

# NAM

## Working Papers on Gay / Lesbian Liberation and Socialism



New American Movement

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# INTRODUCTION

by Hannah Frisch

*The Working Papers on Lesbian/Gay Liberation and Socialism* are addressed first of all to people who sense a connection between gay liberation and socialism and who are interested in thinking about that connection, in developing theory to make the connection more explicit. *The Working Papers* are also addressed to two skeptical audiences: to socialists who doubt whether gay liberation has much to do with the real revolutionary work of overthrowing capitalism, and to lesbian and gay activists who don't see socialism as having much to do with their liberation. Most of the articles are written by lesbian and gay socialists and directly or indirectly bring out why the authors are both gay activists and socialists.

From its founding, the New American Movement has been committed to supporting gay liberation. As a socialist-feminist organization NAM has also been committed to the theoretical task of developing a Marxism which not only supports but uses and is enriched by the insights of the lesbian and gay movements. The papers included here represent some beginnings on that theoretical work.

*The Working Papers* are published by the Gay and Lesbian Task Force of the NAM Socialist Feminist Commission. The Blazing Star women's NAM chapter has done the editing and coordinating. With the exception of *Why Marxism?* by the Gay Left Collective, all articles were written by NAM members. The general approach of *The Working Papers* is consistent with NAM national policy. The specific points, of course, represent the individual authors' opinions and would not necessarily be held by the organization as a whole.

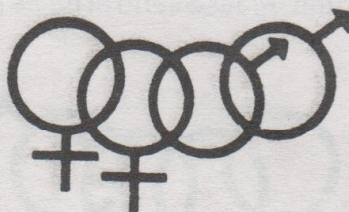
Critiques of these articles and new articles submitted for inclusion in later editions of *The Working Papers* will be very welcome. Please send articles and feedback to Blazing Star, 3244 N. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60657.





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# LESBIANS AND THE LEFT

*by Judy MacLean*

In the past decade, the relationship between lesbians and the left has been uneasy. In 1972 when New American Movement, a socialist organization of which I am a member, made gay liberation part of its political principles, many leftists were dismissing gay liberation as merely a personal struggle. Some even called it reactionary. At that time, many lesbians who wanted to change the entire society were convinced the left was hopelessly dominated by men who would never even support feminism, let alone lesbianism.

The tension also exists for anyone who tries to advocate both. When I am talking to someone outside the movement, trying to link socialism and lesbianism means combining the unpopular with the taboo. When I get someone convinced of the justice of one, I have to take a deep breath and wonder if I can muster the energy to start on the other. Small wonder people feel uneasy in our political statements about joining the two. In 1972, the organizers of a Washington anti-war march worried that a group of lesbians (who carried pro-lesbian, not anti-war signs) would turn people off. By 1977, some participants in a Chicago march against Anita Bryant worried about the presence of a group called "Gay Socialists."

Although I expect this tension to continue, there are some encouraging signs. There are fewer parts of the left that don't support gay liberation today. A year ago gay demands were part of the July 4 demonstration in Philadelphia that included a wide variety of leftists, including many third world groups. More recently, leftists have been part of the massive actions against Anita Bryant. The left has come around, I believe, because lesbians and gay men refused to listen to criticisms of the early 70s and have built a strong and progressive movement. Groups like New American Movement and individuals who have stayed within the left have also argued for support for gay liberation. And Ms. Bryant herself has probably helped by making the connection between right-wing politics and opposition to gay liberation so explicit.

I believe the struggles for lesbian rights and many of the insights of lesbian feminism should be an important, integral part of the larger struggle to transform society, of a socialist revolution. I want to outline here why I think it is important, at this point in history, and in this country. In doing this, I am making a crucial assumption: that a revolutionary struggle that does not include a commitment to feminism is not worth waging.

While all socialist revolutions have had sweeping changes in the status of women as goals, and most have put some of them into practice, none has ever included rights for lesbians. There are reasons why lesbianism (and gay rights generally) has come to the fore in the U.S. at this time, and I believe those very reasons make the struggle for lesbian rights a crucial part of a socialist strategy.



In the past century, ordinary people have been encouraged by the media and by the circumstances of their daily lives to find fulfillment through their private, personal lives. (Eli Zaretsky, in *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life* gives an excellent description of how this has happened.) As capitalism in the U.S. has developed and life has become more complex, people experience less and less ability to be creative or effective in the world as a whole. At work, even people with higher salaries in the corporate world feel as much like cogs in a machine as blue-collar workers (or cogs without a machine, in the case of the unemployed.) More and more, we are told by TV, popular songs, and psychotherapists, we can find fulfillment, happiness and ourselves in our personal lives. In the 1950s, the focus of most of this alleged happiness was the family; by the mid-sixties it had switched to sexual relationships. People are absolutely bombarded with the message that a satisfying sex life is the key to the good life, and that it is achievable, for one and all, if only certain products are used, or certain therapies applied.

In contrast, when people (women especially) can honestly talk about how they feel about sex (see *The Hite Report*) they describe a great deal of misery. And we're all doubly miserable, unhappy with our sexual lives and unhappy again because we're told that it is so important that we be happy, and our own fault if we are not. This creates what Marxists call a contradiction, and it has been one of the factors in the rise of both the feminist and the gay liberation movements.

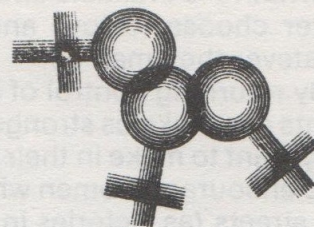
The feminist movement provided the great insight that the personal is political. Women are not unhappy in our personal lives because we are neurotic. As Shulamith Firestone, for example, showed in *The Dialectic of Sex*, love relationships between men and women repeat the same patterns--patterns perpetuated by the ways men and women are raised and enforced by unequal access to power over our own lives. Our misery as women is shared, and it is not our fault as individuals. It is political in that it stems from the power relationships that are the basis of how our society is organized. And so the way to change our situations is through political changes in the society as a whole, not through changes in ourselves. Of course, we will be transformed, too, in the course of the struggle, by our very act of trying to change the world. (To say the personal is political has many ramifications. I'm focussing primarily on the sexual ones here but I don't mean to imply that the others are unimportant, or to limit that insight to sexuality.)

So, we find ourselves impaled upon a contradiction. We are supposed to find freedom and happiness in our sexual lives; in fact our every move has been choreographed long ago. It is inevitable that with all the propaganda about sexual freedom that some women would actually try to seek some. And for some women, this means violating the heterosexual norms. Surely one of the most basic kinds of sexual freedom is the freedom to love another woman, to build this realm of personal happiness with someone who hasn't been programmed to oppress you.

A hundred years ago in the U.S., there were probably just as many women with inclinations toward lesbianism as there are today. But in a society that downplays sexuality, that doesn't preach fulfillment through sexual relationships, many women probably ignored those inclinations. Of course, some never did. But it is the contrast today, between a keyed-up culture, where sexuality is almost always the backdrop and where it is held as a panacea, and the reality of what many of us would do with real sexual freedom (which we're only beginning to discover) which makes the contradiction acute.

Yet the very acuteness of this contradiction contains a trap for us all. The reason marriages (and heterosexual relationships generally) continue to be troubled is not just that one half has been trained to oppress the other. Our most intimate relationships are forced to carry so many burdens--economic and emotional security in an increasingly hostile environment, adventure, fun, a place of rest and fulfillment, personal growth, etc.--no wonder the fragile craft of life founders and sinks. Because we have no other way to fulfill these needs, we try to fulfill them in our personal lives. But we never quite make it; under capitalism our intimate lives are like a bed without enough covers; an arm, a leg, or even a whole person is always out in the cold. And this can be as true for lesbian relationships as heterosexual ones.





The problem is that we have another kind of erotic need besides the personal, sexual ones. I believe it is just as strong but that we've had to suppress it so thoroughly we're often not aware we even have the need (just as, if my guess is right, there were a lot of women a hundred years ago unaware of their need for lesbian relationships.) We don't even have a good word for the need I'm trying to describe; I like to call it the need for community love.

The difficulty in creating good personal relationships is a social one. It comes about because our need for a loving community--a community that works together to provide basic things like food, shelter, safety, health care, security in old age, and less tangibly, good vibes and support around us all--is systematically denied.

You can glimpse a shadow of what the fulfillment of this need would feel like. At demonstrations, when thousands of people come together with shared goals and commitment, the exhilaration we feel is a ghost of the feeling we would get if our society, with its millions of people, were organized around the goal of caring for each other. In crises, like power failures, people often report feelings of happiness and exhilaration in spite of the inconvenience. It is during a crisis that people see the interrelatedness of their lives and pull together. It is the belief in something like community love that has inspired revolutionaries the world over to brave all kinds of hardships and even death.

Most of the time we suppress this need because we see no possibility of fulfillment. We even fear it, seeing how crowds behave at football games. And like any basic need, pent up too long, it may overwhelm us when finally let loose.

Building a "woman's community" or a "lesbian community" is an attempt to come to terms with this need, and to provide a support system around personal love relationships. But such a community, outside the society, hasn't the material resources to really meet its members' needs, and much bitterness results. To really create a loving community of the kind I am talking about requires political power. It means the whole community must control the resources on which our lives are based. We can only create it by transforming the whole society; such a transformation is what a struggle for socialism must be about. When a socialist movement become stronger in the U.S., it will involve our coming to terms with our long-suppressed need for loving social relationships. And for a socialist movement to succeed, it must give people a taste of the experience of community love, through its own struggles.

(I don't mean to dismiss the attempts to build a lesbian community. They are not substitutes for struggling to change society as a whole. But such attempts at community can be very nourishing, supportive places, where many of us gain strength to keep doing what we're doing. To keep such communities going, and to keep up the cultural manifestations, like concerts, requires someone working hard at it. It doesn't just happen.)

I want to conclude by talking about the importance of winning reforms for lesbian rights for lesbians, for all women, and for a revolutionary movement.

First, gay rights is a matter of human rights, of basic freedom. The fear of discovery most lesbians live with, the lack of rights to jobs, to custody of children, to any kind of legitimacy, can corrode our lives. For lesbians and gay men, civil rights are urgently necessary.

Winning rights for lesbians can also help all women. Being a lesbian is tied up in complex ways with personal autonomy for women, with making choices instead of being chosen, with living a life, however precarious, independent of men in one fundamental, intimate way. If that



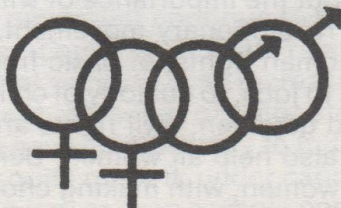
alternative is available and acceptable for women, it will have a ripple effect even on women who never choose to love another woman. It will be a factor that supports their own choices, whatever they may be.

By returning control of a very intimate aspect of our lives to women, the struggle for lesbian rights can make us stronger. It can strengthen women who have very different kinds of demands they want to make in their personal lives, even if their intimate relationships are with men. It can also encourage women who are saying no to low pay, to the violence in their own homes and in the streets (as victories in these areas can encourage struggles for lesbian rights.) Any reform that gives us more control can strengthen us, but especially one in a personal area about which we all, at one time or another, feel a lot of anxiety.

I believe the struggle for lesbian rights can also strengthen a revolutionary struggle. Marxists have often commented on how women tend to be "backward" and "conservative." They don't always support strikes. They are harder to organize. While there is a whole complex of reasons for this alleged backwardness, not the least of which is male leftists continually framing "progressive" demands in ways that benefit men more than women, I believe one reason is simply that we are taught from birth that we can't have even the amount of control over our lives that relatively disadvantaged men assume. The women's movement is slowly changing this. A reform like lesbian rights, which gives us a measure of control over an area of personal, painful, and often unacknowledged oppression, can give us strength to meet other challenges. Those whose daily experience tells them they have no control do not set out to change the world. And as I said above, all women will have their choices expanded by lesbians being able to openly acknowledge their choices. Much as male leftists have accused us of conservatism, I'm not sure they are happy about the prospect of women within their ranks (and outside of them) becoming surer of what they want, becoming uppity. But it is necessary, if we want a socialist revolution that really reorganizes society to meet human needs, that one half of humanity feels strong and vocal enough to define goals. It's the only way for a socialist revolution to really make the meaningful changes we all need.

I've concentrated on how I see lesbian feminism in the context of a struggle for socialist revolution in the U.S. The political situation today makes that struggle a long term goal. In the short term, there are several things both lesbian feminists and leftists should be doing. Perhaps if we all do them, the movements can work together more closely, though I still foresee a somewhat rocky road.

We need to be part of the movement for complete equal rights for lesbians (and gay men, too.) In doing this, we also need to fight against the way sexuality as a whole is degraded in the U.S. today. One way would be not to let the right wing politicians take an issue like the sexual exploitation of children and distort it for their own ends. We should speak out against this, pointing out how it is far more often young girls who are the victims. Another good example is the recent fight against sexual violence against women on record covers. We need to fight against sexism when it comes up in the gay rights movement, and against sexism and anti-gay attitudes on the left. It's a tall order, a lot of struggles to wage simultaneously. Each of us has to sort out priorities. But it's a fight well worth waging; the stakes, both personal and political, are high.





# WHY MARXISM?

by the Gay Left Collective

*This article is reprinted from Gay Left of Winter, 1977. Although arising from the collective's experience in Great Britain, it has much of relevance to NAM's situation in the U.S.*

*This article recognizes the importance of connecting the personal and the political, and Gramsci's posthumous contribution to our current discussion in NAM.*

--Roger Hansen

Two years ago, in our first collective statement, we put forward our aim:

*"First, we hope to contribute towards a Marxist analysis of homosexual oppression. Secondly, we want to encourage in the gay movement an understanding of the links between the struggle against sexual oppression and the struggle for socialism."*

We hope that the issues of the journal we have produced and our participation as socialists and gays in political activities have furthered both our own development and the aims we put forward. But we are engaged in an ongoing theory and practice, and have always rejected the notion of having a finished or completed position. We have learnt, and are learning, from our continuing practice and theoretical debate. While on the one hand we reject the idea that a "theoretical practice" is a sufficient basis for our political activity, we also reject the notion that activity must always have a higher priority than theoretical discussion. A solely "activist" position ignores the insights for practice which can be gained from these theoretical debates. In restating in this article our belief in the necessity of a Marxist politics, we both sum up the changes we have undergone and outline some of the areas which still need clarification in the debate on gay liberation and socialism.

