Reinventing a Queer Left

written by Peter Drucker | March 14, 2009

AS SEVERAL OF THE PARTICIPANTS in Part I of this symposium noted, the association between lesbians, gays, and the left was a constant through much of the 20th century. It is an open question whether that connection will amount to much in the 21st century. As in many countries, there is a push in the United States today to incorporate lesbians and gays into the prevailing sexual and familial order. Given how that order is structured under capitalism, probably the best it can offer us is second-class citizenship. But the radical left, in its current weakened and marginalized state, is not doing much to expose the lousy deal that queers are being offered or to build an alliance with radical queers who reject it. Unless the left does better in meeting this challenge, a rightward realignment of the lesbian/gay movement could succeed in co-opting the great majority of LGBT people into mainstream Democratic and even Republican politics.

The left-wing sympathies of many lesbians and gays over the past hundred years were not due mainly to what the left was offering them. Several of the contributors to Part I rightly criticized the narrow economic focus and sexual conservatism that characterizes much of the U.S. left even today. For much of the 20th century, most of the U.S. left was at best tolerant or indifferent to lesbians and gays. At its worst — particularly at the high point of Stalinism and other forms of "socialism from above" from the 1930s to the 1950s — much of the left followed the lead of the Soviet Union in associating homosexuality with bourgeois decadence or even fascism. Bettina Aptheker's account of her experience of CP homophobia was all too typical. Even later and further to the left, many Maoists and some admirers of the early Cuban revolution were just as bad.

Despite their bruising experiences with the left, many lesbians and gays persisted in orienting toward it, because they felt they had no choice. They knew that there was no hope at all of tolerance from the Christian-oriented right. A commitment to secular enlightenment played a large part in drawing gay radicals like Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter, and Magnus Hirschfeld toward socialism, as Jeff Escoffier mentions in his article. Their hopes were briefly buoyed by the early experience of the Russian revolution and its decriminalization of homosexuality. Sex radicals like Alexandra Kollontai helped make the early Soviet Union a supporter of the World League for Sex Reform in the 1920s.

This tradition was revived in the 1970s when, as John D'Emilio and Escoffier point out, leftists played a prominent role in the lesbian/gay movement through publications like *Gay Left, Gay Community News*, and *Body Politic*. The first three U.S. national marches for lesbian/gay rights, in 1979, 1987, and 1993, were led by the left, with exemplary democratic decision-making processes and a wide range of progressive demands. While not necessarily representative of the mass of apolitical lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, these platforms did speak for thousands of activists. Urvashi Vaid's tenure as director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force was the apogee of progressive LGBT leadership — which shipwrecked on Clinton's betrayal in his first months in office on the issue of gays in the military.

Rightward

DESPITE VICTORIES FOR LESBIAN/GAY RIGHTS that bucked the general rightward tide, the lesbian/gay left of the 1970s and 80s grew weaker as the left in general went into retreat. Equally important, though barely perceptible at first, were the openings to the right that have gradually become available to mainstream lesbian/gay leaders. The new opportunities for gay moderates and

conservatives were manifest in a sea change that took place in national lesbian/gay politics late in the 1990s. The fourth national march in 2000 marked a drastic change in leadership, style, and program. The right-leaning Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF) and the Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches seized the initiative with a mobilization around the theme "faith and family" that brought hundreds of thousands of lesbians and gays to Washington DC. The LGBTQ left has yet to succeed in winning the initiative back.

D'Emilio has a point when he writes that many lesbians and gays today see the left as inconsequential. The centrality of same-sex marriage as a demand is both a reflection and a cause of this shift. As D'Emilio says, the "single-issue marriage-equality platform" risks becoming "a mobilizing tool for the right." "The right" in this context does not necessarily mean the Republican Party. People for whom defending same-sex marriage is a priority were not likely to vote Republican in 2008, since Obama's position on the issue was a bit better than McCain's: he supported same-sex civil unions, though like McCain he has voiced opposition to same-sex marriage (and like McCain wanted to leave the issue to the states). But support for Obama as a lesser evil on lesbian/gay rights was one aspect of a long retreat from the progressive LGBT activist agenda of the 1970s, 80s and early ‘90s. And it reflected the absence of an adequate queer agenda in the broader political arena.

