

The politics of biology

A personal viewpoint

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Many lesbian and gay activists appear to have become enthralled by the "gay gene" hypothesis: that we live in a genetically determined world. That who we are, what we are, is biological determined by the existence of a specific gene that ordains our sexual orientation - homosexual or heterosexual.

As Gabar says in her book *Vice Versa*, "biology is back as an explanation of homosexuality" (p271). We have the "gay gene" of Michael Bailey, Richard Pillard and Dean Hammer, or we have the "gay brain" of Simon LeVay. This biological determinism has become a major focus of 'scientific' studies on "the causes of homosexuality" - but not of course - on the cause of heterosexuality!

For many lesbian and gay activists this determinism was a godsend. No more social constructionism, but a 'scientific' proof of essentialism. We are what our genes make us. As *The Wall Street Journal* noted at the time (David Jefferson, "Science Besieged: Studying the biology of sexual orientation has political fallout," *Wall Street Journal*, August 12, 1993, p1)... "the discovery of a definitive biological cause of homosexuality could go a long way towards advancing the gay-rights cause. If homosexuality were found to be an immutable trait, like skin colour, then laws criminalising homosexual sex might be overturned...." So our desires become reduced to "skin colour".

There are two significant issues here in this debate. One is that which arises from a belief of biological determinism, and the consequences of the search for this hidden grail - a definitive biological causation of a supposed homosexual identity. The trail from a behavioural choice as a part of a range of possible sexual behaviours, to the sodomite, to the molly, to the homosexual, to the gay man, follows along a path of defining an identity absolutely based around sexual desires and the choice of a same-gender partner.

The other is the lose of freedom of choice, to choose how we express our sexual desires, because we are now configured by tyranny of our genes. The fears that arise from this social constructionist framework are generated from closeted beliefs that to choose same-sex behaviours (whether with a person of the same gender, or a person of the same sex but differently gendered), is somehow shameful, sinful, deliberately perverse, immoral and wrong!

However the consequence of a genetic basis of sexual behaviour follows from the statement of Dr. James Watson, the Nobel Prize winner who discovered DNA, when he defended a woman's right to abortion in the UK and was quoted as saying "if you found the gene which determines sexuality, and a woman decides she doesn't want a homosexual child, well let her abort the fetus." The Hitler death camps do not appear to be far away.

But is there such a thing as biological determinism in terms of sexuality? Is there such a thing as a "gay gene" or "gay brain"? The search for a singular causation appears to ignore the enormous work that has been done in regard to the social constructions of gender, of masculinity, of femininity, of malehood and femalehood. It appears to deny much global anthropological evidence. Do we say that the ancient male Greeks in their pederastic attachments also possessed a "gay gene"? Or that Herdt's Sambia in Papua New Guinea also possessed a gay gene in their enculturation of oral sex and anal sex, both receiver and giver, as a means for masculinisation? Or that the 'manly' partners of hijras, kothis, and zenannas of South Asia also possess this gay gene when they believe that they are not having sex with a MAN, but someone is less than a man? Do these biologists ever talk to anthropologists?

What about the science? The problem here lies in terms such as sexual orientation, sexual preference, identity, and behaviour. Somehow those who have homosexual sex, once, twice, many times, or exclusively, seem to be being defined in terms of fixed sexual orientation, with other terms like "behaviourally homosexual" acting as the cover for those "others" who also have so-called "heterosexual sex". In other words, bisexual behaviours are either classified as "passing", "gaining heterosexual privilege", "hiding", "keeping in the closet", or being defined as "lack of access to females", "single sex institutions", and so on. Sexual behaviour defined within either/or.

Such scientific thinking is a resurrection of the old, largely disproved, reductionist thinking, a Cartesian world of black or white. Binary, hierarchical, reduced to the lowest common denominator. There is no choice. You are either this, or either that. Determinism disavows choice. If we can use the thinking behind quantum physics and ecology, what you see is what you want to see, while reductionism destroys that which arises from complex interactions, simplifying and

making it monosyllabic. It is a stunted language, that invisibilises the humanity of diversity. And it is a failure of the imagination.

Such an approach generates homophobia. Where untoward desires creep into our self-awareness, we can but deny them forcefully since we are not 'that', but 'this'. We have to scourge out this opposite. Such inner torment becomes the lashings of monkdom of the past, hidden away in their cells, bleeding in their suffering to cast out the sins of torment and evil. A singular concept of masculinity becomes deified. Anything less than this imaginary position of an idealised masculinity, of "heterosexuality" or "homosexuality" permanently frozen in the icy grip of reductionism becomes an inner torment, whether you are gay-identified who finds himself desiring a woman, or heterosexually-identified, who at times may desire or acts with other men, but then forced to scourge these out with inner (and sometimes outer) violence, and fear.