## Against Reformism

Why do we think a Marxist analysis is necessary? Since the early 1970s there has been a widespread movement towards Marxism among feminists, gay liberationists, and others who participated in the post-1968 would-be revolutionary euphoria. Many individuals joined established socialist groupings. Others have contributed to the creation of a socialist current in the women's movement and the gay movement. This move towards Marxism implied a rejection of the spontaneist and counter-cultural stress of the early sexual liberation movements and a search for a politics that could more effectively link our particular concerns with wider political struggles against class exploitation, patriarchy, and racism. Marxism offered a politics, a theory and practice, a history of class struggle and struggle against oppression with which we could identify. What does this mean practically?



Firstly, as Marxists, we reject reformism--the belief that all we socialists and gays desire can be attained within the confines of existing society. This does not mean that reforms are impossible within capitalism. If we believed that, we could make no sense at all of changes that have taken place. Neither does it mean that we should not struggle for further reforms, such as abolishing an absurd age of consent, and for the protection of lesbians and gay men against the police and the courts. The struggle for reforms can, indeed, have a vital mobilizing effect, both in drawing in hitherto unpoliticized layers and in developing within us self-confidence and awareness. What a rejection of reformism *does* mean is recognizing clearly what can and what cannot be attained within a patriarchal capitalist society. An awareness of the endemic nature of sexism and patriarchy in our society will inevitably lead one to a rejection of reformism.

The changes of the past decade have revolutionized the possibilities of leading an openly gay life. But it is, as David Fernbach once put it, "Liberation, Capitalist-style." The major thrust of the development of attitudes within capitalism has been the acceptance of homosexuality but only within the confines of a patriarchal and familial framework. There has been a sustained, if unconscious, effort at containment, testifying to the overwhelming strength of exclusive heterosexual norms which express the imbalance in the social/sexual relationships between men and women; an imbalance which simultaneously contributes to the orderly maintenance of capitalism.

There has been an extensive overlap between the values of the gay sub-culture and the heterosexist culture (in clothes, consumerist values, disco culture, etc.). At the same time our separateness as people is confirmed by continuing and increasing state harassment; by media attacks on other minority sexual preferences such as paedophilia; by the differential treatment of lesbians and gay men, with the former still treated as a subject largely for male titillation, while for men in certain circumstances it is tolerable, even modish. Our aspirations as socialists must be to change more than this. We must oppose exclusive heterosexual, male-dominated norms, enshrined in the family, backed by Church and State.

Secondly, Marxism involves an identification with a revolutionary tradition of struggle against capitalism. This implies a recognition that there are objective barriers within capitalism to the full development of the forces of production and the release of new social energies. The development of a socialist society will provide the economic and social conditions for the full equality of the sexes, the necessary condition for the final downfall of patriarchy and sexual oppression. As a revolutionary politics Marxism provides a framework for an analysis of the ways in which the exploited and oppressed can struggle against capitalism and its attendant oppressions. The precondition for economic and social change then is the winning of political power from the dominant classes; the employment of this new power to begin the destruction of old attitudes and ideas, the creation of new forms and relationships. The working class, rooted as it is in the major centers of production, has to be the material basis for this revolutionary struggle.





But, thirdly, our acceptance of Marxism does not preclude a critique of the Marxist tradition in order to reject its deformations. In particular the anti-sexist movements have revealed new areas of struggle against patriarchy and capitalism to which Marxism has to respond. We reject, however, the concept of a "Gay Marxism" as a special variant. We are anxious, on the contrary, to identify certain *absences* in the Marxist tradition as it has developed and to attempt to remedy them.

## Absences

Marxism is a tradition of revolutionary political struggle by the working class for socialism. As a corpus of theory it embodies the tradition of struggle, the lessons of success and failures; and as a theoretical expression of that tradition is a guide to present and future action. It is in this context that Marxism is also a theory of history, an analysis of the workings of a capitalist economy, a science of society. As a science of revolutionary politics, it has to learn all the time from its testing in experience. But as a wider science of society it is till greatly underdeveloped, not only in crucial areas such as ideology and the state, but also in specific areas such as psychology and sexuality. A Marxist method, we believe, can contribute to an understanding of these areas. Hitherto it has been left to bourgeois ideologies (biologisms, eugenics, etc.) to fill the gaps in Marxist theories. The whole area of sexuality is an example of such an absence. This does not mean that socialists generally have not been concerned with questions of sex and gender roles. But there has not, we argue, been a properly *Marxist* understanding of sexual oppression, nor can we claim at this stage to have one ourselves. The interactions of patriarchal structures and capitalist social relations are so complex that we are only at the beginning of understanding them. Such an understanding, we suggest, lies in grasping the relationship between the economy, ideology and culture, and the insights supplied by recent developments in the study of sexuality.

This approach implies and demands a rejection of economism, a deformation to which Marxism has been particularly prone. Because Marxism is a *materialist* theory of society it has been too easy to understand this in purely economic terms. As a result, in some Marxist texts, the economic has often appeared as a piece of clockwork, inexorably and inevitably striking the death of one mode of production and the appearance of the new, with scarcely the appearance of human agency. Socialism is seen as the inevitable product of a capitalism which must perish by its own inherent contradictions. This makes for passivity and reformism.

Even when activism is stressed it can still suffer from economism; for if the stress is placed entirely on the economic as the motor of historical change, then struggle can be conceived entirely in economic terms. Workers' struggle is not limited to a fight for better wages and work conditions. A worker's position is also a result of a structure of social relations which are initially inculcated through the family and reinforced through bourgeois ideology. Thus gender roles as defined in the family are central to the male/female dichotomy of work relations. Economism ignores this whole dynamic and suggests that social relations will be naturally transformed in a post-revolutionary situation. The experiences of 'socialist' regimes throughout the world suggest this is unlikely to happen. Thus state ownership of the means of production has been achieved, though without workers' democracy, whilst the ideology of the family and the social relations which stem from that ideology remain and these are similar to those in Western capitalist countries.

This sort of approach leads to the neglect of ideological, cultural, and above all *political* struggle. Even Lenin, who in practice (and polemically) rejected economism, never entirely abandoned it in his theoretical asides, and Trotskyism, which in many ways has attempted to keep alive the tradition of activist revolutionary socialism through many dark decades, has as its theoretical basis another form of economism in its "concept of the Epoch"--the idea that we live in an age of "capitalist crisis, war and revolution," so that the only question confronting the working class is that of a correct revolutionary leadership. The consequences of this brand of



Trotskyism has been major sectarian battles among rival Trotskyist groups as to who constitutes this leadership.

At its heart is a too narrow interpretation of the "economic base," and a subordination of a full scientific understanding to what is essentially a topographical metaphor--"the base/superstructure." In recent years the revival of Marxism as a creative guide to political action and social analysis has led to a recovery of the insights of those earlier Marxists who rejected economism--especially Antonio Gramsci. A creative debate has developed within Marxism, concentrating on the different levels--the economic, the ideological, and the political--and their complex articulation within the mode of production. The major insight which is relevant here is that the ideological is itself a material factor in society, not, as long tradition suggested, a simple reflection of the "base." Ideas are not a product of simple illusion or false consciousness but as acted on can become real material forces in helping to shape social practices. Societies are not pieces of clockwork but are multilayered formations in which the *economic* is mediated through complex *social* relations, *ideological* forms and *political* practices. The basic reality is of class conflicts taking many different forms--from struggle on the shop floor through constant ideological and cultural battles to the supreme conflict at the level of state power.

In Britain, over the past few years, (and this is the product of a complex political situation) a major development has been in the effort of Marxists to understand the forms through which bourgeois hegemony has been maintained, and in particular the role of ideology. We define as hegemony those forms of ruling class supremacy, leadership, and influence which are outside the formal repressive structures of state power, e.g. education, cultural, political, and social ideas.

This is relevant to the struggles of feminists and for gay liberation because it is at the ideological level that most of our oppression as gays is expressed, and not on the economic level. This is more true for gay men than lesbians. The oppression of women has a dominant economic expression as the theorization of the role of domestic labor under capitalism has attempted to grasp. But there is also an increasing awareness that the questions of gender and sexuality cannot be simply derived from capitalism. Hence the recent debate on patriarchy and the articulation between capitalism and patriarchy.

One avenue, much pursued of late, has been that of psychoanalysis, conceived of as the "science of the unconscious." Despite a high degree of obscurity, the reassessment of Freud, especially through the work of Jacques Lacan and the debate stimulated by Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* have as their common aim the attempt to grasp how we become social beings, as "men" and "women." As it has been put, this work:

*"...opens the way to a re-evaluation of psychoanalysis as a theory which can provide scientific knowledge of the way in which patriarchal ideology is maintained through the formation of psychological "masculinity" and "femininity." Such knowledge is obviously a precondition of any successful cultural and political struggle against patriarchy--the point being not merely to understand the unconscious but to change it."*

(Randall Albury, *Two Readings of Freud*, Working Papers in Sex Science and Culture 1, Sydney, Australia.

There are problems in this route. Psychoanalysis has the advantage of taking us beyond the purely descriptive and classificatory, which has been the chief contribution of the dominant tradition in recent English discussions of sex, symbolic interactionism (as in the work of J.H. Gagnon and W. Simon, *Sexual Conduct*, and in K. Plummer's *Sexual Stigma*) which influenced us in our last editorial, *Love, Sex, and Maleness*. But the pursuit of the truth of psychoanalysis can lead to a sort of despair of political action or any wider social or collective activity, and to an indulgence in theorization for its own sake.

Psychoanalysis and the debates on ideology provide a theoretical basis for the continuing struggles of women and gays against patriarchy. For if the capitalist social formation is a combination of levels, there are similarly different levels of practice and struggle, though they



must not be artificially separated. As gays our specific struggle is ideological, though as socialists we fully participate in the necessary economic and political struggles against capitalism.

## THE FAMILY

In previous issues of *Gay Left* the heart of gay oppression has been located in the family and we have attempted to explain why this should be so. In retrospect we probably overstressed the purely economic aspects of the family and mechanically assimilated homosexual oppression to it. But the stress on the family must still be central for it is here that in each generation the boy-child and girl-child enter into the rules of social life. Here also is where the dominance of reproductive sexuality is maintained. In our culture these rules closely relate gender-identity to a particular form of sexual expression. Male homosexuality has until recently been interpreted in terms of having "undesirable" social characteristics such as effeminacy, or in terms of a pervasive disease-sickness model. Lesbianism, scarcely defined at all, has suffered from the general ideological stress which has equated female sexuality as secondary, responsive, and maternal. The ways in which male and female children enter the social, with all its attendant expectations, are not yet clear, though psychoanalytic theory may be able to help our understanding. The usefulness of such an understanding is that it transcends essentially *social* and historical divisions of sexuality into heterosexual (good) and homosexual (bad), and strategically links the struggle against homosexual oppression in our culture with the struggle *against* patriarchy and *for* women's liberation. The fight for gay liberation is thus an aspect of a wider struggle against male domination.

But having recognized that, and the need to work closely with an autonomous women's movement, there are specific areas where homosexual self-activity on the largest possible scale is vital.

(A) in the defense of gay rights, especially when, as at the moment, they are threatened with erosion by court and police pressure, and by public prejudice in this period of economic decline.

(B) in struggling for further gay reforms--for the rights of lesbians and male homosexual parents; against the age of consent; for extension of civil rights to all homosexuals, etc.

(C) in the development of a theoretical and practical awareness of our situation.

(D) for lesbians and gay men, independent struggle for the development of our own non-oppressive community, leading to the articulation of a positive identity; including, in this, discussions of central areas such as the nature of relationships, sexuality, and role playing.

The gay movement is wider than any specific organization. Indeed we can argue that the movement as such can have no single organizational form; gay liberation is the self-defined activity of gay people fighting to gain control of their own lives and destinies. This struggle has to go on under capitalism *and* socialism. The struggle for sexual self-determination will not cease because a society calls itself socialist as the gruesome experiences of homosexuals in many of the self-described socialist countries of the world today testify. The transition to socialism will not obviate the need for an autonomous gay movement or feminist movement; they will in fact be more essential, for in the struggle to determine the form of a new society, the activity of oppressed groups and identities will be decisive. But the essential precondition is our self-organization now.





# CULTURE AND POLITICS

*by Christine R. Riddiough*

Culture is one of those vague terms that tends to mean everything and nothing. Is culture simply aesthetic and intellectual endeavors like opera, ballet, painting--the fine arts and their allies? Does it include the more popular expressions of art like movies, TV, and disco music? Is culture more than this even? And what of culture and politics: do they interact only when a political group sponsors a concert as a way of raising money? Too often these limited views of culture and its relationship to politics are the ones held by socialists. In order to act politically, to be effective and to understand the society in which we live, we have to have a fuller sense of culture. In the United States our culture is shaped by many forces including those things not often thought of as culture, like TV and popular music and shopping centers and political campaigns. And while all of us live to some extent in that culture--the world of McDonalds and Christmas and cars--many of us also live in another culture, the culture of our own social group. For in the U.S. while straight white men generally live in *and* define the ruling culture, those outside that group have brought with them and developed a culture of their own within the dominant one. Among these groups are gay men and lesbians.

## GAY CULTURE

What is 'gay culture'? Webster's describes culture, in general, as 'the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech, action and artifacts and depends on man's [*sic*] capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations. [It is] the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group.' Gay culture, then, includes institutions such as bars, centers, papers; it includes the language, humor, and ideas of gay people.

