



The Invention of Heterosexuality

Jonathan Ned Katz, Gore Vidal, Lisa Duggan (Afterword)

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“Heterosexuality,” assumed to denote a universal sexual and cultural norm, has been largely exempt from critical scrutiny. In this boldly original work, Jonathan Ned Katz challenges the common notion that the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality has been a timeless one. Building on the history of medical terminology, he reveals that as late as 1923, the term “heterosexuality” referred to a “morbid sexual passion,” and that its current usage emerged to legitimate men and women having sex for pleasure. Drawing on the works of Sigmund Freud, James Baldwin, Betty Friedan, and Michel Foucault, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* considers the effects of heterosexuality’s recently forged primacy on both scientific literature and popular culture.

“Lively and provocative.”—Carol Tavris, *New York Times Book Review*

“A valuable primer . . . misses no significant twists in sexual politics.”—Gary Indiana, *Village Voice Literary Supplement*

“One of the most important—if not outright subversive—works to emerge from gay and lesbian studies in years.”—Mark Thompson, *The Advocate*

The Invention of Heterosexuality Details

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Korri says

Katz places the normative category of heterosexuality under the microscope, reviewing and commenting on its history in American & European literature that often focuses on challenges to the system in the form of the 'abnormal' (ex: 'homosexuality' or feminist discourses). I was impressed by his analysis of key texts and found it very thought-provoking. At the end of it all I find that the definition of heterosexuality (in all its historical specificity) still remains elusive.

John Eliade says

I have not read anything by Jonathan Katz before, so I cannot say that I know his work very well. But it is quite clear to me that he has done his research and his homework, though it seems like a work about this topic could span many volumes, and not so much as 200 pages. This is more of a skip through notable historic episodes in the evolution of (Western) sexuality, and less a tracking of the subtle development of heterosexuality.

However he DOES do that. He charts the inception of the word "heterosexuality" to a medical journal in 1892 where, shockingly, it represents a medical condition that was UNdesirable (!). The sufferer of "heterosexuality" was possessed of an overwhelming erotic sensation (daresay, the word "obsession" be used) for the opposite sex, just as the sufferer of "homosexualit" was possessed of an overwhelming erotic feeling for the same sex.

It's a curious alternate history scenario to wonder what might have happened had these words not been invented. The 1890s happened just as the world was taking some major shifts into the modern era. The 1920s saw the invention of the flapper, who was a flaunting of the heterosexual woman. For the first half of its existence, this term "heterosexuality," and its siamese twin "heterosexuality," represented erotic states of pleasure and love, coming out of a time in general and a time in particular (the Victorian era) where pleasure, especially erotic pleasure, was something to be ashamed and horrified by. Only during second-wave feminism, the inception of identity politics, and the rise of the Religious Right did "heterosexuality" evolve into its present standard of a "normal" and "good" sexuality through which procreation is engaged, as opposed to the until recent "abnormal" "homosexuality."

People can become quick to attack work that may serve to dismantle pieces of their identity. Since so many people identify as "heterosexual," a word which never saw the light of day until 1892, many of the premises of Katz's work can be upsetting at best, and downright disturbing at worst. It's hardly a controversial thing to pinpoint and identify historical trends, especially ones that are easily identifiable in most University libraries, but the conclusions that Katz comes to, that our sexuality is as invented as our nation-states, and are often times just as old or young as them, is to some just as disturbing as an attack on their national identity.

To me, a student of language and concepts, this book is an important work to show not only how language memes develop, spread, and evolve over time, but also the sheer power they can have over such large segments of the population. It becomes downright scary to consider that most of this happens invisibly, as well, that it occurs in a subliminal space of language possessed by its speakers but wholly out of their

control.

For that reason, if not for the history of sexuality itself, this book is important.

Hamad says

The afterword pretty much sums up the whole point of the book. And in more clear, concise language. However, if you do want to enjoy some (well-deserved) Freud-bashing, or the nuances of Victorian-era sexuality, just flip through the chapters.

Greg Chandler says

This work is fairly dry and academic. It seems to focus more on the word heterosexual than on the set of behaviors and societal norms, rules and laws. It is interesting that the first use of the word was in describing a psychosis: an excessive fixation on the opposite sex. This apparently predates the use of homosexual to indicate an excessive fixation on the same sex.

It mentions societies that were less binary - homo vs. hetero, even suggesting that the early differentiation on sexual interest as being only for procreation and therefore condemning acts that "wasted" a man's "seed" (masturbation, and homosexual sex), did not overtly condemn female-female relationships, which could be quite strong even romantic.

