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Civil Society and the Sexual Politics of Difference*

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This paper discusses the sexual politics of anti-normalization within the context of the sociological discussions of civil society and the public sphere. The sexual politics of anti-normalization is less centered around "identity" as a means of securing group solidarity and representing sexual communities in civil society. A politics of anti-normalization comprehends identity as a means of normalizing and regulating sexual desire and difference. Anti-normalization entails the politicization of ethical-moral issues concerning sex and desire and the production of sexual differences beyond the usual opposition of heterosexuality to homosexuality. I discuss the ways that the theoretical discourses on civil society reduce conceptions of difference to identity and develop a framework for analyzing the sexual politics of difference "beyond identity" in the public sphere.

Sexual politics seems to be less and less about issues of identity. Or, at the very least, focusing on issues of identity where sexual politics is concerned encapsulates less of the ongoing public sphere struggles of sexual political communities (Seidman 1997; Warner 1993). A recent debate in San Francisco over bathhouses and public sex offers a good example. Before AIDS, the bathhouses were a central institution of San Francisco's gay (male) community. Bathhouse owners won the right to stay in business during the onslaught of AIDS in the early 1980s, but, the *New York Times* reports, "AIDS scared their customers off and put them out of business anyway" (Nieves 1999:A9). Now, however, a movement to reopen the houses is under way, in part as a reaction against San Francisco's 1997 policy on public sex. "In the clubs that have sprung up to replace the bathhouses, sex is allowed as long as it is public—that is, as long as it is performed in a place where monitors can determine whether partners are using condoms, where safe sex rules are posted and where safe sex information and products are provided. About a dozen such business are operating, some of which have glass-walled rooms" (Nieves 1999:A9).

For those seeking to reopen the bathhouses, the 1997 policy is inadequate and ineffective. Most people, they claim, will not want to perform sexual acts in front of people and instead may resort to "picking up strangers and engaging in unsafe sex in cars or restroom stalls" (Nieves 1999:A9). Bathhouses, they claim, provide a "safe-sex alternative" for those who do not feel comfortable having sex in the public gaze (e.g., the closeted). Even though AIDS has occupied much less national attention than it did in the 1980s, the image of the bathhouse continues to symbolize disease and the death of a community, bringing about large-scale resistance to the reopening of the houses. The fear of contagion continues to undergird the debate: "Because San Francisco is a lure for gay men, attracting many weekend and holiday visitors, what becomes the cultural norm of sexual behavior here could affect behavior elsewhere" (Nieves 1999:A9).

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Focusing on identity to explain this struggle, as well as a host of other sexual political struggles ongoing in the United States, would yield spurious results. While some sexual political struggles remain organized around affirming and legitimating a respectable gay citizenship and gaining access to the institutions of U.S. democracy, struggles such as these over normative and ethical issues surrounding sex and sexuality go beyond identity politics. Moreover, they have broad implications for how we are to think about civil society, the public sphere, and difference. We seem to be moving further away from the civil rights, multiculturalist model of politics we inherited from the struggles of the 1960s, which centered on the formal recognition of identities. Instead, many new sexual political struggles are the products of the emergence of a plurality of styles of life, sexual practices, subcultures, and competing visions of the good life.

The San Francisco struggle exemplifies the way public debates about sex and sexuality have moved beyond identity politics and have also moved beyond the formal institutions of democracy and "legitimate" avenues for securing citizenship and inclusion in civil society. Their struggle cannot be comprehended as a "politics of recognition," pure and simple (see Taylor 1994). Such a shift requires us to consider the way sociologists produce a certain way of thinking about difference. The call has been made to think of differences "beyond identity politics" (Nicholson and Seidman 1995), not only because feminists, poststructuralists, and queer theorists have illuminated the many ways in which identities are "essentializing" and exclusionary (Foucault 1978; Young 1990; Butler 1990) but also because focusing on identities, recognition, the formal processes of civil society, the public sphere, and democratization fails to capture the richer texture of sexual politics. The debates over public sex in San Francisco, for example, would not be explained adequately using such a focus. However, this is not to say that these struggles occur "outside" of the public representational processes associated with civil society, that they represent desire as opposed to politics, private battles as opposed to public ones. These struggles are in every way speaking a language of democracy but not in the civil rights and multiculturalist registers we are accustomed to hearing. Civil society, the public sphere, democratization, legitimation, and recognition remain important concepts for discussing difference. But postidentity struggles point to the limits of the civil society discourse and to the ways this discourse might be opened up to new ways of thinking about difference "beyond identity."

In this paper, I explain how civil society, as (1) a set of institutions separate from but penetrated by the state and economy (Habermas 1989); (2) a cultural and moral "code" for narrating our collective ways of thinking about citizenship and rights (Alexander 1992; Alexander and Smith 1997; Jacobs and Smith 1997); and (3) as an academic/sociological discourse for discussing these issues, has consistently reduced thinking about difference to the familiar tropes of identity and recognition (e.g., Taylor 1994). This reduction can be seen in the work of the earliest philosophers of civil society like Hegel, in the works of more contemporary theorists like Jurgen Habermas, and even in the work of those who have attempted to take the politics of difference seriously like Nancy Fraser. I will suggest that the sociocultural processes that govern a pluralistic civil society and its public spheres should be analyzed not only in terms of identity, recognition, and formal democratic processes but also in terms of *normalization* and *anti-normalization*. Moreover, the ways that normalization is related to (in fact, inextricable from) identity, recognition, legitimation, and democratization, and the ways that anti-normalizing sexual politics resists normative dominance, call for new conceptions of difference¹ that better capture the texture of con-

¹ While thinking about difference beyond the formal recognition of identity may be new for those of us with an interest in civil society, philosophers have been attempting to imagine "difference" differently for quite some time. My own thinking about difference has been influenced by books like *The Inoperative Community* (1991) by Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (1994) by Alfonso Lingis, and *The*

temporary struggle. While the arguments I make regarding sexual politics and difference are to some extent case specific, it is my hope that these arguments will register in other areas of multicultural politics and study as well.²

1. THE ANTI-NORMALIZING SEXUAL POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

The “play” of sexual differences could not be more serious than it is today. Whether in the debates around public sex in San Francisco and other metropolitan areas (Rotello 1998; Signorile 1998; Berube 1998; Bronski 1998), in the complicated language of the closet and coming out (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999; Jeness 1992), in the mélange of different faces one sees on television talk shows (Gamson 1998), in the ways individuals narrativize their own sexual “stories” (Plummer 1995), in interpretations of gay/lesbian history (Chauncey 1994; Bravmann 1997), or in sexual social movements (Seidman 1993, 1997; Bernstein 1997; Taylor and Whittier 1997), the coherence of gender and sexual identity categories seems to be in crisis. Identity categories such as homosexual, gay, lesbian, women, men, which were (perhaps) once taken for granted as referring to a distinct group of people, are now characterized by instability, as voices from within have emerged to challenge the representational validity of these identities and the normative proscriptions attached to them. These communities are now (if they were not in the past) shot through with internal differences, and the idea that gay identity, or any identity, can ever adequately represent a group of people, politically, culturally, and in day-to-day life, is more problematic than ever. Yet resistance continues, beyond identity as it were. In this section, I analyze resistance and the sexual politics of difference.

