

Socialism and Homosexuality

June 12, 2009



SAME-SEX DESIRE has always been a part of human life. There is much evidence, though not yet conclusive, that a predominant sexual attraction to members of one's own sex is innate. But innate or not, we know that it is definitely formed early in life, certainly before the age of ten.

The absurdity of the claim that homosexuality is contrary to "human nature" can easily be demonstrated by pointing to the wide variety of attitudes toward same-sex desire to be found in human societies throughout history. At the opposite extreme from modern post-Christian homophobia are the attitudes and practices of ancient Greece, especially Athens. There, sexual relations between men were not only accepted but praised. As in all cultures, however, strict rules governed sexual conduct, and Greek homoeroticism was accompanied by a strong tradition of misogyny.

Michel Foucault was one of the first to show that the Greeks did not treat sexual desire as a problem, as Christianity has always done.¹ He argued that sex for the ancient Greeks was analogous to eating and drinking — one appetite among others, to be indulged in moderation. Since Foucault, other historians have reconstructed the elaborate ethical discourse with which the Greeks surrounded homoerotic desire.

Adult Greek males were conventionally attracted sexually to handsome adolescent boys and courted them assiduously. Boys, on the other hand, were expected to gratify their adult lovers only from motives of respect, admiration and non-physical love (unless they were prostitutes). In relations between men, as in relations between men and women, one partner was supposed to play the "active" role and the other the "passive"; this meant that one was the penetrator and the other the penetrated. If a boy felt sexual desire for an adult man, this could only represent a desire to be penetrated, to have a penis inserted into his anus or mouth — to be, in other words, like a woman, who took pleasure in sexual subordination. He might properly, however, allow his lover to thrust his penis between the boy's thighs. Women were thought capable of reciprocating their male lovers' sexual passion, but, again, since this required being penetrated through one orifice or another, it was considered a mark of their inferior nature. (Only a very small amount of evidence exists for lesbianism in Greek antiquity. The poetry of Sappho, a woman from the island of Lesbos — whence the nineteenth century euphemism for female homosexuality — expresses erotic attraction to women, but there is not much else.)

While imaginary women played a prominent role in Greek mythology, literature and visual arts, living women were ranked with children and adolescents. The male ideal was for women to be secluded, to remain indoors. A woman's chief function was defined as marriage at puberty and the production of legitimate children; beyond that, men had little use for them as companions or conversationalists. Even the women of Sparta, who engaged in wrestling, footraces and other forms

of public physical exercise, much to the disgust of most Athenians, did so in order to strengthen their bodies for the rigors of childbirth.

Despite Christianity's pronounced erotophobia, same-sex relations appear to have been widely tolerated in Christian Europe until the late twelfth century, even among the priesthood, where heterosexual marriage was also common. Once the Church moved to stamp out priestly marriage and enforce chastity, it could not afford to allow homosexuality to go unsanctioned. So in 1179, the Third Lateran Council condemned sex between men. Within the next century, secular law followed suit, making "sodomy" punishable by death throughout feudal Europe.

But from the fourteenth until the nineteenth centuries, the penalty for sodomy seems to have been applied only episodically, even while it remained a capital crime. In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers called for state non-interference in private life, and it was in that spirit that in 1791, early in the French Revolution, France's Assembly decriminalized sodomy. This was confirmed by the Napoleonic Code and exported to some other parts of Europe, such as the Netherlands and the South German states, by Napoleon's conquests. The liberal principle justifying decriminalization was later formulated by John Stuart Mill: an activity that does no harm to non-consenting others should not be regulated by law.

At the same time, however, the Industrial Revolution extended the bourgeois family model, developed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and based on marriage between men and women, with strictly-defined gender-roles and clear patriarchal supremacy, to the population as a whole. Because this structure entailed the unpaid labor of women, including their exclusive responsibility for the care of children, it was the least expensive means of reproducing the labor force. Its rigidly hierarchical structure fostered the relations of domination and subordination necessary for the reproduction of class society as a whole. And the foundation of these relations was heterosexual love.

It therefore became necessary to stigmatize and, if possible, suppress alternative living arrangements. All the more so, because capitalism, along with the secularization of life and the opportunities to elude community surveillance in the cities, made it possible for a growing minority to live outside the nuclear family, earning independent incomes, as "homosexuals" — a term coined in the 1860s to designate a new social identity.

