

# Keeping the Communist Party Straight, 1940s-1980s

June 13, 2009

GROWING UP IN A COMMUNIST FAMILY and in Communist circles in New York City in the late 1940s and 1950s sexuality of any kind was never discussed, ever, in any context, for any reason. I am not laying claim to any kind of universal experience in saying this; I am only commenting on the absence of discussion in my own experience.

Although I knew from an early age, and certainly by adolescence, that my primary attractions were to women, I had no language with which to express these feelings, and a firm belief that I was sexually perverted and evil, and absolutely singular in my desires. It was not until 1973 that I learned the word "lesbian" because I found the book *Lesbian Woman* by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyons. I hid the book from my husband and read it with acute attention and a shortness of breath, borne of panic. By 1980 I was in a committed lesbian relationship, but I was still terrified to tell my Communist parents, Herbert and Fay Aptheker. Much to my mother's credit, when I did come out to her she was very supportive, and told me not to worry about my father; she would take care of him.

By the late 1970s many feminists and gays and lesbians were using Marxist theory as a way to analyze both women's oppression and homophobic institutions and practices. In line with this interest I was asked to give a paper at a conference in San Francisco in 1980 on Marxism and Sexuality. I began that paper by saying I didn't think Marxism had anything to say about sexuality, still shied away from the lesbian issue, and proceeded to talk about the historical and social construction of sexuality, and the ways in which heterosexual marriage was tied to capitalist relations of production. In the same year John D'Emilio wrote his wonderful essay on "Capitalism and Gay Identity"; a few years earlier and in the same genre, Eli Zaretsky had published his book on *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life*, using Marxist theory to examine the relationship between the family and the modes and relations of production. Likewise, Zillah Eisenstein's edited volume, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, historicized and gave a materiality to issues that had previously been seen as "personal" and/or "fixed." Although heterosexuality was the unspoken, underlying, and unquestioned assumption in the book, the Combahee River Collective Statement offered an intersectional analysis of multiple systems of domination for the first time, and included sexuality and lesbian experience.

All of these works were extremely helpful to me. All of them were also outside the framework of any politics within the Communist Party, which, in my experience (between the 1950s and until well into the 1980s) looked upon these works — insofar as they were viewed at all — with suspicion and ridicule.

Shortly after I had left my husband, I talked to an older woman comrade in the Communist Party whom I trusted and who I thought could help me understand my own sexuality. This would have been sometime in 1978 or 1979. With trepidation I came out to her. She responded to me gently, looking out the living room window of my home, and not making eye contact with me. She said two things that I clearly remember. First, this comrade told me that she thought that sex was solely for reproduction, and not for recreational purposes, and therefore any sex outside of this framework was not appropriate. She was careful in her choice of language and especially not to cast moral aspersion.

## Told to Leave

THE SECOND THING SHE TOLD ME was that in the 1950s during the McCarthy and HUAC hearings, she was instructed by the Party leadership to talk with several women comrades about their sexuality. Because these comrades were lesbians, or had had a lesbian liaison, she was told to ask them to leave the Party. My comrade friend explained this was because the Party feared that if the FBI threatened them with exposure they could become informants. Although no one has done a study of this, none of the informants I know of, or who surfaced in various trials, were blackmailed homosexuals, with the possible exception of Jerome Robbins.<sup>1</sup> My friend said that other comrades were asked to make similar inquiries inside the Party, and women and men were thus forced to leave the Party voluntarily or were expelled. My friend told me that she deeply regretted her role in this purge. I was stunned at such a level of homophobia and I could only just begin to fathom the impact this would have had on gay women and men forced to abandon their comrades, at a time when everyone was under such intense attack.

This historical episode was reconfirmed when sociologist Ellen Kay Trimberger published her study of women in the Old Left and recounted an interview with a former CP organizer who related that in the late 1940s

The Party leadership made a decision to drop all homosexuals from the Party because of their presumed openness to blackmail as state repression increased. A local organizer was asked to speak to several known lesbians to request their resignations. These lesbians were friends of the organizer, although she never discussed their sexual preference with them. When she met them, they all cried, but the lesbians "obeyed" and resigned. Looking back on this incident this activist says that neither she nor the lesbians, although some may have questioned the assumption, ever considered opposing the Party decision.<sup>2</sup>

This heterosexist history within the Communist Party was further explored by historian Jennifer Terry in *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine and Homosexuality in Modern Society*. While the anti-Communist purges of the McCarthy period are well known, Terry makes the connection between them and the persecution of gays and lesbians. In her discussion of "Loyalty, Security, and the Homosexual Conspirator," Terry argues that the men in power in the 1950s invoked a hyper-masculinity as a hallmark of patriotism, while at the same time asserting a hyper-femininity that propelled "normal" women firmly out of their higher paying jobs and careers and into heterosexual marriage, low-paying marginal employment, and maternity.