There is an ambiguity in the work of Michel Foucault concerning the question of resistance. On the one hand, Foucault’s writings on power, especially power/knowledge as it concerns sexuality, suggest that there can be no resistance outside of the discourses that “invented” sexuality in the first place. Homosexuals must resist the pathologization of their desires by adopting the same categories, labels, and identities that had once been used against them. “Homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories with which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault 1978:101). The process of homosexuals speaking in their own behalf is referred to by Foucault as a “reverse discourse,” where those who were stigmatized reverse the value attachments to an identity while leaving the labels and overall framework for thinking about sexuality intact. Homosexuals, in this view, can only resist the “regime of sexuality” on its own grounds, through its rules, logic, vocabulary, and categories. Thus homosexuals can only *react* against this

Coming Community (1993) by Giorgio Agamben. Where the sexual politics of difference is concerned, I have found the essay *Voice II*, by Jacques Derrida helpful, where Derrida asks: “what if we were to reach, what if we were to approach here (for one does not arrive at this as one would at a determined location) the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? The relationship would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond bisexuality as well, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing. As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. . . . Of course, it is not impossible that desire for a sexuality without number can still protect us, like a dream, from an implacable destiny which immures everything for life in the number 2” (1995:156–57). Moving beyond “the number 2” is, I believe, Derrida’s way of describing a sexual political terrain beyond identity politics and is the precise location of sexual politics today.

²This is not to say that racial, ethnic, religious, nationalist, and other multicultural differences operate in precisely the same way as sexual difference. On the contrary, my argument in this paper suggests that these differences are, in many ways, irreducible and incommensurable with one another. But, to the extent that identities serve regulatory functions in these communities (see, e.g., Appiah 1994; hooks 1990), and to the extent that identity is the focal point of their own particular politics of recognition, some form of normative dominance and resistance against it will inhere within them. The specific dynamics between normalization and anti-normalization in various multicultural communities would have to be the subject of specific empirical investigation.

power. One can, for example, come out of the closet, but this announcement does not “liberate,” according to Foucault, it only resituates one’s place along a grid of regulatory instruments. This changes the rules of the game, perhaps, but what cannot be resisted is the linkage of sexuality to identity itself, the idea that one’s sexual desires are the key to one’s psychic and social life, the essential marker of one’s normality or abnormality, and a primary lens through which one evaluates one’s experiences and interactions with others.

Most who have written about Foucault in the arena of sexual politics have focused on this *reactive* dimension of his statements on resistance (e.g., Sawicki 1994). Yet another type of resistance emerges from Foucault’s writings. Elsewhere, he notes that while homosexuals speaking on behalf of their own “naturalness” may be a useful strategy in some instances, homosexuality has a much more radical potential. Rather than asking oneself, “What is the truth of my desire?” Foucault notes, “Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, ‘What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?’ The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of sex, but rather to use sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships” (1996:204). Homosexuals then can either react against the sexual regime in a normalizing way that accepts the implicit assumption that sexual identity is a key representative of the self, or they can use sexuality to *produce* new social and sexual relations.

Thus Foucault suggests two fairly distinct means of resisting sexual oppression, a *reactive* resistance that, while it may enable some stigmatized groups to be considered normal, is highly problematic because of its imbrication in techniques of normalization; and a *productive* resistance, which seeks to loosen the connection between desire and identity and to completely transform the experience of pleasure through deconstructing rigid, narrow, identitarian ways of thinking about desire. Where a reactive resistance to sexual oppression takes a stance that is primarily normalizing, a productive politics is characterized by what I am calling a politics of anti-normalization. In actual politics, normalization and anti-normalization exist side by side and count primarily as analytical distinctions. What counts as anti-normalization at one historical moment may not be so at another. As Chauncey (1994) discovered, organizing one’s life around an urban gay subculture had transformative potential during the first half of the twentieth century (producing, among other things, the conditions that made gay liberation possible). Today, years after the institutionalization and normalization of gay life, this act may not be anti-normalizing.³

Although subject to historical change, and although the two exist side by side in actual sexual politics, normalization and anti-normalization can be carefully distinguished analytically. The normalization of sexual difference is characterized by the following three features. First, it relies on the problematic idea that sexual desire is a key marker of the self, that sexuality is somehow essential to who we are “at the core” and related even to aspects of the self thought to be unrelated to desire and sexuality. This idea has been theorized as the linchpin of both heteronormativity and homophobia (Stein 1992; Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1990). Thus, during the modern era, sexual identity came to be *the representative* of the self, the chief category for relating to oneself and the other. Sexual desire came to be thought of as the secret that must be confessed and analyzed interminably, and for individuals possessed by “pathological” desires, every aspect of the self came to be read as a “sign” of this perversion.

Second, sexual identity functions as the key means by which the differences of the self and social differences can be deduced. Sexual difference is reduced to the difference between

³As David Halperin notes, “In any case, to conceive of gay politics as a reverse discourse and a form of resistance is not to assign to it an entirely reactive and negative character—to deny it a claim to independence or creativity. After all, a reverse discourse, as Foucault describes it, does not simply produce a mirror reversal—a pure, one-to-one inversion of the existing terms of the discourse it reverses” (1995:60).

heterosexuals and homosexuals, the two master categories of the sexual soul into which all must fit. These categories are seen as mutually exclusive and internally coherent, and because of their putatively essential character, sexual difference in this reduced form *seems* untroubled by other differences (race, class, gender, ability, taste, life history, etc.). Thus the reduction of sexual difference would not be possible without a sexual identity that places one's "difference" on a grid of sameness through which one can relate to others with like sexuality and also to those whose sexual identity is "different." One might note that "assimilationist" sexual political strategies—affirming the insignificance of the differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals—and "separatist" strategies—affirming these differences—both reduce sexual difference in this manner. The latter emphasizes the different sexuality that all homosexuals are reputed to share vis-à-vis heterosexuals, whereas the former emphasizes that, while homosexuals might be different from heterosexuals, these differences pale in comparison to common humanity (Seidman 1993; Taylor and Whittier 1997).

