

**Abstract** In this article I seek to examine some of the key issues arising from a relatively new and rapidly expanding literature on sexuality and citizenship, looking primarily at how lesbian and gay theorists have engaged with the concept of sexual citizenship in general and lesbian citizenship in particular. I shall explore the question of whether sexual citizenship is being used as a sexual/gender-neutral or a sexual/gender-differentiated concept. In addition, and in so far as citizenship is defined in terms of rights and duties, the question of sexual rights and obligations will be discussed. Overall, an attempt is made to critically assess the complex interrelationships between this new body of work and lesbian/feminist perspectives. I hope to demonstrate how within such theoretical frameworks the expansion of a concept of sexual citizenship is far from unproblematic. These theoretical developments in understanding sexual citizenship are located against a backdrop of changing notions of 'sexual politics', more especially the increasingly dominant 'equal rights' approach to claiming citizenship.

**Keywords** citizenship, feminism, lesbian, sexual citizenship, sexuality

Diane Richardson  
*University of Newcastle*

## Claiming Citizenship? Sexuality, Citizenship and Lesbian/ Feminist Theory

### Introduction

In recent years citizenship has re-emerged as a key concept in social theory, albeit one that is widely contested both in respect of its meaning and potential utility. An important aspect of this emergent literature has been critiques of traditional discourses, which have privileged analyses of the relationship between social class and citizenship for their 'gender-blind' approach. Feminist analyses in particular have examined the relationship

between concepts of citizenship and gender, pointing out how, despite claims to universality, the normal citizen/subject is encoded as male (Lister, 1990, 1996; Phillips, 1991; Walby, 1994). Traditional accounts of citizenship have also been much criticized for neglecting to consider the relationship of citizenship to race. Thus, for example, writers such as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) and Alexander (1994) have demonstrated how ideas of citizenship are racialized, as well as gendered.

A further challenge to understandings of citizenship is the emergence over the last few years of a new body of work concerned with sexuality and citizenship. It is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a literature that has been developed largely by lesbian/feminist, gay and queer theorists. Since the 1980s, social movements concerned with 'sexual politics' have increasingly couched their demands in terms of the attainment of citizens' rights, particularly 'lesbian and gay' movements. This has been most evident in the US, but is increasingly dominant elsewhere. The growth in the use of the language of citizenship, in contrast to the language of liberation spoken by social movements of an earlier generation, has in a sense, therefore, prompted this examination of the ways in which sexuality intersects with the status of citizenship in modern democracies.

These developments raise a number of important questions for lesbian/feminist theory and practice. At a fundamental level, how are we to interpret this growing interest in and use of the term sexual citizenship? In what ways is sexual citizenship being defined? Is it primarily being used as a gender-neutral or a gender-differentiated concept? What are the consequences of a relative lack of emphasis on gender in the sexual citizenship literature for women, in particular as 'lesbian citizens'. And, in so far as citizenship is defined in terms of rights and duties, what are meant by sexual rights and obligations?

In this article, I shall consider these questions, beginning with an examination of how the concept of 'sexual citizenship' is currently in the process of being defined. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive review of the literature, but rather to identify common themes and issues, as well as vocabularies employed, in discussions of sexuality and citizenship. In particular, I will look at the treatment of gender and sexuality within the literature on sexual citizenship in order to illustrate how different writers place greater or lesser emphasis on a sexually/gender-neutral or a sexually/gender-differentiated approach.

It might be claimed, given its relative newness as a field of study, that it is too soon to attempt to map the shifts in understanding of citizenship that we are witnessing through an expansion of the concept to include practices and identities associated with sexuality. However, I would argue that it is possible to begin to identify a number of distinct, albeit overlapping, strands emerging within the literature which draw on different

epistemological concerns: 1. the sexualized nature of concepts of citizenship; 2. notions of sexual or intimate citizenship; and 3. the claims of different communities to 'sexual justice' and the principles and models of citizenship upon which such claims are founded. I will very briefly sketch out these three interrelated strands before going on, in the remainder of this article, to critically examine such developments from a lesbian/feminist perspective. In particular, I will look at some of the ways in which 'lesbian citizenship' has been conceptualized. In so doing, I hope to foreground in the final section of the article some of the reasons why, from a lesbian/feminist perspective, the expansion of a concept of sexual citizenship is far from unproblematic.

## Key themes and issues

### *1. Is the concept of citizenship sexualized?*

A number of writers, including myself (Richardson, 1996, 1998), have addressed the question of how ideas of citizenship are based upon certain assumptions about sexuality, in particular hegemonic heterosexuality. This is a common theme in lesbian/feminist work that has engaged with questions of sexuality and citizenship (see, for example, Wilson, 1993; Herman, 1994; Cooper, 1995; and Duggan, 1995). The main focus of such work is to demonstrate how citizens are normatively constructed as (hetero)sexual subjects and, related to this, offer a way of analysing the resultant inequalities faced by 'excluded' citizens in terms of the institutionalization of heterosexuality.

### *2. What do we mean by sexual or intimate citizenship?*

The second theme that I have identified can be understood in terms of the more general trend towards the expansion of the idea of citizenship, as is evidenced in the diversity of arenas in which citizenship is being contested (Pakulski, 1997). It represents a concern shared by a number of writers who seek to theorize a new version of citizenship: sexual or intimate citizenship in which both universalistic notions of 'the sexual citizen' and differing versions of sexual citizenship based on diverse forms of sexuality are conceptual possibilities.

One of the first to claim to address citizenship and its relation to sexuality was David Evans in his book *Sexual Citizenship* (1993). Evans provides examples of what he delineates as different *forms* of sexual citizenship, including the experience of male homosexuals, bisexuals, transvestites, transsexuals and children. For Evans, sexual citizenship is primarily constructed as membership of sexual communities, with rights and privileges determined by individuals' relative moral worth and status as consumers. A somewhat different approach is taken by a number of other

writers whose interests are to rethink citizenship more generally. This broader concern with sexuality and citizenship includes the work of writers such as Giddens (1992), Weeks (1995) and Plummer (1995), who seek to rethink citizenship through notions of 'the intimate'. Elsewhere, I have addressed the question of how sexual or intimate citizenship is (being) defined in more detail (see Richardson, 2000a).

### *3. What rights and demands are the concern of sexual or intimate citizenship and what are the principles and models of citizenship underlying such claims?*

Work relevant to this third theme has examined claims for 'sexual rights' and the justifications advanced for them, as well as the arguments offered by those who oppose such claims. One of the main ways in which sexual citizenship has been addressed in terms of analyses of the rights claims of various 'sexual constituencies' is through an examination of the relationship of lesbian and gay rights to the state (see, for example, Cooper 1993, 1995; Herman, 1994). This is perhaps hardly surprising, since lesbian and gay communities have been among the most vocal in demanding various rights claims. (The implications of regarding lesbian and gay communities as a single constituency are discussed later.)

Analyses of campaigns for specific rights in relation to sexuality, such as those mounted by lesbian and gay political movements, have not only been concerned with identifying the type of demands and arguments that are expressed within the discourse of sexual rights. A further concern has been to explore the political and policy implications of different models of citizenship in relation to forms of inclusion and exclusion that are related to sexual status. The focus here is on examining how useful various frameworks of citizenship may or may not be in furthering 'sexual justice' (see, for instance, Cooper, 1993; Phelan, 1994; Bamforth, 1997; Kaplan, 1997). In my own work I have approached the question of theorizing 'sexual rights' from a somewhat different perspective (Richardson, 2000b), emphasizing how this is a contested concept both in terms of meaning, given competing claims over what are defined as 'sexual rights', and in terms of differing views over its political utility.

In the remainder of this article I will draw upon all three of these strands within the literature in assessing the possible significance of contemporary debates about sexuality and citizenship for lesbian/feminist theory and practice.

## **Feminist politics and the language of rights**

Historically, lesbian feminism has been closely associated with radical and revolutionary feminist perspectives, although not exclusively so. Struggles

---

have been far less about the pursuit of 'formal equality' and rights of citizenship and much more about critiquing and seeking to transform the heteropatriarchal nature of society (Wilton, 1995). In this sense we can identify common ground with the first theme in the sexuality and citizenship literature, which I have characterized as focusing on how claims to citizenship status are closely associated with the institutionalization of heterosexual, as well as male, privilege.

Although lesbian/feminist theory has developed powerful critiques of heterosexuality, marriage and the family, in contrast to the increasingly dominant and US-influenced 'equal rights' approach to political change which seeks to integrate lesbians and gays into such social institutions and practices, it has not entirely eschewed the language of sexual citizenship. Indeed, the concept of sexual (and reproductive) rights has a long history within feminism. Examples of this can be identified in demands for the right to sexual pleasure, which were an aspect of feminist politics in the first part of the last century and, much more centrally, in the early years of 'second-wave' feminism during the 1970s, as well as claims expressed in terms of the right to sexual self-determination, bodily control and safety – often characterized as 'the right to say no' (Segal, 1987; Jackson and Scott, 1996).

Lesbian/feminist analyses have made an important contribution to these and related debates within feminism over what are defined as sexual rights, or lack of rights. More specifically, lesbian feminists have insisted on the right to *be* lesbian, as a specific identity and practice, and the freedom (for all women) to be able to choose to have relationships with other women. Some of the most contested debates within lesbian feminism, however, have been over claims to 'rights' which centre on particular forms of sexual practice such as, for example, s/m and the use of pornography. More recently, political attention has shifted towards relationship-based rights claims, in particular the right of lesbians to marry (Rankine, 1997).

I am not suggesting that we should understand lesbian/feminist demands as calls for 'rights' in the 'equal rights' sense of the term. Indeed, rather than seeking inclusion and equal treatment, lesbian/feminists have critiqued the rights and privileges accorded heterosexuals. Moreover, many lesbian/feminist demands have not been premised on the idea of lesbians as a 'minority group' who are entitled to certain rights that have previously been denied them. They have been based on a more complex argument for the rights of all women to have sexual relationships with other women, and for conditions which enable women to exercise sexual autonomy more generally.