For surely it is obvious that if sexual orientation (whatever that means) were biologically determined, this would make it impossible for so-called bisexual behaviours and desires to exist. After all, where do erections come from? From where does sexual desire arise? In some ways then self-masturbation would be impossible. Desire would have to be for the "opposite sex" or "same sex," and can only be acted out through their intercession. Self-masturbating is a same-sex behaviour. It is a 'many' hand holding the penis, no matter what the surface imagination relates.

And if Kinsey was right, where some 46% of Americans in the 1940's reported having sex with both males and females, then this obviates such biological determinism.

The follow on from such a reductionist hypothesis, that by using such determinism as an argument for lesbian and gay rights - we are a minority, we can't help what we are, *please* give us our rights as you have done for people of colour, for women, for children, we just happen to be born this way - is a dangerous argument in the long term, where eugenics is constantly discussed, albeit in the new world of genetic engineering. Rights given under such an argument express a special pleading - a gift from those who are deemed to be better than we are. And why should "heterosexuality" be placed in this superior position. Heterosexuality is not about reproduction. It is about a condition of exclusivity. What privileges it? And why? For surely if there is a "gay gene" then there must also be "hetero gene" and a "bisex gene" ... and so ad-infinitum, a gene to express every singular human behavioural choice.

Such arguments of privileging are based on an argument that is victimising and pitying. The hidden assumption here is that somehow homosexuality is "not good" and heterosexuality "is good", and we can make homosexuality "good" by stating it is inborn. The same arguments have been used historically to attack a range of behaviours and people.

What is wrong with arguing that our bodies are our own. That whatever sexual choices we make and manifest, what business is it of the State to interfere, as long as it is consensual and freely chosen.

What does it matter where homosexual behaviours, choices, identities come from. Why is there a need for seeking a causative factor? Why isn't there the same urgency to seek the cause of heterosexuality?

Perhaps it is because the wrong questions are being asked, and these questions arise from false premises. They are no different from the belief that the sun revolved around the earth, or that the earth was flat, where such beliefs arose from daily observation of the violent outcomes of how many angels dance on a pinhead. But these observations developed within a context of a-priori assumption that eventually was shown to be false.

These pseudo-scientific questions are based on the assumption that "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" are *exclusive* conditions of human existence, that there is a sub-species of homosexuals, distinct from the heterosexuals, and that these two frameworks are mutually exclusive. That these conditions are biologically fixed and immutable, and that - for many - homosexuality is bad while heterosexuality is good - and finding a causative factor means that we can exterminate homosexuals for good through applying some effective process, whether it be social or genetic engineering.

But what of the supposed scientific discoveries of LeVay, Hammer, et al? This is a return to 19th century biology, where 'criminals' and 'deviants' can be recognised by certain stigmata, or 19th century social science that deemed Bengalis as "effeminate" and Punjabis as "manly", or that African women are sexually vociferous while European women were sexually timid, by the fact of their genetic inheritance. It is another version of a belief that women who were hairy, or wore trousers, or had short hair, were masculinised and therefore lesbians, while men who liked the arts, were gentle, had long hair, were feminine and therefore homosexuals. Homosexuality as femininity, heterosexuals as masculinity.

A close reading of their methodologies and conclusions, show quite clearly bad science, inadequate conclusions, a prior assumptions that are inadequate if not downright wrong, hypothesis masquerading as theories. Desires given biological form. Thus while we inherently have the desire to eat, are the choices of what we eat biologically determined? We (perhaps) all have the desire for sexual pleasure, but is the manifestation of what we do biologically determined? This is not a science of freedom, but (as Fromm would say) an escape from freedom. It is a science of seeking forgiveness.... "I am so sorry, I can't help myself". Thus a man is this and only this, while a woman is that, and only that. Where traits and desires are "masculinised" OR "feminised", and treated as absolutes. The fault is as much bad science as bad language.

We all know that words cannot describe the reality of our lives and our experience of the world and self. They are totally inadequate expressions of who we are and what we are. Yet we give them the status as god-given... "In the beginning was the Word..!" And we try to conform to these words. Fit into the straightjacket of a language that tries to describe the ineffable. We are living in a mental asylum where everybody has to wear his or her straightjacket. But remember, straightjackets were invented as a means of control by outside forces. The warders, the governor, the doctor of the asylum.

