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978-0-521-59970-2 - Difference Troubles: Queering Social Theory and Sexual Politics

Steven Seidman

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Difference troubles examines the implications for social theory and sexual politics of taking difference seriously. It explores the trouble difference can make not only for the social sciences, but also for the very people – feminists, queer theorists, postmodernists – who champion difference. Seidman asks how social thinkers should conceptualize differences such as gender, race, and sexuality, without falling into the trap of reducing them to an inferior status. He looks to the new social knowledges for innovative approaches to difference, while pointing out the conceptual, ethical and political difficulties which can characterize them. This is a wide-ranging and sophisticated discussion of contemporary social theory and sexual politics, focusing on questions of difference, knowledge and power. It culminates in a persuasive case for a pragmatic approach to difference troubles in theory and politics.

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1997

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Times 10/12½ pt [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Seidman, Steven.

Difference troubles: queering social theory and sexual politics /
Steven Seidman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 59043 4. – ISBN 0 521 59970 9 (pbk.)

1. Pluralism (Social Sciences) 2. Difference (Psychology) – Social
aspects. 3. Feminist theory. 4. Gay and lesbian studies.
5. Postmodernism – Social aspects. I. Title.

HM276.S445 1997

301'.01–dc21 97-8908 CIP

ISBN 0 521 59043 4 hardback

ISBN 0 521 59970 9 paperback

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Preface

In a sense, it is coincidental that the title of this volume evokes Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Coincidental in that the essays are not intended as a response to or elaboration of Butler's seminal text. Coincidental too in that the essays in this volume do in fact explore the difference that difference makes for social theory and politics. At the same time, Butler's book, in a sense, makes possible my own, as the texts of Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Irigaray, Said, Memmi, Adrienne Rich, Dennis Altman, the Combahee River Collective, and so on make possible the texts of Butler – and indeed those of many contemporary social thinkers who have made the theme of difference central to social analysis and politics.

The aim of *Difference troubles* is to expose the way social theory, in particular sociological and lesbian/gay theory, has resisted conceptualizing difference as a central axis of subjectivity and social life. Recognizing difference as a key social structuring principle disturbs foundational notions of the subject, knowledge, history, and politics that give coherence to much current social thinking. Difference troubles means then the troubles theory and politics have with bringing differences of (say) nationality, race, ableness, gender, and sexuality into social analysis and political practices without defining them as inferior, subordinate, retrograde, or primitive.

Difference causes trouble not only for types of theorizing that rely heavily on Enlightenment assumptions about a unitary subject, narrative of progress, and transcendent notions of knowledge. Difference also makes trouble for types of theorizing – and politics – which have sought to affirm difference, indeed which have asserted their own foundation in social difference. In this regard, I focus on sexual theorizing and politics, in particular, efforts to ground lesbian and gay theory and politics in the assertion of a common “minority” sexual identity. The troubles difference present to at

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least certain identity-based theories and politics are twofold. First, to the extent that identity-based knowledges and politics cohere around a unitary notion of identity (e.g., the assertion of a common lesbian or gay identity), it is difficult to consider differences within identity-based communities. In part, queer theory emerged to expose the normalizing and disciplinary role of sexual identity politics. And yet, queer theory is not without its own difference troubles. These are not so much the difficulties of suppressing differences as those of accommodating a strong assertion of difference with a commitment to a critical social theory and left politics. Although I do not believe, as some do, that a difference-based theorizing subverts the possibility of critique, it does create problems – for example, with respect to the grounds of critique, normative or ethical standards and justifications, conceptualizing oppositional subjects, and proposing constructive political projects.

Difference troubles is then primarily deconstructive in its impulse. I aim to criticize certain currents of theorizing and politics to the extent that they have been structured by assumptions or endorse practices that suppress or devalue important social differences. Of course, it is impossible to fashion concepts without ignoring some differences or positioning some of them as peripheral. For example, if, in order to avoid a concept of women in general we speak of white, middle-class, American women of the 1990s, we are still suppressing differences that pertain to sexuality, ableness, religion, ethnic-national heritage, physical attractiveness, and so on. Social theories and politics cannot be fashioned that will be inclusive of all differences. Acknowledging this excess of difference does not mean that we should ignore difference or that diverse conceptual strategies are equally defensible with regard to the way they handle differences. Rather, it means that social analysts must think hard about which differences matter in social theory and politics, why, and the potential impact of particular theoretical and political strategies upon a range of social differences. As I see it, this line of thinking points to a “pragmatic” approach to theory or conceptual strategies and politics, a position I sketch throughout the volume but clarify programmatically in the epilogue. Accordingly, the critical aim of this book is connected to a positive proposal both for making the theme of difference central to social theory and politics and for defending a pragmatic approach to questions of knowledge and power.

