

# Queer theory and its continuing significance

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Reviewing:

Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002. 320 pp.

Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002. 334 pp.

THROUGHOUT THE EARLY 1970S, writers around the world borrowed from traditions as diverse as Marxism, psychoanalytic theory, feminism, and post-modernism in an attempt to articulate the broad message of gay liberation. Gay papers were born nationally while elements of high culture intersected with an underground press. By the time the AIDS crisis hit a cross-section of groups occupying outsider status, this combination of influences—from Normal O’Brown’s *Life Against Death* and Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* to Boyd McDonald’s pornography/political philosophy to Guy Hocquenghem’s *Homosexual Desire*—contributed to ongoing debates about the meanings of the AIDS epidemic and of activism aimed at fighting the carnage. The process laid the groundwork for a broad new critical framework that came to be understood as queer theory.

Two of the foremost proponents of this framework were Douglas Crimp and Michael Warner. From 1987 to 1993, Crimp helped inject a scholarly analysis into ACT UP’s response to the health crisis. His seminal works, *AIDS Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* and *AIDS Demographics* (with Adam Rolston), served as the first and best examples of queer theoretical writing aimed at describing and challenging the phobic representations of the epidemic. Crimp established queer theory as an embodiment of ACT UP’s social and cultural activism. During those early years, Crimp even had groupies at ACT UP meetings. Michael Warner’s 1993 anthology, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, with its presumption that queer theory was a critique of social and economic norms as much as heterosexuality, helped propel the queer theory framework onto college reading lists across the United States. The lesson these two writers offer is that discrimination against queers—whether men who have sex with men in public, women on welfare, or injection drug users—functions out of similar antihumanist ethos. Beyond calling for mere interest-group representation for gays, the work of Crimp and Warner expands the ways to consider the ethics of democratic citizenship and public life.

Late in 2002, Crimp and Warner published new works that use a queer theoretical analysis

of topics ranging from the relationship between high art and pornography to a psychoanalysis of drives, pleasure, and community life. The result is a series of investigations into the nature of pluralistic democracy. Both volumes include foundational essays on the queer theoretical project as well as newer contributions. Six years after the authors last took the nation by storm, these new volumes offer an opportunity to consider the broader topic, the continuing significance of queer theory.

Queer theory was born and thrives as an effort to create social and sexual spaces for expressions, questions, study, and unashamed recognition of the value of public sexuality. Crimp and Warner have worked tirelessly at cultivating such spaces both as activists and scholars. Years after Crimp's active involvement with the original ACT UP New York, debate has renewed about the relationship between public sex and HIV transmission in the mid 1990s. In response to the controversy, Warner and Crimp played central roles within the AIDS Prevention Action League and later SexPanic! Concurrent with the 1990s' economic boom, AIDS/queer activism, like much of radical culture, struggled against a homogenization of the movement by a "we're just like them" gay politics on the left and a globalization steamroller flattening out communities of difference on the right. "The culture always holds out a bribe: Clean up your act and we'll tolerate you," Warner explained at the time. "But it's our messy act that we're fighting for in the first place, and anyone who accepts that bribe is going to lose."<sup>1</sup>

Amid these changes, the gay press, which had served as a public commons for debates over queer politics from the Vietnam War era through the AIDS years, seemed to be favoring a bland spot in the middle of the road. As a second wave of HIV/ AIDS was causing hysteria, there was an attack on queer meeting spaces. Driving the frenzy was a conservative urban regime, backed by real estate interests that successfully justified their grab for power as a morality campaign. Queer meeting places were shut down. A footnote in Crimp's introduction to *Melancholia and Mourning* explains that "the AIDS crisis also coincided with profound transformations in New York City, where...previously abandoned or peripheral neighborhoods that were home to gay sexual culture were reappropriated and gentrified by the real estate industry, thus making them inhospitable to the uses we'd invented for them" (15). That little footnote outlines themes that permeate both of these new books.

