



## Towards a Historical Materialist Concept of Asexuality and Compulsory Sexuality

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper seeks to expand the work of Marxist-feminist scholars Rosemary Hennessy and Nancy Fraser by placing it into conversation with the emerging work of scholars of asexuality and asexual identity. In resisting the tendency to reify the identity category of “asexual” as a newly emerging and dialogically structured identity which stands in opposition to the “allosexual,” this paper will rather attempt to determine its nature as a historically structured and contingent emergence of a particular moment in neoliberal capitalism. From this, it will argue that there need not be a tension between the notions of “compulsory sexuality” and “sexusociety” developed by scholars such as Elizabeth Emens and Ela Przybylo. It will be demonstrated that asexuality can be used as a positional tool in order to illuminate the totality of sexuality as a reified and commodified entity under late capitalism, one which is useful for understanding and resisting the capitalist historical (re)organization of human potentials for sensation and affect.*

**KEYWORDS** sexuality; gender; asexuality; political economy; social reproduction

### Speaking Asexually

In recent years, asexuality has emerged as both a defined social identity and a field of scientific and social research, most prominently in North America and Western Europe. Some researchers recognized the phenomenon as early as the 1940s (Kinsey, 1948) and conducted a few scattered studies in later decades (e.g., Johnson, 1977; Wellings, 1994). Bogaert (2004, 2006) investigated asexual identity and experience from psychological and self-reported physiological perspectives, examining questions such as physical sexual arousal and sexual fantasy in the lives of self-identified asexuals. Bogaert's influential work inspired research on asexuals' romantic (Hinderliter, 2013), relationship formation (Carrigan, 2011), and masturbatory habits (Yule, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2014). Current scholarship

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focuses mainly on the biological and sexually-based behavioural aspects of asexuality.

The sociological and political-economic aspects of asexual *identity* and its formation have drawn considerably less academic attention. However, a wealth of anecdotal evidence – much shared through online communities such as the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network – points to social discrimination and lack of recognition of asexuality as a valid identity relative to more commonly recognized sexual identities. In one of the few studies of social attitudes towards asexuality, MacInnis and Hodson (2012) found substantial evidence of cognitive social bias against asexuals among non-asexuals. Building on these findings, Emens (2014) describes a discourse of compulsory sexuality, a vector of social oppression conceptually comparable to heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality. Uncovering these largely invisible forms of discrimination has immense importance, but formal legal (in)equality is insufficient to explain social inequality without analysing the social structures underlying these legal systems (MacKinnon, 1983).

A crucial research gap, therefore, is knowledge of the economic and social basis of compulsory sexuality, particularly how narratives of compulsory sexuality sustain capitalist modes of production. Feminist and queer theorists who have become interested in asexuality have noted the lack of “literature on the subject” and observed that “feminist and queer sexuality studies certainly have [yet] not caught on” to whether asexuality relates to existing theories and frameworks (Bishop, 2013, p. 200). Without directly referring to asexuality, the growing emphasis on the notion of the sexual self as a productive individualist within mainstream sexual liberation narratives aligns with the changing face of compulsory sexuality within late consumer capitalism. This notion in some ways diverges from the classical Marxist-feminist analysis of sexuality as socially reproductive labour and the female body as a site of primitive accumulation, but can also be seen as emblematic of neoliberal approaches to sexuality. Companies such as Tinder and OKCupid reap massive profits from this conception of the human adult self as *necessarily* sexual, particularly through applying neoliberal subjectivities to areas of life previously considered beyond the purview of the market (Brown, 2015). Moreover, radical groups’ political articulation of asexuality as an anti-capitalist strategy in the 1960s and 1970s has largely been forgotten, leading to a view on asexuality as a purely personal identity without political or economic implications (Fahs, 2010).

I seek to expand Hennessy’s (2000) and Fraser’s (2013) work on social reproduction and place it in conversation with the emerging scholarship on asexuality and asexual identity. I critique Fraser’s work, in particular, for its positioning of queer sexuality – and, implicitly, asexuality – as separate from economic distributional struggles. Resisting the reification of the identity category of asexual as a new, dialogically structured identity opposed to the allosexual, I attempt to determine its nature as the historically structured and

contingent emergence of a particular moment in neoliberal capitalism. From this, I argue there need be no tension between the notions of compulsory sexuality and sexusociety (e.g., Emens, 2014; Przybylo, 2011), and social reproduction analysis (e.g., Federici, 2014; Fraser, 2013; Hennessy, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Instead, asexuality can be used as a positional tool to reveal the totality of sexuality as a reified, commodified entity under late capitalism, which is useful to understand and resist the capitalist historical (re)organization of “the human potential for sensation and affect” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 72).

According to Hennessy (2000, p. 72), “the extraction of surplus value requires that workers alienate themselves from their human potentials, including their sex-affective potentials.” Through the purchase of various products and services, capitalism inevitably facilitates alienation through the expressive externalization of the sexual self. In this sense, the system of compulsory sexuality facilitates production and exchange by channelling affective impulses into the creation of new social needs. With proper valence, asexual positionality can be used to expose the distinctly *capitalist* nature of compulsory sexuality and the modern sexusociety it undergirds, and to examine these components of the totality of social reproduction.