Third, while one category of identity enjoys the privileges of normality (heterosexuals) and another is stigmatized and thought to be abnormal (homosexuals), the stigmatized can appeal to normalization in order to gain wider acceptance, tolerance, and so on. So while it is true, as I mentioned above, that sexual identity is the condition of possibility of heteronormative and homophobic discourses, it also, at the very same time, provides the discursive mechanisms for homosexuals to speak on their own behalf, to convince others of their normality, to make claims for formal rights, inclusion, and tolerance. Thus the idea of a sexual essence, an identity that forms through condensation around sexual desires, enables both the pathologization of stigmatized individuals and groups and their resistance to it. Homosexual identity emerges in part as a reaction against objective oppression (D'Emilio 1983; Taylor and Whittier 1997).

A politics of normalization has not been altogether unsuccessful for homosexuals in the United States. Since Stonewall, gays and lesbians have successfully lobbied some local municipalities for various sexual bills of rights, official partnership recognitions that function like marriages, and the right to adopt in some states, and in more recent years, gays and lesbians have made headway into mainstream entertainment. However, normalizing strategies also have costs. Through reducing sexual difference to sexual identity, a politics of normalization ignores that sexuality is experienced differently according to other axes of social difference and inequality. It excludes, for example, the way that race figures in the experience of sexual desire (Hemphill and Beam 1991; Hawkeswood 1996; Trujillo 1991), thus ignoring the way that oppression is sometimes multiple and intersecting. Moreover, a strategy of normalization does relatively little to challenge sexual identity as a key representative of the self; in fact, it crystallizes this notion, creating a multiple array of insides and outsides. As Steven Seidman notes, "A 'mainstream' [normalized gay community] . . . makes sense only in relation to an 'opposition'" (1997:225). This opposition has included S/M practices (Califia 1994), pedophilia (Rubin 1982), bisexuality (Ault 1996; Esterburg 1996; Rust 1996), and nonmonogamy (Seidman 1997:255–56), and the list is certainly longer. Just as heterosexual self-understanding as "normal" and "natural" came about through a reference to its deviant opposite (homosexuality), homosexuals have come to understand themselves as having a unified, coherent, and normal sexual identity through stigmatizing other "Others."

An identity politics of normalization does not encapsulate the entirety of sexual politics, however. In recent years, the dominance of identity as the key axis of political mobilization and contestation of heteronormativity and sexual oppression has begun to crumble. As a result, other non-gay-identified sexual communities have begun to emerge and have taken on, to some extent, a politics of anti-normalization. Even among more strongly gay

identified groups, for whom gay identity has been normalized, political issues have emerged that seem to have less to do with the formal processes of democracy and the recognition of gay identity but instead cover a range of “lifeworld” ethical and regulatory issues. In some ways, this is not an altogether new historical development. Radical sexual politics has, since gay liberationism, sought not only to speak of the normality of homosexuals but also to undo the opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Decades prior to the rise of “queer politics,” Dennis Altman noted that “[i]t is necessary now to transform sexuality into eroticism” ([1971] 1993:107), and “above all there is a need . . . to form *new sorts of human relationships*” (116; emphasis mine). Altman and other liberationists knew that sexual oppression would continue so long as a discourse that divided the world into the sexually pure and impure continued to regulate desire. The transformation of sexuality into eroticism would not simply liberate gays and lesbians or recompense them for historical misrecognitions in civil society. This transformation would completely change the way desire is thought about in everyday life—everything from the overly genital-focused nature of pleasure to monogamy, the family, and the eroticization of society’s putatively “asexual” spheres of life, such as work.

Sexual politics then has sought not only to legitimate “sexual minorities” to a privileged sexual majority, though it has certainly done that at times. It has also, most importantly, sought to continually reinvent and reeroticize the sexual landscape. At times these strategies have appealed to normalization. But at other times, radical sexual political resistance has been characterized by anti-normalization, which entails the following. First, and not entirely unlike a politics of normalization, anti-normalization entails a challenge of dominant considerations of sexual morality and sexual normalcy (Seidman 1997, chap. 11). But whereas a politics of normalization seeks either to “share the center” of normalcy with dominant groups (through making radical exclusions of other differences), or to pluralize this center, an anti-normalizing politics seeks to displace this center altogether. Thus, anti-normalizing politics cannot be easily organized into “assimilationism” versus “separatism” since a politics of anti-normalization would challenge the very grounds upon which negotiations of inclusion are made. Queer Nation, a group of radical sexual politicians that emerged in the 1980s, held protests and “kiss-ins” in suburban malls, not as a civil rights strategy, but to show how homosexuality was the invisible, repressed “Other” that shadowed every seemingly coherent expression of heterosexual desire. They showed how even the most sterile, seemingly asexual public places were overdetermined by sex and sexuality and, furthermore, that the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality were always blurry and open to contestation and reversal (Cunningham 1992).

Second, anti-normalizing politics is less centered around a politics of identity. The idea of a self populated by multiple voices and desires, sometimes in contradiction with one another, seems to have replaced the idea of a unified, sexual subject with a coherent identity. This aspect of a politics of anti-normalization troubles the dominant conceptions of recognition that surface in the civil society debates and troubles our dominant sociological conceptions of individual and communal identity. How can one make claims for rights, for example, or “equal representation” under the law, or equal air time in a mass-mediated public sphere, when the very identity categories through which those claims are made have been problematized *from within*? In San Francisco, identity has been decentered in the bathhouse debate. These debates are not about the legitimization of homosexuals in a predominantly heterosexual society but over *who* will be able to use public spaces for sex and under what conditions; what ethical and moral visions of sex are promoted by bathhouses; and whether or not such a vision is acceptable.

Third, a politics of anti-normalization entails a *productive* or creative contestation of normative dominance concerning sex, desire, and pleasure. This entails not *only* or even

primarily contesting dominant heterosexual norms; in fact, as we can see in San Francisco, the contestation of sexual morality seems to be directed as much to members of the “gay community” as to heterosexuals. Resisting in this manner entails everything from new sexual practices, which need not be so strongly focused on genital pleasure, to new modes of self-stylization and ethical self-regulation based on these practices, to new subcultures and communities based on these practices and modes of self-styling. Productive resistance entails, most importantly, the attempt to bring into being a new mode of social relationality—a new sexual relation to the other less encumbered by constraining codes such as man/woman, heterosexual/bisexual, active/passive, and so on. So while some might refer to this aspect of anti-normalizing politics as desire as opposed to “politics,” productive resistance has the potential to exact broad social and cultural change. Commenting on one example, adoption practices, Foucault noted, “we should secure recognition for relations of provisional coexistence, adoption, . . . of one adult by another. . . . Why shouldn’t I adopt a friend who’s ten years younger than I am? And even if he’s ten years older? Rather than arguing that rights are fundamental and natural to the individual, we should try to imagine and create a new relational right which permits all possible types of relations to exist and not be prevented, blocked, or annulled by impoverished relational institutions” (Macey 1993:367, quoted in Halperin 1995:82).