With these important provisos in mind, I want to suggest that, although perhaps not immediately apparent, it is possible to re-articulate issues and

debates within lesbian/feminist theory in the present context of analysing the construction of a notion of sexual citizenship (the second theme) and theorizing 'sexual rights' claims (the third theme). This is one way we may begin to critically assess the interrelationships between this new body of work and lesbian/feminism. As a first step in this process, I would argue that we need to ask how and in what ways 'lesbian citizenship' is being defined?

## A universal or differentiated sexual citizenship?

Over the last 15 to 20 years many of the major debates within feminism have been concerned, in one way or another, with the question of difference between women and, related to this, the meaning and political utility of the category 'woman'. In part, this reflects the influence of poststructural and postmodern perspectives on feminist theory, which challenge the idea of 'woman' as a fixed, natural category regarding it instead as a 'constantly shifting signifier of multiple meanings.' (Stacey, 1997: 55). Another important reason for this problematization of the category 'woman', which is often given insufficient recognition relative to the attention paid to the influence of postmodernism and deconstructionism, has been the response of women who felt excluded from such a 'unitary' category. Black and lesbian feminists in particular have critiqued the way in which use of the category 'woman' within feminism has often served to conceal racial and sexual difference.

These *apparent* tensions (see Walby, 1997) between theorizing difference and diversity and employing an analytical category that might be seen as universalistic (for example, 'woman', 'patriarchy', 'lesbian'), have also been evident within the discourse on citizenship. Within feminist perspectives, this can be characterized as a concern with the terms upon which women's claims to citizenship are articulated.

Typically, women have been faced with a choice between a universalistic claim based on the principle of their equality with men or a particularistic claim based on their difference from men. These represent on the one hand a gender-neutral and on the other a gender-differentiated model of citizenship (Lister, 1997: 197).

It is against this background of debate within current discourses about gender and citizenship that I want to try and decipher some of the possible implications of the newly articulated concerns with sexuality and citizenship, previously outlined, for how we think about and experience lesbian relationships.

The immediate parallel to be drawn, it seems to me, is the question of whether we are encouraged to theorize sexual or intimate citizenship in terms of universalistic notions of 'the sexual citizen' or to embrace a

gendered and sexually differentiated model which would allow for a specific notion of 'lesbian citizenship'.

Jeffrey Weeks opts for a notion of the 'sexual citizen' (or would-be sexual citizen), which he describes in the following very broad terms:

The sexual citizen, I want to argue, could be male or female, young or old, black or white, rich or poor, straight or gay: could be anyone, in fact, but for one key characteristic. The sexual citizen exists – or, perhaps better, wants to come into being – because of the new primacy given to sexual subjectivity in the contemporary world. (1998: 35)

Weeks does not here deal directly with the question of the tension between universality and difference, however despite this very inclusive and some might want to claim universal definition of 'the sexual citizen', his work clearly suggests a desire to embrace a 'differentiated universalism' rather than the either/or positions presented above. For example, he talks of the importance of 'balancing the claims of different communities with constructing new common purposes' and of 'learning to live with diversity at the same time as building our common humanity' (Weeks, 1998: 49). (There are parallels here with some feminist work on citizenship, which has been critical of binary characterizations and has attempted to 'ride the tension between the universal and the particular' (Lister, 1997: 200).)

Another influential writer who has addressed the theme of sexual relations and citizenship (what he often refers to as emotional democracy) in very broad-based terms is the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992). In exploring the values of the intimate sphere, Giddens argues that sexual relationships built on a sense of equal vulnerability and mutual trust, respect and care, free from coercion or violence, are democratic. He uses the term 'pure relationship', defined as 'a relationship of sexual and emotional equality' (Giddens, 1992: 2), to refer to the democratic restructuring of intimacy.

What is important in the context of this discussion is the fact that Giddens regards gay men and lesbians, whom he variously refers to as 'lesbian women' and 'gay women', as brand leaders in the practice of emotional democracy; more likely to be in relationships which are based on the principles of the 'pure relationship' than those who are involved in heterosexual relationships. For example, he states that '... it is the gays who are the pioneers in this respect – the prime everyday experimenters. They have for some while experienced what is becoming more and more commonplace for heterosexual couples' (Giddens, 1992: 135).

Whether one agrees with this statement or not, the point I want to make is that access to sexual or intimate citizenship is perceived here as a sexualized process. However, contrary to understanding this as part and parcel of the institutionalization of heterosexuality which characterized the first

theme that I outlined, within this conceptualization it is lesbians and gay men who are regarded as 'privileged' in so far as it is assumed that, at present, lesbian and gay relationships provide a context in which more equal and intimate relationships can be achieved. Thus, although Giddens does not talk about specific categories of sexual or intimate citizenship, such as 'the lesbian citizen', but rather focuses on an inclusive notion or ideal of the 'pure relationship', he nevertheless implies a link between the historical attainment of forms of sexual or intimate democracy and different sexualities.