The new morality of compulsory heterosexuality was buttressed by legal sanctions. In Britain, the old law that made "buggery" punishable by death was repealed in 1861. The new law banning "gross indecency" between males reduced the maximum penalty to life imprisonment, but it was designed to increase prosecutions, which it did. Upon the unification of Germany in 1871, Prussian law was enshrined in Paragraph 175 of the new penal code: "Unnatural coupling undertaken between persons of the male sex and between people and animals is punishable by imprisonment" of up to five years.

But the beginning of the nineteenth century also saw the appearance of anti-capitalist thinkers who criticized the nuclear family and proposed a reorganized society in which people's sexual potential would be unleashed. Charles Fourier devised schemes for non-monogamous "phalansteries" that would encourage all kinds of sex, including what he called "sapphic" and "pederastic" — the latter referring, on the Greek model, to relations between mature men and boys in their late adolescence, not children. The trouble with these early socialists was that they were uninterested in, even hostile to, democratic mass movements and had no strategy for abolishing capitalism other than appealing for the support of wealthy philanthropists and spreading their utopian communities.

Marxism: The Flawed Legacy

MARX AND ENGELS NEVER SUBJECTED homophobia to the sort of historical materialist criticism that they, especially Engels, applied to the family and the oppression of women. Indeed, Engels in particular evinced all the prejudices of high Victorianism when it came to homosexuality. In an 1869 letter to Marx about Jean Baptiste von Schweitzer, the gay leader of the rival Lassallean socialists, he joked coarsely about the allegedly spreading influence of homosexuals within the workers' movement: "It is a bit of luck that we, personally, are too old to have to fear that, when this party wins, we shall have to pay physical tribute to the victors. . . . If Schweitzer could be made useful for anything, it would be to wheedle out of this peculiar honorable gentleman the particulars of the pederasts in high and top places, which would certainly not be difficult for him as a brother in spirit." (This last dig referred to the fact that Schweitzer, following his mentor Ferdinand Lassalle, was a supporter of Bismarck and the Prussian state.)

Engels' pioneering analysis, published in 1884 as *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, tried to show that the family and the oppression of women were not embedded in "human nature," but arose historically in conjunction with the emergence of class societies²; the abolition of class society, therefore, could be expected to free women and abolish the family, at least as a site of gender inequality. At the same time, Engels presents heterosexuality as unproblematically "natural." Homosexuality is briefly mentioned, disparagingly, in connection with ancient Greece as nothing but a product of misogyny.

Without excusing Engels' ugly homophobia, and that of Marx, it seems short sighted to simply equate them with the standard-issue bigots of their time. Marxism, as a method of historical analysis and a theory of democratic revolution from below, created the tools for understanding the relation of gay oppression to misogyny and compulsory heterosexuality, and for pointing the way toward liberation. As a body of theory, it has proved capable of cumulative development and of incorporating, eventually, all aspects of human emancipation. Its utopian — and later anarchist — rivals did not, despite their often more enlightened attitudes toward homosexuality, and sex in general. Even in their own era, the prejudice of Marx and Engels, unlike the homophobia of those who defended the status quo, was a failure to live up to their ideals of universal freedom from oppression and exploitation. And in fact, after them, socialists' consciousness of gay oppression and their willingness to fight it did grow — until the colossal setbacks of the 1930s, from which Marxism has still not fully recovered.

In Britain in the 1880s and 1890s the more democratic and libertarian socialist tendencies, especially those associated with William Morris, attracted prominent homosexuals such as Oscar Wilde and Edward Carpenter.³

But it was in Germany, where the first significant organized gay rights movement arose, that links were forged between the socialist movement and the fight for gay rights.

In the late 1890s, a number of leading German Social Democrats were won over to the theory, advanced by Magnus Hirschfeld, that homosexuals constituted a third, "intermediate sex," between men and women, and that same-sex attraction was as natural and ethical as heterosexuality. Hirschfeld, a doctor, sex researcher, homosexual, and SPD member, was the founder of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. In 1897 he launched a campaign to repeal Paragraph 175. August Bebel, the chairman of the SPD, was one of the first to sign Hirschfeld's petition, and in 1898 he spoke in favor of it in the Reichstag. A large number of prominent figures in the SPD (but not, apparently, any of the party's leading left-wingers) put their names on the petition, although the party never officially endorsed it. Already in 1895 Eduard Bernstein had written a series of articles in *Die Neue Zeit* condemning the trial of Oscar Wilde.