If a productive, inventive, and creative politics of anti-normalization takes us beyond rigid concepts of identity for thinking about difference, how does it do so? At the very beginning, we must realize that this question must always remain a question. For what is most important about anti-normalizing politics is that it points in the direction of the future, a future that must always remain open to new and different forms of sexual expression, new relations, new communities. Thus, to stipulate what form of difference is espoused by a politics of anti-normalization would be to do a certain violence. It would represent the attempt to organize such a politics into rigid categories based on our present understandings, understandings that remain overdetermined by concepts of identity. Alberto Melucci put it this way: “Like the prophets, the movements ‘speak before’: they announce what is taking shape even before its direction and content has become clear. The inertia of the old categories may prevent us from hearing the message and from deciding, consciously and responsibly, what action to take in light of it” (1996:1). Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is to offer new ways of thinking about difference based on the “lesson” of anti-normalizing politics. What then does the sexual politics of anti-normalization teach us about difference, beyond identity?

The anti-normalizing struggles within the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered community over ethical, moral, and lifestyle issues have shown us that what enables the reproduction of identity is not the way that it binds a “class” of people together, “in spite of their differences.” Nor does it refer unproblematically to an essence that they all share in common, nor to a sense of solidarity that all homosexuals share based *simply* and *unproblematically* on a common history of oppression that has affected them all in the same manner. Rather, this identity can be articulated and reproduced precisely because it can never “mean” what it is supposed to, because what it attempts to mean, and those to whom it is supposed to refer, is always a question open to contestation, renegotiation, reversal, even erasure. This does not mean that “homosexual” is meaningless but rather that its internal *incoherence* loads it with more meanings, more differences, than the identity itself can ever capture, articulate, or represent. Thus every collective claim to identity, while attempting to be recognized, *necessarily* entails a misrecognition—first and foremost. For in the absence of *interminable* difference, contestation, and *misrecognition* around the meaning and *recognition* of this identity, it would be impossible to speak of the homosexual at all. If these differences are in some way central to the articulation of any identity, perhaps

sociology's focus should be on bringing these differences and misrecognitions to the fore, with an awareness that stating what this difference "is" can never be "once-and-for-all" and that we are always in the process of *misrecognizing* differences, perhaps differences that do not yet even exist in a way that can be articulated.

Many collectivities such as Queer Nation, Outrage, and Act-Up emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, attempting to forge communities where the meaning of identity was continually contested and, in some cases, decentered from politics (Epstein 1996; Cunningham 1992; Duggan 1992; Gamson 1989; Elbaz 1993; Crimp 1990). But, as Joshua Gamson (1996) has noted, queer politics ultimately turned into identity politics and ultimately ignored many differences. This is not due to any insurmountable problems internal to these collectivities but rather to the way that civil society privileges identity as the primary means of representing difference. While civil society remains a vital arena for the sexual politics of difference, it is not innocent where the normalization of sexual difference is concerned.

2. CIVIL SOCIETY AND DIFFERENCE

Modern social theorists conceived of civil society as an arena set apart from the state, economy, and family, where individuals could both protect their own personal interests and form necessary solidarities with others who had similar interests. It was in the realm of civil society that the tensions associated with modernity (such as the tension between individual self-interests and general social interests, between particularity and universality) could be resolved or attenuated. Perhaps more important, in civil society individuals could shape the society they inhabited, making civil society of paramount importance for the maintenance of liberal democracy (Habermas 1989, 1992; Cohen and Arato 1997; Seligman 1992). While sociologists have focused on the specific institutions of civil society and the way those institutions act in conjunction with the economy, state, and family, the cultural and normative underpinnings of civil society itself were thought to be relatively given and unproblematic (Alexander 1990, 1992; Alexander and Smith 1997; Jacobs 1996; Jacobs and Smith 1997).

Contemporary accounts of civil society have extended the earlier liberal story in order to account for the tension between democracy and difference. Rather than emphasizing rigid boundaries between private and public life, latter-day scholars have emphasized that the citizens who inhabit civil society experience private and public boundaries more fluidly (Fraser 1992, 1997). To the extent that a strong division between private and public remains, it counts as a symbolic axis of domination that, for example, relegates women to domestic life or helps to maintain a view that sexual relations are private and natural and therefore outside of the realm of public, political considerations (Landes 1988; Ryan 1992). Likewise, whereas liberal scholars assumed broad social agreement on basic normative and ethical principles (Habermas 1987), contemporary scholars have examined the various cultural and moral codes that make up the "lifeworld" of "shared understandings" and meanings (Melucci 1996; Jacobs 1996), showing that these codes and meanings are often the site of contemporary contestation. Even the filial sense of trust thought to be necessary for a strong civil society has been shown to be affected by the cultural processes associated with race, class, gender and sexual privilege, and hegemony (Anderson 1990; Jacobs 1996; Weeks 1998). Consequently, civil society is now seen not only as the realm of unified democratic action but also as the primary realm in society where meanings, identities, interests, and needs are circulated and contested (Fraser 1992), as "the locus and target of contemporary struggle" (Cohen and Arato 1997:513).

As the tension between democracy and difference comes closer to the center of civil society theories, domination, hegemony, hierarchies, and authoritarianism are exposed as not only forces that threaten civil society from without but also as regular cultural aspects of civil society's own functioning within (Young 1990; Fraser 1992; Benhabib 1992; Schudson 1992). In this section, I focus on the work of two major figures in these debates: Jeffrey Alexander and Nancy Fraser. I have chosen Alexander and Fraser because both offer compelling social theories that make *both* civil society *and* difference central to their discussions. Alexander offers us a view of the ways cultural and moral "codes" operate in civil society, how the meaning of citizenship in civil society is guaranteed, and how the moral boundary between citizen and enemy is maintained. Fraser's work shows us how individuals who have been marginalized and constructed as "enemies" of civil society contest these boundaries. They offer useful tools for understanding the sexual politics of difference, but tools that need to be supplanted, I will argue, with an understanding of the politics of anti-normalization and difference beyond identity.

