WHAT CAN ASEXUALITY DO FOR QUEER THEORIES?

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ABSTRACT
Asexuality has thus far been analyzed mainly as a sexual orientation or identity, whose particular approach to defining sex, identity and relationships has made it an interesting addition to social queer theories. In order to suggest further points of connection between asexuality and queer theories, this paper aims to look at asexuality as a theoretical concept that can be a useful contribution to the anti-social strand of queer theory as proposed by Edelman and Sikora. The main connection between asexuality and anti-social queer theories is the rejection of positivist values imposed by neo-liberalism such as social, cultural, and biological productivity, happiness and futurity. Inspired by Edelman’s take on queer anti-futurity, Ahmed’s criticism of the concept of happiness, and Tomasz Sikora’s idea of the strategic outside, this paper will propose a reading of an asexual as a figure full of radical political potential because of, rather than despite, its negative aspects.

KEYWORDS
Asexuality, queer theories, anti-futurity, non-reproduction, strategic outside

1. INTRODUCTION
As a relatively newly-emerged sexual identity, asexuality has quickly become the object of interest of sociologists and psychologists, who employ a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze issues such as definitions of asexuality used within the asexual community, types of relationships asexuals engage in, and their social and political agenda (Brotto et al., 2010, Carrigan, 2011, 2012, Scherrer 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Much of this research has led to interesting findings about the intersection of queer and asexuality, as it suggests that asexuals negotiate and problematize a number of common-sense assumptions about human sexuality, especially those related to the formation of sexual identity, forms of relationships, and the central role of sex itself. However, it seems that asexuality can also engage with queer theories on the theoretical plain, if approached more as a metaphorical concept than a sexual identity grounded in lived experience. One of the latest books on asexuality, Cerankowski and Milks’s Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives, employs a broader perspective on asexuality and “builds on, reworks, troubles, and perhaps defies” the most common definition of asexuality used in sociological research, according to which it is “a sexual orientation describing people who do not experience sexual attraction” (2014, p. 7). This article will contribute to this effort by discussing the ways in which the concept of asexuality can contribute to the anti-social strand of queer theories and be useful for undermining certain a priori assumptions about universal
values and quality of life. Since my aim is theory-oriented, I will not use the definition and terms commonly used by the asexual community but instead turn to ideas worked out by thinkers inspired by the anti-social turn in queer theories, such as Lee Edelman and Tomasz Sikora, to analyze the critical potential of asexuality as a political choice and as a resistance to social and political institutions governing human sexuality.

In this article I will abstract from asexual community and asexual people and instead look at asexuality as a concept that can serve as an entry point into reflections closely related to the anti-social strands of queer theories that see the potential in negativity, non-productivity and strategic outside. Additionally, asexuality will be approached as a conscious political choice, a radical anarchist politics of sexuality that involves rejection of sex and all political and social institutions that govern people’s sexual lives (Fahs, 2010). Both of these understandings of asexuality are only loosely linked with the actual lived experience of asexual people and while they are not the same, they share the project of radical refusal of neoliberal values of productiveness and happiness. This paper will in turn propose a reading of asexuality as anti-futurity, asexuality as refusal of happiness, and asexuality as the position of the strategic outside.

2. BODY OF PAPER

A common charge against asexuality is the fact that it appears to be a concept built purely in negative, oppositional terms. As such, it is always destined to be on the defensive, refuting mistaken claims and proving what it is not rather than what it can be. Indeed, the very term suggests a negation of sexuality and the asexual identity or asexual political project, regardless of the competing definitions and meanings among the interested parties, is largely constructed as opposition to what is seen as oversexualized culture and the sexual assumption, according to which all people have sexual needs and desires (Carrigan, 2012, Przybylo, 2011). As a result, it can be said that asexuality has little positive content and can only be perceived as a reaction to mainstream values: a barren construct that does not create anything on its own but only rejects. This claim, however, need not be seen as a charge and can instead be treated as an opportunity, as a theoretical perspective on sexuality that in its negativity can be quite fruitful.

As a matter of fact, queer theories have embraced the negative aspect of sexuality and queerness, most famously (and contentiously) since Lee Edelman wrote his manifesto against futurism and its most prevalent symbol, a child (2004). For Edelman a queer is a figure of denial of futurity as he/she rejects the value of reproduction, on which the continuity and well-being of liberal societies is said to depend. In his understanding neither the non-reproductive queer, nor the kid-loving majority of the society are concrete, sociologically-grounded figures. Instead, Edelman uses psychoanalytic tools to comment on cultural tendency to treat children as a symbol of hope, futurity, biological, social and cultural reproduction, all of which are supposedly unquestionable values. In this context a phantasmatic figure of a queer, who is both barren and a potential threat to children, stands for a radical rejection of the positive social values and as
such must be erased. Edelman’s contribution is not limited to this diagnosis, but involves a call to reevaluate the abovementioned ideas: instead of rebutting such an image of a queer, he suggests embracing it and appreciating the potential of negativity. This stance became an inspiration to think of an asexual as a similarly non-productive, non-reproducing, unhappiness embracing, and situated on the “strategic outside” symbolic figure.