The switch to seeing sex as enjoyable (for men at least), while it rules out a major argument against homosexuality, first emphasized that it was acceptable only within the purity of marriage.

Arguments over the pleasure principle become more heated in the days of women's lib, though they often consciously excluded lesbian discourse. It was OK for women to like sex now, and to join in the "sexual economy", but only for heterosexual women.

Heterosexuality is redefined largely by the fight for gay rights. The book argues, if that isn't too strong a word for it, for a less either-or duality or binary view of sexual orientation. Sexuality orientation can only be determined along a spectrum, though even that seems to suggest a lack of fluidity and an assumption of some sexual identity. Some people who are asexual, or see their sexual identity as fluid will still be left out of this model.

Zeo says

Book generally summarized by:

Contrary to today's bio-belief, the heterosexual/homosexual binary is not in nature, but is socially constructed, therefore deconstructable. With the abolition of the slave system, the relations of domination signified by the terms master and slave lost their immediate salience

and gradually became archaic, though racism continues on. With the abolition of the heterosexual system, the terms heterosexual and homosexual can become obsolete.

Nice dreams of simple solutions...Katz can't decide if he's critiquing heterosexuality, its invasion into society as a term for something natural for some people which has evolved into what we know as modern heterosexuality, or simply the word itself. While many LGBT writers talk about LGBT issues as they effect upper and middle-class white people only as though poor people and people of color don't exist/aren't queer, Katz makes explicitly clear that he's aware of the existence and at least some issues for poor people and people of color, and then says that here he will not talk about those issues, thus reinforcing the assumed validity of the actions and opinions of the white middle class; quoting Baldwin, Lorde and Foucault isn't enough to fix that. Chapters 2 and 3 are worth reading for a quick history, but you're probably better off reading the Wikipedia article, where most of the important information from this book was used; the rest is self-promotion (it's worth noting the number of citations to other works of his, or at least to one of them) or poorly-done critique of others.

David says

As a (nominally) heterosexual male, I remember having some arguments with some of JNK's tenets & positions. All I can remember is trying to formulate a spectrum of distinctions (?) confronting the construction of hierarchy within heteronormativity...seeing as how there is a new take on the topic-- historicizing the definitions of heterosexuality, whether as a 'sexuality' or inserted in a gendered totalizing of normative behavior-- by Hanne Blank-- I am overdue for a more careful rereading-- along with picking Blank's book up!

Carlos says

Utterly amazing, controversial and thought-provoking book! I strongly recommend everyone read it. Katz's premise is straight forward enough, heterosexuality and its counterpart homosexuality are completely arbitrary and constructed labels that have endured to the detriment of all. Now that does not mean that heterosexual or homosexual relationships do not exist or have no value, but that society (at least the western portion of it) has been encased in a completely unnecessary dichotomy whose starting point can be narrowed down to the last decade of the 19th century. Katz goes on to make an argument that will give cause to members of both camps to want to object, a true mark of a revolutionary idea. Throughout the book, Katz then takes the case with a mixture of historical research and literary criticism, uncovering the origins and underlying causes for the evolution of these terms as well as their acceptance into mainstream society throughout the 20th century. Along the way Katz gives insightful commentary on such matters as Victorian sexuality, Freudian ideas and the second wave of feminism. To add to Katz brilliant discussion, Gore Vidal provides an enticing introduction while Lisa Duggan gives a wonderfully appropriate afterward, ending with the suitable call for the debate to commence. This was truly a book that is well worth reading and discussing!

Gabe says

If Evelyn ever returns it to me, I will finish reading it. from what I have read thus far, this book contains, again, a very well researched analysis of a very touchy subject:sexuality, specifically, heterosexuality. very rarely does the "Norm" come under the microscope.

Nick says

In *The Invention*, written back in 1995, Jonathan Ned Katz argues that heterosexuality is a "historical social convention, rather than [a] natural and eternal given" (pg 193). The book, which reads like a very detailed literature review, focuses on analyzing the work of others in depth throughout certain time periods and from certain groups, such as feminists, in order to argue, in occasionally semantic fashion, against the unassailable nature nature of heterosexuality, and for the removal of the homosexual/heterosexual division and some sort of alternative, label-less or less label-centric 'eros' or common sexuality, which the author leaves to future readers to develop and define. Katz argues that the term, or concept of the heterosexual came into being around 1892, and that before that there were different sexual terms and foci. For example, for most of the 19th century, he argues that the focus was on procreation, and homosexuality was not really defined other than 'buggery,' which could be applied to men with women or men with men. I find this interesting, though I think for good chunks of history, including the 19th century, 'sex for procreation' had much in common with 'heterosexual,' and I feel that in some respects Katz's focus on the term 'heterosexual' is all-consuming.