As I indicated in the first part of this article, a distinction can be drawn between this kind of broad approach and that of writers who seek to acknowledge difference through the articulation of concepts of citizenship that refer to forms of participation (or forms of exclusion) of specific sexual constituencies such that we might talk of the lesbian citizen, the queer citizen and so on. An obvious example of a gender and sexually differentiated approach is David Evans (1993), referred to earlier, who discusses *female* sexual citizenship, *male* homosexual citizenship, as well as the experience of bisexuals, transvestites and transsexuals as examples of differing forms of sexual citizenship. The experience of lesbian citizenship is barely mentioned, however, neither under the heading of homosexual, nor under female sexual citizenship. This absence of 'the lesbian citizen' is interesting for a number of reasons, not least because it prompts the question of how useful it is to employ discrete categories of sexual citizenship in the manner that Evans does. In addition, it highlights how the question of the inter-relationship between gender and sexuality, crucial to much feminist theory, is not adequately addressed.

While Evans can be criticized for ignoring lesbians, other authors have been accused of neglect of a different kind. The dominant trend in analyses which conceptualize sexual citizenship in terms of varying degrees of access to specific sets of rights has been to focus upon 'lesbian and gay' struggles for equality, rather than specifically analysing lesbian citizenship *per se*, thus failing to differentiate lesbians from other 'queers' or 'gay men'. What we then have is a gender-neutral approach – 'lesbian and gay' citizens or queer citizenry – which embraces lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens. This is particularly salient given that, in many countries, such rights movements are associated historically with demands, mainly by gay men, for the decriminalization of 'male homosexual' offences, in particular age of consent and sodomy laws (Herman, 1994). Thus, in making no distinction between lesbians and gays the concern is not simply that possible differences in the experience of social inclusion/exclusion are being ignored, but that lesbians are at risk of being subsumed under the category 'gay'. As Phelan (1994: xi) points out, 'the 1990s paradigm of "lesbian and gay" too often heralds a return to male-dominated politics'.

---

These debates highlight the extent to which gendered understandings of the concept of sexual or intimate citizenship are being used in contrast to ‘gender-neutral’ definitions. As I have illustrated, the dominant trend has meant that lesbians have either been ignored altogether or made invisible, to varying extents, through being subsumed under a universal notion of the ‘sexual citizen’ or a sexually differentiated but not gender-specific category such as ‘queer citizen’ or ‘lesbian and gay citizen’. It is in the context of such critiques that we need to understand the development of analyses of lesbian citizenship.

## The lesbian citizen

The majority of attempts at fleshing out what the term ‘the lesbian citizen’ might mean have come, not surprisingly, from lesbian/feminist writers, especially within sociology, and political and legal theory. There are several approaches to this question, and I will explore these by examining the three main ways in which lesbian citizenship has been conceptualized.

The first of these is concerned with lesbian citizenship as partial or ‘unjust’ citizenship. This includes accounts of how and in what ways lesbians are penalized within legal and welfare systems, which are founded upon and support normative assumptions about heterosexuality and ‘the family’. Wilton (1995), for example, examines the effects of the law and the welfare state in Britain on ‘the lesbian citizen’, while Carabine (1996) provides a theoretical analysis of the ways in which social policy regulates non-heterosexual sexualities. Then there are accounts that describe political responses to such injustices, in terms both of examining what are the specific campaigns for ‘lesbian rights’ and the justifications advanced for them. The collection edited by Rosenbloom (1996), for instance, documents ‘human rights violations’ against lesbians in 30 countries around the world and discusses the strategies and arguments that lesbian movements have employed to challenge such discriminatory social practices. More commonly however these questions are addressed, even by lesbian/feminist writers, through an analysis of the demands for equality for lesbian *and* gay citizens (see, for example, Cooper, 1993; Herman, 1994; Palmer, 1995).

Within such political struggles for full citizenship, the lesbian citizen is cast as the legitimate citizen who has been wrongly excluded from certain rights, such as, for example, the right to be legally married or the right to adopt or foster, because of her different (relative to heterosexuals) sexual status. The focus, in what is often referred to as an assimilationist or integrationist model of citizenship, is on reforming current frameworks of citizenship in order that lesbians may have access to the same rights as those currently granted to heterosexuals. What is often missing in analyses of

'equal rights' claims, however, is a critical examination of the ways in which access to rights to, say, pensions are influenced by gender or, much more fundamentally, a problematizing of the notion of 'lesbian and gay' equality itself. To whom do gay men want to be equal, heterosexual women or heterosexual men? And is the same answer likely to be forthcoming from lesbians? Clearly these are complex questions, but we need to ask them if we are to recognize the possible gendered meanings of sexual citizenship.