Crimp's collection outlines what was, what is, and what has not come to be queer world-making, while Warner offers new directions for the project. As one reads Crimp's essays on resisting the quicksand-like emotional tug of the Names Quilt, celebrating Vitto Russo's resilient campiness in the face of death, and the eternal return of the moralists turning their back on the AIDS/homophobic carnage, the meaning of the collection's title, *Melancholia and Moralism*, becomes clear. Building on Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, Crimp considers the difficulties of fighting the fatal implications of a culture's indifference to death as it watches a movement struggle with the difficult task of simultaneously mourning and fighting. A subtext of all the essays is a weariness of fighting yet another Bush, who could

care less if queers or anyone else but his contributors lives or dies.

Warner assesses the gay male sex wars in terms of the "public sphere theory" outlined by Frankfurt School theorist Jurgen Habermas. For Warner, the gay men's sex wars were a clash between a repackaged model of respectable gay citizenship and the "Good Gay's shadow: the Bad Queer, whose immaturity can be inferred from his or her pursuit of sex, defiance of propriety and willingness to build a collective way of life through promiscuity."<sup>2</sup> Warner continued to elaborate on the tensions conflict between shame, private life, and public identity in 1999 with his book, *The Trouble with Normal*. By 2002, he reframes the conflict as a struggle between a dominant mainstream gay public sphere and a radical subaltern public:

The bourgeois public sphere consists of private persons whose identity is formed in the privacy of the conjugal domestic family and who enter into rational-critical debate around matters common to all by bracketing their embodiment and status. Counterpublics of sexuality and gender, on the other hand, are scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate.<sup>3</sup>

This conflict expresses itself as competing pressures between global capital and community building, market pressure and pluralistic democracy, private interest (with attendant isolation and alienation) and public consciousness (as expressed in interconnection and solidarity). The private sphere is seen as an ideology of capital, heteronormativity, reproduction, family values, and privilege. The public is a place for conversations, for cross-class contact and for community building. Warner is frustrated with the mainstream gay movement's "privatized notion of identity based in the home/hetero language of sexual orientation."

Both books address the debates in the movement about dwindling public spaces-an issue with implications for other communities as well-and dilemmas specific to AIDS/queer activism concerning love, life, and death. Crimp's book begins with a series of essays on an activist engagement against an emerging epidemic; it ends with a wrenching reflection on why those who know better still have unsafe sex. The collection evokes the fury and passion of the fifteen years of struggles against the closure of gay baths, attacks from Jesse Helms, and fights against an increasingly influential group of neoconservative gay writers (oft-described as the Gang of Four of gay journalism): Gabrielle Rotello, Michelangelo Signorile, Larry Kramer, and Andrew Sullivan.

Crimp attempts to isolate the silence that has allowed the AIDS epidemic to spread. Although Reagan failed to even murmur the word "AIDS" for the first six and half years of his administration, by 1996, a gay, HIV-positive journalist furthered the line of denial about AIDS. Andrew Sullivan proclaimed that the AIDS epidemic was over in a cover story of the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "When Plagues End."<sup>4</sup> Sullivan argued that gay people first gained a sense of self-respect through the AIDS crisis, despite the "irresponsible" tirades of ACT UP-a strange message from an HIV-positive writer who

had himself benefited from ACT UP's successful fight for fast-track approval of lifesaving medications. And of those in the developing world battling AIDS, whom Sullivan mentions only briefly, the essay consigns them, in effect, to death. While the taking apart of Andrew Sullivan and his fellow neoconservatives has become a pastime of queer critics, Crimp situates Sullivan's class-based blind spots within a framework for the discussion of public morality. From here, Crimp begins the process—the central focus of AIDS/queer activism—of wresting the ethical high ground from self-proclaimed moralists. Every time activism successfully beats back the right-wing moral panic, a cancerous blame-the-victim thinking reemerges. Twenty years later and with a new conservative Bush in office, the fight is now at once bleak and absurd.

