

**Fighting The Insult of A “Gay Gene”  
Subjectivation Through A Politics of Choosing Choice**

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For many years I have grappled with a conversation I had with one of my uncles about a schoolmate or substitute teacher making some glib comment about how being gay is a choice and a sin. I was so angry that these people would portray the life of my uncle my aunt and my grandmother as some choice that they should take back. It was obvious to me that if science hadn't already demonstrated that being gay was natural then it soon would. There was so much discussion within the liberal community of my hometown, and even within my immediate family that implied as much. My uncle didn't seem too thrilled by this mode of defending him though. He instead asserted to me that being gay was a “choice” for him. Having grown up in Columbia, MO around the time of the commencement of the human genome project, in what was generally taken to be a very liberal family this statement confounded me. My uncle's assertion sounded more like something one of the conservative members of my hometown, who hate and condemn homosexuality, would be saying rather than my gay uncle. After entering into the study of philosophy at the University of Oregon I have had the opportunity to reapproach my uncle's assertion, stay with it and consider the significance of our conversation. This has allowed me to critically think on the tension I initially felt all those years ago between standard liberal discourse, homophobic discourse, and my uncle's claim to “choice”. I have come to realize that my surprise originated from having absorbed a seemingly progressive rhetoric that promises gay people political and social protections which hinge on their homosexuality being scientifically linked to the actualization of a biological destiny. At that time I wholeheartedly believed that an appeal to a biological origin for homosexuality seemed to work in direct opposition to those

conservatives who wanted “to pray the gay away” or convince gay people that they could and should live a heterosexual life on the basis that they were actively making wrong choices that are worthy of condemnation.

I think that a carefully applied reading of Eribon’s conceptualization of the constitutive power and temporality of insult reveals the degrading aspect of the scientific and political impulses that unreflectively advocate for biological origins of homosexuality, and the underlying effect of reaffirming the insulting heterosexist social order they carry. Such a reading of Eribon also serves to provide tools which will help to articulate the potential for positive projects which can come from denying a universal, rooted and final “origin” of homosexuality in a “gay gene” when enacted by subjects outside of these normative discourses who assert that their sexuality is in fact a choice. This project is timely given the increasing prevalence of this seemingly liberal rhetoric that links gayness and its hope of political legitimacy with a gay gene. This is seen increasingly in musicians from Macklemore and Lewis to Lady Gaga, as well as in television shows like *How I Met your Mother* and *American Horror Story*. An appeal to the assumed genetic destiny of gay identity is now the dominant progressive means of expressing and making one’s homosexuality relatable and worthy of acceptance socially and politically. I will begin this project with a history of the scientific research into sexual orientation to contextualize modern day “gay gene” research, and the merits of a ‘direct model’ of genetic determination specifically in the case of sexual orientation. This history will come from Udu Schuklenk and Edward Stein’s article *The Ethics of Genetic Research on Sexual Orientation*, which provides a history of genetic sexuality research, while posing ethical concerns that arise from the impossibility of such research to be value neutral. I will then introduce Eribon into the conversation by examining his use of Althusserian interpellation in describing the world of insult that temporally “always already” pre-exists the gay

individual. I take this as being strongly related to the impossibility of value neutral sexual orientation research that Schuklenk and Stein develop in their article. Furthermore, Eribon also provides tools to comprehend the impact of such research, which produces a rhetoric that seeks to define gay sexuality as *truly* “always already” pre-existing a gay-self, not in the exterior world of insult, but from within the gay body *itself* through genetic destiny. (paradoxically this “return to the body” is pre-determined and inflected by the heterosexist sexual hierarchy). I will engage these scientists, and those in the GSM and ally communities who take up the “gay gene” premise, in order to place themselves politically and rhetorically in opposition to the easily problematized religious right. This leads me to address the voices from within the gay community who, on a rhetorical level, place themselves in alignment with the religious right and claim that being gay is a choice. By making use of Eribon’s work with Foucault’s notions of power I hope to make sense of how such discrepancy in meaning, and content can exist within such similar rhetoric in a world of insult.

