

Review: That Oldtime Queer Utopia - On Mario Mieli's "Towards a Gay Communism"

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Towards a Gay Communism:

Elements of a Homosexual Critique

By Mario Mieli, translated by David Fernbach and Evan Calder Williams

London: Pluto Press, 2018, 260 pages plus index,

\$30 paperback from University of Chicago Press.

Contents

- [Liberation — and Communism](#)
- [Missing Perspective](#)

THE PAST DECADE'S mini-boomlet in queer Marxist publishing has sent some people in search of queer Marxist ancestors. This may be what prompted Pluto Press to put out a new edition of Mario Mieli's book *Towards a Gay Communism*, first published in Italian in 1977 and in English (as *Homosexuality and Liberation*) in 1980.

Rereading this classic confirms that recent queer Marxists indeed did not have to entirely reinvent the wheel — and at the same time that our queer Marxist forebears lived in many ways in an almost unrecognizably different world.

Mieli's work includes some striking echoes, not only of today's Marxism, but of today's queer theory and activism more broadly. Above all, he was in your face about sex, about being different, about being "abnormal."

Today he might be called, not "homosexual" or "gay" (his words back then), but "trans" or "genderqueer." Either way, it's easy to imagine him out there zapping bigots and conformists with the best of them.

Mieli today would be in a minority among queer theorists in relying so heavily on psychoanalysis for much of his analysis — but not a tiny minority (at least, not as tiny a minority as queer Marxists). There are still a fair number of queer scholars out there giving their own perverse take on Freud, and queer Marxists in particular who borrow from Herbert Marcuse's 1955 classic **Eros and Civilization**. [\[1\]](#)

Mieli's outlook dovetails with Marcuse's in many ways. Like Marcuse, he insists on human beings' universal bisexuality (which he calls "transsexuality"), calls for a return to infants' non-genitally-fixated "polymorphous perversity," decries sexual repression as well as "repressive tolerance," and gives sexual "perversions" a major role in a project of full human liberation.

Contemporary in feeling too is Mieli's declaration that queer sex (especially anal sex and sex between gay men and women) and what liberationists then called "genderfuck" — "a stylistic means

of disrupting the categories of gender normativity to unsettling and often humorous effect,” as Tim Dean puts it in his insightful foreword to the new edition (xii) — can in themselves be radical acts.

Long before Judith Butler, Mieli cited an Italian feminist as declaring, “Femininity is a drag show.” (15) His celebration of a trans woman’s participation in English feminist gatherings (208-09) is a startlingly early anticipation of today’s calls for trans inclusion.

Sadly, the gender nonconformity that liberationists championed in Mieli’s time has been increasingly marginalized among gay men as they’ve become more prone to present themselves as “real men.” Today, radical trans non-binary people and other genderqueers have largely taken over the challenge to gender norms, while many trans men and women insist that they are simply “trapped in the wrong body” and can conform reasonably well to the norms of their “true” gender.

Mieli’s condemnation of the commercial gay ghetto is also as timely as ever. As Colin Wilson’s review of the new edition rightly observes, Mieli lived among radicals who had “a broader sense of the political” and wanted “to begin living now in a new way.” [2])

Liberation — and Communism

What would really make Mieli an oddball among contemporary queer theorists is his call for “liberation,” not to mention “communism.” As Tim Dean points out (x), Mieli’s book was published within months of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Volume I (1976) — a work that would have far more influence on later queer thought and head in dramatically different directions. [3]

Notably, Foucault rejected accounts of sexuality that made repression central, insisting that the powers that be spend at least as much effort inciting and constructing sexuality as they do repressing it. And he dismissed “liberation” (particularly Marxist and feminist versions of it) as not only utopian but drearily utopian.

Foucault advocated, not so much a liberated sexuality, as a multiplication of forms of pleasure and ways of playing with power in sex. For those of us who oppose the reign of capital, cis straight male supremacy and other oppressive structures, Mieli makes a refreshing contrast to the dominant Foucauldeanism of the past 40 years.

In other ways, however, Mieli could have learned a lot from Foucault — as Marxists over the last several decades have. Above all, Foucault stressed that sexuality in general is a product of history and that “homosexuality” as defined today in particular is a product of recent history, dating back a couple of centuries at most.

Historians of sexuality over the last few decades have proved Foucault’s point exhaustively, exploring a myriad of extremely different patterns of same-sex sexual behavior and varying constructions of gender across time and space. Marxists in particular have drawn on this research, with John D’Emilio’s seminal essay, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in particular laying bare the intimate connection between what Marx called “free” labor and the emergence of “homosexual” identity. [4]

D’Emilio’s essay was another work that Mieli (who died in 1983, at age 30) just missed — and might have dismissed. *Towards a Gay Communism* succumbs to the worst potential pitfall of a Freudian-Marxist synthesis: it virtually jettisons Marx’s sense of history, trading it in for a timeless Freudian schema. As Wilson notes, Mieli sees sexuality “as a natural, pre-given thing on a basically biological model.”

For example, