

# Queer in a Lean World

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THE QUEER MOVEMENT has made impressive gains in the thirty-one years since the Gay Liberation Front emerged out of the Stonewall Riots in New York City. It is now possible for many lesbians and gay men to live relatively open lives in fairly supportive environments with access to real community resources.

Yet many others have benefited little from these gains. There has been little change in the lives of the most vulnerable queers, including transgendered people, queers living in poverty, people of color, people living in the closet and many women.

Before the Stonewall riots, queers were largely culturally invisible except for negative stereotypes. A predatory gay man or lesbian was sometimes depicted in a movie, play or novel, but they were usually killed off by the end of the story. Now shows like "Will and Grace" are prime time hits on conservative American networks.

Magazines, books, movies and plays have lots of queer characters, ranging from lesbian heroes in detective novels to the closeted high school teachers. It is a real gain to have some point of reference in popular culture, even if these are often chaste images of white middle-class gay men or lesbians.

In Canada, queers have made significant gains in the areas of human rights protection and workplace benefits. The Federal government and every Canadian province now include non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in their human rights codes. Many unions, particularly in the public sector, have bargained for non-discrimination clauses in collective agreements and full benefits for same sex-partners.

Indeed, from the perspective of Canada or much of Western Europe, the United States is an exceptional backwater in its denial of human rights. This is particularly surprising when you remember that the contemporary lesbian/gay liberation movement first emerged in the United States.

Yet these gains should not make us smug. The state continues to coercively police sexuality. Male

Toronto police officers recently raided a women's night at a Toronto bathhouse, using liquor license standards as an excuse to harass and terrorize.

Extensive spying and entrapment operations in parks and washrooms across North America continue to turn up vulnerable, closeted men who are often exposed to the glare of destructive publicity. High school is still a hotbed of harassment and violence against young people who are labeled "queer."

Indeed, the threat of heterosexist violence and harassment is pervasive. The horrifying incidents that come to public attention, such as the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, are just the tip of the iceberg. The threat of violence hangs over even the most open queers, who often do complex calculations of the risk of exposure in specific settings.

The danger of violence increases dramatically the farther one strays from the gender-normative gay male and lesbian images that have entered public consciousness. Transgendered people, people of color and queers on the street are openly targeted for harassment and everyday violence, including ongoing abuse at the hands of police.

## **Victories in Lean Times**

This is a situation in which real and important gains for some gay men and lesbians have to be understood in the context of the many queers who have won little or nothing. Further, the most important of these victories have been won in the last 20 years, a period marked by a sharp shift to the right. The overall political climate has been marked by poor-bashing, anti-affirmative action measures, immigrant-bashing, the rise of the right, the decline of the left and a generally defensive stance on the part of the labor movement.

Those gains that were won have come for two reasons. First, they came through struggle: Queers have mobilized again and again, taking to the streets to protest against state violence, queer-bashing, inaction around AIDS and the denial of our human rights. In doing so, we have changed the world and, perhaps more importantly, changed ourselves into activists. None of these gains would be here today if it was not for this gutsy activism.

Queers are not the only people, however, who mobilized in the face of this right-wing offensive. Anti-poverty groups, immigrants rights organizers, anti-racist activists, feminists and labor movements activists have fought back hard. We need to probe a bit farther, then, to understand the changes in capitalist society that have created certain spaces for the consolidation of lesbian and gay identities in a generally hostile climate.

## **Capitalism and Sexuality**

The word "homosexual" first emerged in the 1860s. A new word was required to explain a relatively new phenomenon. Of course, there was nothing new about women having sex with women or men with men. The new aspect that this new word "homosexual" tried to capture was the emergence of a same-sex orientation as a full-time sexual identity.

This shift was a product of specifically capitalist social relations. The separation of home from paid employment in capitalist societies provided the ground for the emergence of the homosexual.

In pre-capitalist societies, individuals would produce (expend energy to transform nature to meet

their wants and needs) and reproduce (restore energy and raise the next generation) with the same people. People would hunt, gather, harvest, eat, play, raise children and have sex in the same kinship-organized community.