### **A Review of the Theoretical Literature: Three Lenses**

#### *Asexuality-as-Theory*

In addition to studies on asexuality within established disciplines such as psychology, academics have increasingly begun to construct a discursive framework for its study outside these frames. If this movement can be termed *asexuality studies*, however, it remains in an embryonic stage, and works falling under this loose umbrella often lack common terms of reference and agreed-upon study frameworks. This makes the field uniquely exciting and dynamic but also demands several cautions before examining its specific contribution to my analysis.

First, the emerging field of asexuality studies draws on queer and feminist theory frameworks in some respects but often questions their relevance to asexuality. It seemingly settles on using modified versions of these frameworks as the best available tools for critically discussing sex and sexuality. Queer and feminist theorists’ contributions to this paper’s analysis are outlined below, but their relevance to asexuality is very much an open, contested question. Although “more women than men appear to be asexual” (with women making up 60-73.5% of the asexual population in various

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<sup>1</sup> Przybylo (2011) proposed the term “sexusociety” to describe the perception commonly held by individuals identifying as asexual, that social organization is based on an assumed sexuality. Its use is explicated later in the paper.

studies) (Van Houdenhove, Gijs, T'Sjoen & Enzlin, 2014),<sup>2</sup> some have argued that the cause lies in the relatively greater cultural acceptability of a lack of interest in sex among women. Consequently, asexual women are more likely to be open about their identity and willing to participate in a study. That said, if more women actively choose to *self-identify* as asexual *per se* (rather than merely remain privately uninterested in sex), this points to at least the potential relevance of feminist theory on women's relationship to sexuality, and more specifically, the concept of the sexualized body *vis-à-vis* asexuality.

Second, those working in this emerging field tend to use the word *asexuality* to describe the field's subject matter, but are far from reaching consensus on the term's definition and scope. Whereas most work in existing fields define asexuality as the "absence of sexual attraction," researchers in asexuality studies attempt to trouble the implied binary between sex and not sex in this statement, and offer differing examples of asexuality, emphasising its adoption as an active identity (and what this means) rather than as a strict clinical definition. This difference occurs because "identification as asexual cannot be divorced from either the subjective meanings which that identification holds for individuals, nor the processes of intersubjective negotiation through which such meanings emerged" (Carrigan, 2011, p. 464).

Third, this self-chosen identification can exist only within a wider social intercommunicative space, in this case the space surrounding sexual identity where asexuality is juxtaposed with not only heteronormative sexuality but also, to some extent, queer sexualities. This status as self-definition is especially important, because more than other "deviant" sexual identities "asexuality is a category largely constructed by those identifying as such" (Hinderliter, 2013, p. 175). It must be remembered that the act of self-labelling as queer is fundamentally a reclamation project of an originally often violent and hostile epithet. The construction of queer and other LGBTQ identities has had as much to do with this experience of active exclusion and external perception as the choice to identify as asexual does. Moreover, active misperceptions, hostile and otherwise, of queer sexualities are relatively common (e.g., a man might be perceived as gay due to mannerisms or clothing when he does not identify with this label), whereas misperceptions of a person as asexual are rare (i.e., others do not perceive those identifying as asexual as such). These ambiguous definitions and identifications have led some to suggest that "asexuality might be a meta-construct, analogous to sexuality and encompassing similar kinds of subcategories" (Van Houdenhove et al., 2014, p. 187).

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<sup>2</sup> According to statistics from these same studies, trans\* and other non-binary gender identities are over-represented in the asexual population. This might be due to selection bias if such individuals are more likely to be open about and willing to discuss their asexual identification than those who identify with binary gender identities. Nevertheless, this overrepresentation is worth further study.

However, the major commonality among “researchers of asexuality [is a] general commit[ment] to depathologizing asexuality, to separating it categorically from ‘disorder’” (Przybylo, 2013, p. 193). These researchers actively interrogate medicalization discourses on asexuality (and sex more broadly) and the underlying cultural construction of the so-called sexual imperative. The idea that to desire, if not have (frequently, if possible), sex is a universal experience “construct[s sex] in the sexual imperative as synonymous with the self” (Cerankowski & Milks, 2014, p. 229). In certain ways, this analysis of the *assumed* rather than *existing* nature of the sexual imperative recalls the “well-established critical practice to remark on heterosexuality’s supposed invisibility” within queer theory (McRuer, 2006 p. 1).

