

Gay Leftie Seeks Straight Friends

June 13, 2009

THE PRESENCE ON MANY CAMPUSES of a significant number of liberals ("Of course gay people are entitled to the full rights of citizenship") proved critical in allowing lesbian and gay studies to gain a toehold. But as I kept discovering, unpleasantly, a willingness to grant us basic rights wasn't remotely the equivalent of actually wanting to know about our lives — let alone of believing that our distinctive perspectives might have anything of importance to say to *them*. Even as these liberals fell in love with, and broadly announced, their own tolerance, they seemed clueless about the patronization that so often characterized their actual tone when dealing with us. ("What YOU PEOPLE need to understand is that")

This was *far* more true of straight white male scholars than female or minority ones. The latter, after all, knew a great deal about being kept outside the centers of power — and how being on the margins often gave them greater insight into the psyches and behavior of the Big Boys than those self-reverential smarty-pants had about themselves. Women also know — having themselves long been relegated to the private realm — the inherent falsity of such commonplace statements as "what gay people do in the privacy of their own homes is no concern of ours."

The liberal adoption of "the privacy principle" is an effective shield against letting too much subversive information get through, the equivalent of building a wall between gay and straight that not only perpetuates the fallacious het/homo binary but conveniently protects straight male academia from learning more about the actual complexity of gay lives and the challenging findings of gay scholarship. Even male scholars further to the left than merely "liberal" (Todd Gitlin, say, or Eric Hobsbawm and Bogdan Denitch) seal themselves off from the realities of gay identity — or as Gitlin scornfully puts it, being "overly concerned with protecting and purifying what they imagine to be their identities."

Many left-wingers, on campus and off, position themselves as radicals on economic and class issues, but are utterly traditional in regard to feminist and gay concerns. Zealous in challenging the economic status quo, they are no less zealous in defending the status quo in regard to cultural issues. Michael Tomasky, to give one example, has cavalierly dismissed "supposedly oppositional" gay culture with its "superficially transgressive ideas." Supposedly? Superficially? None of these left-wing traditionalists could conceivably express such views if they'd read a word of Eve Sedgwick or Judith Butler. If they had, they'd have to take seriously some of the basic insights of queer history and theory: the performative aspects of gender, the nature and parameters of friendship, the shifting view across time and culture of such purported universals as the nuclear family, monogamy, lifelong pair-bonding and the questionable linkage between love and sex — and as well, the omnipresence in all of us of a wildly anarchic, unorthodox range of erotic fantasy and desire. Such insights, *iftaken* seriously, would have a transformative impact on current arrangements of power — yes, economic power too.

Diary, March 30, 1990: At the end of the "Whose History?" panel last night at the New York Historical Society, a young man with a large ACT-UP button on his lapel came up to me and said he wanted me to know how I ended up (belatedly) on the panel: "When I got the NYHS mailing," he said, "and saw that gay/lesbian history had been omitted, I wrote in protest to R.M., director of public programs. She wrote back that NYHS simply couldn't afford another fee (a big \$250). To which he responded, "That simply isn't good enough. *One way or the other* we will be represented at that event." R.M. got the

message — and out went the call to me. Good old ACT-UP!

The "young man," I soon learned, was in fact 45 and his name was Bob Rafsky. He'd been a public relations executive until 1989 when he quit to devote his time entirely to ACT-UP. Arrested several times in civil disobedience demonstrations, he became ACT-UP's media coordinator in New York and a well-known figure in the struggle against AIDS. Soon after the NYHS panel, Rafsky sent me the pertinent correspondence. I reprint excerpts below to demonstrate the kind of liberal double-speak I just wrote about — to say nothing of illuminating Rafsky's organizing skills and eloquent prose.

Rafsky to R. M., Feb. 2, 1990:

"Here we are, in New York, in 1990, in the midst of an epidemic beyond imagining. One of the few consolations of these plague years — if the very idea of consolation is not obscene — is that it has forced us all to focus on the presence of gays and lesbians everywhere, and the implications of that presence — social, political, historical..." (NYHS's advance announcement of the "Whose History?" panel had noted that it would examine "the role of race, nationality and gender in contemporary historical thinking," and that the panelists would speak from the vantage points of women, Puerto Ricans, blacks, and Asian-Americans.)

Rafsky went on:

"But is something missing from this panel? Is something missing? I doubt you can appreciate how angry it makes me to have to take time from dealing with my life and the epidemic to write a letter that, in effect, forces me to justify my existence to you, And who are you? "The only thing that makes me angrier is the prospect of having to deal with your reply and whatever rationalizations and excuses it trails with it. What are my obligations here? Do I have to tell you what you should do by March 29?" (the evening of the panel): "Do I have to make clear what I think our community will do if you don't do what you should? ..."