In capitalist societies, production is separated from reproduction and paid employment is removed from home. This opens up new spaces, as our access to the key productive resources in society no longer depends directly on our location within kinship structures. At some level, the employer in a capitalist society does not have to care about what employees do on their own time, as long as they show up ready to work.

Capitalism both opened up new possibilities for the exploration of sexuality and eroded family structures through long hours of work and inadequate pay. In the later 1800s and early 1900s, state policymakers and moral reformers began to worry that the working class was going through a process of “moral degeneration.”

In many households, men, women and children were all employed for pay outside the home. Overcrowded housing units meant that children were exposed to sex and that boys and girls lived in close proximity. Non-marital heterosexual relations and homosexuality seemed to be thriving in the streets and the bars. State policy-makers saw moral reform in part as an antidote to working class militancy.

A revived working class family was seen as a potential pillar of stability as well as an ongoing source of new workers. The state developed a range of new forms of moral regulation to shape the working-class family in the period 1880-1920 in Canada, Britain and the United States. Male homosexuality was outlawed. (Women were omitted from this legislation in Britain, as sexist law-makers could not even imagine that women had a sexuality independent from men.)

The new gender order was reinforced by activities, such as segregated home economics classes for girls and shop classes for boys in schools. The unpaid labor of women in the household was subjected to new forms of scrutiny, as public health nurses would suddenly show up on the doorstep to inspect and instruct.

## **Moral Deregulation and Queer Capitalism**

The regime of moral regulation that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was incorporated into the welfare state structures that emerged after World War II. It remained largely intact until the 1960s. The past thirty-five years have seen a partial moral deregulation, in the face of changes in capitalist society and the emergence of militant lesbian/gay and women's movements.

Capitalism, then, both opened up new spaces for the development of sexuality and shut them down with a regime of moral regulation. In the recent past, this regime of moral regulation has undergone important changes.

There has been a partial moral deregulation as rules have been relaxed in certain areas of life. Yet at the same time, new forms of moral policing have been introduced, for example in the harassment of people receiving welfare benefits and homeless people.

Moral deregulation has been closely related to the deeper penetration of commodification (the production of goods specifically for the market) into our everyday lives. In North America, bread once baked in the home is now mainly purchased on the market. Birthday parties are increasingly organized at commercial venues like fast food restaurants.

The market is fundamentally amoral. It is about making a buck. The old regime of moral regulation was actually a barrier to making a buck in certain ways. For example, restrictions on gambling kept that ultra-high profit industry on the margins of North American life.

The shift to the right in the last twenty years has included a fair amount of deregulation as barriers to market expansion at any cost have been removed. Transportation industries, for example, have been deregulated in such a way as to decrease safety inspections, health and safety protection and limits on competition. There have also been elements of moral deregulation. Casinos now compete to suck money out of the pockets of working class people in Windsor and Detroit.

This moral deregulation has largely followed market forces and has therefore included elements of sexual liberalization. Commodification is strongly associated with sexualization as advertising endeavors to charge everyday objects with desire. Overly strict sexual regulation is an obstacle to this process of sexualization.

The deregulation of sexuality is in some ways parallel to the legalization of gambling. The state has reoriented activities that stood in the way of profit-making. The market-viable aspects of lesbian and gay existence have therefore gained some space.

Indeed, the whole idea of “gay community” is generally associated with commercialized spaces such as bars, publications, stores, heavily sponsored pride marches and queer personal style as expressed in clothes and haircuts. The last twenty years have seen many non-profit gay community publications and spaces shut down in the face of commercialized competition.

This commercialized gay lifestyle is not equally accessible to all. These spaces tend to be oriented towards men rather than women, in part because men generally have greater buying power. People with lower incomes have very limited access to these spaces, which generally run on the principle of pay to play.

People of color generally don't fit the “image” generated by the commercialized queer culture industries and face racism in queer communities. Transgendered people are often excluded by the gender-normative orientation of these spaces.

Indeed, gay men have been pioneers in the development of a new market-oriented masculinity that is spreading to heterosexual men. Hey, it's okay to care about your appearance, guys—you can be manly and shop all at the same time.