These advances should not be idealized. The SPD was officially noncommittal on Paragraph 175, and even most Social Democrats who took a stand never went beyond the position of decriminalization as a civil rights issue. Socialists in Germany and elsewhere tended to take, publicly, an ascetic attitude toward sexual matters, to emphasize continence and personal responsibility rather than sexual liberation. Added to this was a persistent leitmotif in socialist discourse associating homosexuality with the degeneracy and immorality of the upper classes, and a conviction that real workers — routinely idealized as brawny heterosexuals — just “didn’t do those things.” Bernstein, for example, despite his support for decriminalization, thought that homosexuality might be a form of “dissolute licentiousness” most common in the upper echelons of society; either that, or some sort of illness.

Bernstein did no more than reflect prevailing scientific opinion. Unlike Hirschfeld and his followers, the great majority of medical and legal experts defined homosexuality as a mental illness or some other kind of pathology, rather than a natural variation. As such, they insisted, it would respond to treatment, not punishment; this more sophisticated form of prejudice was common among liberal, secular-minded people, as well as, probably, most socialists.

On the whole, however, the socialist press avoided the whole subject of homosexuality, whether from prejudice or puritanical squeamishness. At the same time, popular homophobia was eagerly exploited whenever it was politically opportune, as when prominent gay members of the elite became embroiled in sex scandals.⁴ It should be stressed, however, that the SPD was far more advanced on gay rights than any other European socialist party — mainly because of pressure from Germany’s politically active, high-profile gay rights movement, which was virtually unique at the time.

The Early Soviet Period

IT WAS AS A RESULT OF THE BOLSHEVIK Revolution that socialism came closest to embracing sexual liberation, including gay liberation, if only temporarily. Almost immediately after the Revolution, voluntary homosexual relations for persons 14 and older were legalized. In 1922 the new Soviet criminal code removed all legal restrictions on sexual activity as such. Sex crimes were defined as the violation of an individual’s “life, health, freedom, and dignity,” not as specific sexual acts.

The authoritative text on these matters is Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*. In a work of painstaking research, Healey argues that Bolsheviks were divided between “libertarians” and “rationalizers.” Rationalizers, he claims, were suspicious of pleasure and interested in regulating sexual expression and promoting reproductive capacity — hence they tended to “pathologize” homosexuality. For Healey, Alexandra Kollontai was the outstanding champion of sexual libertarianism, while he places Lenin squarely in the camp of the rationalizers.

Kollontai is not recorded as having said or written anything about homosexuals; her major concern was promoting sexual autonomy for women in their relations with men. The evidence for Lenin’s view comes essentially from only two sources: his correspondence with Inessa Armand, a Bolshevik of French origin (with whom Lenin is rumored to have had an affair), and conversations with the German Communist Clara Zetkin. The latter was published for the first time only in 1925, after Lenin’s death, as *Reminiscences of Lenin*, and widely circulated thereafter because it suited the needs of the emerging Stalinist policies on sex and the family; the letters to Armand were not published until 1939 and were clearly used to justify the extremely conservative family law instituted in the years immediately preceding. Both sources should therefore be taken with a grain of salt. In neither does Lenin refer at all to homosexuality. He expresses impatience with talk of “free love,” and warns that it should not mean “freedom from the serious” in love — for example, taking

responsibility for children and honoring commitments to one's spouse or partner. He declares that "skirt-chasing" is incompatible with revolutionary activity. Lenin can be reproached for his obvious prudishness — to Zetkin, he expresses distaste for "poking about in sexual matters" — but not for the sort of proto-Stalinist social engineering to which Healey seeks to link him. And whatever the differences between "libertarians" and "rationalizers," until 1934 Soviet law made no attempt to control sex for social goals or to stigmatize homosexuals.