In looking at gay culture, it is important to note, first of all its unique relationship to mainstream culture. Gay people are both the most integrated and the most isolated minority in this country. Unlike other oppressed groups, gay people are not relegated to certain jobs, social strata, or neighborhoods. While there are some occupations and communities that are disproportionately gay, nonetheless gay people can be found in every workplace and neighborhood. We can also be found in every family. Because of this, gay culture is in several ways different from other minority cultures within the U.S. Gay people are not born into gay culture--it is something we enter as adults or young adults. Gay culture is not passed down



through the family tradition, but is distinguished by being outside the family structure. Nonetheless, gay/lesbian culture does have a historical tradition (as documented particularly in Katz's *Gay American History*).

Because of the aforementioned diversity of gay people, gay/lesbian culture has less of a geographic focus than most minority cultures, though in large cities there is likely to be a 'gay ghetto'--an area where many gay people, especially gay men, live and work. Furthermore, gay/lesbian culture has a much greater focus on social and personal institutions and except for those few people who actually live and work in the community, has only limited connections to people's work lives. In fact, for many gay people, there is a lot of energy that goes into keeping the two parts of their lives separate.

These factors have shaped gay/lesbian culture; some, non-gay people, might even question the existence of such a culture. But a rich and varied culture does exist. A full examination of it is not possible here (for that see, in particular, Jay and Young's *Lavendar Culture*), but we can look at some of the most important aspects of it.

### *The Bars*

The concrete institutional focus of gay and lesbian culture is the bars. In *The Front Runner*, by Patricia Nell Warren, one of the main characters, Harlan Brown, is near the Stonewall Bar in June 1969. Seeing what's going on, he becomes angry and sad. He thinks, "I didn't drink, but those bars were about the only public places where gays could be themselves. No straight could understand how precious they were to us" (p. 31). The bars have been the cornerstone of gay/lesbian culture and community. They are a place to meet friends and lovers, a place to dance, play pool, talk. They have provided a family for those who, having come out, no longer have families. They have provided a refuge from the straight world--little gay islands in a hostile sea.

Of course they are at the mercy of that sea: frequently owned by straights (though less so now than in the past), they are subject to pressure from the police, organized crime and local 'queer baiters'. As the primary meeting place for gays, they have clear limitations--most notably the alcoholism they promote.



*Lesbian bar of the 'Golden Twenties',*



Who goes to the bars? At some point almost every gay person does. Some people never feel comfortable in the bars, while for others they become a second home. In between is a large group of people who go to the bars on occasion--with friends, when visiting a new place, or when looking for a new lover. It's not that unusual to see a group of people come into a bar after a feminist newspaper meeting, or a gay church service or a women's concert.

Thus while there are those who don't like the bars, there are still enough people who go to them for every city of any size to have at least one. In the cities with the largest gay communities, there may be upwards of 100 bars. In these places each bar will have its own particular atmosphere and clientele. Where there are many bars, some of them (10 to 20%) will be women's bars, while the others will be primarily men's. There are black and Latino bars, discos, leather bars and drag bars.

While there may be a generalized 'bar crowd', each bar will tend to have its own specific crowd. In Chicago, for instance, there are women's bars which most appeal to feminist women (though it's not a feminist bar), there's another bar where most of the women are over 40 and/or have been out 15 years or more. The first bar plays disco and feminist music on its juke box, while the second includes Bobby Vinton and the Beer Barrel Polka.

Going to the bars means learning bar behavior--what's the appropriate thing to do in a given bar in different situations. There aren't guides to bar behavior, no formal rules of etiquette like Amy Vanderbilt or Emily Post, but there are informal rules. Many bars have rules, often unwritten, about what is proper attire. Bar owners will sometimes ban someone from their bar for what they consider improper behavior. And there are some unwritten rules for interactions among the customers--who you look at, buy a drink for, ask for a dance. Much of this sets the standards for cruising, especially in women's bars where it may be less open than in men's bars. That cruising is an important part of bar behavior for both women and men cannot be overemphasized. One way to tell a gay bar from a straight one gives an example of the cruisiness of gay bars. In a straight bar the customers are usually sitting facing the bar, watching the TV or talking to the bartender. In a gay bar, customers frequently will be turned at least partly away from the bar and looking at the customers. Since gay bars have been one of the few places where gay people can meet potential lovers, this cruisiness is no surprise.

One type of behavior that has been reinforced by the bars is role playing. In the fifties and sixties a woman going into a lesbian bar for the first time was often asked whether she was butch or femme. This was then the basis for deciding who could cruise or be cruised by her. Though this happens less frequently now, there are still instances where it is assumed, based on appearance, that a woman is butch or femme.

The bars have been and remain, even now, the focal point of the gay and lesbian community. They are the most stable institution in a frequently unstable world. As such they shape the culture of gay life, even as they are shaped and changed themselves. They contain within them all the contradictions and weaknesses of gay life. They, nonetheless, are our territory, even with all the control that the outside world exerts. They are the main places where gay people can be gay. While political gays, especially feminist lesbians, often criticize the bars (and rightly so) for their weaknesses, their importance cannot be denied. A lyric by Holly Near shows why. In her song about a woman piano player, on her album "Imagine My Surprise," she describes the transition the woman goes through--she winds up playing piano at a lesbian bar and 'her life will never be the same.'

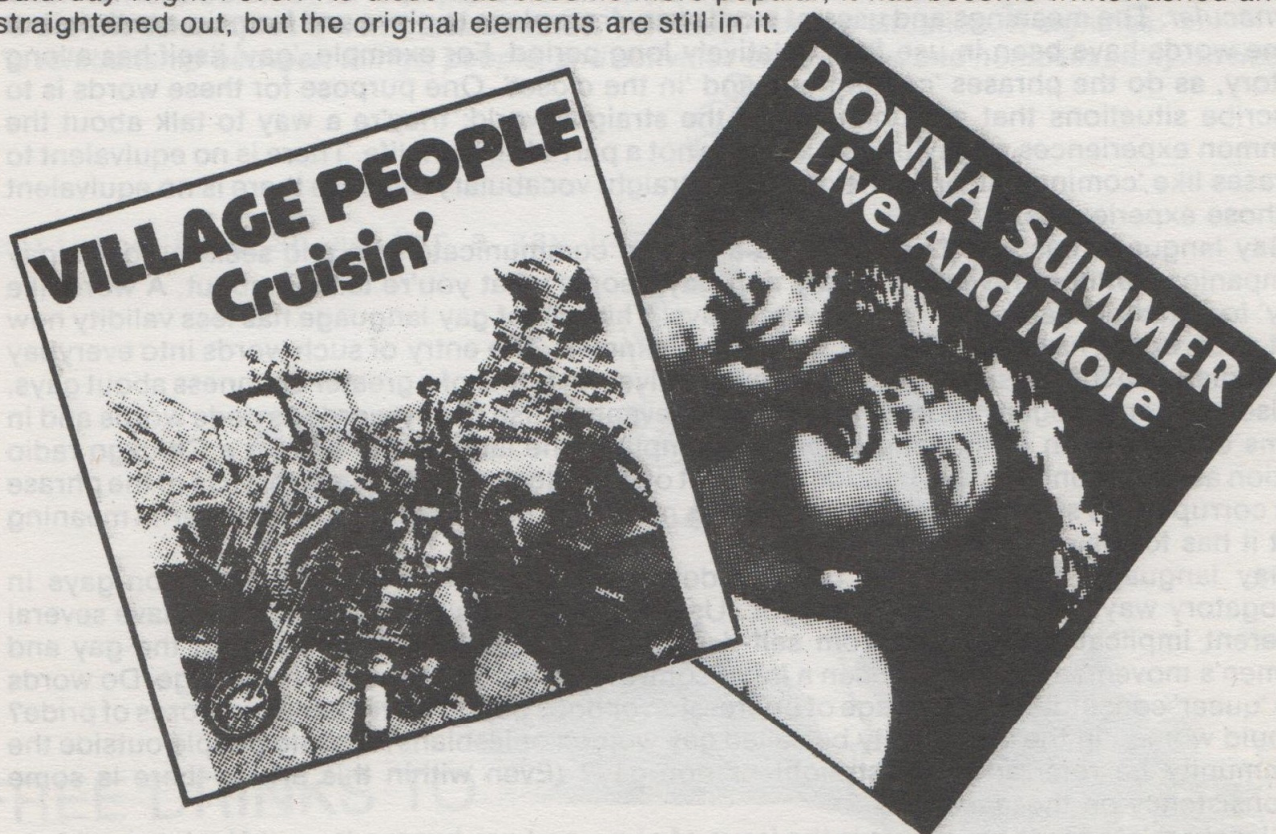
## ***The Arts***

Gay people have often been associated with the arts--theater, dance, literature, painting. We have often been thought of as shapers of art and fashion. At the same time the arts have often shaped the lives of gay people; from the salons of Paris in the '20s and '30s to the 'piss elegant' apartments of today. Art is the arena in which gay people have frequently been the most accepted and at the same time most ghettoized. There is a certain amount of glamour attached



to the arts that somehow softens the impact of gayness for many non-gay people. An early issue of *Women: A Journal of Liberation* had an article on lesbianism that included the statement that "lesbians in Paris are exotic. Lesbians next door are perverted."

The impact of gays in the arts goes beyond the 'high culture' of ballet and theater to the more popular cultural forms like disco. Disco is the latest musical craze in the U.S. One of its characteristics is that its popularity comes not so much through the radio as through cabarets, bars, and clubs. In this way it is made for the gay scene which also has a focus on the bars. There is also a sensuality and physicality about the music--it is hard *not* to dance to it. Disco stars often got their starts in gay bars and still have gay followings. Some of the music, like the Village People or 'Disco Queen', is openly gay--at least to those in the know. The Village People's title cut on their first album is not only a gay song, but actually a gay liberation song. Non-gay audiences seem to avoid making these connections no matter how obvious they are. Gay culture shaped disco--gave it its emotion and energy and sensuality and those characteristics are more present now in a gay disco than in a straight one. Disco also wrought changes in gay culture. It reinforced the role of the bars and at the same time opened them up. In places where dancing was not allowed, as was true in many '50s and '60s gay bars, disco changed that. It also made it more possible to dance in an emotional and sensual way without attaching that to a particular person; it is not a romantic form of music. Disco has roots in other cultures as well, as Kopkind has pointed out in his recent article on disco. It comes from black and Latino music as well as the gay scene. And its white fans are generally working class people, as for example in *Saturday Night Fever*. As disco has become more popular, it has become whitewashed and straightened out, but the original elements are still in it.



Another musical expression that has roots in gay and specifically lesbian culture is women's music. Unlike popular music, women's music is rarely played on the radio, records are often difficult to find. Nonetheless there is a growing audience for it among feminists and lesbians (frequently overlapping groups). Women's music is distinguished from other music not so much by its style as by its lyrics. The music itself is pretty much middle of the road with occasional



hints of country, rock, and other types thrown in. But the lyrics are powerfully political--feminist and often lesbian oriented. The best example of lesbian music is the album "Lesbian Concentrate," which is a collection of lesbian oriented songs by many of the best known individuals and groups in women's music. Alongside the music itself has developed a women's distribution and production network so that much of women's music exists completely outside the 'established' music hierarchy.

Both in content and production women's music parallels other women's art, particularly writing. There are more and more feminist novelists, poets, essayists and in the production end there are feminist printers and publishers and bookstores. Though most of the feminist artists and producers in these networks, as well as the networks themselves, are generally identified as 'women's music', 'women in distribution,' or 'feminist writers', clearly many of the individuals are openly lesbian. More importantly, the tone and content of much of it is lesbian and this new development in women's culture belongs as much to lesbian culture as to women as a whole.

### *Language/Camp*

In order to communicate, people within a culture need language; gay culture is no exception. While the language in the U.S. is English, the words and phrases take on different meanings, meanings that are only known to those within the gay/lesbian community. (Though of late some 'gay words' have become popularized.) Many of the gay words we use have obscure origins. An effort to compile a gay dictionary and with it to trace word origins has been made in the *Queen's Vernacular*. The meanings and uses of words vary from place to place and from time to time, but some words have been in use for a relatively long period. For example, 'gay' itself has a long history, as do the phrases 'coming out' and 'in the closet'. One purpose for these words is to describe situations that are unknown in the straight world; they're a way to talk about the common experiences of gay people that are not a part of straight life. There is no equivalent to phrases like 'coming out' or 'in the closet' in straight vocabulary because there is no equivalent to those experiences.

Gay language has also been used as a way to communicate with and seek out one's gay companions without revealing to any non-gay people what you're talking about. A word like 'gay' for example can be taken in several ways. This use of gay language has less validity now that such words have become more commonly known. The entry of such words into everyday vocabulary--in the press, on TV, has many positives, in terms of a greater openness about gays. It also has some negatives, both in terms of preventing use of gay words as code words and in terms of corruption of the language. An example of the latter is the ads for a Chicago radio station asking country music fans to "come out of your closets." Obviously this use of the phrase has corrupted its special gay meaning; it does not in this use have the kind of powerful meaning that it has for gay people.

Gay language has also been used to defuse some of the words used by non-gays in derogatory ways--'queer', 'dyke', 'faggot'. Use of these words by gay people can have several different implications ranging from self-deprecation to pride. With the rise of the gay and women's movement, there has been a lot of controversy around the use of language. Do words like 'queer' constitute the language of oppression or does gay use turn them into words of pride? Should women in the community be called gay women or lesbians? Should people outside the community be referred to as straight or non-gay? (Even within this article there is some inconsistency on these issues.)

Closely related to these issues is the issue of camp and gay humor. It would be impossible to write about gay culture without discussing camp, yet camp, as many have suggested, is extremely difficult to discuss. One author who has is Susan Sontag in her "Notes on Camp" which appeared in her collection, *Against Interpretation*. Sontag describes camp as a sensibility:



*"[Camp] is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric--something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques" (p. 275).*

She goes on to describe camp as an aesthetic, a vision of the world, a love of the exaggerated, "of-things-being-what-they-are-not" (p. 279). The camp taste in persons responds to the androgyne, to the feminine in virile men, to the masculine in feminine women. And conversely to the exaggerated masculinity in men and femininity in women. Camp sensibility is "alive to the double sense in which some things can be taken" (p. 281); it is to "understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role" (p. 280).

