

LGBT Political Cul-de-sac: Make a U-Turn

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Electoral Cul-de-sac

ON THE EVE OF 2009, it is impossible to speak of a national gay liberation movement, as that would entail active groups of people mobilizing at the grassroots to achieve common aims. There has not been a national march on Washington to demand civil rights, to say nothing of liberation, since 1993.¹ The vibrant twenty-fifth anniversary march commemorating the 1969 Stonewall rebellion in New York City the following year drew an estimated one million people, but these actions were not used by mainstream gay organizations with money and powerful connections to build grassroots movements as a means of winning concrete gains.

The largest and most visible LGBT group is the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), which from its inception has been a lobbying group that touts corporate sponsors such as American Airlines, Citibank, and IBM. There are, of course, small but important local initiatives to stop reactionary legislation or fight incidents of violence against LGBT people. But these are usually defensive battles, disconnected, and short-lived — regardless of the intentions of many committed activists.

With the virtual collapse of an organized left over the last thirty years, the quest for LGBT liberation has been abandoned as impractical, undesirable, or just plain Utopian. Under attack by a confident right, most existing LGBT groups struggle to challenge bigotry and reactionary legislation, or provide social services to gay teens under siege or people with HIV/AIDS in a climate of slashed social services. Discussions about the origins of gay oppression inside the nuclear family, class society's construction of strict gender roles, and the material and ideological connection between LGBT and women's oppression exist today almost exclusively on the margins of the left and in the classrooms of a few radical professors. These ideological and organizational weaknesses feed off each other and amount to a lowering of expectations and demands.

This political retreat has been decades in the making. The combative gay liberation movement that flourished in the years following the Stonewall Rebellion was effectively absorbed into the Democratic Party by the mid-1970s. The fact that the last march on Washington was scheduled *after* the 1992 presidential election, rather than as a show of force beforehand to pressure the candidate Bill Clinton, was itself a concession to the notion that LGBT activists ought not expose the Democrats to gay scrutiny lest their broader appeal be tarnished. What was tragedy under Clinton became almost farcical with Barack Obama's rise. No prominent LGBT organization demanded that the candidate even defend same-sex marriage. And Obama offered nothing but verbal palliatives on LGBT issues alongside explicit opposition to same-sex marriage. Lack of independence from the Democrats has left LGBT activists in a self-defeating cul-de-sac, giving politicians an official pass to maintain homophobic and oppressive policies.

Socialists and LGBT Liberation

IN THIS CONTEXT, there is an urgent need to rebuild a national movement for LGBT liberation—one based on struggle, not collaboration with the Democrats. It is high time to revive and further develop the Marxist tradition as the theoretical basis for such a movement. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels lived in the Victorian era, many decades before the notion of gay liberation took form. They did, however, provide the theoretical tools to wage a successful battle against all forms of oppression.

Quite simply, Marxism is about all the oppressed and exploited taking control of society and running it in their own interests. Socialists view oppression as the result of the division of society into classes. Because the ruling class under capitalism is inevitably a small minority of the population, it must use the institutional and ideological tools at its disposal to divide the mass of the population against itself in order to prevent the majority of exploited peoples of the world from uniting and rising in unison to take back what is rightfully theirs. Homophobic, sexist, racist, nationalist, and other divisions in modern society reflect the needs of the class that owns and controls capital. The Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass put it aptly when he said of the slaveholders' strategy against slaves and poor whites, "They divided both to conquer each."²

Much work remains to be done to develop an explicitly socialist approach to LGBT oppression, but Marx's method provides the basis for doing so. As historical materialists who believe that people's behavior and attitudes are shaped by their material surroundings, it follows that socialists are constructionists when it comes to the question of sexuality. In other words, sexuality is a fluid and not fixed behavior. The historical fact of the creation of homosexual and heterosexual identities in the latter half of the nineteenth century (and the emergence of trans-sexuality in the twentieth) attests to this outlook. If we lived in a truly free society, in which people were neither oppressed by their sexual identity, nor were they even defined by it, we could begin to see how a liberated human sexuality would evolve and express itself.