Regarding asexuality, two terms have come to be used to encapsulate this sexual imperative system, albeit from slightly different perspectives: compulsory sexuality and *sexusociety*. Legal scholar Elizabeth Emens (2014, p. 305) prominently employed the latter to discuss how “ours is arguably a sexual law, casting asexuals on the outside in a range of ways.” Similar to using a lens of queerness to critically interrogate law and legal systems, utilizing the lens of asexuality “as a diagnostic tool or heuristic for identifying the ways that law’s interactions with sexuality affect the broader society” reveals several facets legally enshrining the sexual imperative (Emens, 2014, p. 307). For instance, the possibility to void unconsummated marriages constitutes a major vulnerability for asexuals and results in a lack of legal status for asexual relationships that might otherwise be accorded the legal and social policy benefits of marriage. Furthermore, non-discrimination laws and other human rights instruments designed to protect sexual identities leave out asexuality as a category, except for a few municipalities in the United States and the state of New York. Arguably, asexuals face little risk of discrimination based on their sexual identity, which is not visible in the way homosexuality is, but this might be due only to its relative lack of visibility at this time.

Beyond the strict confines of the legal system, Przybylo’s (2011, p. 446) *sexusociety* is “very much akin to what patriarchy is for feminists and heteronormativity is for LGBTQ populations, in the sense that it constitutes the oppressive force against which some sort of organizing and rebellion must take place.” Here, she refers to a set of social practices and discourses broader than strictly compulsory sexuality. *Sexusociety* has larger reach and holds that “it is not enough to simply have sex, but there is also pressure for the sex to be immensely enjoyable” (Przybylo, 2011, p. 448). Much effort, time and money ought to be invested in the pursuit of sex. “To be asexual, for a subject of *sexusociety*, is to be ‘afun,’ to be boring, to be a prude” (Przybylo, 2011, p. 452). As such, the asexual identity becomes viewed primarily as seeking a sense of safety and belonging apart from social pressures, even as long-term safety requires that identity to be normalized within society. “The asexual body [thus] attests to the possibility of a

localized space of safety within sexsociety's bounds" (Przybylo, 2011, p. 455), although its transgressive and political elements are only *potentialities* depending how it is employed as both a self-identity and a valence of critique.

Insofar as "the discovery of an asexual identity involves accurately identifying and articulating desires" (Scherrer, 2008, p. 636) without drawing on normative scripts, the articulation of this identity position is consistent with queer and feminist critiques of heteronormative and patriarchal sexual norms. However, in some ways, asexuality stands outside and beyond these theories' categorical frameworks and articulates new subject positions. The potential radicalism of these subject positions is determined by both internal and external factors and so far has had mostly limited impacts. That said, an asexual heuristic tool could "revitalize [the] queer critique of naturalized gender and sexual identities and heteronormativity" by illuminating compulsory sexuality and the resulting sexsociety (Gressgard, 2013, p. 180). In other words, the asexual, like the queer, has the potential to be "the subject who practices critique [and] interrogates the limits of what is can 'be' and, concomitantly, follows the system's breaking points" (Gressgard, 2013, p. 187).

### *Queer Theory*

The relationship of queer theory to critiques of capitalist social accumulation regimes has been highly contested, and it has been criticized for offering cultural critiques divorced from material economic realities (Butler, 1997). In this telling, queer theory, with its postmodern emphasis on identity acquisition and formation processes, and notions such as Judith Butler's performativity of gender and sexual identities, has moved social struggle closer to issues of representation than redistribution. As a result, the social notion of "the queer" may be quite compatible with a neoliberal form of subjectivity and with the personalization of a politics that does not actively challenge structural social injustices, but instead seeks to normalize that identity within the existing system. Precisely on these grounds, socialist-feminist thinkers like Fraser (1995) have said that queer theory presents a dead-end for transformative left thinking.

However, this critique ignores that the emergence of the queer was "a floating signifier to acknowledge the manifold ways in which [queer] interests, voices and identifications stood in opposition to the construction of the essentialized gay identity of the mainstream movement" (Valocchi, 2017, p. 323). In other words, queer theorists and their leftist critics generally agree that the mainstream gay rights movement has taken an overly accommodating stance on capital and social power, but they differ on what form the critique of this accommodation ought to take and how to best counter it. It should be acknowledged that "neoliberalism produced a market-mediated and

consumer-driven visibility that moved gay identity in the direction of a niche market,” while not believing the existence of this niche market *necessarily* invalidates queer positionality as a potentially revolutionary subjectivity (Valocchi, 2017, p. 326).

Queer theory arguably has acknowledged the political ambivalence of queer identity from its very beginnings; for example, Bersani’s (1987) classic article states that “to want sex with another man is not exactly a credential for political radicalism (p. 205).” However, the label *queer* commonly is interpreted to refer to sexual identity, so it is important to note that theorists in the field of queer theory often intentionally do *not* use it to refer to sexual attraction patterns. Rather, “queerness is an ideality” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1) that troubles and challenges social norms and binaries. Moreover, within the social order, “queers ... are people without a future” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 98) who “name the side not fighting for the children” (Edelman, 2004, p. 3), thus questioning the hegemonic idea of futurity and social continuity extending from conservative to progressive political circles. This conception of futurity and the active rejection of its hegemonic variations stating that things must be done for “the child” as “*telos* of the social order” (Edelman, 2004, p. 11) renders queer and by extension asexual bodies defective, incapable of reproducing that vision of the social future. “Compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice-versa” (McRuer, 2006, p. 21), so unsurprisingly, those bodies unwilling or unable to perform their notionally “proper” social reproduction function are subject to medicalization and pathologization to either correct or exclude them from the social world.

