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The Invention of Heterosexuality

by Jonathan Ned Katz

In the twentieth century, creatures called heterosexuals emerged from the dark shadows of the nineteenth-century medical world to become common types acknowledged in the bright light of the modern day.

Heterosexuality began this century defensively, as the publicly unsanctioned private practice of the respectable middle class, and as the publicly put-clown pleasure-affirming practice of urban working-class youths, southern blacks, and Greenwich Village bohemians. But by the end of the 1920s, heterosexuality had triumphed as dominant, sanctified culture.' In the first quarter of the twentieth century the heterosexual came out, a public, self-affirming debut the homosexual would duplicate near the century's end.

The discourse on heterosexuality had a protracted coming out, not completed in American popular culture until the 1920s. Only slowly was heterosexuality established as a stable sign of normal sex. The association of heterosexuality with perversion continued as well into the twentieth century. . . .

In the first years of the twentieth century *heterosexual* and *homosexual* were still obscure medical terms, not yet standard English. In the first 1901 edition of the "H" volume of the comprehensive Oxford English Dictionary, *heterosexual* and *homosexual* had not yet made it.

Neither had heterosexuality yet attained the status of normal. In 1901, Dorland's Medical Dictionary, published in Philadelphia, continued to define "Heterosexuality" as "Abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex." Dorland's heterosexuality, a new "appetite," was clearly identified with an "opposite sex" hunger. But that craving was still aberrant. Dorland's calling heterosexuality "abnormal or perverted" is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary's first Supplement (1933), a "misapplied" definition. But contrary to the OED, Dorland's is a perfectly legitimate understanding of heterosexuality according to a procreative norm.

The twentieth century witnessed the decreasing legitimacy of that procreative imperative, and the increasing public acceptance of a new hetero pleasure principle. Gradually, heterosexuality came to refer to a normal other-sex sensuality free of any essential tie to procreation. But only in the mid- 1960s

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would heteroeroticism be distinguished completely from reproduction, and male-female pleasure sex justified for itself. ...

Between 1877 and 1920 Americans were embarked on *The Search for Order*, documented in historian Robert H. Wiebe's book of that title. Though Wiebe doesn't mention it, this hunt for regularity gave rise in the arena of sex to the new standard model heterosexuality. This paralleled early-twentieth-century moves to standardize railroad track widths, time zones, business and manufacturing procedures (discussed by Wiebe), as well as to test and regularize intelligence and femininity and masculinity....

In 1923, "heterosexuality" made its debut in Merriam Webster's authoritative New International Dictionary. "Homosexuality" had, surprisingly, made its debut fourteen years earlier, in 1909, defined as a medical term meaning "morbid sexual passion for one of the same sex." The advertising of a diseased homosexuality preceded the publicizing of a sick heterosexuality. For in 1923 Webster's defined "heterosexuality" as a "Med." term meaning "morbid sexual passion for one of the opposite sex." Only in 1934 does "heterosexuality" first appear in Webster's hefty Second Edition Unabridged defined in what is still the dominant modern mode. There, heterosexuality is finally a "manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality." Heterosexuality had finally attained the status of norm.

In the same 1934 Webster's "homosexuality" had changed as well. It's simply "eroticism for one of the same sex." Both terms' medical origins are no longer cited. Heterosexuality and homosexuality had settled into standard American.

In 1924, in The New York Times, heterosexuality first became a love that dared to speak its name. On September 7 of that year the word "hetero-sexual" made its first known appearance in The New York Times Book Review significantly, in a comment on Sigmund Freud. There, in a long, turgid review of Freud's Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego one Mary Keyt Isham spoke of "repressed hetero-sexuality" and "hetero-sexual love". . . .

By December 1940, when the risqué musical "Pal Joey" opened on Broadway, a tune titled "Zip" satirized the striptease artist Gypsy Rose Lee, by way of a character who, unzipping, sang of her dislike for a deep-voiced woman or high-pitched man and proclaimed her heterosexuality. That lyric registered the emergence in popular culture of a heterosexual identity.

By 1941, the glossary of a book about "sex variants" said that "straight" is being employed by homosexuals as meaning not homosexual. *To go straight is to cease homosexual practices and to indulge--usually to reindulge--in heterosexuality.*

The "not homosexual," a new creature, defined by what he or she isn't, had emerged among the cast of erotic characters on the twentieth-century stage. Here, "straight" is a condition toward which one may venture or not,

depending on one's "practices" (feeling is not the issue). Now, the sex variants are doing the defining--categorizing is a game that two preferences can play.

The "cult of domesticity" following World War II--the re-association of women with the home, motherhood, and child care, men with fatherhood and wage-work outside the home--was an era in which the predominance of the hetero norm went almost unchallenged. In the late 1940s and the 1950s, conservative mental-health professionals reasserted the old link between heterosexuality and procreation. In opposition, sex-liberals strove to expand the heterosexual ideal to include within the boundaries of the normal a wider-than-ever range of gender ideals and nonprocreative, premarital, and extramarital behavior. But that sex-liberal reform actually helped to secure the dominance of the heterosexual idea, as we shall see when we get to Kinsey. . .

This sex scientist [Kinsey] popularized the idea of a "continuum" of activity and feeling between hetero and homo poles:

Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum.

His recasting of the hetero/homo polarity did suggest that there are degrees of heterosexual and homosexual behavior and emotion. But that famous continuum also emphatically reaffirmed the idea of a sexuality divided between the hetero and homo.

Kinsey's "heterosexual-homosexual rating scale," from zero to six, sounded precise, quantitative, and scientific, fixing the het/homo binary in the public mind with new certainty. His science-dressed, influential sex-liberalism thus upheld the hetero/homo division, giving it new life and legitimacy.

Kinsey also explicitly contested the idea of an absolute either/or antithesis between hetero and homo *persons*. Stressing the variations between exclusive heterosexual and exclusive homosexual behavior and feeling, he denied that human beings "represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual." The world's population, he ordered, "is not to be divided into sheep and goats." (That revealing Biblical metaphor positions heterosexuals as sheep, coupled with conformity, and homosexuals as goats, linked with licentiousness).

The hetero/homo division of *persons* is not nature's doing, Kinsey stresses, but society's. As sex-liberal reformer, he challenged the social and historical division of *people* into heterosexuals and homosexuals because he saw this person-labeling used to denigrate homosexuals. Motivated by a reformist impulse, he rejected the social reality and profound subjective force of a historically constructed tradition which, since the early twentieth century in the U.S., had cut the sexual population in two--and helped to establish the social and personal reality of a heterosexual and homosexual identity. . . .

Between the 1890s and the 1960s the terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* moved into American popular culture, constructing in time a sexual solid citizen and a perverted unstable alien, a sensual insider and a lascivious outlaw, a hetero center and a homo margin, a hetero majority and a homo minority. The new, strict boundaries made the new gendered, erotic world less polymorphous. The term *heterosexual* manufactured a new sex-differentiated ideal of the erotically correct, a norm that worked to affirm the superiority of men over women and heterosexuals over homosexuals. Feminists questioned those gender and pleasure hierarchies.

Excerpted with permission from [The Invention of Heterosexuality](#) by Jonathan Ned Katz (New York: Dutton Books, 1995), pp. 83-112. Footnotes omitted.

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