

What use is queer theory to development?

Queering Development

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Discussion Paper

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This paper looks at two areas in which queer theory can inform/challenge development. Firstly, along with other post-structuralist theories, queer theory challenges the materialism on which much of development is still based, and proposes a broadening of development to include non-material factors such as sexuality. Secondly, queer theory deconstructs the categories of biological 'sex' and social 'gender', which are still often taken as the basis of Gender and Development.

In 1998, I facilitated some gender awareness workshops for rural Women's Federation Officials in Beijing. The standard training began with a game which some of you may have played in one form or another. Everyone sits in a circle, and one by one shout out a word they associate with 'woman', and then the same for 'man'. These are all written on the board. A discussion follows as to which words can apply exclusively to one sex or the other. The usual conclusion we reached was that 'pretty, handsome, brave, tender' could describe either women or men, but that 'beard, menstruation, pregnancy etc' apply only to one sex. At the end of the exercise, I would reveal that they had discovered the distinction between sex and gender. Both these terms are recently created in Chinese. They have been translated from the English into *shengli xingbie*, literally 'biological sex difference' (sex), and *shehui xingbie*, literally 'social sex difference' (gender), and come across as special new terminology from the West.

While playing these games, I kept thinking about the gay bar downtown, packed with Chinese boys, and sometimes a few girls, playing gender games with a consciousness way ahead of the 'awareness' we were trying to promote through our training. I heard questions such as 'of the two of you, who's the man, who's the woman?', 'Are you a top or a bottom?', and some boys referred to each other as 'sisters'. While these frameworks might not be completely unrestrictive, they do allow for some flexibility of gender roles, and implicitly recognise that it is not the body you are born with that makes you a boy or a girl, but what you (choose to) do with it.

I wondered how the understandings from the gay scene could be brought into our gender training. It would not have been politically acceptable to hold an open meeting between rural Chinese government officials and cosmopolitan gay boys from Beijing, and in any case the culture clash might render the exercise counter-productive. However, there must be ways to start such communication, which could well be worthwhile. In fact, during the last year it seems there has been greater interaction between a few individuals in established positions relating to women's issues, (such as academics) and individual queer activists, and I am sure this will have an effect.

This experience started me thinking about how Queer approaches could constructively inform development efforts, both on a theoretical and practical level. Today I focus on the theoretical, looking at how queer theory can contribute to development.

1. Queer Theory

The word 'queer', originally an insult for marginalised sexualities and other 'deviants', was in the late '80s reclaimed and invested with new meanings by activists in America. Formerly, with the words 'gay', 'lesbian', 'homosexual', we had defined ourselves in relation to heterosexuality. 'Queer' constituted a rejection of the hetero-homo binary, and a conception of sexualities as non-essential, shifting and transitional, a post-structuralist understanding of sexual identities. Queer aimed to provide an approach open to all those oppressed by the hegemony of heterosexual norms – whether they themselves were gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, transgender, transexual, celibate, undecided, SM, hermaphrodite, androgynous etc. This new energy permeated into academia, and a body of 'queer theory' emerged with thinkers such as Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Leo Bersani, David Halperin, Johnathon Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. Queer theory has, for some, now moved beyond a necessary association with sexuality. Halperin, somewhat controversially, explains:

queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without essence (David Halperin, cited in www.theory.uk)

So queer has moved beyond challenging sexual norms, to present a broader challenge to other norms. I believe queer theory can likewise challenge development norms, in two ways in particular. Firstly, it presents a challenge to materialism. Secondly, it challenges the sex-gender division on which much of Gender and Development is still based.

2. Materialism

Economics is a large part of development studies. The 'progress' and 'success' of development has often been measured in terms of economic indicators such as GDP. Now, the limitations of such approaches are being recognised and broader indicators based on 'basic needs', such as health, literacy etc. are being brought into the picture. In

some areas, such as IDS poverty work on poor people's own perceptions of poverty, there has also been a recognition of the importance of non-material or 'intangible' factors such as status, 'face', social isolation and social networks. Key features of ill-being, such as insecurity, identified by 'poor' people in such consultations, are concepts which cover both tangible and intangible aspects. The tangible and intangible are not necessarily separated in poor people's discourses. Social Exclusion frameworks, which are gaining application in development contexts, also allow for consideration of such factors, including how the subjectivities of the excluded are created. This provides a space for post-modernist theories, which emphasise the importance of meanings and representations, and the power of discourse. Queer theory is closely linked with post-structuralism, in particular using post-structuralist style approaches to analyse sexuality, and considering the implications of such analyses for other areas.