R. M.'s Feb. 7, 1990 reply, nearly in its entirety:

"... Because of limited funding, we were not able to address the concerns of the gay and lesbian community at this time. But we do plan in the near future to have a series entitled 'New York City in Crisis,' and will at that time address the issue of the AIDS epidemic and health care policy, I will keep your letter on file, and contact you at the time of the event so that you can be in attendance.... I hope that what I have written brings some clarity to the issues raised."

Rafsky to R.M., Feb. 23, 1990, in its entirety:

"'Limited funding' prevented you from adding a panelist to a panel that already had four members and a moderator? And the omission just happened to be the gay and lesbian community? Aren't you ashamed, at some level, to write this sort of thing? "No, we're not going to wait for some ghettoized panel on AIDS to be recognized by the New York

Historical Society, which uses our tax money to insult us. "We're going to stand tall with our black, Latino, and Asian-American brothers and sisters. And we're going to do it on March 29, with or without your cooperation."

A few days later, Rafsky sent near-duplicate letters to both NYHS's President and Chairperson, to the Commissioner of NYC's Department of Cultural Affairs, and to State Senators Manfred Ohrenstein and Roy Goodman (who'd gotten state funds allocated to help cover the costs of the panel). To all, Rafsky sent approximately the same message:

"I assume you're not aware of the slap in the face the New Historical Society plans to give the gay and lesbian community on March 29 — with money from the Department of Cultural Affairs.

"I also assume that, once made aware, you'll take steps to prevent it ..."

What happened next — who stepped on whose toes, and how hard — is unrecorded. But on March 8, Bob Rafsky got another letter from R. M., quite different in tone, acknowledging that the Society had been "remiss" in not having included a gay or lesbian historian in the first place, informing him that I would now be on the panel, and thanking him for his "interest in The New York Historical Society."

As I later wrote Rafsky, "You're a snazzy letter writer; most 'persuasive' ... You did a great job! One more confirmation of the respectful awe I feel for the ACT-UP generation."

Three years later, Bob Rafsky was dead of AIDS. 2008.

When I accepted an offer to join the CUNY system back in 1972 as a Distinguished Professor, I was asked to teach at the Graduate Center as well as on one of the undergraduate campuses. For the time being I declined, preferring for a while just to be on an undergraduate campus. I'd grown tired in recent years of teaching graduate students — they were too dutiful, writing down everything I said as if it was Truth. But I did offer to sit on Ph.D. exams and read Ph.D. theses until the urge to produce scholarly offspring returned.

By the mid-seventies, I'd become increasingly involved in the brand new field of the history of sexuality and at that point I went back to the Graduate School and said that I'd be willing, after all, to offer a course on that subject — that I needed older students with more information and experience to bounce ideas off. The reaction was immediate: NO. So much for *noblesse oblige*. Gertrude Himmelfarb, chair of the Graduate School History Department at the time, acerbically told me that the Department felt that sexual history wasn't "real" history at all; it had been spawned by political polemics, not scholarly necessity. As if activism hasn't always ignited scholarship — the feminist movement and feminist studies, the black movement and black studies. As if a scholar's political and social views don't always, consciously or not, color his/her narratives (Himmelfarb herself — a right-wing conservative — being among the more notorious current examples). My standing as a legitimate scholar, she told me, might well be at stake.

I wasn't entirely surprised. Back in 1974, Dennis Rubini, an openly gay historian at Temple University, and I had submitted a proposal for a panel on "the history of sexuality" (not the more inflammatory "lesbian and gay history") for the American Historical Association's annual convention; not getting any response, we'd inquired and been told that the proposal had gotten "unaccountably

lost." We resubmitted the following year, and this time were formally rejected.

While prepared for the Graduate School's turndown, I was nonetheless angered, and I reached for the only card in my deck. If my scholarship was now regarded as tainted, I told the history faculty, then surely it wouldn't want me contaminating its innocent students. Surely it would be best if I no longer sat on Ph.D. exams or read Ph.D. theses; should the faculty decide at some future point that the history of sexual behavior was a legitimate seminar and research subject, I'd be glad once more to serve as a Ph.D. examiner and mentor.

And there the stalemate held for some 15 years, as the national — and Graduate School — climate slowly changed. Finally, in 1991, my seminar on gay and lesbian history was formally approved.