Sontag further describes the theatricality, the extravagance of camp. Her notes are, in fact, very helpful in understanding camp, but they are flawed in one respect. Sontag is unwilling or unable to fully relate camp to gay culture. She first mentions homosexuality in note 50 where she describes homosexuals as the "aristocrats of taste, the bearers of camp" (p. 290). She uses as an analogy to camp the relationship of Jews to morality and politics:

*"The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.... Nevertheless, even though homosexuals have been its vanguard, camp taste is much more than homosexual taste.... Yet one feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp, someone else would" (p. 290-291).*

Simply stated, this is wrong; camp is much more inextricably linked to gay culture than Sontag was willing to admit. Because of this the full impact of her other comments is diffused. Esther Newton in her book *Mother Camp: Female Impersonation in America* begins to address this. She describes camp as a homosexual ethos, a strategy for the situation. It signifies:

*"a relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality. In this*

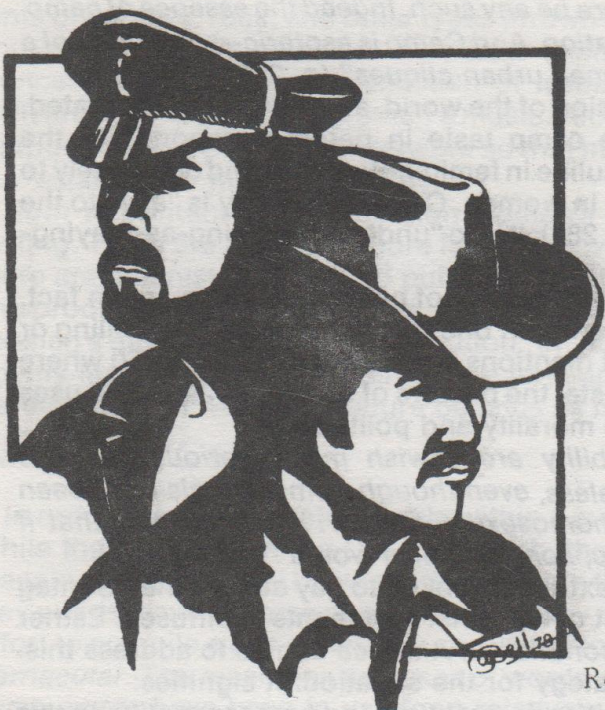
Reprinted from an ad for a gay bar

**FREE  
BANANAS!**

**FREE DRINKS TO  
ALL CARMEN MIRANDA  
LOOK-ALIKES**







Reprinted from an ad for a gay bar

*sense, 'camp taste' for instance, is synonymous with homosexual taste. . . . It is possible to discern strong themes in any particular campy thing or event. The three that seemed most recurrent and characteristic to me were incongruity, theatricality, and humor. All three are intimately related to the homosexual situation and strategy. Incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humor its strategy" (p. 105-106).*

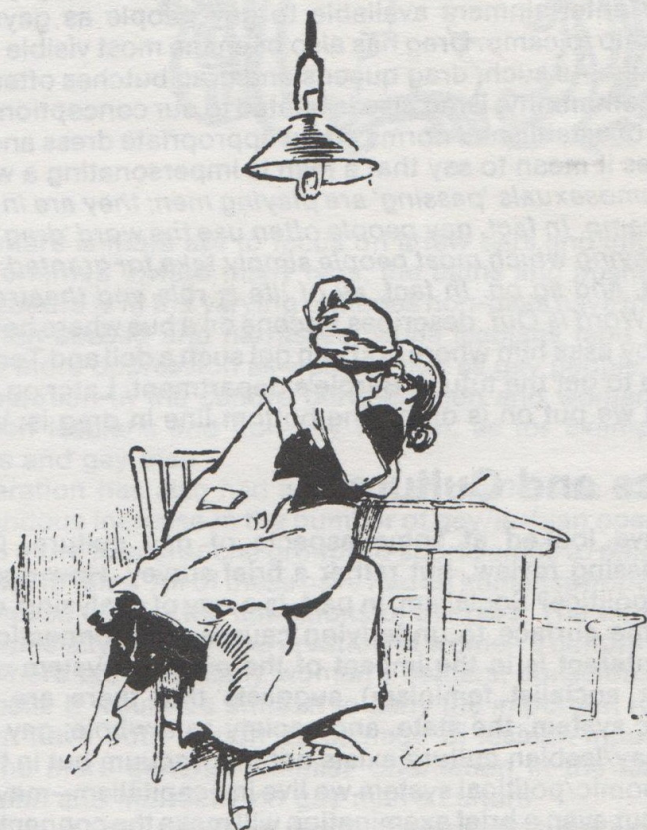
Taking Newton's identification of camp with gay culture, our perceptions of camp come alive; now Sontag's notes begin to make sense. Sontag's description of camp as being in essence unnatural, a love of things being what they are not, the camp response to androgyny, being as playing a role, and so on, can be seen to have their origin in the life situation of gay people. For most gay people living and staying alive requires an ability to be what one is not, to play a role. Gay language, as we've seen, is often based on double meanings. And homosexuality, on some level, explodes the myths of the naturalness of masculinity and femininity and reveals them for the exaggerations they are. Newton's third point, that the strategy of camp is humor, is well taken, for along with having its origins in the gay life situation, camp is also a strategy for dealing with that situation so that one can continue to live. As Newton says, "[Camp] is a system of humor. Camp humor is a system of laughing at one's incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms" (p. 109).

Finally, camp is generally taken to be part of gay male culture and not particularly relevant to lesbians. While it is undeniably true that gay men have been the motive force in the development of camp, it does have a relationship to lesbian culture. Lesbians have been to a greater or lesser extent a part of gay culture and thus have participated in camp. For many lesbians who came out before the gay and women's movement, their community was and often remains the gay community, including men. Furthermore, in looking at lesbian feminist culture we can see elements of camp as described above. For example, what could be more campy than Meg Christian singing "Sherry Baby Won't You Come Out Tonight" or the song "Leaping Lesbians"? So camp, like much of gay culture, while it is male dominated, is nonetheless relevant to and shaped by lesbians as well.



## Sexuality/Relationships

To non-gay people gay means sexual: the only thing that distinguishes us from them are the sexual acts we engage in; to non-gays that is not simply the driving force but the only force in our life. In describing gay culture we can see the richness of our lives that extends beyond the sexual; yet it is important to examine sexuality as a part of gay culture as well. The overriding quality of gay life in this regard is the openness to sexuality, an openness that is in striking contrast to the sexual attitudes of society as a whole.



From Sidonie G. Colette's *Claudine à l'école* (1905?).

Perhaps most striking is the acceptance within the gay culture of sexuality for women. Until the rise of the modern women's movement, straight society pretty much denied the existence of women's sexuality. For lesbians this denial was in contradiction to lesbian relationships between women which are sexual relationships. This contradiction was a source of confusion, guilt, and shame for many, but in overcoming it, lesbians implicitly revealed much about the role of women in society. Aside from demonstrating the existence of women's sexuality, lesbian relationships also showed, by comparison, the inferior position of women in heterosexual relationships. Jane Rule reflects on this in her book *Lesbian Images* when she writes:

"Radclyffe Hall was a courageous woman, and *The Well of Loneliness* is an important book because it does so carefully reveal the honest misconceptions about women's nature and experience which have limited and crippled so many people. . . . [Hall] worshipped the very institutions which oppressed her, the Church and the patriarchy, which have taught women there are only two choices, inferiority or perversion. Inside that framework, she made and tried to redefine the only proud choice she had" (p. 61).



For both gay men and lesbians there has been the potential to examine the assumptions about nature and naturalness of sexual and other relationships, that society as a whole makes. Do love and marriage actually go together (like a horse and carriage)? Do love and sex always go together? Need sexual relationships always be monogamous in order to be fulfilled? Particularly as the women's and gay movements have developed we have seen an increased rejection of the heterosexual model for relationships.

There is also an openness within the gay community to other lifestyles often looked on as deviant. In particular drag (especially among men but also among women) has been a part of gay life. Drag has not always been enthusiastically received by many gay men or lesbians, but it can't be denied that it has played an important part in gay culture. Drag has been one of the few forms of entertainment available to gay people as gays. In this aspect drag bears a close relationship to camp. Drag has also been the most visible aspect of gay life to those outside the community. As such, drag queens and drag butches often have been the most attacked part of the gay community. Drag also is related to our conception of sex roles and stereotypes; it flies in the face of established norms about appropriate dress and mannerisms for either sex. After all, what does it mean to say that a man is impersonating a woman? Newton discusses this point:

*"...homosexuals 'passing' are playing men; they are in drag. This is the larger implication of drag/camp. In fact, gay people often use the word 'drag' in this broader sense, even to include role playing which most people simply take for granted: role playing in school, at the office, at parties, and so on. In fact, all of life is role and theatre--appearance" (p. 108).*

Tede, in *Word is Out*, describes a scene on a bus where he is holding a Ken doll wearing a tutu. A young boy asks him where you can get such a doll and Tede replies that the toy stores are sexist, you have to get the tutu in Barbie's department. Later on he says that we're all born naked and anything we put on is drag. The bottom line in drag is: Who is playing whom?

## Politics and Culture

We have looked at some aspects of gay culture. Clearly, this has not been an all-encompassing review, but rather a brief survey. How does this relate to politics, specifically socialist politics? Socialism, in part, is a way of analysing, understanding society--it helps us go beyond the surface to underlying causes and connections. One way then that politics and culture interact is in the impact of the political system on the culture. For socialism (and in particular socialist feminism) suggests that there are complex interactions between the economic system, the state, and society as a whole; gay culture is certainly a part of this.

Thus gay/lesbian culture exists not in a vacuum but in the context of our society as a whole. The economic/political system we live in--capitalism--may seem far removed from gay/lesbian culture, but even a brief examination will make the connections clear. Perhaps the most obvious effect within the gay community is on the different roles of women and men. In the examples of gay culture we've explored, this is clear. The bars are primarily male oriented; disco, while many singers are women, is oriented more toward men's bars. Camp and drag are focussed more on the gay male community. Two primary factors are at the root of these differences. The first of these is economic: women make less money than men. This is as true of lesbians as of straight women. At a very basic level this means that lesbians have less money than gay men to spend at bars and discos. Lesbians also are more likely to be supporting children on their smaller salaries, which means even less money to spend. There are also lesbians remaining within heterosexual marriage, many of whom may not have any outside incomes at all; for them both the situation of marriage and the lack of an independent income limits participation in lesbian culture. The economic exploitation of women within the capitalist system winds up shaping gay/lesbian culture.

A second factor which shapes the culture is the different sexual expectations there are for women and men in society. While young men are expected to 'sow their wild oats'--explore their sexuality, be 'promiscuous'--young women have been denied any knowledge of sexuality. While lesbians begin to break through this stereotype, it still has an effect on lesbian and gay





men's lifestyle. For example, lesbian culture is more apt to focus on a few bars and informal social groups while gay men are more oriented toward many bars, the baths and bushes.

Another way in which politics affects culture is in the varying attitudes non-gays have toward gay men and lesbians: gay men are often abused and harrassed, while lesbians tend to be ignored. Often, lesbians will experience more oppression as women than as gay people. This has led, among other factors, to a separation in the culture between men and women and sometimes to a greater alliance between lesbians and non-gay women, as for example in women's culture, than between lesbians and gay men.

The politics of gay and women's liberation has also had an effect on gay/lesbian culture. Since Stonewall there has been a tremendous increase in the number of gay/lesbian operated institutions in the U.S. These range from more formal social groups to sports clubs to religious groups, from newspapers and radio shows to films. All of these have had an immense impact on the growth of gay culture and have removed it from the limitations of the bars. The women's movement as well has had an impact, especially through the creation of women's culture such as feminist music, books, and music. There are also many women's centers, consciousness raising groups, newspapers, work projects. It would be difficult to deny the important role of lesbians in these efforts. Many of them have both a high percentage of lesbian input and content, and through this as well as the more general 'feminist' orientation in the lesbian community have had an impact on lesbian and indirectly on gay man's culture.

Finally by making gay/lesbian liberation a political issue, these movements have brought much of the culture out of the shadows. We now see the language of gay people emblazoned across the straight dailies in the headlines. Photos and films of gay bars and discos appear in magazines and on TV; TV shows have also shown gay characters and stories, sometimes in positive roles. Gay movies like *Word Is Out* now can play in mass market movie theaters. All of this has changed the shape of gay/lesbian culture as well.

## CULTURE AND POLITICS

many of the examples given above of how politics shapes the culture are well known. Few socialists would argue with this kind of impact--how the political/economic system (the 'base') shapes the culture as part of the superstructure. (Though obviously some socialists have a lot of disagreements about the implications of this for a socialist view of gay liberation in particular.) The obverse, that a cultural system can have a political impact, is less acceptable to many socialists. There are some socialists however who have begun to explore the effect of culture on politics; of particular interest in this respect are the articles by Cawfield and Boggs in *Socialist Revolution*. Their ideas are based (at least implicitly) on those of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci was an Italian communist of the early twentieth century. He spent many years in prison under



Mussolini and it is there that he developed many of his original ideas. While it is unlikely (to say the least) that Gramsci ever envisioned the application of his ideas to gay liberation, they are, nonetheless, invaluable in the effort to integrate socialism, feminism, and gay/lesbian liberation.

Of the many concepts that Gramsci developed, the one of most interest in looking at gay culture is the concept of ideological hegemony. Gramsci was a marxist and as such saw the primacy of the mode of production in shaping the historical development of a society, but he did not conclude, as do some marxists, that the superstructure of society--those institutions outside the mode of production--was merely a reflection of the economic base. He saw the interaction between the two as complex, changing, and reciprocal. To think otherwise would be undialectical and mechanical. Gramsci stated that the cultural, political, and ideological forces can shape the nature and outcome of a struggle.