As far as homosexuality is concerned, Bolshevik policy went beyond mere legalization — though this alone was a major accomplishment at a time when the maximum sentence for sodomy ranged from five years in Germany to life imprisonment in England. Throughout the 1920s, Soviet representatives maintained relations with Hirschfeld, who in 1919, in the more liberal climate of Weimar, had established the Institute for Sexual Science. The Institute was a center for research, sex education, and legal aid to victims of Paragraph 175, and it campaigned not just for repeal of the sodomy statute but against homophobia in the broadest sense; Hirschfeld often noted that prejudice against homosexuals was just as strong in countries like France and the Netherlands, where they were not criminalized, as it was in Germany. In 1923, the Commissar of Health, N.A. Semashko, on a visit to Hirschfeld's Institute, assured the Germans that Soviet legalization was "a deliberately emancipatory measure, part of the sexual revolution." Two years later, the Director of the Moscow Institute of Social Hygiene Grigorii Batkis, in a pamphlet, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, described Soviet policy as "the absolute non-interference of the state and society in sexual matters, so long as nobody is injured and no one's interests are encroached upon. Concerning homosexuality, sodomy and various forms of sexual gratification, which are set down in European legislation as offenses against morality — Soviet legislation treats these exactly the same as so-called 'natural' intercourse."

But, as Healey points out, throughout the 1920s there were also prominent Soviet medical experts who insisted on defining homosexuality as pathology, a social "problem," and even a source of criminal behavior. Healey also maintains that official policy was inconsistent, although the examples he cites are highly ambiguous. One was the frequent use of pedophilia allegations in the prosecutions of Orthodox clerics; it may well be, however, that these were cases of actual child abuse — as in the recent Catholic Church scandals — rather than gay-baiting political enemies. Likewise, the attempt to stamp out the tradition of employing *bachi* — boy prostitutes who danced and dressed in female clothing — in Central Asia and Azerbaijan seems less likely to have been an expression of homophobia and Great Russian chauvinism directed at "backward" cultures within the Soviet Union, as Healey insists, than a legitimate policy of suppressing the exploitation of children.

Whatever the case, homophobia — like anti-Semitism, national chauvinism, sexism, and patriarchy — could not be eliminated in a few years in a predominantly peasant country beset by the crushing poverty and devastation brought by the World War and Civil War. The problem of emancipating women is illustrative. Major steps were indeed taken to achieve equality for women. As commissar of public welfare, Alexandra Kollontai argued that a workers' state must liberate women from enslavement to continuous childbearing and to the drudgery of endless cooking, cleaning and childcare. She predicted that freeing women from these burdens would give rise to a "new woman" — tough, independent, as free as a man to lead an active life outside the home, to experience love outside of marriage, and to pursue her talents through work. At Kollontai's urging, communal restaurants and laundries were set up and childcare facilities created for working women. In addition, laws against abortion were repealed, and contraception was made available to all. Women could divorce their husbands by simply notifying the authorities, and men could do the same. Women who did the same jobs as men had to be paid the same wages.

But the government's efforts to liberate women were limited by a desperate lack of resources. So, for example, some of the childcare centers sought by Kollontai were set up, but they were bleak

institutions full of malnourished children cared for by half-starved attendants. Communal restaurants serving watery cabbage soup were not appealing alternatives to a working woman's kitchen, where she might at least be able, occasionally, to cook an egg or a piece of bacon obtained on the black market. One consequence of poverty that was especially degrading to women was prostitution. Women who worked in factories, for example, earned so little that they frequently took money for sex. Widespread prostitution, moreover, led to an epidemic of venereal disease. The only solution was to raise women's standard of living, but under the circumstances this was impossible.

Stalin and Hitler: The Night Descends

LIBERTARIAN, DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS OF all kinds withered in this atmosphere, while the conservative, authoritarian prejudices surviving from the old regime flourished and blended in seamlessly with the consolidating culture of Stalinism. Already in 1926 Hirschfeld, returning from a visit to the USSR, expressed disappointment at the prudery he found prevalent there, including the stigmatizing of homosexuality as "unproletarian."

In 1934, with the Stalinist bureaucracy in complete control, homosexuality was recriminalized. A new law imposed three to five years of hard labor for any man convicted of performing sexual intercourse with another man. In the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia of 1936*, homosexuality was defined as "a sexual perversion" considered "shameful and criminal."

The persecution of gays under Stalin was no mere recrudescence of traditional bigotry, however. Homosexuals were regarded as "asocial" outsiders, and therefore potential subversives, potential threats to the new system, which aimed at total control. They were also a threat to the super-productivism mandated by the drive for rapid industrialization. Soviet industry demanded ever more workers, while the maximum diversion of resources toward armaments and capital goods meant that the traditional heterosexual family had to assume the bulk of the cost and burden of maintaining the labor supply.