A word is in order regarding the concept of “queering” which figures prominently in this volume. I view queering as deconstructive – that is, as a discursive strategy involving the displacement or the placing into doubt of foundational assumptions (e.g., about the subject, knowledge, society, and history) for the purpose of opening up new possibilities for critical social

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analysis and political practice. I call this deconstructive move “queering” because I intend to make strange or “queer” what is considered known, familiar, and commonplace, what is assumed to be the order of things, the natural way, the normal, the healthy, and so on. In the spirit of deconstruction, queering does not mean improving upon or substituting one set of foundational assumptions and narratives for another, but leaving permanently open and contestable the assumptions and narratives that guide social analysis and assessing them in terms of multidimensional, pragmatic considerations. Moreover, queering suggests, for me, making sexual theory and politics central to social theory – for example, showing the entanglement of social theory in the making of sexual selves and orders, analyzing the way sexual meanings structure nonsexual social theoretical discourses, and taking the formation of regimes of sexuality as central to social analysis. How would social theory and politics be different if it were queer – that is, if it understood its own standpoint as local, as one among many, and if it took sexual differences and meanings as both structuring its knowledge and as a constitutive part of social organization and change?

A perspective that aims to “queer” social discourse does not of course assume any immunity from its own decentering spirit. Queering occurs from a situated, particular standpoint. Its own deconstructive project must be turned upon itself, exposing its own investments in certain subjectivities, social orders, and social ideals. Thus, the queering of theory must ultimately turn against its own implicit foundational assumptions and meta-narratives. This does not entail the paralysis of theory or politics, but rather bringing a heightened critical reflexivity to its own practices and a willingness to clarify the ethical-political or socially productive implications of its own positions. In an important sense, the queering of theory and politics is a cultural project – a desire to shape a discursive culture that assumes unstable foundations, that aims to speak across communities, that deploys a pragmatic type of social reason, and fashions narratives that avoid unidimensional stories of progress or regress.

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Acknowledgements

There are many individuals who have read through various chapters or responded to them, sometimes in print. Many thanks to Jeff Alexander, Dennis Altman, Bob Antonio, Bill Bogard, Patricia Clough, Norman Denzin, Jan Willem Duyvendak, Rosemary Hennessy, Chrys Ingraham, Richard Lachmann, Charles Lemert, Linda Nicholson, Laurel Richardson, Mary Rogers, Michael Schudson, Marion Smiley, Bernie Yack, and Iris Young, and members of the Great Barrington Theory and Culture Group. Many of these chapters were first presented at conferences or at the invitation of various universities and colleges. I have learned much from these discussions and wish to thank, in particular, the organizers of the “Organizing Sexuality” conference in Amsterdam (1993), the people associated with the Dutch journal *Krisis* for their discussions on multiculturalism and democracy, and the Departments of Sociology at Wellesley, Queens College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Washington State University, UCLA, and especially Colorado State College for their critical but generous response to some of my ideas, the political theory colloquium series at the University of Wisconsin, and Neil Smelser at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford for organizing an engaging conference on social diversity and cultural conflict. At times, when I had doubts about what and why I was writing, my students made me think it mattered after all. I wish to thank Melinda Mecilli, Kathy Dixon, Nancy Fischer, Joseph Sullivan, Debbie Donovan, Chet Meeks, and Xun Xu, who have taught me much about the theory and politics of difference.

Over the last few years Jeff Alexander and Linda Nicholson have been special friends and colleagues. They have responded to my work with consistent intelligence and much needed critical acumen. Linda especially has been a constant intellectual presence in all my work. Patricia Clough and

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Charles Lemert have occupied a special place in my life and in my work. I share with them a deep ambivalence towards sociology and a relentless commitment to analyzing the world, including the world of sociology, with an attentiveness to the unconscious in its friendly and sometimes malicious voice.

Many of the essays have been published previously, although I have edited and sometimes considerably revised them. Chapter 1 was initially published in *The Sociological Quarterly*, 37 (Fall 1996); chapter 2 appeared in *Cultural Studies*, 1 (1996); chapter 4 is based on an article that appeared in *Sociological Theory*, 12 (July 1994); chapter 6 appeared in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), chapter 7 was published in *Social Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); chapter 8 initially appeared in *Social Text*, 19/20 (Fall 1988); and chapter 10 appeared in *Sociological Theory*, 9 (Fall 1991). I am grateful to the publishers for permission to draw on this previously published material.

The Cambridge Cultural Society Studies Series has flourished under the steady, intelligent guidance of Catherine Max. It is a pleasure to once again personally express my appreciation for her commitment to publish innovative and critical work in the area of cultural studies and social theory.

I dedicate this book to my son Andy. I never cease to be astonished at his openness to difference, if not an equal enthusiasm for social theory. It is to him and his generation that I place my hopes for a world that sits easier with difference.