

Can the Left Ignore Gay Liberation?

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THE JESUITS TRAINED ME WELL. My high school speech and debate coach taught me how to speak in complete paragraphs and to construct what he described as a "seamless" argument. Many years later, a close friend and fellow historian used the same word in reference to my historical writing. He described one of my books as a "seamless" narrative. Well, that skill, if I have it, has eluded me as I've tried to compose my contribution to this discussion. So, instead, I offer a series of disconnected, but I hope relevant, observations.

I have been teaching an undergraduate history course on the U.S. in the 1960s for almost twenty-five years. Since important elements of the spirit of "the sixties" lasted well into the seventies and were passed on by older brothers and sisters, for a long time my students came to the course already at least partly versed in that decade's history. But, a few years ago I noticed that something decisive had shifted. I now have to explain that liberal and left are two different political categories; that at many points in the sixties they were bitterly opposed to each other; and that "radical" in the sixties meant something other than a wild fundamentalist, whether Christian or Muslim.

The change brought home to me what I suppose I already knew but didn't want to admit: that the left in the U.S. today is so inconsequential that groups of working class college students at a public urban university don't even know what the term means. That is, they think that liberals are the left. Why do I mention this? Because I find it hard to grab hold of the premises of this forum. Instead of asking "should the contemporary left campaign on this issue as part of a program for American society?" I'm pulled to ask, "why should a gay and lesbian movement, whose component parts number thousands and thousands of organizations in the U.S., give a second thought to a 'left' that, for the overwhelming majority of Americans, is hardly known to exist?"

As Christopher Phelps reminds us, the Mattachine Society, the group whose founding launched a history of continuous queer organizing in the U.S., owed its birth to a group of men with ties to the Communist Party. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, critical figures in the radical gay and lesbian liberation movement — Carl Wittman, Charlotte Bunch, Allen Young are three names that come to mind, but there were many more — had roots in the New Left activism of the era and brought those experiences and perspectives with them as they helped radicalize gay and lesbian politics. Then, in the late 1980s, ACT UP chapters around the country not only had angry twenty-two- year-olds at their overflow meetings, but also alumni of the radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s who invested AIDS organizing with militancy and with a politics that called attention to systemic inequalities and oppression.

So, yes, in a sense, the left can claim a critical role in what I consider the three most compelling, historically significant moments in the gay and lesbian movement. Yet the movement's headiest periods have neither been initiated nor carried out by left organizations and their leadership. Rather, they have come from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender activists whose worldviews were shaped by various left traditions but who worked outside the left.

Wonderful and important as those three transforming moments were, none of them lasted long. After each of them, as gay activism resettled into more mainstream or reformist or civil rights frameworks, individual activists who saw themselves as leftists either went back to the left or tried to keep a left analysis or program alive within the gay and lesbian movement. My own direct experience of this history (rather than my retelling of it as a historian) came in the 1970s in the wake of the gay liberation moment. I joined one of the many pre-party formations that grew out of

the upheavals of the sixties. The one I chose, the New Action Party, was completely unsuccessful in its aspirations to become a political party, but it did provide me with wonderful mentoring from impressive community organizers who were older than I.

At the same time, I was part of a collective in New York called the Gay Socialist Action Project. We organized "actions"; convened educational forums to talk about left analyses of gay oppression; and mobilized visible gay contingents for events like the 1976 counter-Bicentennial demonstrations or protest rallies outside the Democratic National Convention in New York City that summer. There were equivalent gay men's groups in cities around the country — San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, D.C., Los Angeles and, I'm sure, others. I'd be hard pressed to claim that these grouplets did many things of earth-shaking consequence. Leftist labels in themselves tended to marginalize us. But we did function as a system of support and self-education among ourselves, cracking a political isolation that tended to deepen with the rightward shift of the country. The connections between us helped shape how some of us were able to be activists within the gay and lesbian and, as the eighties moved into the nineties, bisexual and transgender movement.

Here's how the above process played itself out with me. At some point, I decided to devote my activist energies to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Of the various national gay groups, it was the one that seemed most attached, even during the Reagan years, to the spirit of gay liberation. And it seemed to attract, to both its staff and its board, folks who were now labeling themselves "progressive." In concrete terms this meant an allegiance to community organizing and grassroots mobilizations rather than to inside-the-Beltway lobbying. It meant an approach to gay politics that always argued for interconnections between issues and between various forms of oppression. Thus, when I chaired the board of NGLTF, we issued a statement opposing the Gulf War in 1991. Later, when I became director of its Policy Institute, we issued position papers and took stands on things like affirmative action, welfare reform, and immigration restriction. From inside the GLBT movement, activists who thought of themselves as leftists worked consistently to magnify the movement's lens so that segments of the movement at least stood for a vision of social justice broader than a single-issue politics contained within a civil rights framework. But, again, we didn't do this as members of a left organization. We did it from within the GLBT movement, as activists who had a left-inspired vision of what social justice might look like.

