Queer Reflections

written by David McReynolds | June 14, 2009

LET ME USE MY SPACE in part simply as memory, reflections by a homosexual whose sexual orientation, at 78, is academic.

Christopher Phelps certainly opened an interesting chink in the history of the left with his article. It is probably as impossible for those under 40 to grasp what the social landscape was like for homosexuals in 1950 as it is for many young Blacks to believe there was a time when night clubs in Manhattan were segregated, and if you were Black and traveled south of the Mason Dixon line, you had to change to a "colored only" car. In the 1950s Allen Ginsberg was the first American "in polite company" who was an admitted homosexual. (After a poetry reading in Chicago sometime in the 1950s, a woman came up to him and said, "Mr. Ginsberg, I love your poetry. But tell me, why is there so much about homosexuality in it?" To which Allen responded, "Madam, it is because I am queer.")

Why did the left ignore this issue? Why not? Sexual "deviation" was then a matter for the obscure, bohemian margins of society. Particularly, it seems to me, the Marxist Left tends to be rigidly "macho," conformist on social norms, while radical on political views. And Marxists, because they are part of the society, tend to accept the norms of that society, even while in some areas setting their shoulders "against the norm." Perhaps it was precisely because Marxists were challenging so many things and had, so to speak, so much on their plate, that they showed little imagination in the sexual byways. Nor was Marx alone — Freud, while not treating homosexuality as "wrong," did consider it an aberration.

Invisible

HOWEVER POORLY THE LEFT DEALT WITH racism, it did try to deal with it. On something as "socially acceptable" as anti-Semitism (prior to the Holocaust), the left engaged in courageous battle. But one of the reasons homosexuality remained beyond the pale was that to a great extent it was invisible (it still is, of which more in a moment). Jews could be identified, as could racial groups. But homosexuals were, it was assumed, those rare and obvious creatures with touches of makeup, the slight lisp, the gentle sense of fashion, the Oscar Wildes of the world, devoted to a love that dare not speak its name.

As a kid in Los Angeles I used to read one of the comics — Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. While others were looking at the sexy Sheena, I was drawn to the half naked guys who were her cohorts. I worried about my "tendencies," read what little I could (no internet then), hoped that as adolescence passed I'd find girls exciting. Never happened. I had nothing against girls, but it was the slim young men my own age who drew my attention.

The how and why I "came out" are not important here (only the date is still clear — May 25, 1949). In those days gay men would ask one another "when did you come out?" in the way one butterfly might ask another "when did you learn to fly?" It was certainly a lonely time. I was very lucky in that the radical group I hung with at UCLA was as much bohemian as it was radical. It was accepting — though only a couple of us in that loose and wonderful group were gay. I could, therefore, be myself as well as take an active part in the Socialist Party.

I wasn't given to effeminate behavior. I might not have been the butchest guy on campus, but my

sexuality wasn't an issue. It was after I came out that I began to realize just how many men are homosexual. Is it one in ten? It certainly isn't less than that. When Kinsey reported that 37 percent of men had had homosexual experiences after puberty the only question I had was why just 37 percent? Were the rest not good looking enough, or did they just miss the odd encounter, because, if we discuss sexuality, and if we go by the common experiences of most homosexual men, it is clear that a hell of a lot of straight guys had such experiences. Young men are open to almost any sexual adventure. We have an entire field of sexuality that is largely invisible. By the time men are 25 their sexuality has become pretty defined and some of their sexual past is simply forgotten (or repressed).

While one could never ignore the African in a white society, or the Jew in a Christian society, nothing was easier than to assume that the only homosexuals were those who were "obvious." (It would be my guess that, at best, only one in every six homosexual men are in any way obvious.) Homosexuals were, for the most part, invisible — even to each other, which was why once we "came out" we discovered an entire world we had never known existed. Homosexuals are not defined by race or class, appearing both as common criminals and J. Edgar Hoover, as truck drivers and actors, carpenters and dancers.

"You aren't one of them, are you?"

I EXPERIENCED LITTLE BIAS WITHIN the Socialist Party. The late, and nearly great, Samuel H. Friedman (a Jew who kept kosher and whose wife was an Irish Catholic) said to me "I've heard some nasty things about you, Comrade McReynolds, but I don't believe them." Dwight MacDonald once said "You aren't one of those, are you?" But it was never used against me except by some of those around Max Shachtman (I always thought it ironic that Max ended up with Tom Kahn, whose homosexuality was an open secret, as one of the few who remained on his side to the end). Within the War Resisters League (WRL), where I worked on staff for 39 years, it was never an issue, not because there was some secret gay cabal in the WRL, but because the radical tradition of the secular pacifists was much more profoundly radical than that of most Marxists. Bayard Rustin wasn't hired by WRL because he was gay (or black) but because he was incredibly talented. (Let it be noted, as part of the historical record, and as a reminder that even great leaders have feet of clay, that A.J. Muste, so clearly a mentor for me, resigned from the executive committee of WRL in protest against the hiring of Bayard, because he felt Rustin's record of making indiscreet homosexual passes would threaten the organization. And Bayard himself, in 1969, when the WRL magazine *WIN* had a "gay liberation" issue, with pieces from Paul Goodman, Allen Ginsberg and myself, phoned Ralph DiGia to say, "you guys are going to have to fire David — he will destroy the organization." I never held this against Bayard, understanding only too well what his own experience had taught him.)

