

Left-Wing Homosexuality: Emancipation, Sexual Liberation, and Identity Politics

Socialism without fucking is dull and lifeless.

– The heroine, *WR: The Mysteries of the Organism*,
a 1971 film directed by Dusan Makavejev.

The history of the relationship between "the homosexual question," to use an old-fashioned phrase, and the left is yet to be written. And when it is, the story will be a difficult and complicated one to tell. One reason for that is that there are many different "lefts" and "homosexual questions" and the strands of these different threads are connected to one another and intertwined in very diverse ways. As a topic "the homosexual question" includes everything from sexual freedom to emancipation and civil rights. But even the terms for homosexuality—that is, same-sex desire and those who identify with it—and its political themes reflect the constantly shifting historical meanings of same-sex desire: the third sex, homophile, gay, gay and lesbian, queer, and most recently, glbtq. Every set of terms implies radically different assumptions about desire and sexual identity, as well as gender roles and identities; about the role of biology, culture and psychological development; and about the political significance of same-sex desire.

Then there are many ways that left and progressive positions in relation to homosexuality have evolved. One is the positions taken by organized socialist and left-wing groups (for example, the Socialist Workers Party or Democratic Socialists of America), another are those left political

perspectives that emerged within homosexual communities (*Gay Left* magazine, *Gay Community News*). But there are also other left perspectives that have impinged on homosexual issues, such as that of the libertarian and anarchist left (Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman) or the Freudian left (Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse). But this list comes nowhere near to exhausting the possibilities. I will sketch a crude map of some of these overlapping and often discontinuous historical currents.

The Socialist Traditions

THE FIGHT FOR ACCEPTANCE of homosexuality and political recognition of homosexuals' right to sexual freedom has a long lineage on the left and can be traced back to political movements and activists on the left in Germany, Great Britain and the United States.

The trial of Oscar Wilde for sodomy sparked many homosexuals and progressives to undertake intellectual and political defenses of homosexuality. In the years following Oscar Wilde's trial, a number of socialists in Germany and England began to champion homosexual rights. Wilde himself wrote a series of essays on political-aesthetic themes that implicitly defended homosexuality, the most famous of which was "The Soul of Man under Socialism." Between the time of Wilde's trial (1895) and World War I, Edward Carpenter, a leading author on sexuality and socialism, wrote about homosexuality, gender, and identity in *The Intermediate Sex* and defended feminism and homosexuality in his best-selling book, *Love's Coming of Age*.

One of the first and most significant connections between the cause of homosexual rights and political movements on the left emerged in Germany at the end of the 19th century. The Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (Wissenschaftlich-Humantitäres Komitee), the first homosexual rights movement, founded in Germany by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1897, was closely allied with the Social Democratic Party, the leading German

socialist party.

In the United States, political activists on the left were often among the earliest proponents of homosexual rights. During the first decade of the twentieth-century, the great anarchist and feminist leader Emma Goldman argued for the acceptance of homosexuals in her speeches and writings.

During World War II, the well-known poet Robert Duncan published the first political analysis of the status of homosexuals in American society in Dwight MacDonald's non-sectarian leftist/anarchist journal *Politics* (August 1944). After World War II the first efforts to organize homosexuals were undertaken—in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York—by war veterans and by members, acting privately, of the Communist Party USA. The homophile movement that emerged in the 1950s was founded by former members of the Communist Party who drew upon their organizing skills to establish the first gay rights organization, the Mattachine Society.

Sexual Revolution and the Left

THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION OF THE 1960s AND 70s played a major role in the emergence of a sexual politics more closely aligned to the left. Three major political-cultural shifts closely allied with the radical politics of the '60s and '70s reconfigured American sexual mores. One was the explosion of youth culture (and the student political movements) that stimulated the thirst of young men and women for sexual experience before marriage; another was the emergence of feminism and the women's movement at the end of the sixties; and lastly was the gay liberation movement's dramatic Stonewall rebellion in 1969. At the same time, changes in the social forms organizing sexuality and gender relations—for example, invention of the birth control pill, large-scale entry of married women into the labor force, decline of the family wage, increased divorced rates, and the emergence of a new consumerism—played a role in the sexual revolution.