The shift to the right in the U.S. lesbian/gay movement reflects something deeper than the accidents of party politics. As someone who has been living in the Netherlands for the last 15 years, I may have an easier time detecting some of the changes underway than people back home. 9/11 gave the right in Europe and North America a chance to redefine itself in relation to women and gays. After acting as a not very effective brake on feminist and sexual change for half a century, many rightists suddenly declared themselves defenders of Western enlightenment, women, and even gays against "Islamic fascism." In countries like the Netherlands and Denmark, right-wing forces have shown since 2001 how Islamophobia can be used to win right-wing hegemony in mainstream lesbian/gay organizations. Even in the United States, neocons — the Republican faction least ideologically committed to Christian fundamentalism — have been repackaging themselves as virtual feminists. Now, with the right shaken and divided by the Iraq quagmire, more space is opening up for gay voices in the center and center-right of U.S. politics.[1]

More fundamentally, the rightward shift reflects the impact of a much more unequal society on LGBT communities. The post-Stonewall gay liberation movement of the 1970s emerged in a capitalist class society, of course, but that society was relatively the most egalitarian the United States has seen in the course of the past century. Gay historians have charted the role of mass military service in World War II and mass access to university education in creating a social base for lesbian/gay communities. But by the 1980s, Reaganism, and neoliberal globalization more generally, polarized and divided LGBTQ communities as they polarized and divided the United States as a whole. Mike Davis described 20 years ago in *Prisoners of the American Dream* the rise of a substantial upper-middle-class layer, whose real incomes rose as most working people's real wages declined. Most working people who vote for Republicans or right- wing Democrats may be deluded by Christian evangelism, nationalism, or similar ideological smokescreens; but many upper-middle-class people have an objective stake in the economic agenda of neoliberalism. Some of them make up the base of lesbian/gay organizations like the HRCF.[2]

Some of these people are lost to the left. It is no accident that some of the most influential lesbian/gay organizations in the United States today are indifferent to racism and class exploitation, as Martin Duberman points out. For a significant minority of lesbians and above all gay men, the passage of anti-discrimination and same-sex marriage laws really are the culmination of their steady progress toward a relatively comfortable niche in an unjust system.

Transforming the Family

WHATEVER THE REASONS, the fact is that LGBTQ people are no longer a constituency that the left can take for granted. The right is a more serious contender for their loyalty than it used to be. With the number of open LGBTQs in the United States now far exceeding the number of socialists or other radical leftists, this should matter to radicals. A well thought out, appealing program on sexual politics is not a luxury for the left today, but a necessity.

Fortunately for the left, there are still many queers that the right is not about to integrate, people the radical left should be able to reach. Race and class are obviously crucial factors that divide most LGBT people from HRCF leaders and their ilk. But they are far from the only factors. Not only can the left reach many queers with basic class and antiracist politics; it should also be able to reach out to them specifically with radical, feminist positions on the family and sexuality. Going beyond narrow support for lesbian/gay rights, the left should integrate support for LGBTQ liberation into a comprehensive program for reproductive freedom and socialization of childcare and domestic labor.

Living in the Netherlands, where same-sex marriage has now been legal for almost a decade, makes it easier for me to see that it is *not* the capstone of lesbian/gay equality. In practical terms, rebaptizing legal same-sex partnerships "marriage" got Dutch same-sex couples virtually nothing — just as the legal right to marry in California gave same-sex couples virtually no practical benefits beyond the civil unions previously available to them under California state law. And it has left some forms of discrimination intact.

Consider the situation of lesbian parents. Under Dutch law, if a man and woman are legally married, when the woman gives birth her husband is automatically the child's legal parent. Not so if two women are legally married. The child's non-birth-mother can become a legal parent only by waiting a legally prescribed period of time, hiring a lawyer and applying to a court for adoption. The child's biological father must appear in court if he can be identified — anonymous sperm donorship was banned in the Netherlands about the time same-sex marriage was legalized — and can make the adoption more difficult unless he testifies that the child "has nothing to expect from him as a father."

Admittedly, this may just be a legal wrinkle that will be ironed out in a few years' time. The neoliberal state may be increasingly tolerant of alternative family forms as long as they, like heterosexual nuclear families, shoulder the economic cost of caring for their members' needs. But I suspect that the fundamental interest of the state in a capitalist society — especially the neoliberal lean state — in ensuring the privatized reproduction of the labor force is likely to perpetuate the second-class status of same- sex and single parents. By far the most effective way of ensuring that parents will do the hard, unpaid work of raising children is to rely on the deep-rooted ideological sense of the natural — meaning biological — bond between parent and child. Even as more room opens up for lesbian and gay parenting and other alternative family forms, there are strong pressures to continue to define alternatives as exceptional and conditional.