Katz doesn't really look to far into history before the 19th century, such as the Greek and Roman periods, particularly interesting cultures such as Sparta, or much of anything else -- though he does touch on a Greek concept of earthly (the act) vs. heavenly (an appreciation for the beauty of boys) love, through Foucault, which is quite fascinating -- but instead concentrates the vast bulk of his historical and research analysis on the 19th and 20th centuries. To be more specific, he speaks a bit about general 'Greek' culture, and then jumps to the New England colonies (where he highlights the death penalty for sodomy as being indicative of the extreme need for procreation to grow the colony, and not as a hetero/homo division) as his only other pre 19th century, pre-heterosexuality example.

I enjoyed his discussion of 'true love' in the 19th century, (eg pgs 44-45), whereby he posits that true love was used as a sexual ideal to define and separate American/British middle classes from "promiscuous upper classes and animalistic lower classes." I also enjoyed his idea the 19th century focus on penis/vagina intercourse along with documentary evidence demonstrates that there was probably a lot of 'non-sexual' touching and sexual activity going on in 19th century relationships (pg 47).

He has a whole chapter on Freud and his role in the creation of 'heterosexual' identity, including an interesting bit on Freud's transformation of sexual instinct from a reproductive instinct to an un-centralized need for satisfaction (pg 61). So Katz praises Freud for his development of concepts of sexuality and libido, for his description of heterosexuality as a learned characteristic rather than innate (pg 74), and also chastises him for his denunciation of homosexuals as people stuck at an immature stage of development (pg 72), which is good, as a good chunk of Freud is balderdash in most academic's opinions.

His examination of the American 'Tough Guy' and labelling, through Baldwin (pgs 100-106) is fascinating, what with the posited creation of the tough-guy image, the threat of homosexuals towards innocent masculine heterosexual, Christian ideals and so forth.

Likewise, his examination of Ti-Grace Atkinson (a self-described radical feminist militant Amazon) and her

work on 'love' is neat. He describes, in his literature review style, how Atkinson sees love as the reason why women stay with men, and how love is both the chain that binds women to men and a 'pitiful attempt by women to attain the human by fusing with a man blurring the male/female role dichotomy (pg 124). Additionally, his look at Gayle Rubin and her 'three foundations of the social sex system' was cool: "Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes, the sexes are different but not naturally opposite, opposite sexes are constructed socially by the suppression of natural similarities -- men repress whatever the local version of feminine traits are and women repress whatever the local version of masculine traits are" (pg 133).

I found his seventh chapter, on 'lavender feminism,' boring and difficult to follow and largely skipped through it.

Ditto for his final chapter, which was quite mind-numbingly boring until his end discussion of the new freedom of sexuality, which has sex no longer constrained to procreation and has heterosexuality with much more in common with homosexuality than previously thought - it's fine for heterosexuals to have lots of sex for non-procreative reasons now too, and the middle class has commodified sexual pleasure (pgs 184-186).

To conclude: the book was a struggle for me -- a fairly open-minded, left-wingish 30-something male with a vague need to further liberate and expand his sexuality; taking me three weeks to pick through and involving a fair bit of skimming. His style of writing is very academic, at times very, very dull, and employs lots of 'nu' words and semantic micro-arguing. It is, as I have stated, like a giant literature review, which has clearly influenced the style of my review, which originally was going to be three paragraphs (pros, cons, conclusion). That said, as evidenced by my previous section quotations, there is significant value in the text for someone like me. I imagine folks really into the study of sexuality would love this book, and those with more of a lighter or part-time/background interest should still find some potentially mind-expanding tidbits within.

True Rating: **3.4 Stars**

So what do I think about heterosexuality after all this? I'd have to agree it is socially constructed, but I cannot deny a biological impulse to procreate, which in our case, involves sex between a man and a woman. That said, our genes are mindless and don't know if you're doing it with a man, woman or sheep, though there are certain sexual features which cause arousal in some and not in others. In nature, there does seem to be sexuality in various forms, taking certain apes or monkeys as an example, whereby many of the males masturbate and I believe bugger males willy-nilly all the time. I think it's a short life, and it's probably best to have fun and explore your sexuality while you can, labels be damned, other than the argument that we do need some labels in society in order to have silly things like language and accurate communication.

Mason says

A fascinating analysis of the not-at-all inevitable preeminence of heterosexual desire. Katz is clear and concise in his arguments, providing ample context for the lay reader curious to learn about the sociosexual structures many take for granted.