The rise of a commercialized gay lifestyle has been associated with a political shift away from radical liberationist politics within queer movements. The radical lesbian and gay liberation movements that emerged in the 1970s after the Stonewall riots had a set of politics that marked a serious departure from earlier queer organizing. The focus was on militant activism to confront power rather than trying to earn favor with the powerful; visibility rather than respectability; and opposition to the compulsory family system rather than assimilation into it, seeking an end to the official state monopoly on defining acceptable relationships.

These liberationist politics have gone in and out of favor in the thirty-one years since Stonewall. By the 1980s, a more moderate reform orientation dominated the movement. This reform-oriented movement favored lobbying to get inside power rather than militant activism, respectability more than visibility and assimilation into the family system rather than opposition to it. Liberationist politics were revived by a wave of militant AIDS activism beginning in 1987. AIDS had a devastating effect on queer communities. The official response to this crisis by governments and the media was absolute silence except for the occasional derogatory reference.

Queer communities organized a whole range of AIDS services and preventive interventions. The anger around AIDS also relaunched militant liberationist politics, around such organizations as ACT UP, AIDS Action Now, Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers.

## **Queer Capitalism, Class and Liberation**

The 1990s saw the consolidation of commercialized queer capitalism. An elite layer of professional queers (including businesspeople, lawyers, doctors, journalists and professors) as the spokespersons for queer communities. In the absence of radical liberationist movements, this professional class often defines lesbian and gay communities and politics.

This group tends to favor court challenges rather than mobilization and commercial festivals (like Pride Day Parades) rather than protests. Given the specific location of queer communities within many North American cities, this queer professional class has often been a leading advocate of gentrification and the coercive policing of the homeless.

The emergence of queer capitalism makes it particularly important to understand the relations between class politics and queer liberation. The business and professional types who often speak for queer communities do not necessarily consider the interests of more vulnerable queers. We are living in an era in which social polarization is increasing, so the rich are getting richer and poor are getting poorer—a polarization reflected in queer communities, where some are benefiting from contemporary social changes and others are suffering.

The specific character of class relations within queer communities requires more attention than I can give it here, for example looking at the relations between the queer service working class (in bars, stores and services) and their (sometimes) queer employers, work relations within the sex trades, and the specific experiences queers have had with welfare systems and homelessness.

The class-divided character of queer communities is also a reminder about strategies for organizing and building alliances. A strong labor movement can help drive queer rights forward. The contemporary lesbian/gay movement emerged first in the United States, and the infrastructure of organization there is very well developed; yet compared to Canada, lesbians and gay men in the United States have gained relatively little in the way of official rights and recognition.

Canadian queers have a proportionately weaker movement, yet substantially more rights. One of the crucial reasons for this is that the more powerful labor movements in Canada (and in much of Europe) have contributed in important ways to the development of rights and recognition. In 1981, Canada's most militant union (Canadian Union of Postal Workers) was the first to win a collective agreement clause specifying non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In 1985, library workers in the Canadian Union of Public Employees were the first to win full benefits for same sex partners and their dependents.

In each of these cases, queer unionists had to organize and fight to convince their sisters and brothers that queer rights was a union matter. Once one set of workers have won these rights, it is possible to spread them across the unionized population. These rights have now spread across much of the public sector in Canada; breakthroughs in the private sector have been harder to secure in the face of determined employer resistance.

## **Socialism and Queer Liberation**

Real queer liberation is a crucial wedge in the struggle to smash the system of sex and gender repression that impoverishes all of our sexual and emotional lives. Capitalism sucks out our life energy into the effort to keep ourselves alive, either through work, on inadequate benefits or in the streets.

This system displaces our sexual and intimate energies onto commercial transactions, so we achieve gratification by shopping. It pits us against each other in cut throat competition. If socialism means anything, it must be access to the resources, knowledge and power to control our bodies and our lives. Queer liberation is not an optional add-on to Marxism, but a fundamental feature of socialist politics.

Just as queer liberation will always be partial in a unequal capitalist society, so our vision of socialism cannot be complete without an end to sex and gender oppression. Queer liberation must be part of a struggle for all-round freedom.

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**P.S.**

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<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/965>