From this he developed the concept of hegemony. A regime can have political control through either domination (physical coercion through state forces like the police) or hegemony (ideological control of the population). Boggs, in his book *Gramsci's Marxism*, defines hegemony this way:

*"By hegemony Gramsci meant the permeation throughout civil society--including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches, and the family--of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc., that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it" (p. 39).*

Through ideological hegemony the ruling class gets the consent of the society as a whole to its rule; its ideas and values become the ruling ideas and values and are viewed simply as common sense. Because of this most working people will not view socialism as in their benefit because it is contrary to 'common sense' and even though the economic conditions may be ripe, the consciousness of workers will be so shaped by the ruling class that the revolutionary struggle will fail. As Boggs says, "In short, hegemony worked in many ways to induce the oppressed to accept or 'consent' to their own exploitation and daily misery" (p. 40).

This concept, as others in Gramsci, is rich in potential for gay socialists; in fact, it cries out for application to gay and lesbian life. Two writers have taken this concept a step further in a way that will be particularly helpful in looking at gay culture. Mina Davis Caulfield in *Socialist Revolution* has developed the idea of 'cultures of resistance' and Carl Boggs, also writing in *Socialist Revolution*, has put forward the idea of 'subversive culture'. These two ideas are similar, but not exactly the same. Neither Caulfield nor Boggs refer to Gramsci though their ideas can be easily related to the concept of ideological hegemony. Caulfield writes about colonized people:

*"Imperialism assaults the total culture. . . . Imperial intrusion deeply affects social structures, economic relations, and cultural traditions. . . . In response, many colonized peoples have developed resistance strategies centering around new forms of cultural affirmation directly or subtly opposed to the massive imperial affirmation of Western European cultural superiority. . . . [N]ew cultural and institutional forms are shaped, drawing in part on the older, pre-imperial culture and partly created anew in adaptation and in opposition to foreign impositions. . . . This conscious affirmation of cultural difference in the face of wholesale denigration on the part of powerful aliens plays an important and largely unanalyzed role in the building of both nationalist and socialist liberation movements. Marxist political analysis must take account of cultures of resistance in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and within the United States" (pp. 68-69).*

The role of a culture of resistance is to resist the imposition of an alien culture and to affirm the validity of the colonized people and their resistance to domination. A culture of resistance is, in fact, an attempt to resist the ideological hegemony of the ruling class. While Caulfield emphasizes their role in situations outside the U.S., she does indicate that such cultures can be built within the U.S. as a way to resist the hegemony of the ruling class here.

Boggs, reviewing the book *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* by Paul Garon, talks about subversive cultures. He describes Garon as seeing blues as "the 'music of the devil' that haunts the



bourgeoisie because it challenges the very premises of established culture" (p. 117). Later on Garon is described by Boggs as seeing:

*"...in the emergence of an urban black subculture a force that was subversive of bourgeois hegemony. It is the secularization of Afro-American culture, the celebration of everything that is repressed and denied by capitalist morality: desire, imagination, the erotic impulses, community, equality" (p. 119).*

These two concepts can be applied to gay/lesbian culture: as a culture of resistance how has gay/lesbian culture affirmed the validity of gay men and lesbians and helped to resist the imposition of ruling class hegemony; as a subversive culture, how does gay/lesbian culture subvert the values, the hegemony of the ruling class not only for gays but for society as a whole?

Boggs, in his description of Gramsci, was quoted above as saying that hegemony worked in many ways to induce the oppressed to accept their daily misery. The gay/lesbian community is one of the best examples of how this hegemony works. Gay people, raised generally within straight mainstream culture, are brought up, like non-gays, with the idea that homosexuality is sick, perverted, a threat to the American Way of Life. Coming out, realising one's gayness, entering into gay/lesbian culture means for each person facing those ideas and accepting or rejecting them. For some gay people anti-gay ideas have been so instilled that they cannot be overcome--this has led some gays to suicide, alcoholism, and generally acceptance of the idea that they are sick and that the misery, the oppression they suffer is their fault because of their sickness. Many gay men and women have been able to overcome, to resist these ideas at least to some extent. They have come to see themselves as valid human beings and have joined in the making of a gay/lesbian community. Part of this self-acceptance comes simply from knowing other people who are also gay and who have had similar experiences to one's own. Those places, like the bars, where gay people can be gay and can meet other gays, where gay relationships are given validity, thus play a crucial role in enabling gay people to resist the



hegemony of ruling class morality. It is far from happenstance that the main political celebration within the gay community each year, Gay/Lesbian Pride Week, commemorates a fight between gay people and police over a bar. It is *not* a coincidence that the gay liberation movement dates its beginning from that raid on the Stonewall Bar. It is precisely because the bars have historically provided the bedrock on which gay culture is built that that raid takes on significance. A police raid on a gay bar is not a simple vice squad action, but an attack by the authorities on the fabric of gay life and culture.

Camp as well has been part of the gay culture of resistance. For camp, as Sontag describes it, is a private code, a badge of identity. Its vision of the world, its love of artifice, its use of humor, explodes for its participants the 'common sense' concepts of masculine feminine, naturalness and so on, and in doing so resists the imposition of those ideas from the mainstream. Though Sontag describes camp as being apolitical, when it is placed in the context of gay culture it is strikingly political in its resistance to hegemonic values.



So gay/lesbian culture is a culture of resistance, but it also is a subversive culture, for gay/lesbian culture provides a challenge to the hegemony for society as a whole as well as for the gay/lesbian community. In looking at blues as a subversive culture, Boggs says that blues "embodies a powerful urge for sexual fulfillment and erotic desire that is repressed or deformed by Christian-bourgeois morality" (p. 122). So too does gay/lesbian culture contain a powerful urge for the sexual and the erotic. Gay/lesbian culture and homosexuality by its very existence challenges the idea that sex is for reproductive purposes only; it brings the erotic nature of sexuality out. The openness of gay/lesbian culture to exploring variations in sexuality, non-monogamy, sensuality, 'promiscuity', and so on, undermines the functionalism and rigidity of heterosexual marriage.



"If she's half as good at selling papers as she is at playing third base, we're sunk!"

Closely related to this is the challenge of lesbianism to the stereotypes of women. Lesbian sexuality opposes the notion of women's non-sexuality, and beyond that the existence of lesbians forces the rejection of ideas of women's dependence on men, women's 'natural' role in the family, women's passivity, and so on. It is not only because women are considered unimportant that lesbians are ignored, but because even admitting the existence of lesbians is subversive to some of our society's basic ideas.

Drag too challenges sex role stereotypes. It is subversive of everyday ideas of masculinity and femininity; it raises questions about what is natural and who is playing at roles. Newton in the preface to her book says:

*"And when I first recorded that impersonators believed the major and most fundamental division of the social world to be male/female I thought I knew better. Now I agree with them, although I draw different conclusions from it than they do, and the same goes for their belief that American society produces people who want 'a fast fuck, a quick drink and how much?' Perhaps what needs to be explained is why I was blind where they could see. Here we return to the questions posed by normalcy, or middle class culture. Middle class culture seems to me to have built-in social blindness, compounded by arrogance. I was prepared to find the views of deviants interesting, but never seriously considered that they could be correct. In the end, I have tried to let the impersonators speak for themselves. They say a great deal about America" (p. xiii).*

The basic subversive nature of gay/lesbian culture is thus focussed on hegemonic concepts of sexuality and human relationships, and male supremacy. But there are other elements to it as well. Boggs, in his review of Garon, says, "there is also a mood of anti-authoritarianism that permeates clubs, taverns, halls, and other locales where blues is played; police are normally considered personae non gratae in such settings" (p. 124). This is also true of gay bars; most gay people have some consciousness of the fact that in most parts of the U.S. they are criminals and that even where sodomy laws have been repealed, gay people, bars, and groups are subject to



police harassment and to lack of protection by the police when attacked by non-gays. Humor and camp also represent a subversive element of gay/lesbian culture. Again Boggs writes of the blues:

*"The phrase 'laughing to keep from crying' is familiar to anyone who has listened to blues. Humor, as Brecht has shown, can keep a rebellious spirit alive at moments of despair; through it the ego refuses to be annihilated. The unique ability of blues performers to communicate with their audience derives in large part from the double entendres, self-deprecating references, and mocking gestures they incorporate into the music....In most cases, no doubt, the humor runs no deeper than simply having fun, but often enough it is 'lodged precisely within the context of the denial and rejection of bourgeois morality' " (p. 124).*

Much the same statement could be made about humor and camp in the gay and lesbian culture.

With the rise of the feminist and gay movements, gay/lesbian culture has taken on an added dimension of subversion. This is particularly clear in women's music where songs like 'Gay and Proud', 'Woman-Loving Women', and 'Imagine My Surprise' add a new dimension to lesbian culture. In these cases the culture goes further than rejection of bourgeois morality to actively putting forward lesbian lifestyles as positive.

Clearly lesbian and gay culture must be seen as both a culture of resistance and as a subversive culture. It is important that socialists understand this and make further efforts at this kind of analysis. It is not to deny the many contradictions within the culture: the promotion of alcoholism in the bars, the misogyny of many drag queens, and so on. But, by and large, socialists, even gay socialists, have erred too much on the side of rejecting the culture for its contradictions, and that imbalance must be made up for.





## TOWARD LIBERATION

If politics affects culture and culture politics, why then do we not have a much more activist progressive gay movement than we can see around us? Boggs again: "The leap from subversive culture to socio-political movement is an enormous and complicated one. . . . We cannot assume that a political translation of subversive cultural movements will in fact occur" (p. 120-121). And later on: "But it is too easy for rebellious cultural forces to end up absorbed, deflected or commodified unless they are clearly tied to political struggles that advance radical goals" (p. 127). Disco, for example, has been commodified and made straight for the mass markets; in becoming so it has lost much of its gay cultural content--even the Village People are trying to put up a straight front. And some of lesbian feminist culture has been deflected into a separatism that refuses to engage in any political interactions with the powers that be.

The key point is that we as socialists and gay activists must use our knowledge and understanding of gay/lesbian culture to intervene in the gay/lesbian movement in a way that will move the culture forward. In some ways the subversive aspects of gay/lesbian culture have already made a leap to socio-political movement. For example, in our discussion of the bars, Stonewall was briefly mentioned--this is the clearest situation in which culture has crossed over to political activism. Stonewall was a spontaneous event, but there are other situations where intervention by activists can help make the leap from cultural to political action.

In her speech at the 1975 Socialist Feminist Conference, Michele Russell spoke of the need to fight racism in white communities. She said:

*"Work in white ethnic communities building a progressive culture of struggle, identifying the positive aspects of ethnic ideas that are not distorted by national chauvinist limitations. The Marxist tradition reminds us that the past is not destroyed by the present, but survives in it as a latent form. We as socialists must help working class ethnic and Third World women recall the times in the past when their circumstances forced them to invent momentary forms of organization and activity such as 'bread riots' which strengthened their collective power. The contemporary relevance of that history must not be lost or have its living record limited to the scope of kitchen gossip. Building on that experience, making the concept of a culture of resistance historically specific, will lead to a collective movement of repossession and creation which is neither utopian nor retreatist" (p. 105-106).*

This same kind of work can be done in the gay lesbian community and for gay/lesbian liberation among non-gays.

### *Work in the Gay/Lesbian Community*

By this time many activists have discovered that the bars provide one of the best outlets for the dissemination of fliers, newspapers, and other literature within the gay/lesbian community. Through the bars people are able to learn about upcoming activities and issues. The bars have also been sources of fundraising efforts for gay causes.

Often, however, bar owners and workers see some of these efforts as parasitic, particularly when bars are, on the one hand, constantly asked for donations for political causes, and are, on the other hand, viewed and talked about as 'the enemy'--a conservative force in politics rather than an ally. To some extent this is understandable--bar owners are out to make money and many of them have been straight. But now, as more owners are gay, they have interests in common with other gay people. Because of this they must be seen as allies in the cause of gay rights and as potential allies for gay liberation, feminism, and socialism. To simply write bar owners off, as some socialists do, as part of the ruling class or petit-bourgeois, is to deny the realities of life for most owners. For all but a very few, life as the owner of a gay bar is a fairly marginal existence much as it is for the owner of any small business. Owning a women's bar on the northwest side of Chicago does not make you a part of the same class as the chairman of the



board of General Motors. For many owners there is a swing between being owner, worker in a gay bar, and worker in a straight job.

Bar owners, workers, and to some extent the 'bar crowds' have been the most active members of the gay/lesbian community historically. For owners and workers being that involved in the community means, at least implicitly, an openness about being gay, even in past decades when such openness was not as acceptable as now.

This argument can be extended to other groups within the gay/lesbian community. In particular, female impersonators, 'street fairies,' 'drag butches,' and others who have been more open about their lifestyle have to some extent been more ready to join in the political fray than those who are more 'respectable.' One woman, who had been involved in drag for some years, describes that as their "way of rebelling against society's expectations." She adds that she sees the feminist and gay movements as a better way of doing it.

The people in these groups, with long experience in the gay/lesbian community, are too often written off by political activists as too blatant or bourgeois, too into roles or too socially oriented to make a commitment to politics. But gay socialists have to learn to work *with* other members of the gay community and a reorientation to the bars is one way to start.

The bars also represent opportunities for non-gay socialists. Gay people have interests beyond the gay community and therefore may be open to political, social, and cultural activities that are not specifically gay oriented. Newspapers, fliers, and other materials can be distributed through gay bars even if they are not specifically gay oriented. In fact it is wrong to assume that gay bars and other gay meeting places can only be outlets for gay material; this is just a way to ghettoize gay people further and to not see us as full human beings.

For socialist groups doing community work in neighborhoods with large gay/lesbian communities it is also important to see that gay community as part of the neighborhood as a whole. Gay areas in cities will often largely overlap with independent and progressive areas. Since these are also areas where non-gay socialists will be involved it may frequently happen that they will want to learn about the gay community and include it within their community organizing work.