However, while a certain space is opening up in development for looking at the 'intangible', non-material, and at 'subjectivities', sexuality is still largely ignored. As Gilles said last week, sexual identities are seen as linked to Western wealth and privilege. The poor 'just reproduce'.¹ Many in development would argue that 'basic needs' are a more immediate priority than sexuality for those in economic difficulty. However, sexuality can itself be a basic need, and basic needs can be contingent upon sexuality, for example where economic resources are dependent on a marital relation, or where homophobic or other sexual violence is a problem. Social marginalisation due to sexual non-conformity, and economic deprivation may still be interrelated by relations of economic dependency. It is certainly true that, for some, food may indeed be a more immediate priority than sexuality. However, the separability and order of priority of the two issues should not be assumed.

I believe there is a space here for queer theory to bring consideration of non-material factors, including sexuality, into poverty alleviation work and other development issues.

3. Sex = Gender

One site where queer theory talks about the interaction between the material and the intangible is the body. By arguing that the body is shaped by the social, queer theory directly challenges the biological sex/social gender binary on which much of GAD thinking is still based. Queer theorists such as Butler have pointed out that there is no pure biological body onto which social gender is inscribed. Rather, the body and the social are interactive and influence each other. Moore describes the body as an 'interface' or 'threshold', between the material and symbolic, the biological and cultural.² Women may have hysterectomies, bear children or not, have anaemia, eradicate facial hair or grow beards. Likewise, men may or may not be muscular, malnourished, have children, or suffer from war or sports injuries. These are all politically laden experiences which shape physical bodies.

¹ Kleitz, Gilles, 2,000, 'Why is development work so straight?', paper for Queering Development Seminar Series, 19.1.2,000

² Moore, Henrietta, *A Passion for Difference*, Polity Press, London, 1994, pp.18 and 22

Butler argues that bodies are not only physically shaped by the political and social, they are 'morphologised' ie. mapped out and given meaning, by such discourses as sex and gender. The categorisation of people according to their potential capacity for pregnancy, or type of sexual organs, is not a neutral descriptive, but rather a political decision to prioritise particular aspects of the body over others, and particular differences between bodies over others. There may be as great a variation between a group of bodies of one sex as between bodies of different sexes.

I do not deny certain kinds of biological differences. But I always ask under what conditions, under what discursive and institutional conditions, do certain biological differences – and they are not necessary ones, given the anomalous state of bodies in the world – become the salient characteristics of sex. (Butler, in 'Gender as Performance, an interview with Judith Butler' in Radical Philosophy, Summer 1994)

If, as Butler argues, we are classified as men or women due to the discourse around our bodies, rather than the nature of our bodies themselves, then sex, as well as gender, becomes a social/political construct that can be challenged. If sex loses its essential meaning, then same-sex and different-sex desire also cease to be absolutely differentiated and fixed categories, and like sex and gender, are revealed to be socially/politically constructed.

Sex, gender and sexual identities are not an essential 'who we are', but instead a performance, what we do moment by moment.

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender...gender is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" which are said to be its results. (Butler, in Gender Trouble, Routledge, London, 1990, p25)

While gender may be a performance however, it is not a free one. We usually act out the socially prescribed and internalised roles assigned to us. However, there is some possibility of change. We can act out variations on the prescribed performances, or re-enact the same roles with a new meaning, repeating against the grain, for example, taking on the label queer, not as a denigration, but as a new politics.

Where does this leave GAD, an approach based on the relations between the sexes – categories queer theory challenges as I have described. In certain situations, 'strategic essentialism' may make sense, ie. to continue with our present categorisations, not because we believe they relate to any fixed or essential meanings, but because they are already understood, and may be practical to work with. However, 'queer' alternatives may be connectable to where we are now. The move from 'Women in Development' (projects focussing on women) to 'Gender and Development' (focussing programmes on the relations between the sexes), opens some spaces for the latter approach. Instead of focussing simply on women, projects can consider those who lack power, whether 'women' or 'men', and those who lose out from not fitting into gender norms/sex

categories. We could look for a new queer strategy, where we challenge the accepted categories, the 'normal/legitimate/dominant', and explore new ways to perform gender for ourselves and in our projects, for example using Theatre for Development. This could be a powerful tool, as it can impact on the emotions and the subconscious levels at which subjectivities are constructed, and through physical movements change the relation to the body.

This discussion, and Butlerian ideas, are already filtering through into GAD discourse, as can be seen in writing by Wieringa and Kandiyoti.³ The interaction between queer theory and development has begun.

³ Kandiyoti, Deniz: Gender, power and contestation: 'Rethinking bargaining with patriarchy' in Feminist Visions of Development, Cecile Jackson and Ruth Pearson ed. Routledge, London, 1998, and Wieringa, Saskia, 'Rethinking Gender Planning: A critical discussion of the use of the concept gender', ISS Working Paper Series, No. 279, Sept. 1998