At some point in my twenties, I began to identify as a leftist. I did it for a combination of reasons. I came to believe that capitalism (the private ownership of the means of production) would always produce inequality and exploitation. I longed for an economic structure in which everybody had enough (vague to you reading this, but clear to me what this means). I wanted a social structure in which other systems of oppression and inequality would become artifacts of the past. Because I didn't think that the latter (no racism, no sexism, no homophobia) would ever happen under capitalism, a democratic socialist vision of a future society became mine. And, as I read more history, especially about American radicalism, I was taken by the way that fighting for the underdog, fighting for those who were persecuted and mistreated, seemed to be what motivated the people who called themselves leftists.

So imagine now how disorienting it is, for someone who thinks the left fights against injustice, to read one of the questions guiding this forum: "Should the contemporary left campaign on this [i.e., gay] issue as part of a program for American society?"

In the 1950s, it is almost certain that more gay men and lesbians than leftists were the target of government investigations and were fired from their jobs. In the 1960s, when leftists were enjoying expansive possibilities for organizing mass protests, gay men and lesbians were routinely arrested in mass sweeps by the police in major American cities. In Chicago, Mayor Daley's police force arrested a lot more homosexuals than radicals. When the Chicago police murdered Black Panther leader Fred

Hampton, there were tons of protests, as there should have been. When, the following year, police shot and killed James Clay, a black transvestite, not a peep of protest. Between 1961 and 1973, something like 58,000 American military personnel died in Southeast Asia. The war became the central obsession of both the government and of a broad left. Between 1981 and 1993, more than 58,000 Americans died of AIDS. The Reagan-Bush government had other things to occupy their attention, and the left, if there was one, didn't make AIDS a rallying cry.

The point of the preceding paragraph? It's hard for me to understand why, at this point in time, adherents of a political tradition committed to fighting against oppression, to championing the underdog, and to promoting justice and equality, would still be asking whether they should campaign on "this issue." What needs to happen to a group of people before it becomes obvious to everyone that they are the targets of systematic oppression?

In the early 1980s, I published an essay titled "Capitalism and Gay Identity." It was an attempt to theorize a materialist basis for the emergence of gay identities, communities, and politics in the U.S. across the twentieth century. A key piece of the argument proposed that gay and lesbian communities formed on social terrain outside the family and kinship networks. It was the system of wage labor at the heart of capitalist social relations that allowed same-sex desire to congeal into an identity and that made it possible for groups of such people to come together. I also argued that the success of gay and lesbian liberation depended on fighting to expand that terrain, but not in the harshly individualist ways of the capitalist market. Rather, it depended on constructing a society in which the boundaries between family and community were porous, a social democratic society, if you will, that offered security for all regardless of an individual's relationship to a heterosexual family unit.

A GLBT movement in the conservative climate of the twenty-first century campaigns on a single-issue marriage-equality platform, and it becomes a mobilizing tool for the right. I suppose the left could stand shoulder to shoulder with those gay activists who are obsessively fighting for marriage rights. Or, it could propose, and then organize around, a comprehensive "family agenda" that promises security for all the complex family forms that exist in the U.S. today. The "valuing all families" approach to policy taken by someone like Nancy Polikoff, author of *Beyond (Gay and Straight) Marriage*, encourages a progressive democratic socialist politics of the family that potentially builds coalition across lines of sexuality, ethnicity, race, and class.

In this first decade of the twenty-first century, gay and lesbian life seems so visible and normalized. Ellen is a big star. Mayor Richard Daley Jr. presides each year over the induction of new members into Chicago's Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame. President Bush jokes with Representative Barney Frank about Frank's boyfriend. But, at the same time, young people who come out, or who betray signs of transgressing gender and sexual identity boundaries, are subject to a level of ridicule, harassment, and violence that was rare half a century ago, when the closet reigned supreme. I suppose the left could add the issue of queer youth to its program for American society (Actually, I wish it would, since these young folks could use all the allies they can get). Or the left could make the systematic dismantling of public education by the right over the last generation the scandal that it is; offer a comprehensive program for financing the education of our children; and have respect for all young folks by the schools, regardless of sexual or gender identity, be a non-negotiable item.

Okay, so I know there's something ridiculous about proposing in two short paragraphs big, complex, almost-impossible-to-imagine-achieving programs. But the point is that there isn't a single significant element of American politics and policy — family, schooling, health care, national security — in which issues germane to GLBT folks don't surface organically. But the issues will surface among leftists only if the left, whoever and whatever that is today, opens its eyes and ears to see and hear the queers all around them. If the left is fundamentally about constructing a society without

exploitation and oppression, I don't see why or how gay issues would not be part of its program for American society.

Footnotes