But the sexual revolution was an immense and contradictory process, often not very obvious, stretching out over the life span of two generations. It was the historical culmination of processes begun long before World War II and it continued to produce significant changes in the decades that followed. It radically altered the meaning of the cultural and social patterns that constitute our lives as gendered and sexual human beings. In time, the sexual revolution also provoked a profound and powerful counter-revolution—the religious fundamentalist right—that continues to wage a battle against the forces and over the issues (homosexuality, abortion, sex education, and non-marital sexuality) that originally ignited the revolution.

The exhilaration, the sense of freedom and the utopian impulse that underlay it is often forgotten today. Even those who contributed to it directly—hippies, rock musicians, anti-war activists, leftist revolutionaries, feminists, and lesbian and gay activists—sometimes felt that it was irrelevant, perhaps dangerous, misguided, or even misogynist. But the sexual revolution shared the same sense of energy, adventure, and utopianism that the political and cultural movements did.

The Freudian Left

FREUD ARGUED THAT "PERVERSE" SEXUAL desires, which was how he labeled all non-reproductive forms of sexual behavior, for example, kissing or oral sex, were incompatible with a stable social order; instead, they must be transformed, through repression and sublimation, into forms of energy more compatible with "civilized society." In his early work, Freud saw the costs of sexual repression, but he also believed that the libidinal energies were powerful and disruptive forces. However, toward the end of his life, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he came to believe that sexual repression and sublimation were necessary to the survival of modern society.

One of his students, Wilhelm Reich, drew a more radical

conclusion—that sexual expression (primarily, the orgasm) was natural and that social control of libidinal energies by the family, conservative sexual morality, and the state was destructive. Reich believed that sexual repression profoundly distorted psychological development and led to authoritarian behavior (fascism).

Reich was committed to "sexual revolution" as the fundamental change necessary to promote mental health—by ending, among other things, the double standard as applied to women and by eliminating the deleterious impact of enforced sexual abstinence on adolescents. Reich argued that all neuroses were accompanied by a disturbance of genitality and that damned up sexual energy was the cause of neurotic symptoms. While he recognized that sexuality had non-genital aspects, Reich stressed the unequivocal importance of the orgasm. The capability of achieving an orgasm—the release of sexual energy—marked the difference between sickness and health, and a true orgasm resulted in the complete release of all damned-up sexual excitation through involuntary pleasurable contractions of the body.

Long active on the left, Reich also contended that progressive political change was doomed to failure unless it was accompanied by the abolition of sexual repression. "To define freedom is the same as to define sexual health," he wrote. Yet Reich believed that homosexuality was a neurotic form of sexual behavior, a product of sexual repression that could "cured" by healthy heterosexual orgasms.

In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Marxist theorist Herbert Marcuse sought to develop the emancipatory potential of Freud's theories. He argued for the possibility of "non-repressive sublimation" which would allow for new forms of work based on non-alienated labor as well as the creation of new kinds of libidinal communities. Marcuse saw the "perversions" as the champions of the pleasure principle; they upheld sexuality as an end in itself. He claimed that "they

thus place themselves outside the domination of the performance principle and challenge its very foundation." He saw "narcissism" and "homosexuality" as examples of revolutionary sexualities which resisted the restriction of Eros to procreative sexuality. He championed "polymorphous perversity," a sexuality not narrowly focused on any specific object or activity.

However, by 1964, Marcuse was increasingly concerned that advanced industrial society had made sexual liberation impossible—not through intensified repression, but by harnessing "de-sublimated" energies through increased productivity and mass consumption. Instead, the de-sublimated sexuality released by the sexual revolution was channeled into commercialized forms of advertising and entertainment, and institutionalized forms of aggression, and it was isolated from broader forms of erotic life. The capitalist economic system had successfully harnessed the liberated libidinal energies to increase productivity and to generate increased consumption through the use of sex appeal in marketing, rather than by encouraging new social forms of erotic communities or pleasant and fulfilling work environments.