### *Working with Non-Gay People*

Different aspects of gay culture can also be used to help bring gay issues to a non-gay audience. The clearest way this has happened is through music. Both disco and women's music have brought some parts of gay/lesbian culture to the awareness of straight audiences. Like other art forms gay participation in these areas has been more acceptable than in other parts of

# SILENT NO MORE



**"Lesbian Concentrate" is out!**



the workforce. They present opportunities to raise many issues in relatively non-threatening ways. Some elements of camp can be brought in as well. Through the use of camp humor, non-gay people can begin to laugh not at gay people, but with us at the stereotypes of gays. This can often be a more effective way of deflating the stereotypes and educating non-gays than heavy handed marxist rhetoric.

Finally it is important to raise the questions implicit in gay sexuality and relationships. This must be done in ways that will move people forward. For example, we don't want to have slogans about 'smash the family' because many people, straight and gay, see their families as one of the few things they can count on. Rather we can hold up the warmth and openness of many gay relationships as examples we can all learn from. We can see the strength and independence of lesbians as a potential of all women and feeling and emotion of gay men likewise as a potential for all men.

These are a few examples of the kinds of styles, attitudes, and types of work we can undertake that will build on the positive aspects of gay/lesbian culture. They by no means exhaust the possibilities. Gay and lesbian socialists have the tools with which to understand and analyze gay/lesbian culture: an involvement/knowledge of the culture and the marxist politics and methodology which can explain its connections to society as a whole. This understanding cannot be developed outside of the culture but by participation in it, and to be relevant that understanding must be put to use through active involvement in the political struggles of the gay and lesbian community as a whole.

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# GAY LIBERATION WILL CHANGE THE CULTURE

by Hannah Frisch

The most visible aspects of the movement for lesbian and gay liberation in the last few years have been the attempts to prevent the repeal of gay rights ordinances. But the newsworthiness and the importance of gay civil rights activity should not lead people to think of the gay liberation movement as essentially a civil rights struggle by an oppressed minority which is seeking equality of opportunity within society. Rather gay liberation presents a challenge to our whole culture as it now exists.

The challenge to society is not directly an economic one (although it is not therefore any less profound). The movements for black and women's liberation present capitalism with a problem—how to provide decent jobs and pay for large numbers of people who are isolated into special job ghettos or who are not currently employed in paying jobs. Because it seems quite unlikely that contemporary capitalism can offer real economic equality to blacks and women, feminist and black liberation movements challenge the economic legitimacy of capitalism. The situation of gay people in the job market is quite different. Lesbians face discrimination primarily as women. Gay men are relatively well-distributed throughout the economic system. This is not to deny the oppressiveness of the requirement for concealment that gay people face in jobs, but merely to say that, in the most simplistic economic terms, capitalism could manage to offer gay people the same treatment as heterosexual people.

This sort of economic analysis has led some socialists to deny the importance of gay liberation struggles. Such socialists misuse Marxism, show a certain moral insensitivity, and, in many cases, seek to justify their own personal homophobia. They use an oversimplified model in which virtually all causality flows from economic base to cultural superstructure. However, these socialists are correct in saying that the impact of gay liberation is upon the culture, not primarily on the economic system. They are incorrect in thinking that it is therefore less important or less subversive of capitalism.

Gay liberation is one part of the broader feminist movement.\* Without the current upsurge of

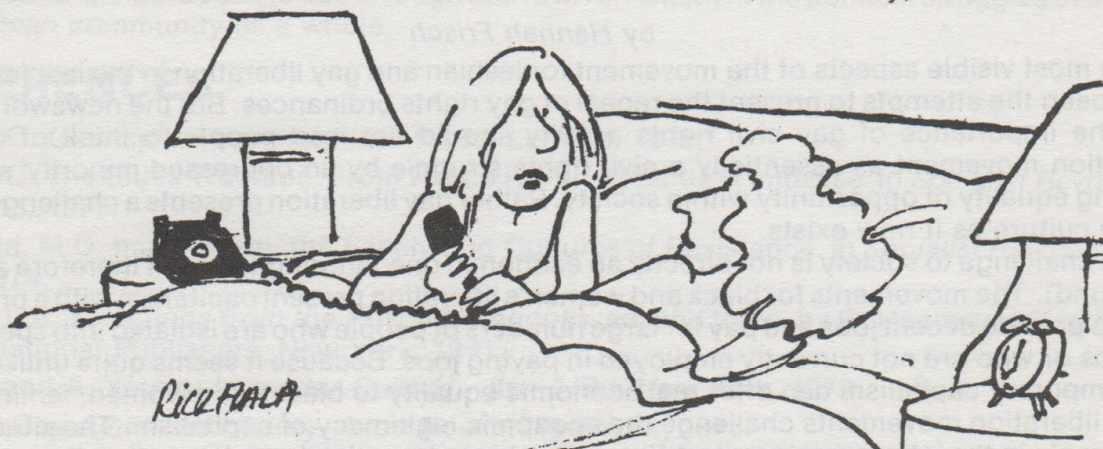
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\*I think that this is true despite the fact that men active in the gay movement do not all see themselves as feminists and that they sometimes behave in a sexist manner toward lesbian women. No gay person can act to fight his or her oppression as a homosexual without thereby fighting sexism.



feminism, it could never have started, and, if the feminist movement died out, it would die out along with it. At the same time, feminism needs gay liberation in general and lesbian liberation in particular. Gay liberation is a cornerstone for a radical critique of sex roles. The idea of men biologically designed to sleep with women and women biologically designed to sleep with men is deeply felt in our culture and provides a psychological underpinning for the feeling that women and men are and should be basically different. A world in which women and men's behavior are not channeled into masculine and feminine forms is seen as a world barren of sensual delight, a dull grey uniformity without sexual tension or excitement. Because we are brought up to view homosexual sex as inconceivable (What on earth do they do?) the idea that women and men have basically different functions in the sex act provides the basis for seeing the world as divided into masculine and feminine polarities. To let go of the idea that women sleep with men and men with women is to let go of a basic way in which we think of women and men as separate.

Lesbians have been mainstays of feminist organizations. In recent years, women's culture, which has primarily been shaped by lesbians, offers a space of their own to all women. It is perhaps less obvious that lesbians offer to women a different way of thinking about themselves. The real possibility of women living separately from men makes a difference in the perspective of even the most stably married heterosexual woman. It is as part of the feminist movement that gay liberation will have enormous effects of the culture and, ultimately, on the economy.



*"It's my parents. Quick, help me think up something heterosexual to say!"*

There is an additional and important way in which the model of a minority trying to obtain civil rights within society does not fit the gay liberation movement. In a sense, there is no separate gay minority. Rather there is a gay minority within most predominantly heterosexual psyches. Gay people are not over there somewhere as victims or allies or comrades. We are all gay people. We will someday live in a society which does not attempt to direct people's sexuality into solely heterosexual channels. We will need to develop social forms that will accommodate the needs of what will probably be a bisexual majority. The human personality structure will not be the same without the constraints imposed by the necessity to suppress homosexual feeling. (Of course, such changes might not all be positive if they occurred without changes in other aspects of sexism.)

In the initial paragraphs, it was asserted that gay liberation, through its effect on the culture, is profoundly subversive of capitalism. It is necessary to be more specific about the capitalist values and institutions which gay liberation subverts. (In saying that there is a connection between gay liberation and anti-capitalism, I do not by any means want to imply that gay liberation requires this connection as a justification. It is fully justified in itself and in its contribution to the abolition of patriarchal structures within society.) First of all, gay liberation is



a broad and diffuse challenge to the unthinking acceptance of conventional values and social relations. If a person comes to question the framework of conventional ideas and values in any one sense, they will be more open to the possibility of raising questions in other areas. More specifically, authoritarian values are undermined by feminism. (At this point it will be useful to look at gay liberation as part of the larger ideology of feminism.) Clearly authoritarian values are very important in maintaining the status quo and for the smooth operation of the capitalist workplace. Intuitively it seems right that authoritarianism and feminism are opposed. Radical feminists have argued, persuasively I think, that the authority of the father in the family is the model for the child's acceptance of authority and inequality in the rest of society. We also know from experience that authoritarian people tend to have anti-feminist, anti-homosexual attitudes. This last observation has been documented in Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levison, and Sanford's (1) classic study of the authoritarian personality. In addition, they found that authoritarian personalities have more rigid defense mechanisms and are less willing to allow socially unacceptable feelings into awareness. We may speculate that one contribution to the authoritarian person's rigidity may be the need to force him- or herself into a conventional sex role. Because of all these connections, it seems likely that the spread of feminist ideas throughout society will have the general effect of lessening authoritarianism.

In discussing authoritarianism within the institution of the family, gay liberation has been considered primarily as part of feminism. However, in discussing authoritarianism within a different institution--the army--homosexuality per se is important. The army is one of the most authoritarian institutions within society. In most countries it plays a reactionary political role. What has been said about feminism and authoritarianism above applies also to the institution of the army. If, through the spread of feminism, people became less authoritarian, the army would find it more difficult to get its recruits to accept military discipline. In addition, there is a question as to what effect gay liberation would have on the effectiveness and the reactionary nature of the army. An army of lovers cannot fail? An army of lover cannot function? Greenberg and Bystryn (2) suggest that homosexuality was useful in military situations where individual combat was important and forces were held together on the field by personal ties--as in ancient Greek and European feudal armies. A modern bureaucratic army requiring masses of men to operate in a coordinated and disciplined manner finds personal ties an interference. Sexual relations within a modern army (or any bureaucracy) creates an atmosphere of favoritism (real or suspected) which undermines the impersonal criteria for promotion and other benefits. An army of lovers would be harder to deploy on military grounds alone. It would be rife with intrigues, lovers quarrels, flirtations.\*

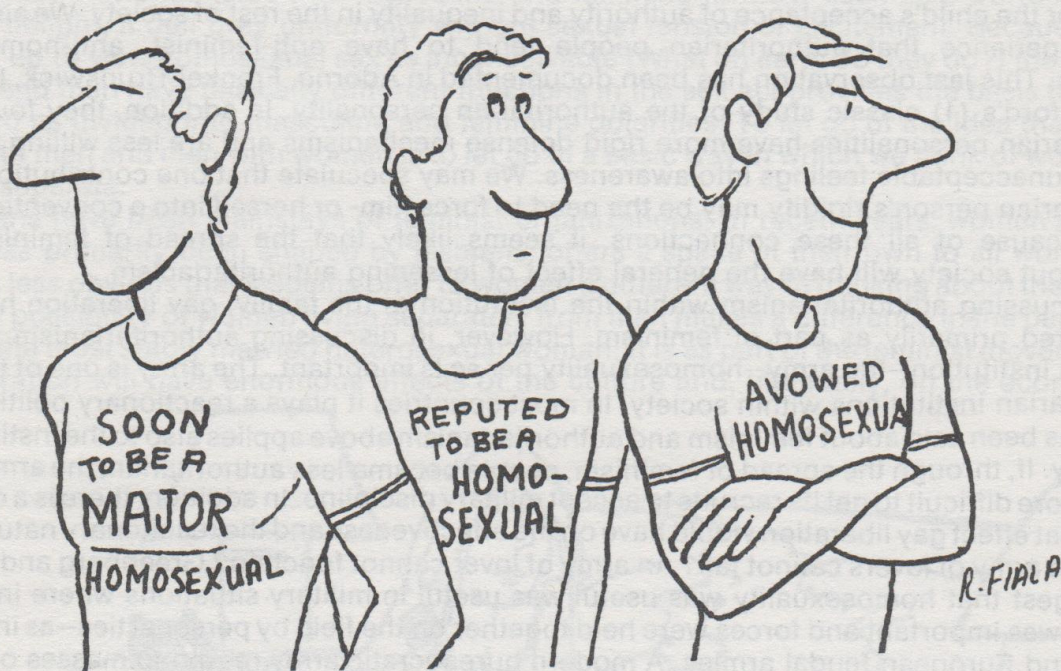
Besides its capacity to interfere with the impersonal functioning of army bureaucracy and discipline, I think that gay liberation poses an additional and even more crucial threat to the operation of the army. The army has the task of getting large groups of 18 year-old boys to do things that they don't much want to do. It needs to fit relatively non-authoritarian recruits into an incredibly authoritarian structure. To do this it has a great capacity to use physical force. Until recently, recruits could also be expected to cooperate voluntarily out of feelings of patriotism.

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\*To some degree, women are now being admitted to the army and other previously all-male bureaucracies. To the extent that women are fully integrated into these institutions, heterosexuality and lesbianism cause similar problems (as Greenberg and Bystryn have also noted.) It remains to be seen what measures will be taken to lessen the disruptive effects of heterosexual attractions. One hint of the future is to be found in Harrigan's *Games Mother Never Taught You*, a primer for women trying to make it in the corporate hierarchy: *Never* have an affair within the company, Harrigan advises. It will enhance the status of the man involved and it will ruin your career. Regardless of circumstance, it is always the woman who will be fired, transferred, demoted, or sidetracked.



The ideal of masculinity has provided another source of voluntary cooperation. The drill sergeant whips recruits into line not only with the threat of the stockade but with the accusation of being a faggot. To 18 year-old boys raised in a homophobic culture whose sexuality may not be altogether clear, who are in a situation likely to evoke homosexual desires, the accusation carries a lot of force. One of the services the army offers to its recruits is to "make a man of you." When the army recruit comes to care more about being a person than about being a man, the authoritarian army as we now know it will be in trouble.



If there is more to gay liberation than the struggle for civil rights, it is still necessary to look at the relationship between gay civil rights and gay liberation. Dennis Altman (3) has distinguished between heterosexual tolerance of homosexuals and genuine acceptance. David Fernbach (4) has suggested that the state no longer needs to deny civil rights to gay people. There would seem to be a "tolerant" position where one might combine support for gay civil rights along with personal distaste for homosexuality. The "human rights" campaigns in Dade County and elsewhere have tried to appeal to heterosexuals to let their sense of justice override their homophobic feelings. In the first draft of this paper, I argued that the defeats in Dade County, St. Paul, Wichita, and Eugene clearly showed that "tolerance" of homosexual civil rights was not the wave of the future. Civil rights could not be won without first changing people's homophobia. Since then, the victory in Seattle and the defeat of the Briggs Initiative in California make this less clear. Nevertheless, I would argue that the victories occurred because the anti-gay forces became overconfident and made errors, not because the "tolerant" position has any long term viability. Principled liberalism along with personal distaste for homosexuality is an unstable combination of attitudes. The right wing accurately points out the contradiction: "But would you want one to teach your children?" Of course, the real issue here is not child molestation but the availability of gay role models for young children. An openly gay person is a living breathing advertisement for the existence and desirability of a gay life style.