The scientific evidence presented as arguments for the existence of "gay brains" and "'gay genes" rests on tiny numbers of people, mostly living (or lived) in the United States. LeVay's investigations into the brains of 41 men and women, many of them self-identified as gay men who died of AIDS... but note, 41 out of a planetary population of some 5 billion people, and from that the extrapolation that gay men had a smaller hypothalamus than heterosexuals, and the hypothalamus was the part of the brain that "produces sexual feelings"...I think the cart and the horse story is as good as an analogy for this supposed scientific hypothesis.

This hypothesis has been strongly contested, and there is no need to go into all the arguments here (neatly summarised in Marjorie Garber's book *Vice Versa*, p271-283). Similar weaknesses are noted for the "gay gene" hypothesis of Michael Bailey, Richard Pillard and Dean H Hamer also.

But why should we buy into this false dawn? Why should we glorify this search for a singular causation for our supposed "homosexuality"? Why do we seek forgiveness for the fact of our desires and sexual aspirations? Is it because deep within our self-awareness we still believe that somehow we are at fault because we, as men and women, desire same-sex/gender partners to enjoy? Is it somehow because we still, at some level, feel guilty because we have these feelings and act them out, in a culture that still hosts a central framework of patriarchal sexphobia in all its variants?

Human beings are human because of their innate plasticity. They are differentiated from other social animals because they are freed from instinctual and hormonal control that other animals live out their lives. We have this remarkable ability to create our own lives, to shape it, mould it, frame it through interaction between our self-awareness and consciousness with the environment in which we live, familial, social, and environmental. Who we are, what we do is a constant process of interaction and mediation of past, present and future, with the outside world and the inner world. We have the power to shape ourselves, and as long as we believe that who is is faulty, out of step, inadequate, sinful, incorrect, then so be it. That will be the extent of our lives no matter how much we dress this up, as "this is who we are..." We forsake our glorious humanity and humaneness and become the straightjacketed being restricting our humanity for something less worthy than that we are all capable of. We become trapped in a hall of mirrors, reflecting our own nightmares of dissatisfaction and self-hatred.

We have to move out of this hall of mirrors and express our true humanity and humanness, and value that inner spirit of joy and liberation that so many mystics and truth-seekers express. It is not freedom from ourselves that such liberation brings, but a freedom to *be* ourselves, bringing a refreshing and clear perspective that these labels and boxes are ultimately demeaning. Having (and enjoying) same-sex sexual encounters, forming same-sex partnerships, falling in love (and falling out of love) with same-sex partners, does not make you a homosexual, a gay or lesbian, or whatever we like to call these experiences. Similarly having so-called opposite-sex sexual encounters, forming opposite-sex partnerships, falling in love (and falling out of love) with opposite-sex partners, does not make you a heterosexual, or straight, or whatever. The current language of sexuality is a prison, a dead zone, and a language of zombies, who cry away from the freedom of the human spirit to be in a process of continuing becoming. To call yourself gay or straight, homosexual or heterosexual, and fixate your choices within these prisons is to deny your own becoming.

This is not to deny that there is a biological basis for sex. But historically this is seen solely as reproductive sex. However, a reading of Bruce Bagemihl's book *Biological Exuberance - animal*

homosexuality and natural diversity, (1999, Profile Books, USA) shows clearly that sex for pleasure and enjoyment without reproductive necessity, exists equally strongly. And this 'sex for pleasure' expresses itself in an exuberant polymorphousness. It could almost be said that reproduction itself is just one by-product of the sexual encounter (if it happens to be one of appropriate biological sex, i.e. male and female). But it is clear from the evidence that reproduction is not the sole purpose of sexual encounters.

Further, this is NOT a plea that everyone should rush out and try sexual experiences different from that which you define yourself in. It is a plea to recognise the right to so without punishing yourself if such desires arise. It is to recognise that everyone on this planet is different from everyone else, each with infinite possibilities to be and become. And for many people, struggling to become free from their inner torments around sexuality, desire and identity, the search for an authentic self becomes a true torment of inner being.

As far as I can determine, shifting from singular and binary thinking to a language of multiplicity, of perversity, of polymorphousness, begins to light up our darkness. Sexuality becomes sexualities, heterosexuality becomes heterosexualities, homosexuality becomes homosexualities. Maybe, more than this, we should move away from this language of labelling, the black holes of true awareness of self, desire and action, into a realisation that science, society, religion and family can only form our destiny if we give them permission to.

So whatever label you identify with, whatever gender role you play and act out, whatever your sexual desires may be, it is an issue of truly mutual consensus that can lead you to freedom to be. Be who you are... do not be what others (and often what you, yourself, generate by this constant process of interaction mediated by fear) condemn yourself to be. There is no need for an apologetic science, or for an apologetic self.

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