Yet the process of sexual revolution during the '60s and '70s undermined many of the social structures of sexual repression and led to new social patterns, attitudes, and ways of sexually interacting—this took place both through individual actions and through those undertaken by the various social movements dedicated to sexual liberation. The Freudian tradition—and both Reich and Marcuse worked in that tradition—had failed to anticipate such an historical process. John Gagnon and William Simon, two sociologists working at the Kinsey Institute, developed a way of thinking that reflected the "deep structure" of experience during the '60s and '70s. Gagnon and Simon developed the view that sexual behavior was a process of learning, one that is possible, not because of instinctual drives or physiological requirements, but because

it is embedded in complex social scripts that are specific to particular locations in culture and history. Their approach stressed the significance of individual agency and cultural symbols in the conduct of our sexual activities. They had redefined sexuality from being the combined product of biological drives and social repression into one of creative social initiative and symbolic action.

Freud and Marcuse had assumed that society regulated perverse sexual energies primarily through repression and/or sublimation, but the success of the sexual revolution showed the weakness of their hypothesis. By the end of the '70s Michel Foucault argued, like Gagnon and Simon, that the proliferation of discourses on sex—whether the theories and ideas of psychiatry, medicine, or statistics, the patterns of social interaction, or popular cultural belief—stimulates the development of certain sexualities. In his *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault showed that certain late-eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century discourses (such as medicine and psychiatry) articulated a series of pathological sexual stereotypes that exerted a tremendous influence up through the twentieth century: the masturbating child, the hysterical woman, the Malthusian couple (who practiced birth control), and the homosexual. Through the construction of these "identities," society is able to govern what would otherwise be an uncontrollable underground sexuality. Thus sexual revolution and its discourses of sexual liberation, in Foucault's theory, both emancipate those who are stigmatized for their sexuality and facilitate the governing of these newly emancipated identities.

It was one of Foucault's most bitter truths that every socially institutionalized form of sexual liberation only furthered disciplinary and normalizing processes that controlled sexual expression and behavior. Yet he also believed that only the active struggle for the freedom to explore "our bodies and pleasures" allows us to also resist,

modify or restructure the disciplinary and normalizing mechanisms that shape our sexuality.

The Gay Left

MODERN HOMOSEXUAL POLITICS dates itself from the Stonewall riots of 1969, when a police raid on a Greenwich Village bar called the Stonewall Inn provoked a series of riots that mobilized drag queens, street hustlers, lesbians and gay men, many of whom had been politicized by the movement against the war in Vietnam. Many early participants in the movements for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people's rights had been involved in movements of the 1960s—the civil rights movements, the anti-war movement, the student movement, and the feminist movement.

The first political organization formed in wake of the Stonewall riots was the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), named in honor of the National Liberation Front, the Vietnamese resistance movement, and as a gesture toward the unity of the struggles of blacks, the poor, the colonized in the Third World, and women. One early flyer, distributed in the Bay Area in early 1970, announced that "the Gay Liberation Front is a nation-wide coalition of revolutionary homosexual organizations creating a radical Counter Culture within the homosexual lifestyles. Politically it's part of the radical 'Movement' working to suppress and eliminate discrimination and oppression against homosexuals in industry, the mass media, government, schools, and churches."

In the period immediately after the Stonewall riots, the gay and lesbian movement did not at first focus on the question of identity, or even strictly on civil rights—though black civil rights was, most certainly, on the political horizon—but on sexual liberation. The sexual revolution had been underway since the early '60s and that, along with the student anti-war movement, which had mobilized millions of Americans against the war in Vietnam, influenced how gay activists framed their

political struggles. Sexuality was defined as a central political issue. One early radical group, the Red Butterfly, GLF's "cell" of Marxist intellectuals, invoked Herbert Marcuse: "Today the fight for Eros, the fight for life, is the political fight."