Terry gives ample and sickening evidence of the ways in which Washington politicians made their careers by alleging that so-called "effete" men were running key government agencies and weakening the country because they were not "real" men. These pundits also claimed that homosexuals in "sensitive" government positions were vulnerable to blackmail by foreign powers. This echoed precisely the (il)logic of the Communist Party. The Washington politicians whipped themselves into a veritable rhetorical and persecutorial frenzy with Congressional hearings, FBI and police raids, arrests, beatings, firings, and purges. By the end of the campaign, Terry concludes, "homosexual" and "communist" were discursively indistinguishable in the Washington lexicon.

Although Terry does not explore this, it is probable that the initial idea for these claims linking Communists and homosexuals was the widely publicized British spy scandal, in which four men who had been students together at Cambridge in the 1930s became spies for the Soviet Union during World War II when we were all allies, but continued their espionage activities on behalf of the

Soviets as the Cold War began. They were all perceived to be gay men, and the case made international headlines in 1951 when Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess defected to the Soviet Union. It is likely that Maclean and Burgess were actually gay. The third key member of the spy ring was Kim Philby, who was very high up in British intelligence, and the fourth member of the group was Anthony Blunt. Maclean and Burgess had been working for the British government and lodged in the United States when they were discovered, and this added to the American panic. What is significant here, of course, is that when you have a targeted and despised minority as in the case of gays and lesbians, the gay identity of two of these actual spies provided fuel for a massive witch hunt. In my experience and from my personal knowledge the Communist Party never defended the many people who came under these homophobic attacks, which is no surprise given the homophobia of the Party itself.

### **Lesbians in the Communist Party**

WHILE I WAS STRUGGLING TO COME OUT, I also searched for evidence of lesbians in the Communist Party. It was awkward because I didn't feel safe in asking my parents or others directly, but I tried to find indirect ways of turning conversations, usually putting my questions in the context of classes I was teaching. This was how I found out from my father about Anna Rochester (1880-1960) and Grace Hutchins (1885 - 1969). He knew them both and deeply respected their work. Anna Rochester's many books and pamphlets were in our home, with titles such as *Rulers of America: A Study of Finance Capital*, *Lenin on the Agrarian Question* and *Why Farmers are Poor: The Agricultural Crisis in the United States*. Meanwhile, Grace Hutchins, whom I had actually met, was a radical labor economist and co-founder in 1927 of the Labor Research Association whose scholarly papers and statistical research I had used for years. My father told me this as though it were no big deal, and reported that everyone in the Party knew about Anna and Grace. They were most certainly not expelled from the Party. It was astonishing to me.

Years later I was interviewed by the biographer of Rochester and Hutchins, Janet Lee, whose book is titled *Comrades and Partners: The Shared Lives of Grace Hutchins and Anna Rochester*. Lee wrote: "To my best knowledge, Hutchins and Rochester . . . never openly identified as lesbians. They demonstrated the innocence of the golden age of romantic friendships, seeing each other as treasured companions and soul-mates." This was so even though, Lee continued, "about the time Hutchins and Rochester started to live together in the early twenties, romantic friendships were starting to come under scrutiny." Lee concluded, and I feel certain that she is correct, that Hutchins and Rochester maintained the designation of romantic friends because it allowed them to remain in the Communist Party; their lesbian relationship was in no way a challenge to the patriarchal family; it was not in any way connected to a feminist movement, and their work was solidly within the fold of Marxist political economy. This is not said to disparage Anna Rochester and Grace Hutchins. It is merely meant as a historical acknowledgement of who they were in their time and place. I personally was thrilled to learn about them and more than a little annoyed with myself for not knowing about them until I was in my mid-thirties!