Contrary to the dominant myth of socialism prevalent in the academy, Marxists do not "privilege" class over race, gender, or sexual oppression. In fact, socialism cannot achieve the liberation of the exploited without the liberation of the oppressed. As any cursory look at the modern workforce will show, class unity is inconceivable so long as these divisions are allowed to fester among working-class people who are themselves Black, transgender, immigrant, and members of every other oppressed group.

LGBT people — like women and Blacks — experience a special oppression in that they can be denied jobs and housing (often legally) and are subject to verbal and physical harassment, as well as being treated as second-class citizens when it comes to marriage, health care, and even experiencing daily humiliations like being accosted in public toilets for appearing to be the "wrong" gender.

But unlike Blacks and women, who perform certain social and economic functions for capitalism, LGBT people do not perform a specific productive or reproductive role. Racism against African Americans, deliberately stoked from above, is the historic ideological division inside the U.S. working class, key to the maintenance of corporate rule. It is therefore inconceivable that a revolutionary socialist movement could effectively challenge the exploitation of workers without taking on oppressions, including sexual and gender, that are essential means of workers' exploitation.

Because socialists oppose oppression of every sort, no matter what class of people is affected, they have been found in the forefront of struggles for sexual liberation from the nineteenth century to the present day. Christopher Phelps and Jeffrey Escoffier discussed some examples of historical links between socialists and the gay movement in the Summer 2008 edition of *New Politics*. There are many more instances, of which I'll touch on just a few.

The first politician anywhere in the world to speak for the rights of gays on the floor of a national legislature was August Bebel, leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), who addressed the German Reichstag on January 13, 1898.³ Not only did leading SPD members such as Karl Kautsky and Finance Minister Rudolph Hilferding sign a petition demanding the repeal of the German anti-sodomy law, Paragraph 175, but they also helped circulate the petition and encouraged thousands to add their names.

The SPD's newspaper, *Vorwärts*, popularized gay issues in its pages. In preparation for a parliamentary debate on the issue in 1905, SPD member August Thiele did research using works from the first openly gay movement, the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. Included in his thirty-four pages of speeches in the Reichstag is this insightful comment, which many members of today's U.S. Congress would never admit: Anti-gay legislation is the legacy of "priestly cruelty and intolerance" that "reminds one of the period of the Middle Ages, of that time when witches were burned, heretics were tortured, and proceedings against the dissenters were conducted with the wheel and gallows."⁴

There are some who try to denigrate the enormity of advances for LGBT people in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution.⁵ But facts are stubborn things. In 1917, all laws against homosexuality were struck down by the new revolutionary government along with the rest of the tsarist criminal code; consensual sex was deemed a private matter and not only were gays free to live as they chose without state intervention, but the Soviet courts approved of marriage between homosexuals and, extraordinarily, there are even recorded instances of sex change operations in the 1920s. In other words, the revolution accomplished this grandiose social-sexual leap nearly ninety years before the Supreme Court of the United States finally struck down all sodomy laws.⁶

The Russian workers' government achieved reforms that most modern LGBT people still fight for around the world. This is all the more remarkable considering that the revolution of 1917 represented the victory of mass struggle led by workers — but in a largely peasant society ideologically shaped by religious superstition and semi-feudal relations. Nevertheless, in the few short years of its existence, the Russian Revolution upended all previous structures of society, including the most intimate relations between people.