Regarding sex more specifically, queer theorists have tended to follow Foucault’s insights, seeing “sex is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time” (Butler, 1993, p. 1). The sexual then is a socially determined construct that includes and excludes a variety of behaviours and has limits and contours determined through discursive and material assertions of power. According to Butler (1993, p. 107), “sex is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms”; therefore, non-normative sexual practices have the potential to threaten power systems only if they actively confront the prohibition mechanisms surrounding sex that exist in terms of active confrontation.

Under the widely recognized “legislation of compulsory heterosexuality at the level of the symbolic and bodily” (Butler, 1993, p. 74), simply exiting heterosexual sexual activity does not necessarily move away from heteronormativity. “The heteronormative paradigm set[s] the terms even for queer desire” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 102), whose expressions are increasingly molded to existing normative forms, particularly monogamous marriage. The links between marriage, property and public policy are well documented, but crucially, there is not necessarily anything *particular* to marriage as a commodification of sexual and otherwise affective desire. It may be the most normative and socially encouraged, but it is far from the only type of sexual expression incorporated into exploitative capital circuits. The push for same-

sex marriage might be “another step in the monetization of all human encounters” (Johnson, 2018, n.p.), but is merely a subset of the broader, “epistemological objectification of sexual desire” (Floyd, 2009, p. 45) endemic to post-sexual revolution neoliberalism. Nor is it necessarily true that a golden age of queer sexuality existed beyond these tenets before the mainstreaming of the marriage push. As Muñoz (2009, p. 34) recalled, the “pre-AIDS days of glory were also elitist, exclusionary and savagely hierarchical libidinal economies,” which adopted elements of the broader capitalist society in which they were embedded, even as they resisted the conservative sexual norms of the time.

The revolutionary possibilities of sex, particularly queer sex, therefore, exist only insofar as “the self which the sexual shatters provides the basis on which sexuality is associated with power” (Bersani, 1987, p. 218). If the queer sexual no longer has the power to shatter this existing, power-defined self, then does it become possible to ask, “can someone be gay without being queer” and vice-versa? (Johnson, 2018, n.p.). The moderate expansion of the socially acceptable forms of relationship types and sexual activities should not be viewed as merely an inevitable or hollow achievement, because many fought and bled for it. However, it must also be acknowledged that these changes have created new social divisions within the queer community. “The expansion of the concept and increasing use of queer, grounded in a shared resistance to the dominant model,” is troubled by a shifting, fluid definition of that very dominant model (Johnson, 2018). Certain identities once represented genuine threats to the status quo insofar as “there was general agreement within gay liberation thinking that capitalism was oppressive” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 45) – but no longer, because they are not theorized in this way. To examine the causes of this shift, it is necessary to look closely at the left critics and sometime fellow travelers of the queer theory movement within Marxist-feminism and theories of social reproduction.

### *Marxist-Feminist and Social Reproduction Theory*

As briefly noted, the relationship between queer theory and the Marxist-feminist analysis framework, sometimes grouped as social reproduction theory,<sup>3</sup> has been characterized by collaboration and confrontation at different times. Hennessy (2000), whose writings straddle the boundary between the two frameworks, explained that “queer theory presented itself in the late eighties as an emphatically post-Marxist critique of sexual identity politics” (p. 52), with a natural affinity for social reproduction framings. Given that

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the term “social reproduction” primarily refers to a specific subset of theories within the general Marxist-feminist framework on women’s role in capitalist production systems. Some Marxist-feminist theorists do not specifically address or use the term *social reproduction* in their analysis.

“the gendered division of labour has historically secured sexual identities to the family and consumer culture” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 67), an intellectual project aimed, at least initially, at troubling normative assumptions of sexual expression and gender logically would have potential to shed light on the labour division upon which they rested. However, political circumstances changed some identified affinities, albeit in a limited fashion, between interpretations of queer identity and the neoliberal political economy. Although “struggles against heterosexist misrecognition do not automatically threaten capitalism but must be linked to other (anti-capitalist) struggles” (Fraser, 2013, p. 12), it became less and less clear whether queer theory was willing and able to link to them.

Simultaneously, there was a tendency on the part of some on the social margins to “‘retreat’ into alternative communities and ‘particularistic’ identities” (Fraser, 2013, p. 42) focused more on building internal community solidarity than reaching beyond themselves.<sup>4</sup> It therefore can be reasonably asserted that “affirming sexual agency and non-reproductive sexualities also often came to mean that pleasure and sexuality were unhinged from the social structure that organizes them” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 178), and thus seen as purely positive, ahistorical phenomenon. This strain of theory stressed the question of sex and sexuality in relation to women and female bodies and therefore might not have applied equally to the whole asexual community. Nevertheless, it offered insights highly important for understanding how the economic organization of sexuality was deeply linked to underlying tenets of capitalism.