Jeffrey Alexander: Civil Society as Symbolic Classification

Jeffrey Alexander defines civil society as "a sphere of solidarity in which abstract universalism and particularistic versions of community are tensely intertwined. It is both a normative and a real concept. It also allows the relation between universal individual rights and particularistic restrictions on these rights to be studied empirically, as the conditions that determine the status of civil society itself" (Alexander 1992:289). Civil society is only analytically separate from other spheres of society; it relies on "inputs" from the economy for example, and from broad cultural discussion. Civil society has an objective dimension, its own organizations and institutions, such as the law and institutions of mass communication, but also an important "moral dimension," a "realm of structured, socially established consciousness, a network of understandings that operates beneath and above explicit institutions and the self-conscious interest of elites" (Alexander 1992:290).

The moral-cultural dimension is a densely layered web of symbolic codes that circulate through and constitute society itself. They give rise to the institutions of civil society, and they serve as a kind of collective consciousness, a secular morality with its own notions of "the sacred," informing us who deserves rights, inclusion, citizenship and who is an "enemy." "The codes supply the structured categories of pure and impure into which every member, or potential member, of civil society is made to fit" and "do not develop merely as generalizations of inductions from structural position or individual behavior. They are imputations that are induced, via analogy or metaphor, from the internal logic of the symbolic code" (Alexander 1992:290–91). Moral codes offer universal inclusiveness in principle but not in reality. In reality, every national and subnational community divides the world into those who are pure and civilized (citizens) and those who are polluted and uncivilized (enemies). The sources of pollution "must either be kept at bay or transformed by communicative actions, like rituals and social movements, into pure form" (1992:290).

The moral codes of civil discourses operate in roughly the same way at the level of individual motivations, social relationships, and social institutions. Through these codes, Alexander explains, we interpret activism, autonomy, rationality, and sanity, for example, as qualities connoting citizenship and democracy, whereas passivity, dependence, irrationality, and madness are characteristic of enemies. This interpretation centers around the capacity for voluntarism. "Action is voluntary if it is intended by rational actors who are in full control of body and mind. If action is not voluntary, it is deemed to be worthless" (1992:295). Thus motives, social relationships, and institutions that are based on voluntary action and that encourage and are supportive of the voluntary action of others form and are

informed by the positive discourse of liberty; those motivations, social relationships, and institutions that do not support voluntary actions form and are informed by the negative discourse of repression:

If people do not have the capacity for reason; if they cannot rationally process information and cannot tell truth from falseness, then they will be loyal leaders for purely personal reasons and will be easily manipulated by them in turn. . . . These anti-civil qualities make it necessary to deny such persons access to rights and the protection of the law. . . . Indeed, because they lack the capacity for both voluntary and responsible behavior, *these marginal members of the national community—those who are unfortunate enough to be constructed under the counterdemocratic code—must ultimately be repressed.* (1992:296; my emphasis)

While sociologists can analyze the inner workings of this discourse, civil society actors, be they citizen or enemy, do not. In actual civil societies, citizens may be “aware that they are struggling over classifications, [but they] do not realize that it is they who are creating them. Such knowledge would relativize reality, creating an uncertainty that could undermine not only the cultural core but also the institutional boundaries and solidarities of civil society itself” (1992:297). Indeed, “[f]or contemporary Americans, the categories of the pure and the polluted discourses seem to exist in just as naturally and fully historical a way” (1992:297). Thus the health of civil society is linked, in the final analysis, to an absence of reflection; individuals cannot be made aware of the fact that they construct the world of citizens and enemies in which they find themselves and through which they concretize their own self-understandings as citizens. Even though a citizen’s reference to the universalistic values embedded in categories of citizen and enemy enables her to gain critical distance from immediate social relations (see also Alexander 1990), her critical consciousness reaches its limit at the citizen/enemy opposition, and exposing it for its socially constructed character would undermine democracy’s moral core.

Whereas earlier theorists took the cultural side of civil society for granted and assumed an overarching synthesis of interests, Alexander places his cultural theory in a framework of liberal pluralism. He accepts the facts that democratic societies will always be characterized by a diversity of interests, styles of life, and communities and that the citizen/enemy binary is not fixed or immutable but rather is the symbolic means of struggle, contestation, and sociopolitical change. “The existence of broadly shared moral ties does not mean that individuals and groups pursue similar or even complementary goals” (1990:162). Democracy is associated with a plurality of differences, diverse ways of life, and does not rest on the bracketing or sublation of these differences but rests instead on the legitimation of the conflict that inevitably rises between them, as a symbol of the health of democracy.

But Alexander does not focus primarily on conflict around notions of citizenship in civil society. Nor does he focus on the *necessary instability* within citizen/enemy codes in order for there to be the kind of pluralism he seems to admire at the end of his essay. Citizen/enemy are portrayed as mutually exclusive “poles” of the language of democracy. Furthermore, a simple change in focus would not allow us to examine moral and ethical conflicts around notions of citizenship. For Alexander insists that, regardless of conflict around the particularities of how citizen and enemy identities are constructed, every contestation somehow manages to reaffirm the universal, binding character of the moral code itself. Even conflict, in his view, implies consensus around general, shared notions of citizen/enemy. While Alexander’s viewpoint would lend itself to an explanation of the contours of identity politics, the politics of formal recognition, Alexander’s civil society

implies, I would suggest, normalization and the reduction of difference to identity. Let me offer the following three criticisms of his viewpoint in order to make this point more explicit.

First, while Alexander is critical of those who would reduce the moral dimensions of civil society to power games,⁴ he seems to commit the opposite reductive fallacy. Conflicts in democratic society arise from groups and individuals who become consternated with their position on the grid of civil society as “enemy” as opposed to “citizen,” and based on this agitation, they engage in a politics that attempts through communicative action to legitimate their own position as an integral part of the universal (yet pluralistic) whole of democracy. The construction of moral codes, however, is always already deeply interested, embodied, and particular even if not in a way that is wholly “strategic.” To the extent that actors remain, as Alexander suggests, unaware in part of the social constructedness of these universally applicable moral codes, these actors remain unreflective of the particular interests that go into the making of these putative “universals,” which can only be recognized as such to the extent that the particularities that go into their making are disavowed through making them *appear* fully natural and historical. Of course excluded individuals can appeal for inclusion based on the very “universalistic” principles that once defined them as enemies, but this means reconstructing oneself according to dominant, normalized cultural constructions of the communities of civil society. We would be wrong, in other words, to conflate a universal sense of society and inclusion with cultural dominance and normalization.