Thus, women too became victims of the Stalinist counterrevolution. Because so many more workers were needed in the industrialization drive, masses of women were encouraged to take jobs that had always been reserved for men — operating heavy machinery, stoking blast furnaces, construction and the like. But the idea of equal pay for equal work was abandoned. Women were paid far less than men and generally kept in the lowest positions. In 1935 abortion was outlawed. Now women were offered financial bonuses and awards for having more babies. Divorce was discouraged. To "strengthen the family," divorcees had to pay stiff taxes, which increased with every subsequent divorce.

Almost at the same time that Stalinism extinguished the promise of gay liberation in Russia, the Nazis brutally cut short the progress that the gay rights movement had been making in Weimar Germany. After the stabilization of the Republic in 1924, Germany saw the flowering of a remarkable new, innovative cultural life, especially in Berlin and other big cities. The American journalist, William L. Shirer, wrote: "A wonderful ferment was working in Germany. Life seemed more free, more modern, more exciting than any place I had ever seen." Just as gay and women's liberation movements paralleled each other in the 1970s, both movements were active in Weimar Germany. The Sex Reform movement campaigned to free women from the burden of constant childbearing through the legalization of contraception and abortion. Although it did not succeed in getting the law changed, abortion was actually quite commonplace in Weimar Germany. Sex Reform also campaigned openly in favor of women's right to sexual pleasure (according to the nineteenth century ideal of "femininity," women were not supposed to enjoy, or even be interested in, sex). Bars and clubs for lesbians and gay men proliferated, especially in Berlin. The first films on gay subjects were made by German studios — *Different From the Others* and *Girls in Uniform* (about lesbianism in a

girls' school). In 1929, with the support of the SPD and the German Communist Party (KPD), the Reichstag came very close to repealing Paragraph 175. In fact, during most of the Weimar years, the KPD was the most consistent and outspoken defender of gay rights. In the Reichstag, Communist deputies called not only for decriminalization, but also for equal treatment of gays and straights across the board.

As previously noted, however, the SPD's commitment to gay liberation was thin and did not go beyond legalization, and by the late 1920s the KPD was becoming Stalinized. With the onset of the Depression and the explosive growth of Nazism, both parties began to change course. The Nazis were militantly homophobic; they often declared that Magnus Hirschfeld (a triple threat — gay, Socialist and Jewish) would be their very first victim when they came to power. At the same time, it was widely known that a handful of Nazi leaders were homosexuals, most notably Ernst Röhm, the head of the Nazi storm troopers — the SA — and one of Hitler's closest associates, and the two parties of the left frequently gay-baited the Nazi movement as a hotbed of sexual "perversion." In 1931, an SPD newspaper in Munich obtained private correspondence from Röhm to a friend in which he discussed his sexual adventures. The SPD attacked Röhm's "immorality," but not the Nazis' hypocrisy. When it was discovered that the Reichstag fire was set by a young Dutch Communist, Marinus van der Lubbe, a drifter who may have been mentally disturbed, the KPD claimed that the whole thing was a conspiracy of homosexual Nazis using van der Lubbe, a "pederast," as their pawn.⁵

Articles condemning homosexuality as "unproletarian" had been appearing in the KPD press beginning in the late 20s, and in 1934 it was more or less officially labeled a "fascistic perversion." From then on, the linkage of homosexuality and fascism became the stock in trade of Stalinist propaganda worldwide. Wilhelm Reich, though not a Stalinist (he had been expelled from the KPD in 1933), attributed the Nazis' appeal to the suppression of healthy heterosexuality by German bourgeois prudishness, and associated homosexuality with fascist sadism, masochism and misogyny. The Frankfurt School's Erich Fromm also claimed to find a relationship between homosexuality and sadomasochistic character disorders typical of fascists. In the Soviet Union, the writer Maxim Gorky proclaimed: "Exterminate all homosexuals and fascism will vanish." Gorky even alleged, obscenely: "In the fascist countries homosexuality, which ruins the youth, flourishes without punishment."