Expressed in a single sentence, these insights declared that “the construction of female sexual agency has never been autonomous” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 197), and has always been subject to complex, varying, often contradictory social forces. At the most basic level, the sex–gender dichotomy between “male” and “female” assignments “in capitalist society... bec[omes] the carrier of specific work-functions” (Federici, 2014, p. 14), broadly pictured as the paid public work of male workers in factories and the unpaid private labour of women in the household. Of course, this crude conception was never entirely accurate and excluded a variety of cross-cutting variations according to class and “race,” amongst other factors. However, the claim that “the body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers” (Federici, 2014 p. 16) does indicate that in the sphere of social reproduction, capitalism’s primitive accumulation and exploitation functions have been targeted primarily at women. When moving to the specific reproduction of the sexual, it should be born in mind that “social production entails making the means to meet human

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note the scare quotes in Fraser’s original text, lest she be interpreted as stating that such identities are inherently non-political. Rather, they are not *necessarily* politically active in an anti-capitalist manner.

needs as well as the production of new needs” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 84). Insofar as sex is socially produced, it is concerned with both functions. It may be said that human nature has certain drives for connection and affection, but “the human capacity for sensation and affect is the basis for pleasure and it is always historically organized” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 72).

Since the 1960s, the major trend regarding sexuality has been to open “the position of desiring subject... to women who would eventually be recruited as the ideal and consummate consumers” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 99). In other words, female sexual desire *could* be legitimate, and women might be expected to be more than mere vessels for male desire – but only when staying within certain boundaries and channeled in certain ways. The free love movement within the 1960s counterculture “turned the meat market of dating into a free market” (Weigel, 2017, p. 134), appearing to promise infinite satisfaction to those who joined and cast off the grey conformity of contemporary modes of sexual access. However, like the social model of coupled heteronormativity it ostensibly pushed against, free love contained deep assumptions about human nature reinforcing conformity to ideal types. “While free market evangelists dressed differently from free lovers, they shared certain deep similarities” (Weigel, 2017, p. 159), particularly the belief in individuals as essentially autonomous, rational actors who negotiated contracts with equal partners for both business and pleasure. Such a belief ignored, first, the failure to overcome deeply gendered power structures by simply claiming to do so, and second, individuals’ different expressions of affective needs. Within free love and the broader culture of what could be termed sexual neoliberalism, “psychological health meant having to embrace a form of sexuality much like the one that *Playboy* purveyed” (Weigel, 2017, p. 152). Consequently, sex became seen merely as a pleasurable interaction that, although highly pursued, did not necessarily have any greater social meaning than shocking a sexually conservative society.

The term *compulsory heterosexuality*, coined by Rich (2003, p. 27), can be roughly defined as the “enforcement of heterosexuality for women ... [to ensure the] male right of physical, economic and emotional access.” Although Rich used this term in the specific context of the denial of lesbian existence, it can similarly describe asexual women’s experiences of being socially pushed into heterosexuality. “Heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized” by a variety of social, economic and legal forces (Rich, 2003, p. 26). The conceptual leap between compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory sexuality more generally is not terribly large, especially when considering the changes in the social recognition of lesbianism since the publication of Rich’s original article in 1980. The preference for asexuality remains subject to much social erasure and stigma and may be cross-cut in the case of women, particularly by the ostensibly progressive perception that the asexual woman is the unliberated, conservative, prudish

woman. Moreover, Rich's (2003, p. 14) claim that "the economics of prescriptive heterosexuality go unexamined" within progressive rhetoric on sexuality can be fairly extended to the notion of prescriptive (sometimes literally medicalized) sexuality as a whole. It is important to keep in mind that, "when desire is understood as lust... equated with a basic human drive, its historical production becomes invisible" (Hennessy, 2000, p. 185). The designation as either biological reality or purely individual choice has shielded certain phenomena from full social investigation.

### **The Limits of Existing Frames: A Combined Approach to Asexuality**

The interaction of Marxist and feminist theories within the analytical framework of social reproduction has long been fraught. Marx's writings neglected questions of male power over women, only occasionally hinting at the need for elaboration by future scholars and activists. Indeed, "Marx never acknowledged that procreation could become a terrain of exploitation and by the same token a terrain of resistance" (Federici, 2014, p. 91). His colleague Friedrich Engels analyzed the origins of family structure in an economic context, but he tended to view questions of patriarchy and women's subjugation as ancillary to private property arrangements in general, a perspective that many have found lacking.

Later feminist scholars, most prominently Gayle Rubin (2011), challenged the applicability of Marxism to women's position. They suggested that Marxism's historical materialist analysis of the capitalist mode of production as the primary site of exploitation could not adequately explain the forms of women's oppression that existed in non-capitalist societies or seemed to actively impede, rather than facilitate, the acquisition of private profit. In response, Rubin (2011) and other scholars developed modes of analysis that decentered historical materialism and production, and focused on identity standpoints involving the creation of new subject identities not specifically tied to or determined by their space within the production system. In feminist analysis, what Rubin (2011) termed the sex-gender system formed the central point of analysis, organizing the social roles and categories of male and female subjects. As well, other forms of analysis based on "race," ethnicity and sexual identity centered on other vectors of social injustice.