"If only they wouldn't flaunt it." But with an active gay movement and with their civil rights guaranteed, they will flaunt it--and some of "them" will be teachers of impressionable young children. If there were civil rights laws but no gay movement, then social disapproval might well



prevent gay people from achieving any real change. If the anti-homosexual forces were not so hysterical, they might find that allowing civil rights laws to pass without repeal campaigns would be a winning strategy. They could then hope (not unreasonably) that the gay movement might succumb to 70s apathy. But for the foreseeable future, civil rights laws will be met with opposition.

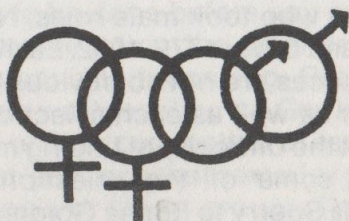
If the lesbian and gay movement as a whole exclusively devoted itself to civil rights it could lose its potential for forcing real change. But the level of personal and psychological oppression experienced by gays is too high to allow them to concentrate solely on their legal rights. A temporary focus on civil rights need not be harmful unless we fail to use the energy mobilized by the campaign for subsequent organizing around other personal, cultural, and political gay movement issues.

In sum, I see the struggle for gay civil rights and for full gay liberation as mutually supportive. At times there will be contradictions on a tactical level: do you choose your straightest looking lesbians and gay men to speak for gay civil rights on TV? But these contradictions are less important. Overall, civil rights will not be won by addressing civil rights alone. And civil rights campaigns have enormous potential for mobilizing and energizing the whole movement for gay liberation. Gay liberation will have very wide effects: from the psyche to the army, all culture and institutions will be touched. Gay liberation alone will not topple capitalism, but the balances which support the capitalist structure will be seriously disturbed.

The relationship between civil rights and gay liberation I have described here has implications for the ways in which socialist lesbians and gay men should relate to gay civil rights groups. Civil rights groups should not be criticized for being reformist but praised for being profoundly subversive of the sexist and anti-human values which now dominate the culture. What is most important at this point in time is that there be an activist gay movement. Non-revolutionary ideology in that movement is not a problem unless that ideology is such that it tends to demobilize people. Or unless it becomes explicitly anti-real liberation or explicitly pro-capitalist. The relationship between the gay groups in California which worked against the Briggs Initiative is a model for cooperation between civil rights groups and more radical groups. There might be various reasons for socialists to work within either type of group, but we need not fear that by working in a civil rights group that we are building something harmful to our ultimate goals.

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# TAKING THE PAST OUT OF THE CLOSET: GAY AMERICAN HISTORY

by Jeff Weinstein

*Gay American History--Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*

A Documentary by Jonathan Katz

Thomas Y. Crowell, 690 pp., \$9.95 paper

When I heard the news last year that a large 'gay history' had been published that was neither hostile nor silly I was excited. Most 'gay histories' were demeaning; brave psychoanalytic studies of repressed writers à la Dickinson or Whitman, or 'famous queers of history' anthologies written by homophobic or apologetic experts. Katz's book would be different. He had written *Coming Out! A Documentary Play About Gay Life and Liberation in the U.S.A.*, *Resistance at Christiana*, about a fugitive slave rebellion, and he had edited a series of books about homosexuality. For an expensive paperback, *Gay American History* was selling like hotcakes. It could not have been published without the existence of an ongoing gay movement and the market such a movement made possible. Nearly everybody I knew involved in gay politics and quite a few others were talking about the book, more about the fact that such a book was published than the information it contained. As more than one reviewer said, *Gay American History* helps create the subject it sets out to document. In any case my excitement was justified: it is a fine group of documents, the result, as Katz notes, of "a certain dogged, one track, single-minded persistence."

Katz arranges his material into six parts, each of these in chronological order: Trouble: 1566-1966; dealing mostly with judgments of the outside world; Treatment: 1884-1974, which documents some lesser known horror stories of psychoanalytic 'therapy'; Passing Women: 1782-1920, with examples of women who took male roles; Native Americans/Gay Americans: 1528-1976; Resistance: 1859-1972; and Love: 1779-1932. Easily available items are not included, although even the most obvious sources are not so obvious to the non-gay scholar. There is a long introduction and each chapter as well as each selection is prefaced by notes.

In his introduction Katz points out the difficulty of finding material. The author found much of his stuff by word-of-mouth, and some of the selections are indeed 'finds': previously unpublished love letters from Almeda Sperry to Emma Goldman; a page of Walt Whitman's diary





listing the men he 'slept with' (which should finally give lie to the constant academic denial of Whitman's homosexuality); as well as many telling legal and personal documents of less famous people. Katz's book has flashes of real life. 'Particular attention was paid to documenting the experience of ordinary gay people' he says in the introduction. The oral history of a young man who experienced electroshock treatment and the interviews with Barbara Gittings (of the Daughters of Bilitis) and Aima Routsong (author of *Patience and Sarah*) are good examples of this necessary reportage.

### *Primary Research*

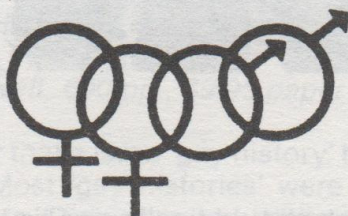
*Gay American History* has been accused of being 'bathroom reading' and in some ways it is (although to me this is no perjorative term). Sometimes the selections seem scattered and their arrangement arbitrary. The *History* does not have, and does not pretend to have, an historical 'analysis'--of why there has been gay oppression, of whether such oppression changes over time or results from a recognizable set of causes. This is no present problem with the book; primary research like Katz's has to be done before any questions like these can be answered. Most analysis of gay oppression coming from the American and European Left has appeared de novo, without much data to support the theorizing. But Katz does make a few unexamined analytical assumptions in his book just by calling it a *Gay History*: that a history can be written of people who are unselfconscious of their connection to each other, that women and men can be included together under the word 'gay', and that sexual or gender proclivities can themselves tie together otherwise disparate people or ethnic groups. I'm not saying that Katz is wrong in his assumptions, but only that they should have been discussed.




The author early identifies himself as a homosexual, which, although it may seem unnecessary, is a reminder that his perception as a gay American male informs *Gay American History*. This book does not wear the mask of neutral or objective history. The documentation of homosexual life must be integrated in any retelling of American (and any other) history. Like black, Native American, women's histories (of which gay history is a part) this documentation must be--for accuracy's sake--one which acknowledges the human, political, and economic rights of the homosexual person. One of the best things about Katz's book is that if anyone is inclined to relax their vigilance about gay rights, *Gay American History* will remind you how easy it has been to imprison, shock, and kill perfectly normal people.

An additional effect of this book is to suggest whole worlds of continuity. In the way Women's and Third World liberation movements helped individuals recognize that their situations were shared and not separate, this book extends that concept of shared oppression to different generations and groups. If there is a continuity to gay oppression, that continuity describes Gay History. Now this history not only has to be found and charted, but carefully described. One uniform symptom of gay oppression in American history is its invisibility, and uncovering scattered facts is what this book does best. It is an exemplary job.

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# LESBIAN AND GAY LIBERATION IN THE 80s: ANDROGYNY, MEN, AND POWER

by Marc Killinger

a review of *Gay Oppression and Liberation or: Homophobia: Its Causes and Cure*

*Editor's Note: The following review is based on the first draft of Gay Oppression and Liberation, published in June 1977. It is our understanding that MNS has revised this publication, and that the revised version will be published soon. The revised edition apparently makes some of the changes which have been suggested in this review.*

The premise of *Gay Oppression and Liberation or: Homophobia: Its Causes and Cure* is that lesbian and gay oppression is an inherent part of capitalism and particularly of patriarchal dominance, and therefore "gay liberation must be committed to building organizations to fight capitalism as a whole" (p. 95). This exciting and useful document was written by two lesbians and two gay men who are part of the Gay Theory Work Group of Movement for a New Society (MNS).\*

*Gay Oppression and Liberation* sees lesbian and gay oppression as located in a comprehensive web where it is linked to many other exploitive relationships throughout our society. It is written from this theoretical perspective. It concludes with a section on strategy and "Next Steps" so that the readers' understandings can flow to political action and response.

The paper suggests a socialist-feminist perspective, though like MNS in general it shies away from the word "socialist." Its focus is on both the personal and the political, insisting there is no inherent split between the two (indeed, the split is created by capitalism). It poses a challenge to all of us to struggle at building new relationships, whether gay or non-gay, as part of pushing forth our political work. Finally, it demands that we do all our organizing in ways that provide constant challenge to hierarchical domination, as well as racism and sexism.

I am a member of both Philadelphia NAM and Movement for a New Society.\*\* I wish to be frank and open with my supportive criticism of both NAM and MNS, the latter of which will be obvious in this paper. MNS is a strong supporter of both individual lesbians and gay men and also of

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\*They remain unidentified because "part of our oppression as gay people is not being able to be open about our identities" (p. 2).

\*\*MNS is a decentralized network of non-violent collectives around the country. It grew out of the Philadelphia Quaker anti-war movement and is now growing steadily, particularly with the expansion of the anti-nuclear movement in the late 70s.





gay/lesbian liberation in general, although it is sometimes confused about the need to broaden itself. This paper is meant to widen MNS's own understanding and practice and to be an outreach tool, as well as the first draft of a position paper. This review should contribute to those goals.\*

Like much of MNS theorizing, *Gay Oppression and Liberation* flows from a description of oppression and an analysis of that oppression to a vision of how things might be and finally to a non-violent strategy for getting from here to there. I will flow through in that order in this review. I find their analysis of patriarchy and their vision of liberated sexuality particularly exciting, along with the amazing comprehensiveness of the paper. I do have reservations about an analysis that emphasizes sex roles and separatism such that sexuality is seen as dangerously pliable and "correct" or "incorrect." There is also a real gap in the treatment of gay male culture and organizing possibilities, as well as the overall lack of contemporary specifics (though that may have been on purpose so the paper does not become quickly outdated). Finally, I think the writers' non-violent approach leads them to not see the extent to which unequal power is pervasive in our society; as a result, they (ironically) fail to see that violence is quite widespread.

## OUR OPPRESSION

The range of oppressions lesbians and gay men are "caught in the web of" is well laid out here: they include primarily the lack of civil rights and outright discriminatory laws and practices; as well as other institutional sources such as religion, the family, and the medical establishment.

The closet--hating or not knowing ourselves--is the first reality of lesbian and gay oppression. An understanding of the psychological toll of anxiety, fear, and self-hate pervades the paper.

When we admit our gayness to ourselves we must face our internalized oppression. Reinforcing this oppression is "the heterosexual assumption": lesbians and gay men have no real identity when surrounded by a heterosexually-oriented culture.

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\*A note on language: the paper uses the spellings "womon" and "wimmin" for "woman" and "women,"

because the word "woman" means literally "wife of man"...in a paper on gay liberation we do not think it appropriate to write about "men" and "wives of men" (p. 3).

Others may react strongly to this usage; I don't. I'm not sure this is the place to alter sexist language if it makes reading more difficult or turns people off. I think the question of how to develop new language as part of our cultural revolution is important; for me the issue is how to do it so that it is easier for radicals to talk to our less initiated brothers and sisters, rather than more difficult.



Being public about our gayness is made difficult by the need to stay in the closet for reasons such as employment and child custody and because of the threat of physical violence. Women have to deal with an ever-present threat of violence in a way that gay men don't, because gay men still benefit from male privilege. The paper mentions "the sexual hassles wimmin now experience as waitresses, pedestrians on the street, secretaries, etc." (p. 52) but for me sexual hassles are on a continuum that includes rape, wife-battering in the "safety" of marriage, and the implications of violence that pornography embodies. The MNS paper never really talks about many of these examples. I perceive that violence pervades our social relations, though it becomes systematized and obscured by work, family relationships, and the law. It is also carefully dissipated and sublimated by spectator sports, the assembly line, religious taboo, and the law.





## ANALYSIS

The MNS analysis of this web of gay oppression begins with heterosexism:

*the institutionalization through ideology and social structure of **enforced** heterosexuality. . . . Heterosexism is part of the system of sexism because it centers on maintaining the subservience of wimmin to men by preventing homosexuality and any deviance from the traditional masculine and feminine heterosexual roles (p. 31).*

The writers state without substantiation or discussion\*\* that "sex was the original class division" (p. 64). This is perhaps overstated, but their location of gay/lesbian oppression centrally in the patriarchy (my definition: the system of male dominance) seems correct. Therefore, the writers divide their analysis of lesbian and gay male oppression because "the essential features of heterosexism are different for wimmin and men" (p. 32).

Lesbian oppression is rooted in the taboo against sexual relations among women and the importance of that taboo in maintaining men's power over women. Keeping strict sexual roles is essential "because they are the roles of submission and dominance" (p. 41). Our society is based on this: not just sex roles, but the dominance of bosses over workers, parents and schools over young people, the U.S. over "underdeveloped" countries, and so on.

For women this has the effect of keeping women's energy from each other; friendships among women play second fiddle to a heterosexual lover, especially since sexuality so powerfully defines commitment in our society. Thus the possibility of knowing about their sexual selves without male definition is rare for women.



\*\*Although the writers don't cite a source, they were probably influenced by Engels in *Origin of the Family* (see p. 129 in the paperbound edition edited by E. B. Leacock, or p. 58 in the 1942 International Publishers edition).



For men, "masculinity" is taught and competition encouraged; heterosexism is an ideological and physical means of punishing deviation; "real men" are never "faggots and queers." Heterosexism "trains men to believe that safe, caring, supportive relationships between men are impossible" (p. 39). I assume that men are also trained to exploit women, though the writers put it more benignly, stating that "men's role is to be the provider, the thinker, the protector for wimmin" (p. 40).