A different approach to this is one which, despite an awareness that lesbians are denied certain rights and protections by the state, is critical of attempts which seek to change the citizenship status of lesbians within present systems that are understood to be founded on heterosexual and male norms. Perhaps one of the most well-known proponents of this position is Ruthann Robson, an American feminist who argues for the development of *lesbian* legal theory (Robson, 1992). Robson's work covers a range of issues, but of importance here is her view of the lesbian citizen as an (out)law. That is, rather than seeking rights *in* law, Robson argues that lesbians should be without and create their own approach to the law. Instead of conceptualizing a universal system of citizenship which can and should be modified to include the demands of lesbians, lesbians are seen as a socially distinct group with their own specific interests who need to develop a uniquely lesbian approach to legal reasoning. In distinguishing lesbian experience from that of both gay men and heterosexual women, Robson's is both a gendered and sexually differentiated notion of sexual citizenship. Within this kind of framework we can think about lesbian citizenship not as a set of equal rights demands, but rather in terms of the elaboration of a 'lesbian-specific' system of rules of justice governing claims to citizenship.

One of the major criticisms levelled at such an approach is that it presupposes that we know who we 'lesbians' are and that there are clear and identifiable shared common 'lesbian interests' which may be expressed as demands (Phelan, 1994; Herman, 1995). Since the 1980s, it has become increasingly clear that the term 'lesbian', far from defining a unitary and homogeneous category, encompasses a complex and diverse population of women who hold multiple social identities and different political positions. The contested terrain among lesbians further evidences the problematic nature of these suppositions over many 'rights claims' such as, for instance, lesbian marriage, motherhood and various forms of sexual practice. Furthermore, the influence of postmodernism on lesbian/feminist thinking, with its valorization of difference and sexual plurality, have brought new understandings of lesbian identities as fluid and shifting, rather than as fixed and stable (Doan, 1994). In the light of such criticisms, writers such as, for example, lesbian political theorist Shane Phelan (1994, 1995) have put forward a 'third way' of thinking about lesbians and sexual

citizenship. Phelan argues that lesbians should claim 'the space of citizenship', understood here as a claim to political participation and public recognition. However, she dismisses the idea that within this space of citizenship we can predetermine what will be a 'lesbian issue.' She still talks of specific citizenships, of which 'lesbian citizens' are an example, and of forging bonds 'between specificities.' (There are echoes here of Weeks.) What Phelan appears to be trying to achieve is recognition that there may be concerns specific to lesbians, though not all lesbians may share in these, and that other groups may have similar concerns.

## Limits of claiming citizenship

In this article I have examined some of the key issues arising from a new and rapidly expanding body of work on the relationship between sexuality and citizenship, looking primarily at how lesbian and gay theorists have engaged with the concept of sexual citizenship and lesbian citizenship in particular. In an age when the politics of citizenship increasingly define 'sexual politics', it is important to engage constructively with such developments rather than to simply ignore or dismiss them. That said, I want to argue that the theoretical and political shift towards sexual citizenship is problematic from a lesbian/feminist perspective. In this final section, I will attempt to highlight some of the directions that future critiques might take.

At a fundamental level, we need to consider the political utility of developing a concept of sexual citizenship. Should we support claims for sexual rights and, if so, what claims and why? These are extremely complex and sensitive questions. In the context of resistance by certain religious and right-wing movements to rights demands by lesbians and gay men, and the existence of social and legal discrimination on the basis of (non-heterosexual) sexual status, it can be difficult to contest moves to claim sexual citizenship without being accused of being reactionary or 'unjust'. As a consequence, this may both limit the development of lesbian/feminist critiques and be used strategically to undermine the theoretical arguments contained within them. (There are parallels here with the way in which radical feminist and right-wing arguments against pornography have sometimes been conflated.)

In addition, we need to recognize that although radical/lesbian/feminists have regarded liberal citizenship as problematic, in practice such feminisms have been influential in the formation of liberal citizenship to some extent. For example, feminist organizations such as Rights of Women have campaigned for the rights of lesbian mothers in respect of loss of custody of their children and barriers to access to assisted conception (Rights of Women, 1984). Similarly, feminists have campaigned for access to free

contraception and abortion, changes in the law concerning rape and divorce, and many other issues connected with what one might regard as aspects of sexual citizenship.

Despite the fact that feminists have campaigned around the legal and social rights of lesbians, the focus on individual 'rights' has not been a dominant emphasis within lesbian/feminist political discourse. On the contrary, such an approach to political change has been subject to fierce criticism. Furthermore, a major aspect of lesbian/feminist theory has been the development of critical perspectives on the social construction of gender and sexuality. In particular, such analyses have addressed the ways in which heterosexuality, as a system of privileged, institutionalized norms and practices, is central to the oppression of women *and* lesbians *and* gay men. Within such a theoretical framework, in which sexuality is seen as a key mechanism of patriarchal control (see Walby, 1990; Richardson, 1997), the expansion of a concept of sexual citizenship is far from unproblematic. Why should we attempt to further rights within a system whose very operation depends on logic that defines lesbians as 'deviant outsiders in order to confirm the 'normality' of heterosexuality' (Jackson, 1996/7: 37). These dilemmas are thrown into sharper relief by the fact that many of the recent campaigns for 'equal rights' for lesbians and gay men represent demands which, far from taking a similar critical stance on heterosexuality, uphold heterosexual institutions and their interlinkage with gender hierarchies as the normative framework of sexual/citizenship.