The positivist liberal values espoused in most Western societies are so deeply ingrained in most people that they seem nearly impossible to question. After all, who wouldn’t prefer to be happy, productive, accepted, and well-liked, to the opposite? Appreciating the importance of questioning, or even rejecting, these commonsensical choices, is a crucial contribution of queer, which has argued for the importance of the outcast perspective. In a similar vein, asexuals occupy the position of ultimate outcasts in the sexu-society that dominates in the Western countries, as they are excluded (or exclude themselves) from what appears to be the defining aspect of being a social human being, sexuality (Przybylo, 2011, p. 437).

As the recent panicked debates about the upcoming demographic catastrophe and depopulation of the West have proven, reproduction remains one of the key concerns of neo-liberal states, even after they have become secularized. The apocalyptic rhetoric that presents the current low birth rates as a mortal danger to the well-being of the North-American and European societies underscores the importance of producing new generations of workers by raising two threatening specters: of a non-white, non-Christian immigrant wave that is bound to destroy the Western civilization, and of a complete economic collapse that will similarly spell the end of the world as we know it. Thus, it is the duty of women to reproduce and the priority of government to encourage them to do so. The neoliberal value of children as the future workforce and consumers blends with the more symbolic attachment to children as representing the future of humanity and the possibility of social and cultural reproduction to create a dominant view of reproduction as the ultimate service for the society.

In this landscape, asexuals seem to be shirking their duties. This is not to say that real-life asexuals do not reproduce: many of them do, in much the same ways as sexual people. However, if seen as a political and/or theoretical position, asexuality is the very embodiment of the critique of reproduction, a rejection of the “natural” mode of reproduction and with it the value of social productivity which is so often, especially for women, associated with the ability to produce new generations. Much like queers described by Edelman and still present in popular imagination, they occupy this role symbolically rather than practically.¹ Breanne Fahs in her article on the radical anarchist politics of women choosing asexuality argues for noticing the potential of such a choice in terms of undermining the patriarchal and conservative hold that political and social institutions have over sexuality (2011, p. 450-1). These institutions include

¹ Edelman’s *No Futurity* has also proved to be an inspiration for fat studies scholars who draw similar parallels between Edelman’s queers and fat people as a marginalized group who appear to be the opposite of reproduction possibility and whose reproduction is generally discouraged (cf. Levy-Navarro, E. (2009). *Fatting queer history: Where does fat history go from here?* In E. Rothblum & S. Solvay (Eds.), *The fat studies reader* (pp. 15-24), New York: New York University Press).
state-recognized marriage, laws controlling access to birth control and abortion as well as welfare, all of which influence women’s lives especially with regards to their reproductive choices. Fahs suggests that “asexuality may help to dismantle the entire institution of sex,” which includes, though is not limited to, the issues of reproduction. Based on Edelman’s and Fahs’s theories asexuality can be seen as a rejection of reproduction not in the literal way, but rather either as a symbolic queer barrenness or a conscious political rejection of the very institution of reproduction. In this context, asexuals may be the ultimate non-productive subjects, as they refuse to create new life, or even to reproduce the social and cultural continuity in the form of a heterosexual monogamous marriage. By not producing future consumers and producers of economic goods, asexuals stand to be accused of social non-productivity and taking economic advantage of the well-adjusted elements of the society, much like gays and lesbians have been.

According to much of the research conducted by social scientists, one of the crucial concerns of the asexual community is the perception that in order to be happy and healthy one needs a satisfying sex life, which would mean that asexuals are doomed to be unhappy by default (Carrigan, 2012, p. 13). The community fights this assumption by explaining how they find happiness in their sexless lives and claiming that other pleasures give them more satisfaction. While this is certainly true on the individual and practical level – there is no reason to assume that asexuals are less likely to be happy than sexual people, if one does not factor in the social discrimination they face – I would now like to look at the concept of happiness in general more critically, following Sara Ahmed’s The Promise of Happiness (2010).

