Socialism and Gay Liberation: Back to the Future

written by Doug Ireland | June 12, 2009

IN 1865, WHILE MARX, IN HOLLAND, was playing the Victorian parlor game "Confessions" with his daughter Jenny, when asked for his favorite maxim he replied, "*Nihil humani a me alienum puto*" or "nothing human is alien to me," a dictum he had lifted from the second century B.C. Carthaginian slave-turned-playwright Terentius (Terence.)

Unfortunately, this admirable and inspiring attitude was never extended by either Marx or Engels to same-sexers. Well before the invention of the word "homosexual" by Karoly Maria Kertbeny in 1869, the correspondence of Marx and Engels is riddled with what we would now characterize as unmistakable homophobia of a vicious character. When the pioneering German homosexual liberationist Karl Ulrichs sent Marx one of his books on the subject, which Marx forwarded to his collaborator, Engels described Ulrichs' platform of homosexual emancipation from criminal laws as "turning smut into history." Marx, in commenting on Karl Boruttau's *Gedanken über Gewissens Freiheit (Thoughts on Freedom of Conscience*), disparaged the author as "this faggoty prick" (*Schwanzschwulen*) The homophobia of Marx and Engels has been meticulously documented by Hubert Kennedy of San Francisco State University, Ulrichs' U.S. biographer, in his es-say"Johann Baptist von Schweitzer:The Queer Marx Loved to Hate," which is included in the anthology *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left,* edited by Gert Hekma, Harry Oosterhuis, and James Steakley (Haworth Press) and is also available online.

Notwithstanding this unfortunate lapse into prejudice by socialism's two most famous names, virtually all of the early important figures who worked for homosexual liberation were socialists. John Addington Symonds, the most daring innovator in the history of nineteenth-century British homosexual writing and consciousness, was a radical socialist; he helped found several "Walt Whitman Societies" in the north of England—the first recorded English groups of gay men founded explicitly to discuss same-sex love—wrote the pro-homosexual *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, published in 1883, and circulated privately printed essays in defense of homosexuality that were very influential. Edward Carpenter, the libertarian socialist poet and essayist who played a significant role in making possible the birth of the Fabian Society and the Labour Party, took up Symonds' homosexual liberationist mantle on the latter's death in 1893, and his 1908 book on the subject, *The Intermediate Sex*, would become a foundational text of the gay liberation movements of the 20th century. Oscar Wilde, who wrote *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* and joined the agitation in favor of clemency for the Haymarket Martyrs, was profoundly influenced by the writings of Ulrichs and adopted his "Uranian" terminology. Wilde and his friends referred in their letters to the campaign for legalization of homosexuality as "the Cause," joining a secret Uranian organization, the Order of Chaeronea, to fight for it (Wilde's position as an important precursor of gay liberation was solidly documented by Neil McKenna's groundbreaking 2003 revisionist biography, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*.) The Order of Chaeronea's founder, George Ives, also thought of himself as a socialist.

In Germany, the pioneer sexologist Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, a member of the Social Democratic Party, founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in 1897 to fight for repeal of the statute criminalizing homosexuality, and he was able to secure public support for repeal from socialist leaders like Karl Kautsky, Edouard Bernstein, and the SDP's parliamentary leader August Bebel (who introduced the repeal bill into the Reichstag). The man who became Hirschfeld's deputy and eventually his successor as head of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in 1929, Kurt Hiller, was

a well-known radical socialist essayist who coined the slogan, “The liberation of the homosexuals is the task of the homosexuals themselves.” When the pacifist novelist Henri Barbusse became the editor of the French Communist Party’s newspaper, *l’Humanité*, in 1926, and — well before Stalin’s recriminalization of homosexuality in 1933 — began polemicizing against homosexuality as the product of decadence in the bourgeois sector of society and a perversion favored by fascism in articles widely reprinted in the world Communist press, it was Hiller who provided the most stinging rebuttal to Barbusse in a famous gay liberationist speech, the “Appeal on Behalf of an Oppressed Human Variety,” written for the Second International Congress for Sexual Reform held in Copenhagen in 1928. Thanks to the work of Hirschfeld, Hiller, and their colleagues in the early German homosexual rights movement, the German Communist Party was the only one in the Western Hemisphere to reject Barbusse’s bigotry.

In the United States, however, both Socialists and Communists bought into the “homosexuality-is-capitalistdecadence” argument and used homosexual stereotypes to attack their enemies. It was thanks to American anarchist writers and propagandists that the defense of homosexuality developed in Europe by the likes of Ulrichs, Hirschfeld, Carpenter, and Symonds crossed the Atlantic to these shores — at a time when no other political movement or notable public figure in the United States dealt with the issue of same-sex eroticism and love, as Terence Kissack has detailed in his important 2008 book, *Free Comrades: Anarchism and Homosexuality in the United States, 1895-1917*.