A further fundamental difference is that the claims to such rights are frequently premised on assumptions about sexuality as an essential characteristic of individuals, defined as a person's 'sexual orientation'. Such is the perceived persuasive power of biological determinism that even where activists are unconvinced by 'born that way' arguments, some nevertheless adopt a position of 'strategic essentialism' to defend lesbian and gay rights (Epstein, 1987). In contrast to this, lesbian/feminist analyses of sexuality have been central to the development of social constructionist models which see the current social organisation of sexuality and gender as socially and historically produced rather than naturally given. They have been extremely critical of essentialist arguments which reaffirm culturally dominant assumptions about sexuality, in particular the idea of heterosexuality, in a particular gendered form, as both natural and normal.

These debates over claims to citizenships also represent, then, struggles over the meaning of sexuality. It is not simply a case of whether we are able to reach agreement on particular rights claims or not, though such debates can be just as contentious, but whether the models of citizenship operating, and the theoretical arguments put forward for them, are compatible with the kind of frameworks that have been used by lesbian/feminists in developing a politics of gender and sexuality. To further illustrate

---

this point, we might consider the recent shift towards a focus on *relationship*-based rights claims by lesbian and gay movements and campaigning groups, both in the US and Europe. As a number of feminist writers such as, for example, Christine Delphy (1996) have argued, this kind of model of citizenship reinforces both the desirability and necessity of sexual coupledness, privileged over other forms of relationships, as a basis for many kinds of rights entitlements. Moreover, it represents the integration of lesbian and gay men into a couple-based system of rights originally founded on heterosexual and gendered norms.

As I have outlined in previous sections, despite these tensions not all lesbian/feminist writers have rejected completely the concept of sexual/lesbian citizenship, choosing instead to ask questions about how it is being used and defined and, in some cases, offering alternative models and meanings. In addition, we need to recognize that despite being sceptical of the utility of the idea of sexual citizenship, especially in the form of campaigns for rights, some writers have adopted what one might term a pragmatic albeit contradictory response to the issue of equal rights claims. In the US, for instance, some feminists criticize the same-sex marriage lobby on a theoretical level, and yet have supported political campaigns to secure domestic partnership recognition by local governments or same-sex partner benefits by private corporations. For example, Nan Hunter and Lisa Duggan (1995), while maintaining a critique of patriarchal familialism, concede that access to marriage could be useful for poor lesbians who do not have the resources, financial or otherwise, to pursue the legal arrangements needed to replace marital rights (for example, wills, power of attorney documentation, domestic partnership registration where available, etc.).

What this highlights is the complexity of the issues raised in considerations of 'claiming citizenship' and that feminist views may differ in different countries, even if certain fundamental issues of political principle remain constant, reflecting differences in welfare systems (see, for example, Rankine, 1997). Some of these issues I have touched on briefly here in my attempt to sketch out the emerging terrain. First, I have pointed to the need to ask how the concept of sexual citizenship is currently in the process of being defined and used. In particular, I have highlighted the relative lack of emphasis in the sexual citizenship literature on gender. Second, at both a theoretical and political level, I have argued that we need to seriously consider whether the definitions and forms of sexual citizenship that are being articulated are ones that embrace lesbian/feminist perspectives? We can address this question on a number of different levels. At a general level, it demands that we consider what models of citizenship are being proposed. In the previous section I outlined how different versions of lesbian citizenship have been suggested. However, this question also touches on another

set of dilemmas in debates over sexuality and citizenship; the problems arising from the interpretation of 'sexual rights'. As I have already stated, there are competing claims for what are defined as sexual rights both from within and outside feminism. This is nothing new to lesbian feminists of course. Questions related to conduct-based rights claims have been some of the most controversial and divisive within lesbian/feminism debates. For example, one objection to feminist critiques of sexual practices such as, for example, sado-masochism by writers such as Sheila Jeffreys (1990, 1994), is that they contravene the feminist assertion of a woman's right to a self-defined sexuality, one of the early demands of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. Similar arguments have been used in the 'political lesbianism' debates and those over the production and consumption of pornography by lesbian feminists. This combination of 'sexual rights' as a contested concept, and the increasing usage of the language of citizenship in relation to sexuality, underlines the need for a critical analysis of its meaning and value as a concept (Richardson, 2000b).