According to Ahmed, happiness has become a duty rather than a privilege and failing in this duty is often seen as a proof of one’s shortcomings, in accordance with the liberal discourse of individual responsibility and agency. Most importantly for queer theories, the understanding of happiness tends to be restrictive and limited and consequently places certain subjects on the outside of the happy society: feminists, queers, migrants, and many other misfits. In her chapter on “Happy Futures” Ahmed proposes a figure of a revolutionary “who refuses happiness, which means not only failing to be happy, but not wanting to be happy” and instead embraces “the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness” (2010, p. 192, 195). This might be understood in two different ways: either as a call to redefine what happiness means (which is the path taken by the asexual community when they questions the necessity of sex), or in its stronger meaning, as a rejection of happiness as an important value. Ahmed also points to the political possibilities of choosing to experience unhappiness: “we would radicalize freedom as the freedom to be unhappy” (2012, p. 195). In her view, unhappiness is a potentially radical political choice, often made by the marginalized subjects, who may be forcibly excluded from the dominant discourse of happiness or decide to reject it themselves. While she does not explicitly mention asexuals, it seems that her chapter on “unhappy queers” fits the situation of asexuals just as well as lesbians, gays, and trans* persons, as the popular association of a healthy sex life with fulfillment and happiness excludes asexuals from the narrative. Similarly to Edelman’s anti-futurity, this stigma can be reinterpreted as creating a potentially productive
figure of an unhappy asexual whose rejection of the seemingly unquestionable value of happiness highlights problems inherent in the duty to be happy.

This attempt to undermine indisputable positivist values is also present in Tomasz Sikora’s project of thinking a “strategic negativism” that allows one to occupy a marginal position that is epistemologically privileged in terms of questioning social and political realities. While Sikora uses the notion of a strategic outside to discuss the violence of inclusion into the liberal society and possible ethics of (queer) betrayal, it also has a potential for theorizing the unique position of an asexual. According to him,

“The outside […] is to be understood as negating, or at least suspending, the present social positivities, and thus as a form of ‘strategic negativism’ that counters the usurpations of the liberal capitalist utopia and its models of political agency. […] The negativity of the outside is not a pure place from which to launch a total attack on the inside, but a constant problematization, [through various practices, of the mechanisms of interiorization and immunization.]” (2013)

This notion of suspending social positivities follows the anti-social strands of queer theories, such as the idea of non-futurity, whose importance for theorizing asexuality was already discussed. The possibility of thinking an outside is, of course, highly problematic, and (at least for now) it is bound to be more of a theoretical possibility than an actual position that would endow the “thinker” with any sort of distanced and thus more critical perspective. What is crucial is the idea of imagining such a position in order to problematize certain practices of inclusion and exclusion of minorities, as well as assumptions about universal values, such as the above mentioned happiness and reproduction. As a result, the figure of an asexual can be perceived as a new embodiment of Ahmed’s “unhappy queer” and Edelman’s “non-reproducing queer,” one that is perhaps even more radically opposed to the aforementioned values by standing against any sex, not only the supposedly reproductive and happiness-inducing heterosexual sex.

The asexual perspective is uniquely suited for this outside position, as it can be thought of as occupying a place outside of the norm of sexuality (Przybylo, 2011). Naturally, this is a purely theoretical proposition, since asexuals are also socialized in a sexual world, so their position of outsiders is in no way a clear-cut opposition to the sexualized world, but rather a constant negotiating of the social reality and their own affects and experiences. Nevertheless, asexuality provides yet another critical approach to the dominant sexual norms: just like gays and lesbians by their very existence stand for a negation of heteronormativity, bisexuals – of the binarism of homo/hetero division, and queers of stable and cohesive sexual identities, asexuals negate the very norm of being sexual.

The “strategic outside” is the point where Fahs’s project of the political project of asexuality and Edelman’s symbolic figure of an anti-futurist queer come together to form a theoretically fruitful position with radical political potential. The figure of an asexual who embraces the strategic negativism of his or her position is one that encourages suspicious treatment of the “obvious” neoliberal values and as such can be an important point of reference for queer
politics, especially when they critique neoliberal societies and economies rather than focus only on sexual minorities (cf. Duggan, 2003, Gibson-Graham, 2006).

3. CONCLUSION

As a sexual identity and a community built around this identity, the asexual movement is very much a part of the identity politics approach to sexuality, since it aims to be recognized as yet another "valid" and "real" sexual orientation, to fight discrimination, and to achieve equal rights. At the same time the way in which asexuals discuss their self-definitions and attempt to create a cohesive common identity by emphasizing the importance of choice and agency suggests that they have felt the impact of queer approaches to sexuality on their way of thinking (Carrigan, 2011, Scherrer, 2008). While this political project is still underway, and remains an object of attention of a number of social scientists, looking at asexuality more as a theoretical concept than an actual community provides an opportunity to notice its more radical potential and think critically about the dominant positivist liberal values that are so often taken for granted. The figure of an asexual can be used as a development of Edelman's and Sikora's ideas about the potential that queer negativity has for creative questioning and problematizing social realities. Asexuality may be a rejection of sex, but a theoretically and politically productive one, with a significant impact on the understanding of general concepts of productivity and happiness and the imperative that comes with them. Asexuality is thus an outside perspective well worth further exploration in terms of its connections with the wider social frames of capitalism and liberalism and their conception of a subject.

REFERENCES