“THE ANARCHIST SEX RADICALS,” Kissack writes discerningly, “were interested in the ethical, social, and cultural place of homosexuality within society, because that question lies at the nexus of individual freedom and state power.”Thus the American anarchists were virtually alone here in the States in defending and iconizing Wilde (who had said he was “something of an anarchist”) after his trial and imprisonment, at a time when his plays were banned and his books removed from library shelves. The towering figure of American anarchism, Emma Goldman, an extremely charismatic public speaker, spoke repeatedly to large audiences all over the United States about homosexuality in the first two decades of the last century, devoting whole lectures to the subject. And Alexander Berkman’s *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, a best-seller published by Goldman’s Mother Earth publishing house in 1912 (with an introduction Goldman had solicited from Carpenter and a frontispiece excerpt from Wilde‘s “Ballad of Reading Gaol”), was one of the most important political texts dealing with homosexuality to have been written by an American before the 1950s.

When Harry Hay, who’d been influenced by Carpenter’s writing, led a group of queer Communists and fellow travelers in founding the “Bachelors for Henry Wallace” during the 1948 Progressive Party presidential campaign, that pioneering (if closeted) effort at starting a gay organization became the nucleus for the creation of the Mattachine Society in 1950 as the earliest lasting homophile organization. But if Mattachine’s roots in the radical left have long been well-documented, Christopher Phelps, in his essay which appeared in the last issue of *New Politics*, has performed a singular service of historical excavation in demonstrating that there were similar homosexual liberationist stirrings in a parallel time frame in Norman Thomas’ Socialist Party. (Phelps gets extra points for understanding the importance of his discovery because he is not homosexual himself.)

When Sylvia Rivera and other transgendered and gender rebels launched the fight-back against a brutal police raid at New York’s Stonewall Inn 38 years ago, that sparked the birth of a radical gay liberationist rebellion — against the State, which made us criminals; against the medical and psychiatric professions, which declared us sick; and against the culture of heterotyranny which made us the targets of disdain, ridicule, opprobrium, hate, and violence. Born in the wake of the Stonewall rebellion, the gay liberation movement insisted — to borrow from the title of an early film by the gay German *cinéaste* Rosa von Praunheim — that “it is not the homosexual who is perverse,

but the society in which he lives."

Drawing from feminist critiques of the tyrannies of patriarchy and the family, gay liberation rejected the white, middle-class culture's patriarchal rigidities, hierarchies, and rituals; homophobia and misogyny were seen as two sides of the same coin. Gay liberation insisted on the right to plural desires and opposed "any prescription for how consenting adults may or must make love," as the historian and gay activist Martin Duberman then put it. Gay liberation was, he wrote, "a rite of passage — not into manhood or womanhood as those states have been traditionally defined; not sanctioned by supernatural doctrine; not blueprinted by centuries of ritualized behavior; not greeted by kinship rejoicing and social acceptance; not marked by the extension of fellowship into the established adult community," but rather placing "ourselves in the forefront of the newest and most far-reaching revolution: the re-characterization of sexuality."

In the early seventies, when I came out, gay liberation saw itself as "a paradigm of resistance" to the stultifying political culture of the Nixon years, and was infused with a sense of commitment to unleashing the collective energies of a hitherto invisible people as part of the much larger effort to maximize social justice and human liberation for all. The early cadres of gay activists were almost always graduates of the sixties struggles on the left — for civil rights, against the Vietnam war and the "corporate liberalism" that dominated the large multiversities. Since official liberalism of that day rejected gay liberation as a "pathetic" celebration of "perversion," we felt it was doubly subversive, and were proud of that.

The accomplishments of the post-Stonewall gay liberation movement were many. It shattered forever the silence that had imprisoned same-sexers in untenable solitude and alienation; its raucous, media-savvy confrontations changed the nature of public discourse on homosexuality — symbolized by the insistence on the word "gay," a code word for same-sex love for more than a century, instead of the clinical, one-dimensional "homosexual." The most significant victory was the successful fight to have the American Psychiatric Association drop same-sex attraction from its catalog of "disorders" in 1973. And, of course, gay liberation made coming out — the most radical act in a homophobic society — not only the basis of mental and emotional health for gay people, but the imperative for creating the political movement that could carry through the fight for civil rights.

AS MORE AND MORE PEOPLE BEGAN TO come out, thanks to the liberationists' clamorous visibility, the out gay community increasingly began to reflect the demographic, political, and cultural makeup of the society as a whole. And thus the gay liberation movement was replaced by what Jeffrey Escoffier, in his seminal 1998 book *American Homo: Community and Perversity,* called "the gay citizenship movement."

Gay liberation considered innate homosexuality as much a challenge to a suffocating and unjust social order as the political radicalism that many of its proponents, including myself, embraced. But it was transformed in a relatively short time into a more limited quest for gay citizenship.

