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The Class-Inflected Nature of Gay Identity

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Abstract

This article explores the creation of a lesbian and gay collective identity in twentieth century United States. Building on theoretical work on the social construction of collective identity, and historical work on the development of lesbian and gay communities and collective action, I argue that the

development of gay identity is a class-inflected process. The idea of 'the homosexual,' as defined by same-sex desire and essentialist notions of sexual identity, was the outcome of an almost century-long process; external social control forces emanating from the imperatives of reform capitalism combined with gender anxieties in middle class communities to privilege middle class gay people and middle class understandings of same-sex desire. Consumer capitalism in the 1990s is changing the nature of lesbian and gay identity from a political to a lifestyle category and, in so doing, reinforcing the already existing class-bias in the nature of gay identity.

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