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Canadian Sociology and its Legacies: Homosexuality, Absence, and Constraint

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If there is one theme in *The Canadian Journal of Sociology's* 2001 special issue "Legacy for a New Millennium" it is the suggestion that Canada's distinct social, political, and economic history "have all had a significant impact" on Canadian sociological practice and research (Hiller 2001: 262). Driedger (2001), for example, notes that after Trudeau placed language and culture on the county's political agenda in 1971 an "explosion of multicultural research" occurred. While Hiller (2001), as the special issue editor, concedes the special issue does not grapple with all of Canada's growing pains, the absence of any reference to sexual politics is striking—indeed, even its absence goes unnamed. Significantly, sexual politics figure heavily in Canada's history: Trudeau's 1969 decriminalisation of homosexuality, the HIV/AIDS crisis of the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the 1997 amendment to Canada's *Human Rights Act,* and the more recent passing of the *Modernization of Benefits and Obligations Act* are only a few major points in Canada's negotiation of the "problem" of same-sex desire. Given this history and the arguments holding the *CJS* special issue together, the sociological study of homosexuality *should be* a critical plank in Canada's self-understanding. This is not, however, the case and near the end of my doctoral candidacy, I'm struck by the paucity of sociological research on Canadian homosexualities. It may be, of course, that I haven't looked hard enough, but one would think that if this were the case, then things would have caught up with me—especially after having completed an MA on homosexuality and jumping through the hoops associated with a PhD on the same topic. While I would never discount the personal support and encouragement of the sociologists I have learned from, the paucity of conceptual resources necessary for engaging in a sociological inquiry of Canadian homosexuality has represented a peculiar legacy of constraint.

There are, of course, *some* tools upon which to draw—such as the work of Gary Kinsman (1996) and Barry Adam (1995)—but the extent of Canadian sociology on the topic is sparse. My own history with graduate supervision suggests that this scarcity of conceptual resources manifests itself as thinner institutional resources. After having an MA proposal on homosexuality accepted I began searching for supervision. Of the handful of faculty with any tangential expertise in sexual politics—all in the areas of social control, deviance, and criminology—all politely declined supervision. My interests were a bit outside what they did. Someone suggested I approach a female faculty member who then asked, "Why me?" I had to confess, "Well, there doesn't seem to *be* anyone else." While I am confident that she would not have taken me on if I had not shown some capacity, she later told me that part of her reason was because of her soft spot for underdogs—having, as a woman, been one herself. Upon completing the MA I began searching for programs that might have more resources to draw upon—I did not want to have to rely on someone with a soft spot for underdogs again. After asking a department chair how a PhD project on gay men's culture might fare in his department, he responded—thoughtfully and without malice—"Well, we *do* study homosexuality in our deviance classes." It has been, in short, not so much been the *sociologists* who have been a problem as the absence of *sociological inquiry.* Notably, most queer thinkers would recognise that heterosexism is as

much about what is present as about what is absent.

It would appear that within sociology, there is the space to conduct sociological analyses of gay culture and there are the resources with which to do so. But in my experience, these spaces and resources are about personalised interest on the part of feminist scholars who have struggled with marginalisation themselves. Clearly, I have feminist scholars to thank for the fact that I can even do my research—and that it has been entirely women who have seen to my graduate supervision is, I think, worth noting. But while I have feminists to thank for the space and tools they created, the relationship between homosexuality and feminism has not always been friendly—far from it in fact. Gay men and gay men's politics are hardly free from sexism—an obvious bone of contention for feminist thinkers and activists. In effect, this means I have been faced with the challenge of constructing the sociological tools necessary for my analysis whole cloth *before* beginning any research. In contrast, we might note that while work around racism, ethnicity and gender is certainly far from over, a sociology graduate student interested in race or gender in Canada has a strong legacy of sociological research upon which to draw.

Part of me wonders if this is what it means to be "distinctly" Canadian. The Canadian homosexual experience is informed by a legislated legal recognition—provided that gay men and women don't ask for *too* much in the way of conceptual or institutional resources. The British Columbia legal ruling on gay and lesbian marriage, the challenges faced by Little Sister's bookstore, and the generally cumbersome nature of human rights commissions dealing with same-sex desire are testament to this. So, while we might be pleased to note that the 2001 Canadian Census included, for the first time, reference to same-sex common law couples, we might also note that the Census is used to assess the financial needs of the state. The recent *Modernization of Benefits and Obligations Act* has enormous implications for the state's coffers, suggesting, perhaps, that while the state might want to know about some of the particulars of same-sex desire, it might not be for all the right reasons. Moreover, Justice Minister Anne McLellan's announcement that the same bill would include a definition of marriage as "the lawful union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others" could be taken as an attempt to control the conceptual resources available for social change. To allow same-sex desire play in the definition of marriage would represent a tool through which the fabric of Canadian culture might be thoroughly reworked.

Compare Canada's relationship with homosexuality to Britain and the US where protections are not well articulated or Europe where homosexuality is somewhat more thoroughly worked into everyday culture and legislation. Call it what you will—an effect of Canada's struggle to articulate a political, social and economic identity distinct from Britain, the US, and Europe—but in light of this specificity and Everett Hughes' (1959) "more so principle" an interesting—though nearly unexplored—research trajectory emerges. What do heterosexism and homophobia look like in a context where *formal* legal protection is granted, but poorly articulated as lived experience? What are the effects of this tension? And how are they linked to Canada's distinct socio-political history? Buried in this trajectory is, of course, a more pointed and provocative research question that might be asked of Canadian sociology and Canadian sociologists in general. In light of well articulated sociological research agendas around changes we've seen in the areas of race, ethnicity, and gender, why the legacy of constraint around the teaching and research on same-sex desire?

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