Or, as Escoffier wrote, the liberation movement "celebrated the otherness, the differentness, and the marginality of the homosexual; whereas the gay politics of citizenship acknowledges the satisfaction of conforming, passing, belonging, and being accepted."

The de-radicalization of the gay movement was accelerated by a number of factors. For one thing, gay liberation was largely the work of people who had been participants in or influenced by the sixties movements for black civil rights and against the war in Vietnam, or by labor or radical campus struggles. As the first generation of activists began to burn out, the movement was populated with younger people with little or no previous history of political protest. Simultaneously, the fulgurant rise of the commercial gay ghetto and the emergence of the gay market contributed to

the rapid growth of an out gay middle class, which saw itself as having more of a stake in the dominant culture than did the young marginals and intellectuals who made up the movement's first wave.

Finally, the backlash against visible homosexuality and against the demand for full gay citizenship drove the movement to seek political advances through a more traditional form of interest-group politics. The need to appeal to the non-gay electorate helped water down and eventually extinguish the radical liberationist discourse; in this, the gay movement did not escape the similar fate of other initially radical social protest movements.

AND THEN CAME AIDS.

From 1981, when it was first identified as a "gay cancer," until well into the '90s, AIDS was used to stigmatize homosexuals, especially gay males, by the political homophobes of the right. And whatever shards of liberationist thinking and attitudes that remained in the gay community were effectively snuffed out.

First, the epidemic and the social opprobrium it brought with it forced the gay community to turn back in upon itself in a struggle to survive. Government was entirely absent from the fight against AIDS in the Reagan years, so the burden of prevention, education, and even care for the sick fell upon gay people themselves. AIDS consumed an enormous amount of the gay community's money and energies, as we took day-to-day responsibility for our afflicted "extended families" of friends and lovers.

Worst of all, this grimmest of reapers also took away forever thousands of gay liberation's most original and tireless activists, a hemorrhage unparalleled in the history of any other U.S. social movement. I always think of my late, dear friend Vito Russo, the epitome of radical gay and AIDS activism and the author of *The Celluloid Closet* (a history of gays in film) as symbolizing the enormity of this lethal hemorrhage of irreplaceable talent.

Finally, any radicalism that still existed in the gay community was increasingly channeled into the fight against AIDS with the founding of ACT UP. The struggle for simple survival took primacy over the larger issues of social and sexual transformation.

By the end of the nineties, the institutionalization of the gay movement was complete. The Human Rights Campaign, the wealthiest national gay organization with the largest staff, some 114 people now — to which today's corporate media invariably turn for the "gay view" on issues — adopted a top-down, corporate structure that demands little more of its members than writing a check or attending a black-tie dinner, or occasionally writing a letter (or more likely sending an e-mail) to a public official. In their endless search for corporate sponsorships for gay events and activities, in their insistence on presenting a homogenized and false image of gay people, the gay institutions like HRC and their access-obsessed gaycrats are committing serious strategic and tactical errors — like acquiescing in a truncated version of the still-to-be-passed federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act for gays and lesbians that excludes the transgendered — which play into the hands of our heavily funded and organizationally sophisticated enemies on the right.The lack of attention paid to queers in the Black and Latino communities by the institutional gay movement, and their invisibility in the image of homosexuality portrayed by HRC and much of the gay media, also works to our detriment. (Witness the fact that in all the November, 2008 state referendums to ban gay marriage, those communities of color voted overwhelmingly against marriage equality for same-sex couples.)

Yes, the political center of gravity in this country has moved significantly to the right in the decades since Stonewall — and with it the political center of gravity of the out gay community. But now that

three and a half decades of struggle have created an ever-enlarging cultural and political space for LGBT people, I'm sensing a hunger for a return to some of the earlier principles of sexual liberation for all with which our movement began, not just here at home but abroad — and that includes a growing demand for our gay institutions to abandon their navel-gazing isolationism and embrace international LGBT solidarity.

In the long term, developing new strategies of resistance and liberation will require the gay movement, which has become so *embourgeoisé*, to begin a serious and radical rethinking of homosexualities and gender identities so as to understand at a deeper level why the fear and loathing of same-sex love and gender variants are so deeply engrained in society and culture not only here in the United States, but around the world. This also means breaking the forms of social control implicit in the gay market ideology. And re-connecting to other movements for social justice who should be our natural allies — all the while remembering the dictum of a great black civil rights organizer who also was gay, Bayard Rustin, who taught us that "all successful coalitions are based on mutual self-interest," which means embracing the struggles of others as we ask them to embrace ours.

But, as important as the demands of the gay citizenship movement are, ultimately one cannot change minds and hearts simply by legislation alone. Only a fundamental redefinition of human freedom that includes a re-characterization of human sexuality in all its glorious varieties — the original project of gay liberation — can do that.

Footnotes