Diary, February 7, 1991: Thirty seven students showed up last night for my seminar at the Graduate Center — including two faculty members, students from NYU, Rutgers, the Univ. of Rochester, and representing nearly every conceivable field (yes, even Japanese literature!) except history (Joe W. says the history students are afraid to sign up because the department is notoriously conservative.) The official registration list had only 16 names and the turnout stunned — and thrilled — me. It confirms the wish/need for gay/lesbian studies and sends a clear message to the university's powers-that-be. Since my whole point in giving the course is to excite interest in the field, I'm not going to turn anyone away (though I had originally cut off enrollment at 20, wanting to preserve an intimate, informal atmosphere). But I told them last night that they were all welcome, and to keep the size manageable I would break the group into two parts and give a second seminar on another evening. We'll put that decision off until next week, to see if the same number turns up. Anyway, I'm hugely excited, and gratified....

2008. My lengthy review of Michael Tomasky's *Left for Dead: the Life, Death, and Possible Resurrection of Progressive Politics in America*, in which I defended "identity politics" against his attack on it, appeared in the July 2, 1996 issue of *The Nation*. Tomasky had denounced those on the Left who concentrated on demands that had "nothing to do with a larger concern for our common humanity and everything to do with a narrow concern for fragmented and supposedly oppositional cultures."

"Elsewhere Tomasky refers to the 'superficially radical and transgressive' ideas of multiculturalism. But declaring certain ideas superficial," I wrote in my *Nation* response "does not make them so — especially since it isn't clear that Tomasky has absorbed [the radical redefinitions of gender and sexuality that are under discussion in feminist and queer circles] ... postulates about such *universal* matters as the historicity and fluidity of sexual desire, the performative nature of gender, and the multiplicity of impulses, narratives and loyalties that lie within us all. This is no ersatz sideshow...

"Many minority intellectuals ... [are also] troubled about the inability of comprehensive categories ('black,' 'gay,' etc.) to speak to the complex, overlapping identities of individual lives; uncomfortable about referring to 'communities' as if they were homogenous units rather than hothouses of contradiction; concerned about the inadequacy of efforts to create bridges between marginalized people and then outward to broader constituencies. Yet one holds on to a group identity, despite its insufficiencies, because it's the closest most non-mainstream people have ever gotten to

having a political home. Yes, identity politics reduces and simplifies; it *is* a kind of prison. But it is also, paradoxically, a haven. It is at once confining *and* empowering. And in the absence of alternative havens, group identity will for many continue to be the appropriate site of resistance and the main source of comfort ... the legitimacy of our differentness as minorities has not yet been more than superficially acknowledged — let alone safeguarded. You cannot link arms under a universalist banner when you can't find your own name on it. Cultural unity should not be purchased at the cost of cultural erasure.

"Tomasky's appeal 'to connect with those unlike oneself' is unimpeachable — but he's addressed it to the wrong crowd. Many of us involved in identity politics *have* been trying to connect.... Tomasky claims we have 'simply written off' many potential allies. Well, our efforts at dialogue could certainly improve, but they have not been as nothing. Yet we've met mostly with patronization and hostility — that is, when we really try to talk about our lives, rather than pretend that we're 'just folks' who want to join up. It is not our interest-group politics that turn off Tomasky's purported legions of allies — it is our lives...."

I CAME DOWN as hard as I did on Tomasky because he represented what had become a mounting attack by straight, white, and "liberal" male public intellectuals on an identity politics that emphasized issues relating to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Among the more prominent of these intellectuals were Eric Hobsbawm, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Ralph Nader, Richard Rorty, Jack Newfield, and Todd Gitlin. Collectively — and curiously — they chose to focus on us, rather than on corporate America (which of course they did denounce for its greed and corruption), as the chief villain in the decline of interest in the transcendent issues of class division and economic inequity. *We* had abandoned the working class. *We* had destroyed the Left.

They did have what seemed to me several irrefutable points. Our national gay political organizations have long been woefully indifferent to class-based inequities, even among LGBT people — those within our own ranks who suffered from the mounting insecurities of blue-collar life, to say nothing of the impoverished and unemployed. The major, partial, exceptions have been the Gay Liberation Front in the early years of the movement (1969-71), which had spoken out boldly against entrenched privilege of every kind, and the struggles by ACT-UP and other AIDS organizations to get drugs and housing into the hands of those who couldn't afford them.