Second, in order for one to traverse the boundary between the culturally constructed “outside” dimension of enemy to the supposedly universalistic “inside” dimension of citizen, what must one do? It would be a careless analysis of social power to suggest that one must “assimilate,” for pluralistic democracies identify diversity as a chief aim and eschew notions of assimilation. Rather, I think it is more likely that traversing the citizen/enemy divide requires the normalization of differences. This means that one can be different, so long as that difference operates in a particular way, in a way that does not challenge the imperative to construct pure and polluted, citizen and enemy subjectivities. And in the terrain of sexual politics, this subjectivity has been indelibly linked to sexual identity. It means that while one might challenge the way that one’s subjectivity has been codified as “enemy,” one cannot challenge the code itself (cf. Jacobs and Smith 1997). It means policing difference in oneself and one’s collective, it requires that one be in constant search for possible sources of difference that are to be excluded, managed, and regulated (Burchell 1991), that one continually and interminably expel the enemy-other within. This enemy, once discovered, must either be normalized and made commensurable with the identity associated with one’s citizenship and communities, disavowed as an anomaly not central to oneself, or expelled from one’s consciousness altogether in an act of self-repression. This process of governance and normalization of difference is absolutely necessary in order for Alexander’s code to function.

Finally, Alexander offers us the tools to analyze the ways that “enemy” collectivities politicize and reconstitute themselves in public as citizens of civil society. Individuals and social movements engage the moral codes of civil society in interesting and creative ways (Jacobs and Smith 1997; Melucci 1996). But Alexander stops short of giving us a way of

⁴ Alexander is especially critical of Foucault (see Alexander 1992:301, footnote 2): “The central challenge for developing a useful symbolic approach to politics is to translate the understanding and relevance of this classical sociological work on the centrality of religion in traditional society into a framework that is relevant for contemporary secular societies. This means going beyond the overly cognitive emphasis of semiotic and poststructural analysis—from Levi-Strauss to Michel Foucault—that typically highlights ‘discourse’ in a manner that removes it from ethical and moral concerns and from affectivity as well. This removal is one problem with the recent ‘linguistics turn’ in history, which in so many respects is vital and important.”

thinking about political groups that challenge the normalizing tendencies of these codes. His analysis remains slanted toward movements and individuals that accept the citizen/enemy cultural codes of civil society (movements whose struggles are forged against the institutions of society) and not toward collectivities that challenge the very basis of this code (movements whose struggles are forged against cultural norms). Anti-normalizing political collectivities do precisely what Alexander warns we must never do: "Even when they are aware that they are struggling over these classifications . . . most political actors do not recognize that it is they who are creating them. Such knowledge would relativize reality, creating an uncertainty that could undermine not only the cultural core but also the institutional boundaries and solidarity of civil society itself" (1992:297).

The politics of anti-normalization engages civil society in a way that Alexander would not predict. As several scholars have suggested, "queer," anti-normalizing resistance is a politics of irony, that is, an ironization of the citizen/enemy "structure" of the moral codes of civil society, through parodying the position of enemy (see Warner 1993; Berlant and Freeman 1993). The word "queer" in queer theory and politics, for example, raises the position of "enemy" to the level of sacred, inverting the usual conceptions of pure and impure and uncovering the ways that enemy sexualities are always already present in any expression of sexual citizenship or sexual normalcy, making it impossible for heterosexuals *or* homosexuals to make claims to normal citizenship without an ironic awareness of the enemy whose sacrifice makes this articulation possible. In doing so, I would not suggest that anti-normalizing politics is "outside" of or beyond the grasp of Alexander's perspective but rather that it represents a "return" of that which "ultimately must be repressed"—not a return that seeks inclusion in citizenship but one that seeks ultimately to deconstruct such oppositions. For what Alexander's essay clearly suggests, although he never unpacks the implications, is that civil society and democracy, because of the moral code of citizen/enemy he uncovers, *must always have an enemy*, an outside, an Other, through which "citizens" understand themselves as such. And it is this imperative that forms the starting ground and (anti) telos of the politics of anti-normalization.

Alexander did not write his essay with a view to explaining the ways dominance is contested in civil society by marginal groups. He intended to explain mainstream civil society, and he has done so. Many gay/lesbian collectivities have struggled for rights, inclusion, and citizenship following Alexander's theory to the letter, which includes jettisoning the sexual enemies within their communities. But many sexual political collectivities have not followed this course. Although Alexander was attempting to offer a general perspective of mainstream civil society, his position must nevertheless be challenged for what it leaves unsaid—namely, the cultural domination and normalization of difference necessitated by "citizen/enemy" and the ways this domination is resisted by marginalized groups, by what Nancy Fraser calls "subaltern counterpublic spheres."

Nancy Fraser: The Subaltern Counterpublic Sphere

Nancy Fraser's critique of liberal conceptions of civil society (e.g., Habermas 1989, 1992) is an attempt to move beyond the privileging of dominant, "mainstream" public spheres over "multiple overlapping publics" and "subaltern counterpublic spheres," and it stands to have broad implications for the study of civil society and difference. Fraser notes that liberals have attended primarily to the workings of a public sphere that is both bourgeois and masculinist. Liberal theories assume that status inequalities can be bracketed in public discussions, ignoring social inequality; assume that matters of "public concern" should take precedence over private matters; assume a strong division between state and civil

society; and assume that the presence of multiple competing publics is a “step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy” (Fraser 1992:117).

These assumptions render what was essentially a particularistic public sphere (bourgeois and male) to the level of universal. Fraser notes that, according to revisionist historiography, the modern public sphere was built on significant exclusions (of women, the working class, etc.), but that these other publics continued to exist alongside the dominant one. To theorize the bourgeois masculinist public sphere of the modern era as universal is to ignore these exclusions and the ways modern liberal democracies were built upon various stratas of inequality. Such a theorization also ignores the significance of private, particular interests in constructing public, political selves, and it ignores the way that what is intersubjectively constructed as the “common good” is subject to particularistic interests that come to be recognized as the common good through practices of power and hegemony. Finally, the liberal theorization assumes that public authority must maintain separateness from the state, leading to a normative ideal of weak publics who can only hold state power at bay but can never transform it into a socialist democratic force. Strong publics must make direct claims against the state in order for broad social change to occur.

Liberal positions thus occlude the state of “actually existing democracy,” which can only be understood if civil society is examined from the position of multiple, competing publics and subaltern counterpublic spheres instead of from the liberal ideal. Fraser defines subaltern counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1992:123). The subaltern complicates simplified notions of separatism/assimilation. The subaltern always assumes a publicist orientation: “[T]hey function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. . . . This dialectic [between assimilation and separatism] enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies” (1992:124).