In recent years, scientific “findings consistent with the notion of relatively simple links between genes and sexual orientation” have received particularly high degrees of public attention.<sup>1</sup> Examining a brief history of this vein of research into genetic origins of a gay self will serve to complicate the idea of a “simple link” that seems to be so attractive to neo-liberal and secular political discourse as it purports to the validity of a gay identity. One of the early attempts at uncovering the truth of a person’s sexuality was to examine directly quantifiable bodily features such as the “amount of facial hair, size of external genitalia, and the ratio of shoulder width to hip width.”<sup>2</sup> These methods may seem crude in comparison to the more sophisticated and modern morphological research that takes place today, that focuses its energies at the scientifically refined level of neuroanatomical structures. Regardless of refinement this

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<sup>1</sup> Udo Schuklenk & Edward Stein, “The ethics of genetic research on sexual orientation,” *Hastings Center Report*, Vol.27 Issue 4 (1997). 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Schuklenk & Stein, “The ethics of genetic research on sexual orientation.” 2.

approach tends to assume that there are two forms to human sexuality, specifically a masculine and a feminine type. Heterosexual women and homosexual men would share characteristics of a feminine brain and physiology that "causes sexual attraction to men,"<sup>3</sup> while the heterosexual man and the homosexual woman conform to a masculine type of brain and physiology that causes their attraction to women. This is a reflection of how homosexuality is "filed under 'femininity' in the unconscious of our societies."<sup>4</sup> This move is contradictory in that if a man is internally inverted (a 'woman' in a man's body) "one cannot also accuse him of an inversion of the object of desire" for that would imply 'masculinity'.<sup>5</sup>

Along with investigation into an individual's physiology around this same time there was also experimentation into uncovering evidence in a person's endocrine system. It was theorized that gay men would have decreased presence of the male-typical androgenic hormones or increased presence of female-typical estrogenic hormones when compared to heterosexual men. While the reverse would hold true for gay women when compared with straight women. According to Schuklenk and Stein, "an overwhelming majority of studies failed to demonstrate any correlation between sexual orientation and adult hormonal constitution."<sup>6</sup> The result of this was that an offshoot of this original branch of study developed into current hormonal theories in which "lesbians and gay men were exposed to atypical hormone levels early in their development."<sup>7</sup>

These theories fall into line with observations from experimentation with rodents that were taken to show a link between early developmental hormone environments of the rodent brain and later life "male" and "female" patterns of mating behavior.<sup>8</sup> The more obvious problems that come with this cross

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup> Eribon, Didier. *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>6</sup> Schuklenk & Stein, "The ethics of genetic research on sexual orientation." 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2.

species comparison come from the distinction between how sexuality is assigned to the rats in this experiment and humans in particular social contexts. The rodent's sexuality is assigned masculine or feminine based on posture and behavior while in the case of the human sexuality is accepted or condemned based on "one's pattern of erotic responsiveness and the sex of one's preferred sex partner."<sup>9</sup>

Schuklenk and Stein cite Dean Hamer's group as being "the most conceptually complex"<sup>10</sup> study into a genetic origin. This study sought to provide statistical evidence that the genes influencing sexual orientation reside in the Xq28 region of the X chromosome. While the study showed that thirty-three pairs of gay twins out of forty "received the same Xq28 region from their mother" it did not, as it has been misinterpreted to, show that all sixty-six men had the same Xq28 sequence. In point of fact, "No single specific Xq28 sequence was common to all sixty-six men."<sup>11</sup>

To clarify the arguments that are being made in gene research it is beneficial to examine three main models of the role genes are argued to play in sexual orientation. In the "**permissive effect model**" genes affect the neural substrate on which sexual orientation can then be inscribed through formative experience. Genetic factors could also dictate the ages in which such experience can affect one's biological sexual orientation. In the "**indirect effect model**" genes code for proclivity and personality traits that "influence how one interacts with and shapes one's environment and formative experiences."<sup>12</sup> This means that the same gene might predispose toward homosexuality in some environments, towards heterosexuality in others, and have no influence in others. The "**direct effect model**" presumes that genes produce brain structures that "mediate sexual orientation." It is this last

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>12</sup> Schuklenk & Stein, "The ethics of genetic research on sexual orientation." 4.

model which is central to talk of “gay-genes” that researchers such as Hamer, LeVay, and most others seem to favor.<sup>13</sup>

Eribon outlines how the world is constituted of discourses of insult which temporally precede and subjugate the gay-self to an inferior place in the sexual order. Eribon appropriates Butler’s work that emphasizes the ways in which the power of insult lies in how it affects the gay-self before it has even become its direct target. Eribon sees Butler’s project as giving language the same characteristic as Althusser’s notion of interpellation gave to ideology. Althusser describes the way in which, through the pre-existing discourses of power in society, individuals are conditioned by being subject to these forces. Eribon backs away from the totalizing aspect of Althusser’s notion of ideology in favor of an understanding of interpellation as adapting to a complex collective of social sexual structures. Eribon proposes that “insult’s power arises from the fact that it pre-exists the two persons (groups) caught up in it” and that the interplay between individual cognitive structures and social cognitive structures necessarily has “a prior history that exceeds that of the two people (groups) in question”.