In between, middle-class reformism (skilled lobbyists pressing for narrow, piecemeal change through traditional political channels) had reigned — though the quest for respectability was far less pronounced in the separatist-inclined, left-leaning lesbian community. I myself had long been arguing against the reformist turn. When, in a speech at the seventh annual Lambda Legal Defense Fund dinner in 1982, I used the occasion to denounce the "endemic racism" in the gay world and our indifference to class based issues, a number of white men walked out in the middle of my remarks, and I was subsequently reprimanded for my "inappropriate and offensive" comments.

When the central goal of the organized national gay movement is focused on "acceptance," then gay people, like the good, mainstream Americans they choose to emulate, will, by definition, remain deaf to class issues and in denial about the extent of ongoing racism and sexism. But it needs to be remembered that gay politics is not uniquely limited in scope. The Tomaskys were certainly right in 1996 to sound the alarm against the growing disparity in income in this country, even as social services were being scaled back and more and more companies were denying benefits to their

workers.

In 1999, *The New York Times* would announce that it had detected "the biggest surge in campus activism in nearly two decades," most of it focused on improving working conditions for labor — on providing a living wage, an end to sweatshops, and so forth. The announcement mystified me. On my own campus, The City University of New York, I did see a marked increase in tolerance for "differentness" of all kinds — but nothing like a newly activated campaign to curb plutocratic excess or broaden the safety net for the working class. Indeed, over the next decade the gap between rich and poor would turn into a chasm.

In emphasizing the role identity politics had played in shattering the Left, Tomasky, Gitlin, and others failed to give anything like equal weight to a host of other, more convincing culprits: a hostile state apparatus; a news-media network that dutifully turned to conservative commentators for "expert" testimony and shunned the countervailing opinions of anyone to the left of Rudy Giuliani; a corporate culture that increasingly gave workers the choice between rejecting unionization (and collective bargaining's ability to protect them) — or losing their jobs; a powerful religious right that, ignorant of Biblical scholarship, preached the Bible's literal truth (lingering lovingly over the contested Levitical passage about homosexuality being an "abomination," even while nimbly disregarding such discomfiting Biblical injunctions as the need to return fugitive slaves to their "rightful" masters); and the bland textbook mill that either teaches the young nothing about the Left's history or distorts and denounces it (those "fanatical" abolitionists, etc.)

Nor are these well- positioned white male critics of identity politics close to being truthful in claiming we've "written off" potential allies. One could argue (as Stanley Aronowitz has) that labor has long since ceased to be a progressive force. As late as the seventies, many unions had still not integrated; and more recently, the feminist and gay movements have been primarily the butt of jokes. On the factory floor, traditional heterosexist norms remain dominant; gay workers either remain in the closet or risk being ostracized — or physically harmed. When John Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO in 1996, he pledged to push for more progressive policies; some argue that he's succeeded, but others claim that the AFL's new rhetoric has still not been matched by new practices.

The story has been similar when gay people try to form coalitions with other marginalized groups. As far back as the Black Panther Party — for which GLF raised money and offered support — Huey Newton stood alone in accepting the extended hand. As recently as the AIDS crisis, efforts by gay organizations to make information and services available to other groups were largely rebuffed, the black churches slamming their doors with particular force.

Oh — and have I somehow missed Gitlin & Co. making any reciprocal gestures to gay people, ever lifting a finger to alleviate the discrimination under which they suffer? (Some heterosexual women have, with a few of them — Mathilde Krim, say, or Judy Peabody — becoming genuine heroes). During the eighties and mid-nineties, did the Gitlin crowd ever sign a petition or join a protest in support of the life-and-death struggle for early release of promising AIDS drugs? Have I missed their banner passing by in the major D.C. marches for gay rights? Have they so much as written a small check for *any* gay-related cause? I've never seen the name of a single one of these humanist champions on the donor list of an LGBT organization (and I've seen most of them). Certainly none of these prominent and prosperous worthies have ever put a dime into CLAGS' [Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies] coffers — though scholarship is often their own calling, and though topics relating to race and class — which they claim we don't care about — have been the subjects of many CLAGS colloquia and conferences.

Still, it is true enough, and the cause for real despair, that on the whole national gay and lesbian

organizations continue to pay scant attention to issues relating to working-class grievances. And it is equally true that while some unions have improved the work climate for their LGBT members, a significant amount of fear and discrimination continues to exist. The challenge ahead is to further transform attitudes on both sides: to create a heightened awareness of class issues among gays and an increased sensitivity among unionists to the difficulties of gay life. Should that millennium arrive, we would be on our way to a revitalized politics and civic culture.

Footnotes