Paralleling the literature on citizenship more generally, the dominant emphasis in debates about sexual citizenship is on 'rights' rather than 'obligations'. However, just as I have argued that it is necessary to question the meaning of the term 'sexual rights', I also believe it is important to analyse what we might understand to be the obligations and duties of sexual citizens? In a different theoretical context, feminists have drawn attention to women's 'sex-duties', challenging these as well as demanding 'sex-rights'. For example, feminist campaigns for changes in policy and practice concerning sexual violence have highlighted how in many countries the law decrees that rape in marriage is not a crime. Under such laws, a man's right of sexual access to his wife's body is privileged over her right to consent; this is part of a man's 'conjugal rights' and a woman's 'sexual responsibilities' as married citizens. The question of obligation is also implicit in Annie-Marie Smith's (1995) analysis of what she calls the 'good' homosexual citizen, who is socially and legally constructed as 'dutifully' occupying the private sphere.

Both of these examples illustrate how sexual duties and obligations are very often implicit in concepts of citizen and citizenship. However, what is not clear is how we should interpret the language of obligations, as well as rights, in the case of lesbians. Can we assume that the good (and bad) lesbian citizen is the same as the good (and bad) homosexual citizen? Are lesbians subject to similar obligations as sexual citizens as heterosexual women? To the extent that lesbians do not fulfil the demands of citizenship as it has been constructed for women, that is primarily through their reproductive and domestic roles within the heterosexual, nuclear family, are they failing to meet the requirements of 'responsible'/good female citizenship?

---

There is another level at which we need to consider this question of obligation and duty as a defining feature of sexual citizenship, and that is in terms of 'the new deal' of negotiating for equal rights for lesbians and gay men. Previously, as Smith (1995) recognizes, the 'deal' was that in return for certain rights of toleration the obligation of the 'homosexual citizen' was to remain within socially and legally defined boundaries of the private, i.e. to remain closeted. Now, when demands are centred upon *public* recognition of lesbian and gay relationships and identities, the question that arises is what are the sorts of obligations that are concomitant on the recognition of such rights? Who or what, in this political context, will be representative of responsible/good and irresponsible/bad lesbian citizenship?

In the context of the increasingly dominant emphasis within contemporary social/sexual movements on pursuing a politics of citizenship, it becomes all the more important to raise these kinds of questions. Globally, we are witnessing large sections of gay and lesbian (and sometimes bi/sometimes transgender) communities demanding 'equal rights' with heterosexuals. Alongside and as a part of this, we can observe a symbolic 're-presentation' of lesbians and gay men in ways that warrant their inclusion as equal citizens. We are described as 'virtually normal' (Sullivan, 1995), living lives which, in all other respects besides 'sexual orientation', exhibit appropriate civic qualities such as, for example, respect for 'marriage' and 'family values.' The pursuit of citizenship at both of these levels, the material and the symbolic, represents an expression of the 'normalization' of lesbians and gay men which is antithetical to the radical challenge of lesbian/feminist theory. Furthermore, and related to my earlier question about 'obligations', in the process of demanding and gaining access to new forms of citizenship status, lesbians are being constituted as 'good' and 'bad' citizens in ways which, I would argue, are likely to further marginalize those who are critical of the gendered heterosexual norms underpinning citizenship.

In conclusion, I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that we should not be concerned with issues such as, for example, pension and employment rights or unequal age of consent legislation for same-sex relationships. It is extremely important to analyse and challenge the ways in which various forms of polities – nation-states, organized religions, supra-states – exclude and discriminate against lesbians and gay men. However, rather than uncritically accepting the discourse of citizenship, I have argued that we need to acknowledge that such discourses have reproduced a particular version of the responsible/good citizen focused on the values and norms associated with the heterosexual, nuclear family. We also need, at the same time, to recognize the increasing power of the language of citizenship and consider what the implications of this are for 'alternative languages'. What are we giving up if we collapse theoretical analyses

of, and demands for, political change in the social organization of gender and sexuality into those of claiming citizenship?

### References

- Alexander, M. J. (1994) 'Not Just (Any) Body Can Be A Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas', *Feminist Review* 48: 5–23.
- Anthias, N. and Yuval-Davis, N. (1992) *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class, and the Anti-Racist Struggle*. London: Routledge.
- Bamforth, N. (1997) *Sexuality, Morals and Justice: A Theory of Lesbian and Gay Rights Law*. London: Cassell.
- Carabine, J. (1996) 'Heterosexuality and Social Policy', in D. Richardson (ed.) *Theorising Heterosexuality: Telling it Straight*, pp. 55–74. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Cooper, D. (1993) 'An Engaged State: Sexuality, Governance and the Potential for Change', in J. Bristow and A. R. Wilson (eds) *Activating Theory: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Politics*, pp. 190–218. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Cooper, D. (1995) *Power in Struggle: Feminism, Sexuality and the State*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Delphy, C. (1996) 'The Private as a Deprivation of Rights For Women and Children', paper presented at the International Conference on Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship, Brighton, 10–15 November.
- Doan, L., ed. (1994) *The Lesbian Postmodern*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Duggan, L. and Hunter, N. (1995) *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Epstein, S. (1987) 'Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism', *Socialist Review* 93/94: 9–54.
- Evans, D. (1993) *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities*. London: Routledge.
- Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Herman, D. (1994) *Rights of Passage: Struggles for Lesbian and Gay Equality*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Herman, D. (1995) 'A Jurisprudence of One's Own? Ruthann Robson's Lesbian Legal Theory', in A. R. Wilson (ed.) *A Simple Matter of Justice?: Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Politics*, pp. 176–92. London: Cassell.
- Jackson, S. (1996/7) 'Taking Liberties', *Trouble and Strife* 34: 36–43.
- Jackson, S. and Scott, S. (1996) 'Sexual Skirmishes and Feminist Factions: Twenty-Five Years of Debate on Women and Sexuality', in S. Jackson and S. Scott (eds) *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, pp. 1–31. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Jeffreys, S. (1990) *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution*. London: The Women's Press.
- Jeffreys, S. (1994) *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution*. London: The Women's Press.