In the early 1970s, many political discussion and consciousness-raising groups in the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Argentina, and Brazil sought to create a synthesis between Gay Liberation and Marxism. In a number of instances, these discussions took place in or on the fringes of established political parties and organizations.

In the autumn of 1975, a publication called *Gay Left* (1975-1980) appeared, published by a collective in Britain. More than any other political grouping around the project of creating a synthesis of Gay Liberation and Marxism, the Gay Left group produced an ambitious and theoretically coherent argument about the ways in which power shaped the notions of homosexuality and produced sustained sexual oppression.

Over the next five years, the Gay Left collective sought to articulate a radical politics of the left in which the gains of the women's and gay movements would be fully integrated. Drawing on the work of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, Sigmund Freud, and Michel Foucault (whose theories they anticipated to some degree), they wrote about the development of sexual oppression under capitalism, the forms of political resistance to it, the integration of sexual politics into political organizations on the left, the nature of the new gay and lesbian culture, the role of consumerism, and the emergence of lesbian and gay political identities.

Many members of the Gay Left collective became influential writers and thinkers in the decades since: Jeffrey Weeks on the history of sexuality; Frank Mort on the history of health, medicine, and the regulation of sexuality; Richard Dyer on film and gay culture; Simon Watney on the impact of media and

on the politics of HIV/AIDS; and Bob Cant on the integration of sexual politics into the left. Writers like Mary McIntosh (in the UK), Dennis Altman (from Australia) and Amber Hollibaugh (from the U.S.) made their own contributions to the Gay Left perspective.

One of the most significant intellectual contributions of the *Gay Left* group was a historical account of the emergence of homosexual identity. The approach combined the sociological approach of "symbolic interactionism" with Marxist analysis. Weeks, Kenneth Plummer, and other gay left historians identified the specific social and economic conditions that permitted the growth of a homosexual subculture and its psychological-political outgrowth—the modern lesbian and gay male identity. They saw sexual identity as the result of a historical process, not a natural process. Jeffrey Weeks organized *Coming Out*, an early book on the history of homosexual politics in Britain, around that process.

In the late 1970s, centers of gay left thinking emerged in the North America—among the writers and editors of *The Body Politics* in Toronto (James Steakley, John D'Emilio, Tom Waugh); around the *Gay Community News* in Boston (Michael Bronski, Urvashi Vaid, Sue Hyde, Amy Hoffman, Ellen Herman); in the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project (Amber Hollibaugh, Gayle Rubin, Allan Berube, Jeffrey Escoffier); and in a series of study groups on sexuality in New York City (John D'Emilio, Jonathan Ned Katz, Lisa Duggan, Nan Hunter).

Political Perspectives

IN THE UNITED STATES, the "Gay Left" perspective has repeatedly addressed certain key issues—coalition with other minorities, sexuality, and economic equality.

Since the founding of the GLF, the Gay Left as a political tendency has maintained that political freedom of homosexual and transgendered people must take place within the context of

promoting the rights of women, racial and ethnic minorities, working-class and oppressed people around the world. Differences between this "rainbow" approach and a more "single issue" approach has frequently been the subject of major political debates within the movement. In fact, the demise of the GLF was due to a series of divisions within the organization around this question.

The second central tenet of the Gay Left is sexual freedom—that consenting sexual activity is the basis for the social and political rights of all glbtq people. The early gay and lesbian rights movement emerged in the context of the sexual revolution; so did the early opposition to the gay rights movement, right-wing fundamentalism. The issue of sexuality has also generated an ongoing series of debates within the LGBTQ rights movement—about the rights of sexual minorities such as the leather community, the issue of promiscuity, the role of pornography, and the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

The third issue that the Gay Left has addressed is the "traditional" one of the role of capitalism, social class, and economic forms of oppression. Gay Left writers have explored how the market has shaped the identities of LGBTQ people. In addition, they have criticized how large corporations have targeted LGBTQ communities, and promoted narrow standards of beauty, restricted social needs and fostered a limited social expression. New formations on the Gay Left have emerged to address the inequalities of income and opportunity that affect LGBTQ people from minorities and working-class backgrounds.

Footnotes