Understanding this gives the left an angle to tackle the issue of same-sex marriage differently from the right. We should not turn our backs on all the same-sex couples who yearn for marriage equality; as long as there are practical or symbolic benefits to be gained by marrying, same-sex couples should have an equal right to them. But the left can take a transitional approach to the issue, supporting the demand for equality in a way that undermines marriage as an institution. This can be the starting point for the comprehensive "family agenda" that D'Emilio advocates in his contribution. The left can, for example, demand that children be supported by the community as a whole (even Hilary Clinton once said that "it takes a village to raise a child"!); millions of stressed parents should welcome this. We should demand that the rights and responsibilities of social parenthood be

uncoupled from the often questionable fact of biological fatherhood. This would make the left a natural voice not only for all the lesbian mothers who are today denied equal parenting rights, but also for millions of queers who remember how alienating it was to grow up in families structurally defined as straight. The left should also insist that essential social rights like health care and legal residency should not be dependent on marital status, thus making itself the champion of millions of people who are single by circumstance or choice.[3]

A New Queer Left

THE LEFT COULD ALSO WIN A NEW QUEER base by rediscovering radical demands around sexuality. The differentiation within LGBT communities in recent decades has taken place not only along class and political lines, but also along lines of sexuality. While some lesbians and gays have been mastering the arts of dressing — and acting — for success, various sexual minorities who don't identify with the new lesbian/gay respectability have been defining and organizing themselves. Transgenders are a notable example. More generally, sexual diversity is a defining feature of communities that tend to identify today as "queer" rather than "gay."

Transgender inclusion has become an unavoidable issue for any effort to combat discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Every lobbying group trying to push a civil rights bill through Congress or a state legislature has to decide whether to add "gender identity" after "sexual orientation." The left should be clear that sacrificing transgender people to political expediency is unacceptable. Transgender has in fact assumed the mantle of gender nonconformity that the lesbian/gay mainstream shucked off in the course of the past 30 years. It is also highlighting basic feminist issues about the role of gender in structuring the labor market.

Queer politics in the broadest sense is (re)raising fundamental issues not only around gender roles, but also about power relations in sexuality. Once upon a time the lesbian/gay movement understood that issues like sadomasochism and intergenerational relationships were defining issues for sexual politics. Past debates — as in 1979, when socialist groups with opposite positions on age-of-consent laws almost derailed planning for the national march, and 1982, when "pro-sex" and "anti-porn" feminists clashed over SM — may not always have been constructive; but they dealt with the unavoidable question of how sexual relations can be free and equal in a society where power differentials are ubiquitous.

Today, judging by the contributions to Part I of this symposium, these issues have slipped beyond the pale of discussion on the left. Dave McReynolds at least alludes to them in a couple of sentences. None of the other contributors touches on them at all. I believe that sexual rebels who have been effectively read out of mainstream lesbian/gay politics should at least be able to get a hearing on the radical left.

All this puts in question the idea that there can ever again be "a" gay movement, a sort of "big tent" including the whole LGBTQ spectrum from left to right. When all sexual dissidents were outlaws, we all had a certain common interest in battering at the walls of prejudice. Today some gays seem to be scaling the walls if not safely inside them, and feel that disreputable allies can only hold them back. Shifting alliances of different currents and of people with varying sexual identities, issue by issue, may make more sense as an image of the LGBTQ future. Within this landscape, the broad radical left should become a reliable ally for a new queer left as it challenges the newly respectable lesbian/gay right.

This means that the left itself needs to be transformed. It needs to reclaim the almost forgotten liberatory impulses of the 1960s and 70s, when radical politics embraced the whole of human

experience, including its most intimate aspects, and the most despised of society's outcasts. And the left needs to purge its own culture of heteronormative attitudes and habits so that queers, for the first time, will feel equally and fully at home in its ranks.

Footnotes

1. For a discussion of LGBT politics in relation to the Arab world, see my review of Joseph Massad's *Desiring Arabs* in *Against the Current* 137 (Nov.-Dec. 2008).
2. I explore these socioeconomic and sexual changes in greater depth in an article for a planned special issue on sexuality for the journal *Historical Materialism* (London).
3. This approach to the issue of same-sex marriage is outlined in point 17 of the Fourth International's resolution "On Lesbian/Gay Liberation" (2003).