

Queer Sexual Needs?

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It seems uncontroversial to say that heteronormativity cannot meet queer sexual needs. But how can we understand these queer sexual needs without reifying them as a set of positive needs that exist ‘outside’ heteronormativity, simply waiting to be found?

When incels (‘involuntary celibates’) claim that their need for sex ought to be met via social institutions and regulations—that they have, in short, a ‘right to sex’ (see Srinivasan 2018)—they understand sexual needs precisely in this reified way. Incels assume a world of naturalised, fixed sexual needs, in which ‘real’ men need women for their sexual fulfilment, and ‘real’ women are perpetually delighted at the prospect of meeting these needs. In claiming that their sexual needs are not met in a world in which there is no right to sex, incels are thus appealing to an understanding of needs as rooted in a supposedly ‘natural’ heteronormative matrix of sex/gender/desire.

By contrast, when queer people argue that heteronormativity does not meet their sexual needs, it is exactly this idea of a naturalized heterosexuality that is thrown into crisis. The invocation of queer sexual needs calls into question the heteronormative idea that sex is the domain of marital bliss and private harmony, offering much-needed respite from the demands of public and political life. On this idea, sex and intimacy are part of a catalogue of private enjoyments—the pleasures that you are promised at the end of a ‘good day’s work’. Bracketed from public life and relega-

ted to the private sphere, sex is thus configured as “the endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse, a promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives” (Berlant and Warner 1988, 553).

Crucially, however, the claim that heteronormativity does not meet queer sexual needs should not be understood as either presupposing or requiring a stable conception of what these queer sexual needs *are*. The point, in short, is not that heteronormativity should be fixed, or expanded, in order that queer subjects can finally have their sexual needs met, too. This is an assimilationist, liberal model of queer emancipation through inclusion into heteronormative conceptions of sex and sexuality. Instead, we want to suggest that invoking queer sexual needs calls into question the very idea of sexuality as being a domain in which pre-figured, stable sexual needs encounter future possibilities for their fulfilment. Rather than viewing sexuality through the prism of a subject whose sexuality is a definitive answer to a given set of sexual needs, the very impossibility of defining once and for all what queer sexual needs are points to a subject for whom sexuality is forever an open question.

To make this less abstract, consider the experience described to Avgi Saketopoulou (2023) by Adam*, one of her analysands. Adam was visiting a queer bathhouse with his lover when he saw a stranger walk into the room. Both he and his lover found the stranger’s appearance repulsive—‘disgusting’ even (25). Yet, despite feeling a strong urge to leave the room, Adam could not tear himself loose from the stranger. He ended up having sex with him—both despite himself and nevertheless because he wanted to. This sexual encounter ‘exploded’

his own sense of who he was: a white, middle-class gay who is “clean, organized, ‘together’” (26). “When orgasm came, he said, ‘I exploded into thousands of tiny pieces, was hanging out in space like overheated pieces of dust’”(25).

A common reading of the queer demand for sexual spaces such as the bathhouse that Adam visited would understand these spaces as providing opportunities to meet the pre-existing sexual needs of queer people. But Adam’s experience points to a different understanding of the queer need for spaces that make possible sexual encounters beyond the confines of the bourgeois, heteronormative private sphere. This queer need is indeed a *need* in the sense that it is not superfluous, or a luxury, but essential for queer flourishing. At the same time, it cannot be rendered as a given, finite set of sexual needs—queer need has to remain radically underdetermined in order to remain queer. This means that the queer demand for public sexual spaces like the bathhouse or the kink party is not a demand for existing needs to be met, but a demand for a space in which queer sexual needs can be formulated, contested, and revised. A space in which subjects can articulate sexual needs that might turn out not to be identical to themselves, and craft from within this non-identity of need sexual experiences that reconfigure who they are—or who they thought they were.

References

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