Meanwhile, the Nazis were showing just how much "flourishing" homosexuals were to enjoy in Germany. As soon as Hitler came to power, the SA went around raiding gay bars and packing off the men they arrested there to concentration camps.⁶ The first great public book burning — the one most often seen today in documentaries — took place when Nazi students attacked Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science (Hirschfeld was, luckily, in Paris at the time; he did not return to Germany). After the purge of the SA in 1934,⁷ the Nazis launched a massive attack on gay men. Paragraph 175 had prohibited sexual acts between men; in any case, it had rarely been enforced under Weimar. The Nazis now passed a new law making "simple contemplation of the desired object" a felony. In other words, a man could be convicted merely for flirting with another man. Thousands were sent to prisons and concentration camps; the total is unknown, but it was at least 10,000 and more likely several times that number. In the camps, gay men had to wear yellow armbands with the letter A (for *Arschficker* — "ass-fucker") on them. Later, gay prisoners were identified by a pink triangle sewn on their shirts. Homosexuals were subject to especially cruel treatment by the guards and even, tragically, by their fellow prisoners, so the death rate among them was unusually high. Lesbians were largely ignored, partly because lesbianism was less visible and partly because heterosexual men found it hard to believe that women could have a settled preference for sex with other women ("all they need is a good . . .").

The Closeted Postwar Years

THE PERIOD FROM THE 1930S UNTIL THE LATE 1960S was one of profound retrogression for the cause of gay liberation. The virulent homophobia of Stalinist Russia was reproduced in Communist parties throughout the world and, after World War II, in the bureaucratic collectivist regimes of Eastern Europe, East Asia and Cuba. In West Germany, the Nazis' 1935 sodomy law was upheld by the high court as late as 1957 and not repealed until 1969 (the GDR decriminalized homosexuality in 1968, to my knowledge the only Communist country to do so until Cuba in 1992). Gay survivors of the Nazi concentration camps were denied compensation, and some actually remained in prison until the 1960s. The 1950s witch-hunts in the U.S. and Britain that victimized thousands of gay men are well known. Homosexuality remained classified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association until 1973.

On the left, the whole pre-1930s tradition was simply forgotten. Even though most non-Stalinist socialist groups did not prohibit homosexuals from joining or expel those who were discovered (the U.S. Trotskyist group, the Socialist Workers Party, was one notable exception, retaining a Stalinist exclusionary policy until 1970), gay men and lesbians were often closeted within these organizations. Nor did democratic socialists even take up the essentially liberal cause of decriminalization, which is what makes the Socialist Party internal document uncovered by Christopher Phelps and discussed in his article in the previous issue of *New Politics*, so significant as an early portent of change.

The change, initiated in the United States by the Stonewall Riots and the Gay Liberation Front, and reinforced by the women's movement and the "sexual revolution," when it came brought a sharp awakening among socialists (as opposed to the deluded admirers of Brezhnev, Mao or Enver Hoxha). Groups such as the International Socialists — of which I was a member at the time — suddenly had gay caucuses and moved to adopt resolutions in favor of gay liberation. The GLF, in its turn, framed the struggle for sexual freedom as part and parcel of the broader struggle for radical social change.

The Contemporary Scene: Progress and Danger

BUT WITHIN A FEW YEARS, the New Left petered out, and the revolutionaries of the GLF were eclipsed by the assimilationist spokespersons of an emerging "gay community" — self-appointed leaders who had a stake in the political and social status quo. Well-heeled gay organizations now cater to almost any politician, no matter how conservative, as long as she/ he is "good on gay issues."

Today, anti-sodomy laws are a thing of the past, and progress is evident on many fronts. On the other hand, the scandalous bipartisan resistance to equalizing marriage rights persists (recall the near-unanimous vote in Congress in favor of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act); in the 2008 elections many of those who went to the polls for the first time to cast their votes for Barack Obama also voted to amend their state constitutions to prevent the legalization of gay marriage. Indeed, even among progressives, it is commonly felt (though not necessarily admitted) that the demand for marriage rights, while just in principle, is politically inexpedient because it makes it harder to elect Democrats — increasingly the be-all and end-all of progressive politics. But when Democrats, such as our new President, offer civil unions rather than marriage, even with all the legal benefits of marriage, they thereby continue to treat gay men and lesbians as second class citizens, which in turn makes it easier for the right to stigmatize us. From most Americans, we can now expect tolerance, but not full respect for our human dignity.