- Kaplan, M. B. (1997) *Sexual Justice: Democratic Citizenship and the Politics of Desire*. New York: Routledge.
- Lister, R. (1990) 'Women, Economic Dependency and Citizenship', *Journal of Social Policy* 19(4): 445–68.
- Lister, R. (1996) 'Citizenship Engendered', in D. Taylor (ed.) *Critical Social Policy: A Reader*, p. 168. London: Sage.
- Lister, R. (1997) *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*. London: Macmillan.
- Marshall, T. H. (1950) *Citizenship and Social Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pakulski, J. (1997) 'Cultural Citizenship', *Citizenship Studies* 1(1): 73–86.
- Palmer, A. (1995) 'Lesbian and Gay Rights Campaigning: A Report from the Coalface', in A. R. Wilson (ed.) *A Simple Matter of Justice? Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Politics*, pp. 32–50. London: Cassell.
- Phelan, S. (1994) *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Phelan, S. (1995) 'The Space of Justice: Lesbians and Democratic Politics', in A. R. Wilson (ed.) *A Simple Matter of Justice? Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Politics*, pp. 193–220. London: Cassell.
- Phillips, A. (1991) 'Citizenship and Feminist Theory', in G. Andrews (ed.) *Citizenship*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Plummer, K. (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. London: Routledge.
- Rankine, J. (1997) 'For Better or For Worse?', *Trouble and Strife* 34: 5–11.
- Richardson, D. (1996) 'Heterosexuality and Social Theory', in D. Richardson (ed.) *Theorising Heterosexuality: Telling It Straight*, pp. 1–20. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Richardson, D. (1997) 'Sexuality and Feminism', in V. Robinson and D. Richardson (eds) *Introducing Women's Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice*, pp. 152–74. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Richardson, D. (1998) 'Sexuality and Citizenship', *Sociology* 32(1): 83–100.
- Richardson, D. (2000a) *Re: Thinking Sexuality*. London: Sage.
- Richardson, D. (2000b) 'Constructing Sexual Citizenship: Theorising Sexual Rights', *Critical Social Policy* 61(4): 105–35.
- Rights of Women (1984) *Lesbian Mothers on Trial*. London: Community Press.
- Robson, R. (1992) *Lesbian (Out)Law: Survival Under the Rule of Law*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand.
- Rosenbloom, R., ed. (1996) *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights*. London: Cassell.
- Segal, L. (1987) *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*. London: Virago.
- Smith, A. M. (1995) *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968–90*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stacey, J. (1997) 'Feminist Theory: Capital F, Capital T', in V. Robinson and D. Richardson (eds) *Introducing Women's Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice, 2nd edition*, pp. 54–76. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Sullivan, A. (1995) *Virtually Normal*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Squires, J. (1994) 'Ordering the City: Public Spaces and Political Participation',

- in J. Weeks (ed.) *The Lesser Evil and the Greater Good: The Theory and Politics of Social Diversity*, pp. 79–99. London: Rivers Oram.
- Walby, S. (1990) *Theorising Patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Walby, S. (1994) 'Is Citizenship Gendered?', *Sociology* 28(2): 379–95.
- Walby, S. (1997) *Gender Transformations*. London: Routledge.
- Weeks, J. (1995) *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Weeks, J. (1998) 'The Sexual Citizen', *Theory, Culture & Society* 15(3–4): 35–52.
- Wilson, A. (1993) 'Which Equality? Toleration, Difference or Respect', in J. Bristow and A. R. Wilson (eds) *Activating Theory: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Politics*, pp. 171–89. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Wilton, T. (1995) *Lesbian Studies: Setting An Agenda*. London: Routledge.

### **Biographical Notes**

Diane Richardson is Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Newcastle. She has written extensively about feminism and sexuality and her publications include *Theorising Heterosexuality* (Open University Press, 1996), and, as co-editor, *Introducing Women's Studies* (Macmillan, 1997). Her most recent book *Re: Thinking Sexuality* will be published by Sage in 2000. She is currently co-editing, with Steven Seidman, a major international text on debates in lesbian, gay and queer studies. *Address*: Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Claremont Bridge Building, University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK. [email: [diane.richardson@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:diane.richardson@ncl.ac.uk)]