### **Elizabeth Gurley Flynn**

ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT MOMENT in my history with the Communist Party and its lesbian and gay members was the controversy surrounding Elizabeth Gurley Flynn whom I knew well in childhood, and whom I last saw in San Francisco in 1962, during my first year in college, about a year before her death. A heroine of the U.S. working class movement, especially in her days with the I.W.W., Flynn's membership in the Communist Party was a source of pride for the Party; there was great reverence for her. In 1963 Flynn's account of her life in prison was published. She had been convicted of conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the U.S. government under the infamous Smith

Act and served 28 months in Alderson Federal Penitentiary. I read her prison memoir with considerable personal interest and came upon her somewhat disparaging description of lesbian life behind bars. I was in such desperate need of anything relating to lesbian life that I read Flynn's descriptions again and again. She focused in particular on the punishments meted out to lesbians in prison, and announced her theory that these relationships were a result of the deprivation of male companionship.<sup>3</sup>

Years later a controversy over Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's papers erupted. In the early 1980s Rosalyn Baxandall got in touch with me with an urgent request. She was then researching her book *Words on Fire: The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn*, eventually published in 1987. Flynn's papers were in the possession of the National Office of the Communist Party and Baxandall could not gain access to them. She was told at first that the papers were "lost," and then she was told a series of other stories, all of which were untrue, and all of which were intended to deny her access to the papers.

In an effort to help Ros I talked to my father because I knew that Elizabeth had left her papers to him as director of the American Institute for Marxist Studies (AIMS) precisely, as I understood it, to avoid Party control over them. At first my father was vague as he discussed this with me, but I finally got him to admit that when he had moved to California in 1978 and established a West Coast office for AIMS he had not wanted to bother with Flynn's papers, and had arranged for the Party to have them after all. I was furious with him for betraying Elizabeth's trust because it was inconvenient for him to arrange for the transport of the papers or for their relocation to a university archive, which apparently never occurred to him. I contacted Gil Green who was a member of the Party's Central Committee. Gil was more broad-minded and reasonable than many. He promised to help and shortly afterwards the Party made Flynn's papers available to Baxandall. I am sure that other folks also intervened on Ros's behalf.

Now, one may ask, why was this even an issue. It was an issue because Elizabeth Gurley Flynn had lived with a "known lesbian," Marie Equi, a physician in Portland, Oregon, for ten years beginning late in 1926. Flynn had suffered a nervous and physical breakdown during a particularly vigorous speaking trip, and credited Dr. Equi with having saved her life. Labor historian Helen C. Camp, who wrote a biography of Flynn, felt compelled to write the following:

Equi's open acknowledgement of a number of lesbian unions has inevitably led to speculation about the nature of her relationship with Flynn. Nancy Krieger, who made a study of Equi's career, has stated that "it is certain they had an intense, emotionally involved relationship" — a judgment confirmed by Flynn herself — but neither she nor any other researcher has found positive evidence of an erotic relationship. Kathie Flynn (Elizabeth's sister, who was devoted to her) worried about Elizabeth's living with Marie because she thought it would hurt her sister's reputation.<sup>4</sup>

It was certainly personally thrilling for me to learn of Flynn's relationship with Marie Equi. However, Camp's preoccupation with the "erotic" is foolish both because she is using it as a euphemism for sex and because it so narrows and belittles the emotional sustenance and importance of their relationship. This preoccupation with "protecting" Flynn from the lesbian charge — by the Party even posthumously in the 1980s — is a measure of the Party's demeaning attitudes towards gay and lesbian people. As for Elizabeth herself, I would say that she didn't cast negative judgments on people's sexual orientation. For example, she was a member of the Heterodoxy Club in New York in the 1920s and she wrote about it with fond memory in her autobiography, *I Speak My Own Piece*,

It was a women's luncheon club which met fortnightly. . . . It shunned publicity, but as its name implied, had free and frank discussions on all subjects . . . . The subjects dealt mainly with women and their accomplishments. All of its members were ardent suffragists, some were quite extreme feminists. No one was there because her husband or father was famous. . . . It made me conscious of women and their accomplishments. My mother, who had great pride in women, was very pleased by this association."<sup>5</sup>

Out lesbians were among Heterodoxy's many luminaries, including the well-known poet Amy Lowell.