In one sense, this framework is a justifiable reaction to a purely economic analysis tending to "marginalize, if not wholly obscure, other dimensions, sites and axes of injustice" (Fraser, 2009, p. 101). Together, however, the increased centrality of these forms of analysis, and the shift in the nature of capitalist production to a transnational, flexible, neoliberal form, have eliminated a properly contextualized analysis of capitalism's role in shaping the form of social and identity reproduction. This is not to say that capitalism requires or is the root cause of patriarchy, racism or homophobia in a deterministic sense, or that if capitalism were overthrown those other forms

of oppression would simply cease to exist. As Hennessy (2000, p. 30) states, “capitalism has both made use of and broken down traditional kinship structures and forms of family” and thus acts in complex, often seemingly contradictory ways. However, as Fraser (2009) makes clear, the neoliberal turn in capitalism has found common cause with certain aspects of feminist analysis, even if unwittingly on the part of the latter.<sup>5</sup>

With this said, one should not retreat into a purely economic analysis of the problem of identity for both tactical and analytic reasons. Tactically, it must be recognized that a movement or organization does not choose the terrain on which it fights social and political battles. Instead, the social and political understandings of the current historical moment deeply shape this terrain. The stated opinions and beliefs of those with whom one is ostensibly trying to build a coalition for social transformation should not be disregarded, even recognizing their historical contingency. Analytically, an exclusively economic analysis tends to recenter an unspoken, white, male, heterosexual, cisgendered subject as the social “default,” even if this is not the intent (Rivers-Moore, 2013).

What is needed, therefore, are forms of analysis and action that attempt not to paper over the real, lived divisions of gender, “race” and sexuality, but rather to expose and disrupt their reified nature. Both Fraser and Hennessy identify queer theory as a potential example of such analysis as it attempts to “deconstruct the homo-hetero dichotomy” (Fraser, 2000, p. 109). Hennessy (2000), however, cautioned about the use of queer theory in this context, seeing it as “a site of struggle, not a monolithic discourse” (p. 53), and critiquing the notions of some gender and identity scholars as “radically performative” (p. 56) rather than historically contingent.

A recent trend in sexuality studies and queer theory has been an interest in asexuality as an emergent mode of self-identification rather than a medical or psychological label of pathology (Gressgard, 2013). It should be noted that in this analysis asexuality is not defined absolutely but exists as a spectrum of identity. It nevertheless plays a similar role for an assumed, compulsory sexuality as the figure of the queer does for heteronormativity. Queer theory attempts to use asexuality as a tool to decenter the sexual self and deconstruct the dichotomy between sexual and asexual persons and bodies. At the same time, there is the risk of reifying the asexual identity like other identity categories within what can be called gay-identity politics (Fraser, 1995). This might help affirm and revalue the identity of those identifying as asexual previously considered to be psychologically or medically dysfunctional, but it leaves the door open for an asexual group identity to become increasingly rigid and enforced, eliminating its initial exploratory potential.

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<sup>5</sup> One can critique neoliberalism as a concept distinct from capitalism in general, but I follow Fraser’s (2009) use of the concept.

*The New Left and Neoliberalism*

The strain of analysis Fraser (2000) terms identity politics,<sup>6</sup> which largely originated from the New Social Movements of the 1960s and 1970s, needs to be placed in a particular historical context: the era of state-organized capitalism or the Golden Age of capitalism. This era was characterized, at least in Western Europe and North America, by significant state involvement in the market economy, increased union density and organized labour power, and an expanded system of state welfare service and benefits. Second-wave feminism, as Fraser (2000) describes, emerged as a critique of several underlying tenets of this overall context. Second-wave feminists sought to name and address injustices, mostly but not exclusively directed at women, outside the analytic framework of state-organized capitalism. For instance, they located sites of oppression in the family structure and culture beyond the narrow confines of the economy as conceived by both capital and mainstream labour and left organizations. These feminists also responded to what they viewed as the overly controlling, bureaucratic nature of social arrangements by embracing new organizational practices, such as consciousness-raising groups, and generally favouring grassroots organizations over professional ethos.

It is important to acknowledge the many gains made by second-wave feminism, even if they are more cultural than institutional, but the historical context in which many of its ethos were formed has passed away. In the late 1970s, state-organized capitalism gave way to the neoliberal, post-Fordist organization of the economy. Feminist organizations have generally opposed the socially harmful consequences of these changes, but a “perverse, subterranean elective affinity” between feminism and neoliberalism has persisted (Fraser, 2009, p. 108). Much of the cultural and rhetorical legitimization of neoliberalism “was fashioned from the New Left’s ‘artistic’ critique of state-organized capitalism, which denounced the grey conformism of corporate culture” (Fraser, 2009, p. 109). From a feminist perspective, this should be understood in the context of the critiques of traditional authority in both feminism and neoliberalism (Fraser, 2009).

This critique gains importance when considered in the context of asexuality in particular, due to the persistence of the assumption that women lack sexual desire within traditional social forms.<sup>7</sup> At a certain point in the evolution of capitalism, it was relatively more useful to perpetuate than discard the model of the monogamous, male-dominated household and its underlying cultural

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<sup>6</sup> I use this term in the same sense as Fraser (2000), recognizing that its definition is far from settled in both scholarship and colloquial discourse.