My personal take on the homosexual issue is controversial. I don't think homosexuality is "normal" any more than I think my brown eyes are "normal" or my height, of 6' 3" is "normal." Normal is a matter of a norm within a society. Natural is another matter altogether — homosexuality is as natural as any other form of sexual expression. I have found it hard to get used to transsexuals, etc. because those are things that happened long after I discovered who I was. Nor did I understand cross-dressing (except that I've learned many transvestites are not homosexual at all, but quite straight). I believe the curve of nature is to reproduce, and for this purpose a good bit of heterosexuality is essential. But in the whole of the animal kingdom there is always, also, a remarkable display of homosexuality. It ain't the norm, but it is very natural.

The task of socialists who seek "the liberation of all" must be to understand that this must include all the byways of human sexuality. The only exceptions are forms of sexuality that harm people against their will. Sadomasochism is neither straight nor homosexual — it permeates much of our society. So long as it is consensual we have to accept it, even if we don't understand it. Children are off- limits not because they are innocent (Freud would be amused at the idea that children were ever really

innocent) but because they too easily become victims.

Once I asked a group of young gays and lesbians what they thought about the movement for "inter-generational" sex. They laughed and said they noted that the magazines pushing this view all seemed to carry illustrations of young boys — never of old men. The kids were right. They had put their finger on why there need to be legal limits. But even conceding this, those limits are often unreal — whether in homosexual or heterosexual relations. It is hard to persuade me that a sexual liaison between a 16 year old and a 25 year old is some perversion.

A quick note on gay rights and the presence of gays within left organizations. We have always been there. I remember in the early 1950s that in California one friend had been expelled from the Socialist Youth League (linked to Shachtman's Independent Socialist League) because he was gay. I know from talking with Dorothy Healey that there was a similar policy in the Communist Party — they were worried about possible dangers of blackmail. And until fairly recently it was true of both the main Trotskyist groups and of the Maoist groups (Bob Avakian of the Revolutionary Communist Party viewed homosexuality as a disease of capitalism).

The irony, for those of us with any sense of history, is that while the Soviet Union became quite puritanical under Stalin, the Bolsheviks, shortly after taking power, eliminated the laws relating to homosexuality. (And, I might add, they abolished the death penalty).

When the first Gay Pride Parades took place, I joined them, because I felt they needed support. But they are now so large (and commercial) that I don't feel a moral obligation to attend.

On issues such as gay marriage, I am not at all sure if I would have wanted to be married back in the days when this might have made a difference to me (as I said, at 78, some things are academic). But while I might not have made that choice, men and women who are gay and lesbian should have the same right to be unhappy that heterosexual couples have. Why do straights feel that their marriages are threatened if homosexuals get married? How insecure are straights that they are nervous about full rights for gays and lesbians? A person who is comfortable with his or her own sexuality really doesn't care. The only people who are nervous are those who have a deep homosexual streak they are trying to hide. Show me a gay-basher and I'll show you someone just one step away from being queer. (This I know from dangerous personal experience, not theory.)

Finally, I don't think homosexuals need the same kind of concern on the left in the way that racial minorities do, or women, or the working class. In those cases we have groups that are systematically excluded from full rights in society. Ironically, when we come to homosexuals, you have Cardinals and offensive characters such as the late, unlamented Roy Cohn among the brotherhood. One reason that gay witch hunts peter out is that eventually you find too many public figures of wealth and power being tainted.

The Left has done a pretty good job catching up with homosexuality, as it has with gender issues. My own concern is more along traditional socialist lines of class, but when we talk about liberating the oppressed, gays and lesbians are right up there at the top of that agenda, and we should not hesitate to embrace their rights.

Let me close by noting that the tragedy in the "old days" was how often the issue of homosexuality defined people, as if their form of sexual expression was the most important thing about them. I probably have never had an original idea, but do recognize one when I see it: Allen Ginsberg put it perfectly when he said that he was not a homosexual poet, but a poet who was homosexual.

Footnotes