

Symposium on Gays and the Left (Part I)

Thomas Harrison and Joanne Landy

THE HISTORIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN homosexuals and the left is complicated, because, as Jeffrey Escoffier reminds us in his overview of various currents – socialist, left-Freudian, post-1969 gay liberationist – “there are many different lefts.” As we see it, the most important difference within the left has been the one separating an authoritarian, top-down tradition that focuses on social engineering, on the one hand, from a democratic, from below tradition that emphasizes freedom and popular control, on the other. Looking at the socialist tradition, specifically – and all our contributors are or have been associated in some way with it – one can discern traces of a different attitude toward sexual difference depending on which of the “two souls of socialism” – to use the term coined by Hal Draper, a frequent contributor to *New Politics* in its early years – one is examining. We say “traces” because explicit discussion of sexual matters of any kind, in writing, has been rare among socialists until fairly recent times.

Christopher Phelps has discovered an internal document of the Socialist Party youth, dated 1952, during the darkest days of McCarthyism, which urges the Party to support the decriminalization of same-sex activity. Tentative though it was, this initiative represents an intriguing echo, from within the left, of the politically neutral (though led largely by former Communists) “homophile” movement cautiously emerging in the 50s. In his important article, Phelps places the episode in the context of a long tradition of sexual libertarianism that has flickered unsteadily in and around the socialist movement since the late nineteenth century – or at least that part of the movement with more democratic

proclivities. The U.S. Socialist Party, as Phelps describes it, was probably pretty typical in its treatment of homosexuals and homosexuality: a “peculiar admixture of freedom and caution, acceptance and denial, silence and honesty” prevailed. There was plenty of homophobia, but “no official prohibition against same-sex desire and . . . no official ideology against it.” David McReynolds, a veteran of the socialist and pacifist movements, recalls this twilight world of gay radicals in the 50s. In McReynolds’ milieu – the Los Angeles Socialist Party and the War Resisters League in New York – homosexuals were tolerated, at best, but a same-sex orientation seldom interfered with common work for the cause.

Hardly a heroic record, but what a contrast with the policy of Stalinism, the system that came to power in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and enveloped the Communist parties of the world – the most extreme development of what Draper called “socialism from above.” The Bolsheviks abolished all legal restrictions on same-sex activity after they came to power in 1917, but in 1934 the new Stalinist ruling elite made homosexuality illegal, punishable by three to five years in prison (a penalty far more severe than that imposed under the tsars). Bettina Aptheker, in a candid and hard-hitting recollection, portrays the stiflingly puritanical and homophobic atmosphere in the American Communist Party, which persisted well beyond the explosion of sexual freedom that accompanied the arrival of the New Left in the 1960s and the birth of the gay liberation movement at the end of the decade. Amazingly, the Party’s official attitude toward homosexuality, and even toward “recreational sex,” differed hardly at all from the most conservative elements in American society. To a young woman trying to come to terms with her lesbianism, it was a powerful obstacle to overcome.

While acknowledging that leftists have played a decisive role in the formation of the modern gay and lesbian movement, John D’Emilio asks why the left as a whole has been so negligent in

championing the cause of gay liberation. In our view, the success with which the right has demagogically exploited the same-sex marriage issue has unnerved many on the left as, increasingly, elements of a left program are subordinated to the perceived urgency of electing Democrats, and one senses a tendency to hold gays and lesbians at arm's length. In his critique, D'Emilio asserts the centrality that gay rights ought to have for a left that claims to fight oppression.

THE GAY AND LESBIAN MOVEMENT, AND ITS demands, have been denounced or dismissed with some regularity by the critics of "identity politics" – moderates such as Todd Gitlin and Michael Tomasky, and even radicals like Ralph Nader. Martin Duberman, in a nuanced and critical defense of the politics of identity, refutes the charge that these politics have destroyed the U.S. left; instead, he insists that it is the homophobia still rampant in the unions, the black churches, and elsewhere, as well as the disdain shown by Gitlin, Tomasky, and co. – not the alleged obsession with identity and difference – that prevents the formation of a powerful alliance of all oppressed forces against the right. "You cannot link arms under a universalist banner," he says, "when you can't find your own name on it."

Below is Part One of the *New Politics* discussion on Gays and the Left. In our next issue we will continue the symposium with contributions from Blanche Wiesen Cook, Thomas Harrison, Amber Hollibaugh, Doug Ireland, and perhaps others.

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THOMAS HARRISON *and* JOANNE LANDY, *members of the New Politics editorial board, organized this symposium.*

[See part II here.]