Guilherme Smee says

Jonathan Ned Katz argumenta que as categorias heterosexual e homosexual são históricas, e portanto, mutáveis. Katz explica em vários capítulos como a separação entre o "normal e aceito" da heterosexualidade foi construído ao longo dos anos, muito com o apoio da psicanálise de Freud, que considerava a homosexualidade como algo "anormal e inaceitável", como por exemplo em seus relatos sobre os desejos sexuais de sua paciente Dora. Percebemos que tanto a heterosexualidade quanto a homosexualidade são construções sócio-culturais. Embora uma dela seja mais difundida e incentivada do que a outra para garantir o controle, o poder sobre massas cada vez maiores, e que as gerações se sucedam. Como Michel Foucault já havia explicado em seu *A História da Sexualidade*, a heterosexualidade serve ao capitalismo e ao poder, gerando mão de obra e servos para os mestres do mundo. A fabricação da heterosexualidade encontra eco no discurso das feministas, que acreditam que sem essa separação de modalidades sexuais, as mulheres teriam um papel de maior destaque na sociedade e, as lésbicas, sejam elas feministas ou não, teriam respeito e não invisibilidade. Um baita livro que resume e deglute bem as teorias e história do estudo da sexualidade até os anos 90. Palmas para Jonathan Ned Katz!

Thomas says

It took me a year to read this book. Granted I had other books to read, but the writing was dense as you might expect of cultural studies. However, part of why it took so long was that it's provocative and energized my brain in thought at almost every sentence.

It's hard to enlighten the public on how much of the hetero/homo binary is invented because, as Katz points out, liberal "heterosexual" people don't want to have their own sexuality questioned. So they are comfortable with the idea that "homosexuals" were born separate but equal.

So, too, do many gay men (and lesbians, though perhaps to a lesser extent) focus militantly on the "Born This Way" bandwagon, seen as a guaranteed road to civil rights. Never mind that racial identities are also socially constructed based around some aspects of biology. But when the enemy is defined as the right-wing religious zealots who are trying to convert you, then the drive to coalesce around essentialized identities grows stronger.

This all being said, it is hard to argue with the increasing body of data supporting biological factors behind same-sex vs. opposite-sex arousal, which is one of the driving factors behind the emergence of straight/gay identities. Nonetheless, Katz does well at drawing out, from multiple angles, just how much of what we take for granted about sexual orientation was made up out of whole cloth at various points in the last 150 years.

Great reading for people who want to think outside the boxes.

Peter Neiger says

Overall, I enjoyed Katz's analysis, but it was a bit tough to get through. His overall thesis, that heterosexuality is seen as a universal norm based on an objective biological determinism, and that has allowed it to escape criticism or analysis, is pretty solid. As is his analysis of heterosexuality as primarily a social construct that has only really been around for 150 years or so.

Unfortunately, this book falls in the "books that could have been a blog post" category. Though, considering

it was written in 1995 I guess that could be forgiven. One of the strengths of the book was also a weakness. Katz cited and quoted a significant number of great essays and books on the subject and provided his own commentary, because of that I have an ever-growing list of books to read on the subject. But, that made many chapters feel like long book reports. It was almost overly academic. There were many sections that I underlined and wrote furiously in the margins, which is usually a good sign, but there were also entire chapters that I found very little of value in.

It was good, though, and enlightening, but it could have been shorter and still expanded beyond an analysis of just western sexual relationships post-1800's. Sexuality was viewed very differently in Ancient Greece (for example) and expanding into other cultures would have been beneficial. Ironically, one of Katz consistent criticisms of other's works is that they failed to directly confront the issue of heterosexuality, but in a way Katz did that as well by limiting his analysis to a small point in time (but maybe that was the point, that heterosexuality really has only existed in a small point in time).

Jade says

It was a thought-provoking read. Usually we are so busy wondering if gender and homosexuality are social constructs that we forget heterosexuality is not something "natural", and is just as much a construct of our society.

This slight change in perspective made a big difference - would recommend to anyone who is studying or interested in the development of heterosexuality. Katz also does a brief review of relevant literature which is helpful in contextualising the book.

(I also enjoyed the Freud bashing :P particularly in the Foreword)

Elizabeth says

different cover c1995 new preface c2007

short review:

I read this from the library and it is so important to understanding the sexual minorities issue that now I own my own copy. This book makes it clear that history, print media and other media, and present culture are interactive, each affecting the other. There was no identity as heterosexual or homosexual before Freud and his contemporaries. There were people who did what they did. That is not the same thing. Behavior is NOT identity. This is a lesson that public health is just recently (hopefully) learning.