Meanwhile, the threat of violence and humiliation remains part of our everyday lives. A significant number of us have been verbally or physically assaulted; some, of course, have been murdered. It

still takes courage to be physically affectionate, even to hold hands, in public. For gay youth, schools can be a living hell, and suicide is much more likely than among other young people.

The Roots of Homophobia

TO COMBAT HOMOPHOBIA, its sources must be understood. At first glance, the main culprit would seem to be religion. In the West, theologically conservative Jews and Christians regard homosexuality not only as an “abomination in the sight of God,” but as a major threat to the sanctity of the family. But the extraordinary virulence of homophobia in the Judeo-Christian tradition is a bit mysterious if considered solely on the basis of scriptural sanctions. In all of the Bible, only one sentence, in Leviticus, explicitly condemns sex between men. Yet, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has pointed out, hundreds of sentences in both testaments condemn greed, and no one calls for denying equal rights to the greedy. And there is no logical reason why, today, gay marriage should threaten heterosexual marriage. But logic has little to do with the way in which gays have been made by religious conservatives into scapegoats for the profound crisis of heterosexual marriage — along with feminists, abortion rights advocates, and “secular humanists.”

Homophobia would appear, then, to have much deeper cultural roots. Nussbaum argues persuasively in *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* that homophobia is rooted in sexual shame, a profound unease with our own bodies that engenders disgust with our messy, sticky, odorous and vulnerable animality. This disgust is taught — it’s not present in infancy — and people also learn, in order to protect themselves from self-loathing, to project it on to certain groups: women, racial minorities, Jews, the poor, in India the Untouchables, etc., as well as homosexuals, who are viewed as debased, contaminated.

Throughout history, and in a great many cultures, women have been degraded as receivers of semen, and they have been the object of elaborate taboos associated with things involving bodily secretions — sex, birth, menstruation. Historians have even shown how the voluminous skirts that Western women wore until the 1920s were considered necessary to hide their unseemly contents. Men’s disgust with women’s bodies has evidently played a central role in women’s subordination.

In our own society, gay men (much more than lesbians) are not only seen by a great many people as deeply disgusting — the idea of anal penetration in particular inspires terror and loathing among straight men. So unclean is the homosexual that he is feared for his potential to contaminate others. His very gaze is polluting and has often been used in court as a mitigating or even exculpating circumstance in gay-bashing cases. It would seem to be this powerful disgust, and the fear it inspires, reinforced by religious sanctions and anxiety for the future of the heterosexual family, that explains the ongoing panic in this country. Gay men are viewed as extremely dangerous, forever preying on children, seeking to advance their “gay agenda,” and to legitimize their “lifestyle.”

Clearly, what Nussbaum calls the “decontamination of the body” in our culture will not be easy; in fact it will not be possible to any great extent without revolutionary cultural change. The struggle against homophobia and for full sexual equality must continue and intensify in the here-and-now, of course, but if we appreciate its deep-rootedness, we must also see that only in a transformed world will irrational fear of contamination and fantasies of steely invulnerability and omnipotence lose their salience and fade away.

Prospects

SOCIALISTS, IT SEEMS TO ME, can play a crucial role in pointing the way, and actually moving us toward, such a future, in the first place by advocating a non-sectarian politics aimed at detaching the oppressed from their ties to the status quo through the creation of a new political party. The

distressingly large vote against gay marriage by Blacks and Latinos in 2008 points up the urgent need for a progressive coalition politics among oppressed groups based on common struggle and mutual respect. The Obama campaign was neither a coalition nor even a movement, and it did not make an issue of homophobia. Nor did it offer anything concrete in the way of “real change” that might have trumped homophobia.

The potential constituency for a populist, anti-capitalist mass movement and a new political party of the left is vast. But it can be built only by eschewing both the narrow economic strategy typified by Ralph Nader, with his almost exclusive focus on corporate malfeasance and his open contempt for what he called “gonadal politics,” and the phony “big tent” coalitionism advocated by Todd Gitlin and many other liberal pundits (and once championed by that undeservedly idealized gay icon, Bayard Rustin), in which “identity politics” must not be allowed to interfere with the absurd fantasy of turning the Democratic Party into a progressive anti-corporate force.