Difference is thus immediately central to Fraser’s theory of civil society and the public sphere. Her position takes account of the ways status is played out in public settings and the way identities are invented and performed (and not merely represented and recognized) in political arenas and through political discourse. The public sphere cannot always be theorized as a space of consensus where identities, interests, and needs are nonproblematic and where the conflicts around such issues can be nullified through rational debate and deliberation about the common good; for the public sphere is, more than anything else, a space of difference and a space of power, where consensus is always bound to hegemonic practices as well as cultural and material dominance. Where Alexander assumes that enemies struggle to become citizens and ultimately affirm the universality of civil discourses, Fraser opens the possibility of thinking about ways in which groups might engage the citizen/enemy code of civil society in transformative ways that oppose those whose hegemony it makes possible.

Fraser’s conception of difference as embodied in multiple and competing publics and subaltern counterpublics is limited, however, in an important way. Even though she rightly troubles the boundary between assimilation and separatism by noting that the subaltern functions both as a space of withdrawal and regroupment and as a means of engaging broader, dominant publics, her analysis ultimately privileges the publicist-oriented dimension of these groups, which places us, once again, in the terrain of official civil society. To use her own vocabulary, Fraser’s theory of the subaltern works for explaining subalterns that are engaging wider publics, but she offers few ways of understanding the processes associated with what she calls “withdrawal.”

Fraser's subaltern must ultimately succumb to normalization, since, once "withdrawal" is over, it must engage the moral codes discussed by Alexander, which, as I have shown, are a force that normalizes difference. This is due to the ways Fraser characterizes withdrawal as secondary to politics (compared to reengagement with wider publics) and as *reactive*. Subalterns withdraw as a reaction against exclusion and marginalization. Homosexuals may withdraw from the official, dominant, heterosexual publics in order to regroup and strategize about ways to combat oppression. But for Fraser, there is always reengagement with these dominant publics in order to make demands about their identities, interests, and needs, struggling against the category of "enemy" that has been thrust upon them in order to make claims for citizenship and inclusion. This regroupment involves normalization, since certain identities, interests, and needs are necessarily excluded from whatever representation of the homosexual subaltern ultimately becomes the collective voice that reengages dominant publics in official civil society.

Withdrawal need not be thought of in this way only, however. Against Fraser's characterization, we must think of withdrawal as an active attempt to create a sexual lifeworld less centered around the opposition of heterosexual/homosexual that characterizes dominant publics and less centered around the formal aspects of democratization. *Active* withdrawal is what I would characterize as anti-normalization. It is the active dimension of these groups that attempts to break with the normalizing effects of public discourses and to forge new ways of thinking about democracy and citizenship that may not be in keeping with received discourses. Queer subalterns not only withdraw from official civil society as a reaction against heteronormativity, they do so in order to engage in the active creation of different lifeworlds, ethical ways of existing, moralities, desires, pleasures, and modes of social relationality. At times, these new lifeworlds undermine reengagement with broader publics, since framing desire beyond heterosexual/homosexual deconstructs the basis of representation in official civil society (i.e., a minority sexual identity).

Fraser does not speak to the active dimensions of withdrawal, I believe, because she continues to imagine sexual difference as inhering in the difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals. She reduces difference to identity and seems unable to think of solidarities that may have identities, to be sure, but for whom identity is neither the starting, nor ending, point of their politics. In her book *Justice Interruptus*, Fraser takes a critical stance toward identity politics. She recognizes, for example, that a strong identity politics has been divisive to the feminist movement through excluding differences among women (1997:177–80). But when venturing into the territory of the politics of difference less centered around identity, she seems unable to say much about politics, difference, and solidarity beyond identity. Discussing what she interchangeably terms "queer politics" and "deconstructive politics," Fraser interprets this form of politics as "dedifferentiating." It will help at this point to quote her at length:

[L]et us consider, once again, the case of the despised sexuality. Affirmative remedies for homophobia and heterosexism are currently associated with gay-identity politics, which aims to revalue gay and lesbian identity. Transformative remedies, in contrast, are associated with queer politics, which would deconstruct the homo-hetero dichotomy. Gay-identity politics treats homosexuality as a cultural positivity with its own substantive content, much like (the common sense view of) an ethnicity. This positivity is assumed to subsist in and of itself and to need only additional recognition. Queer politics, in contrast, treats homosexuality as the constructed and devalued correlate of heterosexuality; both are reifications of sexual ambiguity and are codefined only in virtue of each other. The transformative aim is not to solidify

a gay identity but to deconstruct human identity; it is, rather, to sustain a sexual field of multiple, debinarized, fluid, ever-shifting differences. (1997:24)

The crucial difference between a gay-identity politics and an anti-normalizing “queer politics” is that queer politics seeks not to affirm difference as different-from-heterosexuals (i.e., as reactive to heterosexuality) but rather to affirm differences that emerge from within their own community. Their aim is, in Fraser’s words, to “sustain a sexual field of multiple, debinarized, fluid, ever-shifting differences.” In the very next paragraph, however, Fraser contradicts this statement. She says, “Whereas gay-identity politics tends to enhance *existing sexual group differentiations*, queer politics tends to destabilize it—at least ostensibly and in the long run” (1997:24; emphasis mine). Thus what was once characterized, only a paragraph earlier, as productive of difference now comes to be characterized as dedifferentiating, as destabilizing group differences. This is because Fraser assumes that “existing group [sexual] differences” are those that exist between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Likewise, a “field of multiple, debinarized, fluid, ever-shifting [sexual] differences” only exists in the future, in “the promised land of deconstruction.”⁵ Instead, if we looked at queer politics from the starting point of anti-normalization, we might say that queer politics tends to destabilize existing sexual group differentiations (i.e., the differentiation between heterosexual and homosexual), but far from “dedifferentiating,” queer politics, a politics of anti-normalization, would simultaneously be in the process of *redifferentiating*—of producing new differences, new forms of desire and subjectivity based on these desires, new sexual communities, but none of them centered so closely around hetero/homo. Moreover, given the extent to which homosexuality has been normalized, albeit unevenly, Fraser might have realized that the destabilization of heterosexual/homosexual differences and *redifferentiation* are processes that are already under way *in the present*.

In claiming heterosexuality/homosexuality as “existing group differences,” Fraser, perhaps against her best intentions, reinscribes identity politics. That is, she confirms the idea that sexual difference can be represented, in the present, as the difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals. It is against these “existing group differences” that queer politics positions itself. It is problematic, though, to assume that there ever was a time when sexual difference could be reduced to this opposition. Any cursory reading of gay liberationist political history tells us otherwise (Altman [1971] 1993, chap. 3). Sexual politics has always been shot through with differences of race, class, gender, taste, life history, and so on, and radical sexual politics has rarely been about the legitimation and conservation of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. So if “existing group differences” refers to heterosexuality versus homosexuality, it does so in part because Fraser characterizes it that way, instead of focusing on other differences, other *existing* group differences, which exist *in the present*.