Given the depth of historical distortion, it is worth quoting from the 1923 pamphlet, "The Sexual Revolution in Russia," written by Dr. Grigorii Batkis, director of the Moscow Institute of Social Hygiene: "Concerning homosexuality, sodomy, and various other forms of sexual gratification, which are set down in European legislation as offenses against public morality— Soviet legislation treats these exactly the same as so-called 'natural' intercourse. All forms of sexual intercourse are private matters."⁷

The Myth of Anti-gay Socialism

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION REPRESENTED a rather extraordinary statement of principles for any society, no less one that in the midst of the First World War undertook a working-class revolution — and afterward endured three years of civil war during which millions died, starvation was rampant, and industrialization was catapulted back to the level of the eighteenth century. When the Russian Revolution was finally overturned in the late-1920s and replaced with the totalitarian rule of Joseph Stalin, its gains were jettisoned as well.

Despite the revolution's enormous strides toward achieving gay liberation, Stalin's counter-revolutionary legacy has been accepted by most academics as "socialist practice." But the absence of freedoms for LGBT people in the former USSR after the rise of Stalinism — alongside other self-proclaimed Communist societies in Cuba and China—are not examples of socialism's blind spot to the oppression of gays, but Stalinism's betrayal of all workers, and by extension, socialism itself.

Cuba's sexual policies, more than that of any of the other so-called socialist states, have had an enormous impact on the American left, including left-wing LGBT people. The American Empire's five-decade embargo and attempts to overthrow and discredit the Castro regime for its temerity in nationalizing former U.S. properties in Cuba, while thumbing its nose at U.S. imperial arrogance, has rightly fueled sympathies from the left. However, it is one thing to oppose imperialist aggression

toward Cuba— as any leftist must—and quite another to paint its economic and social policies as socialist.

While Cubaphiles of the American left argue that all progress achieved there is the fruit of revolutionary developments, this explanation is incompatible with the facts. Nearly fifty years have passed since the revolution initiated the open repression of LGBT people. Homosexuality in Cuba was not illegal prior to the revolution, but afterward LGBT people were openly repressed and even sent to concentration camps from 1965-68 or forced into exile with other “criminals” and “scum” in the Mariel boat exodus of 125,000 Cubans in 1980. It is estimated that up to 60,000 LGBT people, mostly gay men, were sent to the Military Units to Aid Production (UMAPs) where they were forced to cut sugarcane or marble surrounded by barbed wire under a tropical sun for twelve to sixteen hours a day in order to meet unrealistic production levels.⁸ Decades later, the worst aspects of Cuba’s anti-gay policies have finally been mitigated, but the refusal of the democratic right to organize any independent movement for sexual liberation persists. As socialist Paul D’Amato argues: “Oppression is not the product of an unfinished revolution; oppression continues to exist in Cuba because exploitation continues.... A society that has not liberated the working class is incapable of achieving the full liberation of the oppressed either. The condition of one is the condition of the other.”⁹

The absence of much scholarship linking modern gay struggles with the far left is an expression of both the withered state of the left and the political biases of many LGBT activists and academics, who largely turned toward a politics of identity under the influence of postmodernism during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This theoretical shift represented a rejection of the working class as the agent of change, translating into a pessimistic strategy for change coming through the actions of autonomous identity groups across class lines. Queer theory that has developed within the academy in recent years shares a common postmodern perspective with identity politics, and nothing has yet risen to replace the identity politics perspective on a broad scale — despite abundant criticism from queer theorists. It will probably take the reemergence of class struggle to retire some of the hostility to work-ing-class politics and the belief that mass struggle and organization are obsolete — ideas that dominate some sections of the LGBT left.

Also troublesome are the pseudo-radical notions regarding assimilation. There is an unwritten assumption behind some of the antiassimilationist chatter about gay marriage that conceives of culturally eclectic and sexually adventurous LGBT folks being sucked into the Norman Rockwellian lives of vanilla sex and picket fences, which all straight couples supposedly lead. In this snooty chimera of reality, sexual minorities are put forward as more evolved members of the species from heterosexual fossils, who, poor souls, pair off and lead lives of quiet desperation. Aside from this moralistic caricature of heterosexuals as wholesale defenders of bourgeois norms, this conception of LGBT folks smacks of Hollywood fantasy upper-class gays and lesbians, not the real lives of the working-class majority. Any truly oppositional politics must stand unapologetically in defense of the right to same-sex marriage — as leftists did sixty years ago with mixed-race marriage — despite critiques of the state, religion, and monogamy.