This account of the unconscious-self which is formed through habits in a pre-existing social world, would gain from an understanding of insult and language as the most concrete forms of Althusser’s notion of interpellation. The gay subject is both a free subjectivity capable of writing its own meaning, and a subjected being that submits to larger social forces that strip him of all but his ability to freely accept his submission. Insulting biological discourses and their effects are merely a new form of internalized interpellation that *always already* existed within the social sexual order that would seek to simply and directly relegate gay existence to a destiny that would now *always already* be biologically predestined. In this movement gay subjectivity is not only inferiorized because it is the product of social

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,4.

structures that necessarily precede it, but has come to be internalized in a profound way. The homosexual subject's history is always in relation to a shared history with other inferiorized subjects, and if taken up in a non-reflective manner the desire for a biological 'origin' would biologically justify this history of insult. It is through conscious recognition of the relationship to a community that makes possible liberatory constitution of a gay-self, but this does not depend on a direct biological origin for homosexuality.

Eribon proposes that the possibilities for a liberatory aesthetics of the gay self lie in its capacity to invent a 'relational system' to the "social fabric."<sup>14</sup> The "relational system" and the "social fabric" that Eribon refers to is informed heavily by Foucault's notions of power which is explained thusly: "Power is everywhere, in every social relation"<sup>15</sup> but power simultaneously, "upon being exercised, cause points of resistance to come into being" making power relationships by definition 'strictly relational'.<sup>16</sup> For Foucault there is not a discourse of power and a discourse of resistance, which are necessarily at polar odds with the each other, but rather "a multiplicity of discursive elements that come into play in various strategies."<sup>17</sup> Eribon takes this as a way of understanding how insulting stigmatizing discourses "function differently in a given field of power relations depending on who gives voice to it."<sup>18</sup> A single insult or even a discourse of insults "never has its meaning defined once and for all."<sup>19</sup> The same discourse can be re-affirmed in its meaning or completely reversed just as two seemingly opposed discourses, when invoked, may actually come to have the same meaning. In each case we see that "resistance can never

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<sup>14</sup> Eribon, *Insult*. 309.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>16</sup> Eribon, *Insult*. 312

<sup>17</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Vintage, 1990. 100.

<sup>18</sup> Eribon, *Insult*. 312.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.



be exterior to power relations.”<sup>20</sup>

It is necessary for the possibility of an aesthetics of the self, for ‘subjectification’, that we “be located in a social world whose norms and disciplinary technologies will constrain, dominate, and subjugate our subjectivity.”<sup>21</sup> It is this very condition that gives rise to resistance, and it would seem that for some in the case of the “gay gene” resistance takes the form of an abject denial of a biological origin as satisfyingly justificatory for their experience of homosexuality. Making the claim that one chooses to be gay, from the position of an always already insulted place in the sexual order changes the weight of this claim. It is not the same insulting rhetoric of the religious right or of “gay gene” discourse for that matter. It is instead a positive project of re-subjectivation.

Even if acts of dissension are relative, incomplete, and delicate, through perpetual critique imposed limits can be altered. Within the alteration of limits lies the potential to expand the possibilities of freedom.<sup>22</sup> Eribon emphasizes this point in saying: “The mythology of all or nothing needs to be set aside.”<sup>23</sup> The gay-self is never able to be outside of their current situation. At no point is the gay-self free from the sexual hierarchy and discourses of insult that pre-exist them, however the gay-self can always change the form of power relations that constitute their situation.<sup>24</sup> For Foucault, this act of subjectivation is not a singular rediscovery of authenticity. It is rather “an act that must be constantly renewed, and whose content cannot be dictated in advance.”<sup>25</sup> Eribon insists, that since subjectivation is a mode of perpetual self-reinvention on the part of the individual and group it can “only be thought in terms of multiplicity and plurality.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>22</sup> Eribon, *Insult*. 334

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 335.

Eribon reads Foucault as inviting us to consider the possibility that the gay subject as well as the gay collective are “produced only provisionally.” This suggests that in the project of self-creation the gay-self should strive to continually remake themselves.<sup>27</sup> Resistance to subjugation, the critical stance, and the creation of new modes of life are all ways of expressing that which allows the gay-self and community to “move from subjection to subjectivation” and to form individual existences by “cultivating their differences.”<sup>28</sup> While there has been uptake of the ‘direct model’ by certain researchers and political groups, in general there is no convincing evidence to support the claims of such a discourse. Infact, current evidence is equally compatible with the “indirect model.” Despite surface level rhetoric, there are situations of power that inherently alter the content and weight of these positions. There is both a politically and independently positive project that is at work when one takes the seemingly radical/reactionary stance that one’s homosexuality is a choice, rather than unreflectively following the dominant progressive impulse to root sexuality in biological destiny.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 337.