I agree with the understanding of gay/lesbian oppression that places it within patriarchy, but this paper sees patriarchy largely in terms of sex roles. To say that "sex roles cannot exist without the repression of homosexuality" (p. 40) overestimates the centrality both of sex roles and of homosexuality. Patriarchy is a system of power. If capitalism rests on economic and material power and manipulation, then patriarchy is likewise ultimately based on physical power. Homosexuality can become more widespread while the same system of power is perpetuated because the system of male violence is not dependent solely on individual acts of violence. Rather, it is tied to institutions of production, the legal system, and the family. In this context, the paper should deal more with why gay men and lesbians have only the possibility of unity; sexism continues in the gay male world and gets reinforced in spite of sexual orientation.

The other systems that aid in enforcing patriarchy are at least touched on in *Gay Oppression and Liberation*. Imperialism and racism have roots in attitudes and structures of domination; capitalism clearly benefits from sexism and heterosexism because both are alienating; sex roles contribute to the exploitation of both sexes and they legitimize the existence of a low-paid reserve force of workers. Finally, the nuclear family is integral to capitalism and sexism. It reproduces and trains workers, encourages consumption, and "sets up the structure for men to control and exploit wimmim" (p. 46). The family is also one of the most crucial and personal locations for the enforcement of "the heterosexual assumption."



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This attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the roots of lesbian and gay oppression is bound to have gaps in it. Some of the subtleties of the intertwining of capitalism and patriarchy are missed in such a cursory treatment of capitalism. For example, sex roles vary with class position; in discussing marriage, to stress the "numerous economic advantages" (pp. 34-35) of material goods and job benefits refers largely to middle-class conditions that don't necessarily apply to the working class.

Also, the realities of work and homophobia mean that working class people are more likely to stay in the closet; professionals more readily have the means to live a comfortable, separate existence, away from a homophobic family or community.

The cursory treatment of racism ("as oppressed minorities... gay and third world people are subject to much the same treatment" (p. 44)) has to be criticized on similar grounds. Racism is a system that probably exists more powerfully among third-world and lesbian communities than does heterosexism. And the racism among gay men shows that homosexuality can be integrated into straight white male society without a general liberation struggle.



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## VISION

The MNS vision sees the necessity of totally freeing sexuality from reproduction, and has androgyny as its central notion. The authors quote from the Gay Revolution Party Manifesto in noting that:

*Gay revolution will not lead to freedom of association for gay people in a predominantly straight world, nor will it lead to straight-defined homosexuality with marriages and exclusive monogamy. Gay revolution will produce a world in which all social and sensual relationships will be gay and in which homo- and heterosexuality will be incomprehensible terms (p. 54, from Out of the Closets, p. 344).*

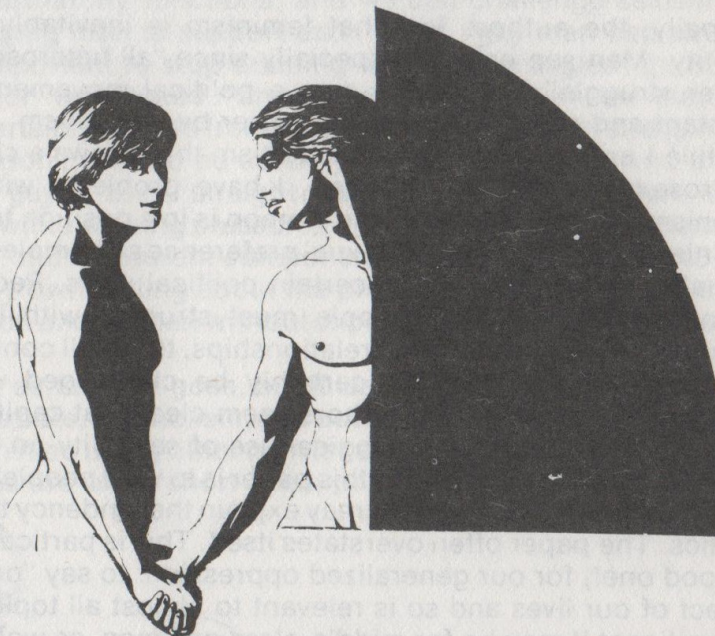
Androgyny means that there is a single character ideal that encourages and rewards such characteristics as nurturing cooperation, initiative, and sensuality; and it will confront objectification, domination, and selfishness. Bisexuality would be widespread, because most people would want to be sexual with both genders, though they suggest that no norm for sexual choice would exist.



The authors make an important distinction between sexuality and sensuality. When sensuality can be a way of loving, playing, and reaching outside ourselves more than is true today, the current emphasis on sexuality combined with the lack of sensuality would disappear.

Of course a whole range of institutional changes would be needed as part of the revolution that would liberate sexuality. New institutions would include full employment; a decentralized, socially-owned, ecologically sound, and democratically controlled economy; egalitarian political structures; and non-elitist cultural institutions. Since "non-violent action is a set of tools which brings conflict to the surface" (p. 58) we will have non-violent ways of dealing with conflict. Finally, unisex dress, universal daycare, and communal childrearing would support the replacement of the nuclear family with "a loving circle of friends" (p. 58).

One problem I have with this section is not so much any fundamental disagreement with it, but rather how it is used to guide strategy. New institutions are not ranked in any order of importance, so there is no sense of which changes might come sooner. Surely unisex dress and a socialist economy are not of the same priority. I have more arguments with androgyny. Perhaps the androgynous vision makes more sense for the future; for a transition period. I think a vision in which people *do* have some preference (without coercion) might make more sense.

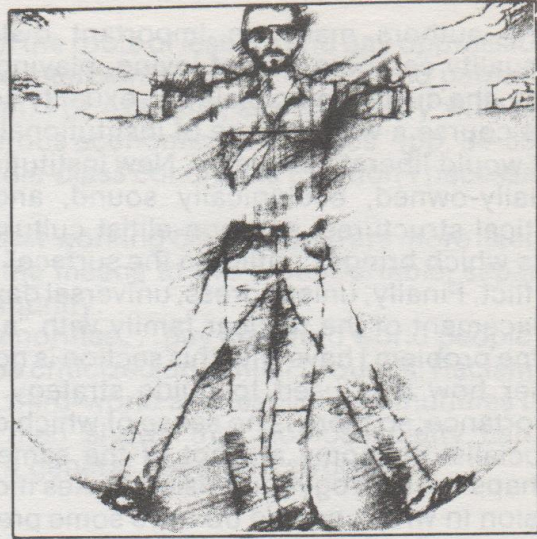


## STRATEGY

The strategy section of *Gay Oppression and Liberation* deals with separatism and even sexual orientation as tools for social change, then lays out a long-term revolutionary strategy. First off, the personal levels and organizational necessity for lesbian feminism are laid out. Essentially this is a strategy of separatism: the need for oppressed groups to organize separately, which exists because women need separate time and space to identify and analyze their oppression and because women as individuals must get support and rid themselves of internalized oppression. Separatism means both separate organizations and caucuses within organizations. This allows struggle on the basis of equality and strength. "The ultimate goal of this separation is solidarity" (p. 61) in order "to pull down our real enemy together" (p. 65).

The argument for women's separatism is well-made. It is an effective polemic for a lesbian feminist political lifestyle. Assuming bisexuality, the authors suggest that women should not act on their heterosexual side ("side"?) in order to fight their own internalized sexism and dependency on men, while building women's culture in the widest sense.





Finally, the authors feel that feminism is inevitably strengthened by individual woman-identity. Men sap energy, especially since "all heterosexual relationships are by definition a power struggle" (p. 72). Building a political movement of, by, and for women that is both resistant and supportive is made easier by lesbianism.

While I am supportive of a separatism that shows a clear grounding in an understanding of heterosexual and male privilege, I have problems with this further elaboration of lesbian feminism. To say that "a lesbian woman is in a position to be very clear with the world about her feminism" (p. 74), to link up sexual preference so completely with political ideology, implies that sexuality should be used in certain political ways. People are not so pliable in their sexual orientation. As long as people must struggle with living out their politics by opposing dominance in their personal relationships, they will continue to be in a variety of relationships. Heterosexual privilege can certainly be challenged without heterosexuality *per se* being declared "incorrect." The authors seem clear that capitalism manipulates sexuality in certain ways; I am wary of the ideological use of sexuality on the left, too.

In general, the tendency in this paper is to view people's homosexuality as more central to our lives than it may be, and this may explain the tendency to see sexual orientation as so crucial to politics. The paper often overstates itself. This is particularly evident as they try to make a case (a good one!) for our generalized oppression: to say "our oppression as gays pervades every aspect of our lives and so is relevant to almost all topics" (p. 15) ignores how comparatively insignificant it may be for middle-class gay men, as well as how over-riding racism, sexism, or class position may be for blacks, women, or workers.

In any case, every man should read the section on "Gay Men in the Feminist Struggle," which does a good job of suggesting men's responsibility under patriarchy. First of all

*there is no such thing as men's oppression....it is true that men are limited and dehumanized by the patriarchy; but they also receive the power, status, greater wealth, and feelings of superiority that the patriarchy confers upon men (p. 84).*

Since gay men still have male privilege, their role is to be supportive of the woman-led struggle. While lesbians "form the cutting edge of the feminist revolution" (p. 85), (because of their double oppression), gay men need women's liberation, led by women, in order to achieve their own sexual liberation.

The authors find much that men can do to be supportive. By visibly opting out of oppressive relationships with women, and by committing ourselves to our brothers, we can be on the cutting edge of men's sexism. That is, if we don't retreat into a men's world that is as old and



dominant as ever:

*wimmin have no reason to assume that men, including gay men, uniting around their own interests are going to do anything beneficial for wimmin (p. 89).*

Gay men's organizations must be clear that they speak for men only, and should respect women's need for separatism. When working in coalitions, men need to challenge other men's sexism:

*gay men should support wimmin and, if they cannot be supportive, they should separate rather than dominate (p. 89).*

Gay men can be supportive in such areas as doing childcare or providing financial support.

The other responsibility of gay men is to change ourselves; we need to renounce male aggression in a way that retains firmness but moves us towards androgyny. Gay male relationships are the briefest in duration (lesbian ones are the longest); gay men must deal with what power has done to us, working on our domineering tendencies while choosing not to be involved with anyone if it takes too much energy.

Finally, gay men have an important role to play among men in general. Our oppression can give us special insight into how patriarchy functions, and we can challenge sexism while sharing nurturing skills. In encouraging men to support each other, "gay men can also raise consciousness about why it is so important to stop draining wimmin's energies" (p. 89).

However, I am not sure whether we should "challenge straight men on their rigid heterosexuality directly" (p. 89). It certainly follows from the paper's analysis that straight men's sexuality is "incorrect." However, I don't want to be used by some straight man who thinks it would be politically correct to be gay; I think straight men, like straight women, can be convinced to support gay liberation without being pressured to change their sexual orientation. Again, it is a question of the priority of the different components of the vision. The MNS paper tends to want everything at once; my own feeling about the present political period is that we need to get support from non-gay men and women without expecting them to change their own sexual orientation.

This section on gay men is good, as far as it goes, but it leaves out much about gay men's subculture (both good and bad). The bars, alcoholism, and occasional violent objectification of each other can be rampant, although men using other men is certainly different from men using women. Though men's relationships are often short-lived, political gay men should become





aware that they can get support and do political work in gay men's groups. Some examples of such groups are "Sissies in Struggle" in New Orleans, and "Men Against Sexism" in the prison at Walla Walla, Washington.

The rest of the strategy section details the movement and alternative building and workplace organizing (though there isn't a lot of support for the latter in MNS) that must happen in the context of a five-stage gay liberation struggle. The five stages of the long range strategy are: 1) cultural preparation; 2) organization building; 3) propaganda of the deed; 4) mass economic and political non-cooperation; and 5) parallel institutions.

Near the end, a section on lesbians and gays in MNS tells a promising story of support and debate in the networks. It includes areas of particular importance for struggling in mixed organizations around support for gay liberation, fighting homophobia, and towards liberating sexuality. The concluding section, "Next Steps: Gays All Together," emphasizes education, building alternative institutions, training, direct action, and ridding ourselves of oppressive behaviors and attitudes, such as racism. There are many excellent and specific examples of things we can be doing to build gay liberation.

The ending is both useful and confusing, particularly in relation to the five stages. It is clear that the stages overlap and do not strictly follow one after another, but that "the stages are in the order that they are for a reason" (p. 98) is not clearly explained. Building alternative institutions, for instance, is listed in stage two and also at the end, I assume as a more or less immediate priority; war tax resistance, on the other hand, is listed in stage five along with coalition building, although many MNSers practice tax resistance right now, while MNS (at least in Philadelphia) has not been a notable participant in coalitions.

Given this confusion with an otherwise useful set of strategic suggestions, the basic outline that MNS embodies is quite contradictory. On the one hand, gay liberationists can learn a lot from a strategy that stresses the interlocking sources of oppression, and places our oppression in patriarchy. That this leads to a politics on the basis of autonomous strength, along with local education and public activity, is a powerful socialist-feminist understanding.

However, the MNS reality is one steeped in the relative comfort of what sociologists would call "deviant subculture." "Living the revolution now" is difficult but also safe. As we build alternatives we must be careful not to make them too culturally separate from ordinary working people. Living in a capitalist society means we must create new forms with an eye to how they move along the revolutionary transformation.

I find the five stage analysis of revolutionary transformation deficient; how can small decentralized collectives in the "belly of the monster" survive and coordinate against state power? How do alternative institutions really take over entertainment, educational, and productive capacities on the mass scale as they exist today?

There are always unanswered questions, and this paper is to be lauded for asking and answering. Although I have differences with MNS, they tend to pale compared to my differences with "gay rights" liberal activists. I believe the 1980s will be a period of retrenchment and base-building, in which we may need to be more practical about the struggles we can wage as we build links between groups and with the wider working class. But lesbian and gay liberation will only succeed in a revolutionary process that is thoroughgoing and attuned to the deep divisions that power relations have wrought in our society.





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