<sup>7</sup> This should not be interpreted as a universalistic construct to imply that all societies have had the same or similar restrictions on female sexual agency. Rather, I use it to point to the distinctive turn in capitalism’s relationship with restrictions on sexuality as highlighted by Fraser (2009).

assumptions. This model provided stability to property arrangements, for instance, and the family wage of the post-war era propped up a system of relative social protection, which also reinforced male dominance. However, at a certain historical moment, as discussed by Fraser (2009), these old forms became barriers rather than facilitators to capital. Individualist feminist rhetoric, the neoliberal reorganization of production forms and the attempt to commodify more aspects of life have furthered “the cultural production of this desiring subject” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 69).

Again, this is not to deny that many have experienced this change as liberating, but it also tends to create a new, normalized ideal sexual subject rather than challenging the fundamental notion of the ideal subject. Furthermore, this ideal desiring subject is configured in a way strikingly similar to the *homo economicus* of liberal economics: a rational, self-directed, self-possessing actor, a kind of sexual free agent. As “social production entails making the means to meet human needs as well as the production of new needs” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 84), the subject is also construed to need new products and services to perform as the ideal. To investigate these questions, however, the exact nature of what the category of asexual can be said to constitute in this social reality must be teased out.

#### *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Asexuality?*

In the analytic model of ideal-type groups on a spectrum from those requiring purely redistributive to purely recognition-based remedies to achieve justice, Fraser (1995) populates the first with the exploited class and the second with despised sexuality. Asexuals would seem to fall into the second category, first because their social devaluation is rooted in “an unjust cultural-valuational structure” rather than the political economy (Fraser, 2000, p. 110), and second because asexuals have consistently received more hostile responses than all other sexual orientation groups on attitudinal quizzes (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, as seen in Emens’ (2014) work, legal systems have various built-in privileges and assumptions related to sexuality, particularly the question of property in relationships, that can be seen as analogous to legal discrimination against homosexuals. From this perspective, redress for asexuals could be as simple as reforming legal and cultural systems to not devalue asexuality or privilege allosexuality as an identity. However, these identities do not exist in a free-floating sense, detached from their historical and economic circumstances, so this assumption needs to be further queried.

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<sup>8</sup> That is, persons of all sexual orientations consistently gave asexuals more hostile ratings than any other group.

In a political economy history of dating in the Western world, Weigel (2017, p. 32) found that the purpose of much of the dating industry has been to “take basic human needs for sex and attention and affection that can never be sated and turn them into engines of potentially endless demand.”<sup>9</sup> The dating industry has achieved this through a variety of mechanisms depending on the overall economic organization at the time. The culture of “pick-you-up-at-five” dating, for instance, was based on the assumption of stable, 9-to-5 jobs, while the current use of Tinder and other dating apps mirrors the “just-in-time” organization of work under neoliberalism. Examined from this perspective, it becomes impossible to define a strict separation between the operation of business and personal lives. Although we attempt to erect barriers between them, they almost inevitably begin to mirror each other. The vision of the self-possessing individual labourer so beloved by liberal and neoliberal economic theory finds a curious partner in the free-love ethos of the New Left. Both are atomized and removed from potential ties to others, pleasure-seeking and self-gratifying above all. For both, “the point of living in the free world [is] to pursue happiness, as you defined it, without interference” (Weigel, 2017, p. 159). The conceptualization of this new, liberated sexual self also involves a kind of bio-politics, with people who exhibit resistance often diagnosed with medical or psychological disorders. Most prominently, inhibited sexual desire (ISD) was included in the DSM-III in 1988 (Weigel, 2017, p. 180).<sup>10</sup> Around the same time, much medicalized and highly profitable discourse and technology around sexuality was released, with the aim to enhance desire or gain greater pleasure from sexual activity (Herzig, 2009).

An obvious analogy exists between the emergence of ISD and the former inclusion of homosexuality as a disorder in the DSM,<sup>11</sup> but this should not be taken at face value. Rather, given the intense linkage between the forms of sexual and romantic expression and work organization, asexuality can be seen as a barrier to capital accumulation, which capitalism in general and neoliberalism in particular attempt to eliminate. In capitalism, “the extraction of surplus value requires that workers alienate themselves from their human potentials, including their sex-affective potentials” (Hennessy, 2000, p. 217). Through the purchase of various products and services, capitalism inevitably facilitates alienation in the form of the expressive externalization of the sexual self. In this sense, the system of compulsory sexuality, reinforced by culture and law, serves production and exchange by channeling affective

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<sup>9</sup> This statement has an embedded assumption of compulsory sexuality, although in much of the book, it is clear Weigel intends something closer to Hennessy’s (2000) “potential for sensation and affect.”

<sup>10</sup> The DSM-III is the third iteration of The American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.