Where Do We Go from Here?

DESPITE THE SORRY STATE OF THE FAR LEFT and the low level of LGBT fightback and organization, there are reasons to be hopeful about the prospects for rebuilding a left and advancing struggles for sexual liberation. The global economic meltdown has created a massive ideological opening for the left to insert itself into the debate about why the free-market system is in free fall and how this is connected not simply to bad neoliberal policies, but the inability of capitalism to satisfy the needs of the very workers who produce profit. Naturally, American workers have mixed consciousness—but alongside backward ideas there is a rising disgust with the nasty culture wars of

the recent past.

At this writing, one week before the 2008 election, it appears likely that a Black man will be elected president in a country built on slavery. Despite Obama's conservatism and adherence to capitalist priorities, his election will indicate a shift to the left in popular consciousness. There are positive indicators regarding LGBT politics too. Fifty-eight percent of Americans oppose a ban on gay marriage, 75 percent believe gays should be allowed to serve openly in the military, and a May 2007 Gallup poll shows 89 percent of the population opposes discrimination against gays in the workplace. These are startlingly good numbers given the equivocation (at best) from the Democrats and near-absence of any activist movement. Imagine the impact on consciousness if workers' opinions were not just shifting on the basis of lived experience alongside the rising ranks of out co-workers and family members, but inside of organizations and struggles where sexual stereotypes were confidently contested.

Two generations of Americans have grown up now without having direct experience of mass struggle, which feeds cynicism. As a lesbian Marxist who came of age in the neo-Cold War, AIDS-ravaged 1980s, I too am a member of the post-Stonewall generation who encounters suspicion that struggle and organization are anachronisms. But reality is forcing those alternatives. I would caution leftists against narrowing our sights, presuming that LGBT battles will or should necessarily rise independently of wider outrage against expanding wars and a collapsing economy. Sexual minorities, after all, are directly affected by these unfolding catastrophes and our demands can and must be brought into broader battles that will eventually erupt and can be shaped by leftists.

The absence over the last decades of a collaborative, organized, and vocal left that mobilizes independently of the Democratic Party has played a role in leading LGBT people into the current political cul-de-sac. As with real world dead-ends, the only way out is a U-turn. The rebuilding of an independent left is now possible, with sexual liberation as an explicit component of its class struggle agenda.

Footnotes

1. A controversial and non-political HRC-sponsored Millennium March on Washington for Equality took place on April 30, 2000. This music concert and marketing fair was boycotted by Pride at Work, NGLTF, National Association of Black and White Men Together, as well as virtually every other progressive and left-wing gay organization and publication for being a "a profit-making business enterprise masquerading as a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender civil rights rally." HRC executive director Elizabeth Birch said of the "march": "For a lot of people who dreamed of a different kind of world, the very notion that the Human Rights Campaign was involved in calling for this march was an anathema." Quoted in Joshua Gamson, "Whose Millennium March?", *Nation*, March 30, 2000.
2. Quoted in W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*(New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 299.
3. John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)* (Ojai, California: Times Change Press, 1995), 11.
4. *Ibid.*, 68.
5. See Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*(New York: Free Press, 1995) and Gregory Carleton, *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia*(Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2005) for examples of a few of the more trenchant attacks on these gains. See Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) for excellent, never-before-published material on the revolution and homosexuality.

6. The U.S. Supreme Court struck down all sodomy laws in a 6-3 vote in *Lawrence et al v. Texas* on June 26, 2003.
7. Lauritsen and Thorstad, 71-73.
8. Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), Chapter 3.
9. D'Amato, "Race and Sex in Cuba," *International Socialist Review* Issue 51, January-February 2007, 57.