So while queer politics may destabilize the boundary between heterosexual and homosexual, the “deconstruction” of this opposition does not mean “dedifferentiation” or the erasure of sexual difference. On the contrary, anti-normalizing politics is productive of difference. Fraser seems to realize this, but in claiming heterosexual/homosexual as existing group differences, she simultaneously obscures other more important differences from

⁵To her credit, Fraser recognizes that claiming queer politics is “dedifferentiating” of sexual difference is complex and problematic. She notes: “Despite its professed long-term deconstructive goal, the practical effects of queer politics may be more ambiguous. Like gay-identity politics, it, too, seems to promote group solidarity in the here and now, even as it sets its sights on the promised land of deconstruction” (Fraser 1997, footnotes 31, 37). Nevertheless, Fraser places difference beyond identity in the future tense, as the “promised land of deconstruction,” instead of offering an analysis of the ways that, for some of these collectivities, the promised land is unfolding in the here and now.

theorization. The aim of anti-normalizing politics has been, and continues to be, the proliferation of difference—different sexual practices, different desires, different subcultures and identities, different families, different modes of social relationality, an entirely new erotics. And there is no reason to assume that, once our sexual culture reaches the point at which heterosexual/homosexual is finally outmoded, this process will end or that there is some kind of future, undifferentiated endpoint toward which sexual politics is moving. If we begin our theorizations of subaltern counterpublic sexual politics with this idea as a first principle, then it becomes clear that we are “beyond identity politics” already, that the “promised land of deconstruction” is now.

3. CONCLUSION: DIFFERENCE, SEXUAL JUSTICE, AND INTIMATE CITIZENSHIP

In the debates over bathhouses in San Francisco, we are dealing with a diversity of interests and sexualities that can perhaps never be adequately thematized, as many sexualities as there are voices in the debates, and perhaps more. Sexualities that value openness, sexualities that find anonymity desirable, sexualities that are afraid of AIDS and sexualities that are not; but above all, sexualities that are attempting, within the walls of their own community, to shape and produce new sexual lifeworlds, informal social institutions that will support a range of intimate solidarities, and a system of ethics that is at once justly regulatory. There are appeals to broadly shared values, to be sure, but these appeals are at the same time less centered around strict notions of normal and abnormal, and normative agreement is not secured through behavioral proscriptions attached to identities and types of personhood. Neither side claims that their vision is more normal or more in keeping with mainstream citizenship than the other. Nor is either side attempting to recenter an identity around their particular sexual desires and have that identity recognized, granted formal civil rights and citizenship. But are these struggles occurring “in” civil society? Are these not battles over public space: how that space is to be used, by whom, and what the appropriate decorum and ethics for regulating that space would be? It seems to me that the answer is yes, and even though public discussions like the one in San Francisco might not be directly related to the formal processes of civil society and democracy, even though their politics might be outside the scope of identities and formal recognition, their politics stands to have far reaching cultural and social-institutional effects.

It would be difficult to make the claim that the bathhouse struggle represents an attempt on the part of its participants to be included in broadly shared cultural definitions of citizenship, or an attempt to contest their construction as “enemies” of civil society. It would likewise be difficult to analyze this situation in terms of a subaltern counterpublic that has as its primary goal the regroupment of its members to reengage wider publics in official civil society. We would be better off, as this paper suggests, to analyze situations like the San Francisco debates in terms of normalization and anti-normalization. Gays and lesbians have struggled since the onslaught of AIDS to promote a respectable representation of gay life, which has included promoting images of homosexual intimacy that pass as normal in the dominant public. They have developed a reactionary sexual politics of normalization—reacting against the conservative backlash against homosexual politics that coincided with the discovery of the HIV virus and against constructions of the homosexual as the carrier of disease, as contaminated, and as dangerous. Survival in civil society has required them to do so, for how could the gay community demand public funding for AIDS prevention and research, sympathy for homosexuals with AIDS, and broad public awareness of the AIDS crisis without first appearing respectable, normal, and so on. Bathhouses constitute a cultural symbol that signifies promiscuity, sexual irresponsibility,

nymphomania, abnormality, and a breeding ground for the further spread of disease. A gay politics of normalization must therefore position itself not only against the homophobic reactions to AIDS but also against those members of its own community that are detrimental to its perceived respectability and that subtract from its currency in wider publics and official civil society. It must create a moral boundary that is closely linked to respectable gay identity as a public representation.

And what of the anti-normalizing response to the bathhouse debate? First, we should note that their primary concerns are not official gay rights or the recognition of “gay identity” as respectable, normal, and so forth. For there are few bathhouse activities that would be considered respectable and normal by mainstream heterosexual and homosexual society. We must also note that they are at odds with the image of gay subjectivity and identity that has been normalized. They wish to keep the bathhouses “open,” but what is it “in” the bathhouses that must be kept “open”? On the one hand, they struggle to keep open a semipublic space where intimacy, sex, desire, and pleasure can be the object of experimentation, play, and invention. A place where intimacy does not get reduced to images of marriage, convention, monogamy, openness, contract, and possession. And a place where play with the self, or selves, can be ongoing—where one can find within oneself secret desires, desires one never knew one had, where one can find pleasure where one did not expect it. On the other hand, this should not be confused with a space of pure liberation, for these individuals are also concerned with ethical self-regulation. They must balance their sexual experimentation and play with an ethics of safety and responsibility. So this is not a space without moral boundaries, but perhaps it is a space where moral boundaries are not so tightly fused to “sexual identity” as such and to the normalizing consequences of that linkage.

In sum, the anti-normalizing sexual politics of difference requires that we imagine difference *differently*. It requires that we further broaden our theoretical definitions of civil society beyond the formal processes of democratization, the legitimation and recognition of revalued sexual identities to include contestations of the norms governing intimacy and desire, struggles *against* identity and the regulatory logic of representation, and attempts to create new lifeworlds of sex and pleasure. It requires that we look deeper into communities to their internal divisions and means of regulating difference. The institutions of civil society, its cultural and moral codes, and the theoretical framework used by social scientists to explore it consistently reduce difference to the trope of identity by privileging a concept of formal, official civil society. Civil society is equipped to accommodate and comprehend the politics of normalization but is not equipped, as of yet, to accommodate and comprehend the politics of anti-normalization. To the extent that this remains true, civil society’s institutions and culture and our social theories of civil society constitute, along with the other discursive practices that regulate desire, a normalizing social force.

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