certain individuals to be ignored. Like Ward, Wardenski does not reference this as a
class-based issue. However, notions of class-based ideologies are inherent in the discourse of what is “appropriate” behavior.

Conclusion

The discourse surrounding class in LGBTQ communities and organizations is often implicit rather than explicit; specific class categories are not discussed directly, but rather exist inherently in concepts such as the “Normal Gay.” LGBTQ organizations and movements such as those discussed by Cohen, Gluckman and Reed, Ward, and Wardenski are all influenced by a form of class ideology that has emerged around surrounding queer archetypes. Class ideology is rarely directly stated, and it can be useful to discuss middle class normativity in terms of how it appears in the media, and how it affects LGBTQ individuals in regards to race and age. Ultimately it appears that the archetype of the “Normal Gay” has been adopted by certain LGBTQ movements and organizations. This archetype aligns LGBTQ organizations with dominant, privileged identities; however, it does not reflect the full spectrum of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities.

Bibliography


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