By its very nature, a truly independent left would go a long way toward breaking down hierarchies and cultivating compassion. Certainly, it should *campaign* for gay rights — that is, not just advocate them but also educate people to understand why they are just and necessary. Within such a left, should it emerge, socialists will be an educational current and aspiring leadership; as such, they will have to think about, and help others to imagine, a great deal more than legal equality for gays. There hasn’t been much discussion in recent years of the abolition of the nuclear family (except insofar as capitalism is already doing so, in part). Still, it’s hard to imagine how freedom and equality for gay men — as well as for women — can be achieved without the socialization of family functions, of housework and childcare, which in turn implies a transition away from capitalism. Not that the nuclear family will be replaced easily, or even that most people in a socialist society will choose to abandon it. With all its problems, it is still the only thing that is at least capable of mediating the pain of development, especially for infants, with deep emotional understanding. But at the very least, a society committed to nurturing — unlike the societies we have known — should be able to provide much more support for the essential work being carried on by families. And as the problem of scarcity is solved, cohabitation will no longer be based on economic considerations, but purely on mutual affection — thus the family will cease to be a compulsory system. Surely this will undermine the basis for homophobia.

We can only dimly imagine how gender and sexual orientation might change in a world without discrimination, hierarchy and domination, in which the erotic is not repressed or sublimated by economic necessity. But it is probable that a socialist world will be one in which people no longer feel disgust and shame, except towards those things that are actually harmful. It seems reasonable to suppose that, freed of the compulsion to correspond to stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and to seek “normality,” people will be able to express themselves sexually with more individuality and variety than we ever dreamed possible.

Footnotes

1. Augustine, for example, believed that original sin entered the souls of unborn children literally through their fathers’ semen. Paul reluctantly recommended marriage only for those incapable of chastity. Even Clement of Alexandria, one of the most positive advocates of marriage among the early Churchmen, said: “Our ideal is not to experience desire at all. . . . A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice continence so that it is not desire he feels for his wife.” See Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*.
2. Actually, on this point Engels may have been wrong: possibly, sexual inequality predates class antagonisms. Its great antiquity does not prove that it is hard-wired into the human species, but does suggest that the subordination of women may prove harder to eradicate than class

exploitation itself.

3. The Cambridge-educated Carpenter, a poet, writer and political activist (he was one of the founders of the Independent Labour Party), lived openly with a work-ing-class man, George Merrill. Their partnership was the inspiration for Maurice and Alec, the gamekeeper, in E.M. Forster's novel, *Maurice*. Less flatteringly, George Orwell apparently had Carpenter, and others like him, in mind when he denounced, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the "fruit-juice drinkers, nudists, sandal-wearers and sex maniacs" that were attracted to socialism.
4. Wilde, a great admirer of Morris, wrote "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," worth reading for its trenchant analysis of the ways in which economic necessity stifles the cultivation of personal excellence. The heroine of Wilde's first play, *Vera*, was modeled on Vera Zasulich, whose attempt to assassinate a brutal Tsarist official launched a series of assaults by Russian socialists that culminated in the killing of Tsar Alexander II. Zasulich escaped to Switzerland, where she was one of the three founders in exile of the first Russian Marxist group.
5. The SPD press had a field day with the Eulenburg Affair in 1907-09, in which several members of the Kaiser's cabinet and personal entourage were accused of violating Paragraph 175.
6. It is still widely believed that the Reichstag Fire was a Nazi plot, but most historians agree that van der Lubbe acted alone.
7. That a gay man, Röhm, could order raids on gay bars is no more inexplicable than the relentless persecution of gays carried out by the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover, a closeted, cross-dressing homosexual. This may also be the place to mention the persistent myth that Hitler himself was gay, for which there is as much evidence as there is for the even more widely held belief that he had Jewish ancestry — zero.
8. This purge — the "Night of the Long Knives" — actually had little to do with Röhm's sexual orientation, although that had always been a scandal to most Nazis — especially Göring and Himmler — and to their "respectable" supporters. Röhm was leading the cry for a "second revolution" against big business, the *Junkers* and the rest of the old elites. He also wanted to get rid of the Army officer corps and replace them with SA men. The *Reichswehr* was alarmed, and the generals promised Hitler that if he would eliminate the radicals they would give him their full support on the death of President Hindenburg, who was gravely ill.