<sup>11</sup> This is not to equate the concrete effects of ISD with the marking of homosexuality as a disorder, which were markedly worse.

impulses into the creation of new social needs. From this perspective, asexuality can be – but is not necessarily – a kind of great refusal of at least part of the late capitalist project. Certainly, radical groups, most prominently a number of anarchist-feminist collectives in the 1970s and 1980s, have made this claim (Fahs, 2010). With proper valence, asexual positionality can be used as a tool to illuminate the distinctly *capitalist* nature of compulsory sexuality and the modern sexusociety it undergirds and to examine this part of overall social reproduction (Przybylo, 2011).

### *Transformation Is a Team Sport*

The risk opened by the creation of asexual as an identity category, flexible though its limits might be, should be obvious from the experiences of the New Social Movements in relation to neoliberalism. Moving from social theory to cultural theory is a significant temptation, and doubtless many, including myself, have found comfort and safety in claiming an asexual identity and obtaining others' recognition of it. It would no doubt be of great benefit, for instance, to see more authentic representations of asexual characters in culture and media, with the aim to reduce interpersonal animosity and confusion about asexuality. However, if the incorporation of asexuality into the left's discourse ended here, this would undersell the greater potential of asexuality. Its emerging link to queer theory shows promise to disrupt the artificial divide between sexual and asexual identities, although caution is still needed because such analysis could neglect the political economy of compulsory sexuality in favour of a notion of performative identity. The asexual then would become, "the bad subject ... who rejects convention, but [whose] rebellion does little to change the existing social system" (Hennessy, 2000, p. 230).

Instead, Hennessy's (2000) suggested strategy of disidentification seems to be a better response method. This "critical practice de-reifies identity by opening the identity from 'I am' to history" (Hennessy, 2000, p. 230). Regarding asexuality, this involves examining its emergence as a distinct, recognizable identity category within the context of late capitalism typified by a hegemonic sexuality both compulsory and commodified. Although in some sense an identity resisting these facts, it is nevertheless shaped by and contingent upon them. Furthermore, "disidentification makes visible the ways the dominant organizations of sexual desires and identities are real sites of affective investment" (Hennessy, 2000, p. 231). This highlights that such affective investments need not be expressed through reified, commodified sexual action, but instead frequently result from political-economic structures that can be subjected to transformative change only through collective action. Insofar as "we might even say affective potential is included in what Marx means by labour" (Hennessy, 2000, p. 215), we need to think about its decommodification in the same manner as we would other forms of labour.

The category of asexuality disrupts the reification of the sexual, particularly its commodified form linked to the productive self in neoliberal capitalism, simply by saying that there exist alternate possibilities for the organization of affective impulses and investments outside those set by marketized culture. In this sense, much as other critical lenses operate as heuristic tools undermining the assumed cores of other social realities, asexuality operates to expose compulsory sexuality as a socially organized, not innate, phenomenon.

### **Conclusion: Openings for an Agenda**

This investigation of compulsory sexuality as a historical materialist phenomenon is not intended to be a definitive account. The discourse on asexuality has only recently been taken seriously in both academia and broader society, so at the least it is premature to pronounce a definitive word on it. This investigation of various discourses of the social production of sexuality has sought to combine their insights into a consistent accounting of compulsory sexuality, but much more work on this front remains. Further research should focus on the relationship between asexuality and gender expression, in particular, trans\* identities. Scholars should also examine the expressions, political and otherwise, asexuality has taken on within non-Western social and political contexts, particularly given the use of sexuality as an oppressive instrument in colonial and post-colonial spaces. In addition, asexuality probably interacts with racialization in ways that modify its subjectivity, particularly given the hypersexualization of certain racial identities and the default assumption of others as asexual.

From a more direct political perspective, “hegemony designates a process wherein cultural authority is negotiated and contested” (Fraser, 2013, p. 142), rendering sexuality a space where hegemony is exercised and negotiated. Both activism and theory have doubtless expanded and changed the bounds of what is hegemonic within that sexual sphere in recent history. However, one of capitalism’s greatest self-preservation features is its ability to incorporate and subsume that which once opposed it in a shifting and dynamic manner.

Under what can be defined as a *hegemony of the sexual*, asexuals are “denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life” (Fraser, 2013, p. 176), because under this hegemony the basis for claims to humanity, and therefore social organizing and resistance is inherently sexual. The *lens of asexuality* helps expose this hegemony in compulsory sexuality and sexusociety. Whether these tools can be harnessed to reinvent the queer, expand its terms or develop an entirely new political critique of sexuality under neoliberalism is yet to be determined. In the worst-case scenario, asexuality as an identity will become a niche category of accepted social “difference” in the same manner as identities contained within LGBTQ have been to some extent. Although a

success on some level, providing relief to many currently deeply marginalized, this creation of social recognition for a niche identity category would seem to underrate the power and possibility asexuality holds from what its existence throws into question. If, indeed, we can have our affective needs met in a manner beyond the socially hegemonic sexual, how can these needs be further transformed to meet other ends? If we can exist beyond the commodification of the body, what does this ability do to the concept of the productive self and capitalist time under neoliberalism? These are questions asexuality compels, and it is in these questions – these troublings – that a future beyond capital can be glimpsed.

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