Late in the SexPanic! debate, Eve Sedgwick, author of *Epidemology of the Closet*, explained: "It's ridiculous to say that queer theory is not about ethical responsibility. There is an ethical urgency about queer theory that is directed at the damage that sexual prohibitions and discriminations do to people."<sup>5</sup> Crimp first conveyed a similar sentiment with his seminal essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," published in 1987 and reprinted in *Melancholia and Moralism*. Within the current push for abstinence-only sex education and marriage-promotion approaches to funded policies ranging from welfare reform to HIV/AIDS policy, the essay still resonates, and Crimp's calls for frankness and honesty as tools for AIDS prevention are more pressing than ever. Crimp's point, of course, is that abstinence is unsafe, and repression is unhealthy. Queer theory is often read as a direct response to Freud's writings on the enticing possibilities and risks of uninhibited sexual expression. But even Freud acknowledged in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that pleasure can be enjoyed with care: "Here the aim of satisfaction is not by any means relinquished; but a certain amount of protection against suffering is secured, in that non-satisfaction is not so painfully felt in the case of instincts kept in dependence."<sup>6</sup> Freud's "protection" can now be understood emotionally, physically, and literally. Queer activists have always argued that protection takes place on many levels. Crimp understood that it was only through embracing its history of sexual innovation and solidarity that queer culture was able to save itself when the health crisis hit:

We were able to invent safe sex because we have always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures. It is that psychic preparation, that experimentation, that conscious work on our own sexualities that has allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviors...it is our promiscuity that will save us.<sup>7</sup>

Practices—not places—cause HIV transmission. This was the cornerstone of the initial safer-sex project. Monogamy and abstinence were unsafe alternatives because no one really abstains. Telling people to "just say no"—without offering alternatives, without offering clean needles, without offering education—pushes people into unnecessarily high-risk behavior. While Sullivan and the rest of the Gang of Four felt that queer sexuality was perversely distorted, activists suggested that HIV prevention could be most effective

through community-based approaches that built on personal connections, kinship patterns, and friendships. Michael Warner argued that "HIV prevention requires taking into account the diversity of people's sex lives" and should be "grounded in people's desires and pleasures."<sup>8</sup> Within community-not outside of it-individuals are allowed freedom from harm.

Queer world-making thus strove to create stronger, more cohesive communities through the political lessons of sexual liberation. The argument can be understood in the context of Isaiah Berlin's essay "Two Conceptions of Liberty."<sup>9</sup> There are positive liberties that limit some freedoms in the name of greater liberty for all. Unfortunately some, such as the moralists, take this reasonable sentiment and use it to justify a limitation of freedoms. The result is a conservative interpretation of guaranteed freedom. At this point, positive freedoms encroach the terrain of negative liberties, which the individual must be allowed to enjoy without state interference. Berlin explains, "Political liberty in this sense, is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or, it may be, enslaved."<sup>10</sup> The process of the state taking away public sexual spaces and outlets, where people of all economic groups could converge, involved just the sort of unfreedom Berlin was addressing. When the U.S. Supreme Court loosened obscenity laws in 1967, they created such a precedent. The result allowed public sexual culture and its venues to thrive.<sup>11</sup> As the mid-1990s sex panic hit, this freedom was contested.

In response, Warner helped form SexPanic! with a number of old ACT UPpers. "We're not simply advocating a redemptive gay identity and its acceptance by the mainstream," Warner explained.<sup>12</sup> The point was to create a vast, unapologetic queer politics aimed at defending sexual self-determination for sexual outsiders, whether gay or not. Unlike Queer Nation of years past, SexPanic! was positioned as against both queer assimilation and queer separation. Whether this strategy would work was another question. While queer theory and its roots in social deconstruction found widespread support within the academy, few rank-and-file gay journalists or activists took its political implications seriously. Crimp noted:

People who do this work are engaged with thought that's advanced and difficult because it's trying to advance new ideas. Yet because the attack on intellectual work from the right is so pervasive, people buy into the idea that the academy is irrelevant, that it isn't interested in the real world. The result is that even some intelligent gay people ritualistically reject queer theory.... We need to take on the task of conveying our work to a larger audience, and we desperately need a publication that is interested in queer intellectual life.<sup>13</sup>

Part of SexPanic!'s work was to advance this new way of looking at culture, desire, and politics. By fortifying its activism with a rich intellectual base, Warner hoped to create a new way of conceiving gay and lesbian politics.