Sometime in the late 1970s I wrote a position paper for the Party's Women's Commission that made a first attempt to link the significance of lesbian women with the struggles of working class women (I was thinking of the lesbian women in the National Women's Trade Union League at the turn of the 20th century, and their heroic organizing in the ILGWU) In that same paper I made my first foray into understanding the relationship between lesbian lives and women's potential independence from men. I was told in very direct terms by the Party leadership to abandon any such effort. It was just after this that I read Mari Jo Buhle's excellent book, *Women and American Socialism 1870 - 1920* and got a better understanding of the ways in which independent women's organizing within the socialist and communist movements had been discouraged. It was then I realized the deeper significance of what I was up to! Eventually I returned to these themes in my book *Tapestries of Life*, but by then I was long since out of the Communist Party. It was also with considerable pride that I learned about Harry Hay (1912 - 2002) and his membership in the Communist Party when he founded the Mattachine Society in 1950 in Los Angeles. He was expelled from the Party for his efforts, although with "regret" because Harry was quite beloved as a teacher in the California Labor School and elsewhere.

### **"Coming Out" in the Communist Party**

I "CAME OUT" IN THE COMMUNIST PARTY under great subterfuge in the late 1970s. The comrades in my Party club in Santa Cruz knew I was a lesbian, and many of them knew my partner. The leadership of the Communist Party of Northern California also knew, and many of them had also met my partner. My comrades in California were accepting, as long as nothing about my sexual preference had anything to do with my politics. There evolved a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" attitude in the Party, as a few gay and lesbian people joined us in the 1970s. As a matter of preference we were tolerated in the Northern California district. Not so the national leadership of the Communist Party, which maintained a steadfast hostility.

In addition to a conservative "good old boys' " objection to gay and lesbian people in the Party, I think two other observations are worth making. The first concerns the attitude towards the family. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman are correct when they speak of "Male radicals wedded to a socialist tradition that exalted the working class family and excoriated capitalism for corrupting it . . . ."<sup>6</sup> There was no critical analysis in the Party I grew up in and worked in, of the family, or of its patriarchal character and its relationship to capitalist relations of production. In addition, whenever I and others tried to raise issues of domestic and/or sexual violence within the family we were told that these subjects were out of bounds because they were private and personal matters.

The Party was generally opposed to any sort of politics that compromised (in its mind) the centrality of the class struggle over all others. Thus, the assertions of intersectional analysis, of intertwining systems of domination by race, class, gender, sexuality that has marked a more mature feminist scholarship but was already evident in the 1970s and 1980s, was rejected out of hand. In this regard, I think that Martin Duberman's essay on "The Divided Left: Identity Politics versus Class" is on the mark.<sup>7</sup>

The continuing spiritual, political and historical analysis of sexuality and of the queer community is a deeply worthwhile and welcome project. Examining the historical record, especially in the Socialist and Communist movements, is of great benefit in critically shifting our understanding of those movements, and of the particular contributions made by the queer community. Christopher Phelps' discovery of H.L. Small's document "Socialism and Sex" is a wonderful one, and he provides a historical context consonant with many of my own experiences in the Communist Party. In continuing to review the archival record with a queer sensibility we might well discover many gems buried in darkened closets. We come from a long line of courageous, inspired, wounded, crazy, beautiful, and talented people who have waited a long time for proper and respectful recognition. Beyond adding the historical contributions of such individuals, the continuing excavations will surely queer the history itself. This process has already begun. May it continue!

Note: This article draws substantially on a paper for a panel on "Queering the Left in U.S. History" at the American Studies Association National Conference, Oct. 13, 2006. Many thanks to Aaron Lecklider for inviting me to participate. The references to my own work, including unpublished papers and letters, are located in the Bettina Aptheker Archive, Special Collections, McHenry Library, University of California, Santa Cruz.

## Footnotes

1. According to Victor Navasky, Robbins was rumored to have testified because HUAC investigators threatened to reveal he was gay. Robbins denies this, although his demeanor before HUAC, says Navasky, had an aura of social blackmail, Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names*, (N.Y.: Viking, 1980) p. 75.
2. Ellen Kay Trimberger, "Women in the Old and New Left: The Evolution of a Politics of Personal Life," *Feminist Studies*, fall, 1979, p. 438.
3. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Alderson Story: My Life As A Political Prisoner*, (N.Y.:International Publishers, 1963) 54-56.
4. Helen C. Camp, *Iron In Her Soul: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and the American Left* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1995) 129-30.
5. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *I Speak My Own Piece* (N.Y.: Masses and Mainstream Publishers, 1955) 270-71.
6. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago press, second ed., 1997) 232.
7. Martin Duberman, *Left Out: The Politics of Exclusion* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002).