Six years and countless struggles and political failures later, both Crimp and Warner frankly acknowledge that queer theory cannot be considered an unqualified success—especially in relation to an increasingly bourgeois mainstream gay and lesbian movement. In the final essay of this collection, Crimp specifically acknowledges that the project has failed both to respond adequately to attacks from the right and to influence the often simplistic gay press with their politically sophisticated perspective. Warner agrees, stating that, while queer theory had established the world-making possibilities of queer public life and activism and laid out the problem of thinking about politics solely in terms of identity, queer theory was less effective in establishing the terms for effective social movement mobilization.

For better or worse, organizing communities involves establishing stark contrasts of us versus them. Yet, postmodernism, of which queer theory was a part, deconstructs the very identities necessary to establish such contrasts. As result, queer theory failed to make a lasting impression in gay journalism or policy-making circles. Unfortunately, what remains is a project that relies too heavily on often limited approaches toward identity politics.

While Warner and Crimp were more than happy to look outward to the rest of the gay community to fight the Gang of Four, they also looked inward within the queer movement to consider why queers, like many other people, do self-destructive things like having unsafe sex. Often Crimp and Warner borrow from psychoanalytic understandings to frame these self-destructive tendencies. Warner, quoting Crimp in a 1995 essay, claimed "only if you can acknowledge that you have an unconscious can you admit doing self-destructive things without feeling guilty."<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the pop psychology proffered in much of the gay press fails to acknowledge the power of the unconscious. For Warner and Crimp, there did not have to be an external foe causing this behavior, but this was not what the gay press wanted to hear. The queer theoretical framework the two helped create proved too expansive for the often-parochial gay press to embrace.

radical gender activist Gender Riki Anne Wilchins writes: "It is arguably the case that when the message of gay liberation changed from all People Are Queer to Gay Is as Good as Straight, the movement lost its revolutionary potential, its moral and redemptive center. It ceded to the very oppressive System it formed to contest the terms of its struggle and allowed the system to dictate the terms of its resistance."<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, Crimp and Warner are still around to outline the limitations of interest-group representation and the possibilities of a queer public's potential to make the world a little bit freer for everyone. That political project continues. "What queer theory has yet to learn," Crimp concludes, is "how...we make what we know knowable to the legions?"<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

1. "In the Company of Men: A Roundtable," *Out Magazine*, October 1997.
2. Michael Warner, "Media Gays: The New Stonewall, Thinking Queers Have Stopped

- Writing for a Movement, Leaving Only Neocons," *The Nation*, 14 July 1997, p. 15.
3. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 57.
  4. Andrew Sullivan, "When Plagues End," *New York Times Magazine*, 10 November 1996.
  5. Dinita Smith, "'Queer Theory' Is Entering the Mainstream," *New York Times*, 17 January 1998, p. B9.
  6. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, James Strachey, trans. and ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), p. 29.
  7. Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, p. 64.
  8. Smith, "'Queer Theory,'" p. B9.
  9. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *The Proper Study of Man: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1958; 1998).
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
  11. Tom Burr, "Sleazy City, 42nd Street Structures and Some Qualities of Life," *OCTOBER* 85 (summer 1998).
  12. Warner quoting Crimp. Michael Warner, "Why Gay Men Are Having Unsafe Sex Again," *The Village Voice*, 31 January 1995, pp. 32-3.
  13. Richard Goldstein, "Its Here, Its Queer! Its Too Hot for Yale, Gay Studies Spawns a Radical Study of Desire," *Village Voice*, 29 July 1997, pp. 38-40.
  14. Riki Anne Wilchins, *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* (San Francisco: Fire-brand Books, 1997).
  15. Caleb Crain, "Pleasure Principles: Queer Theorists and Gay Journalists Wrestle Over the Politics of Sex," *Lingua Franca*, October 1997, pp. 27-37.
  16. Crimp, "Sex and Sensibility, or Sense and Sexuality," from *Melancholia*, p. 301.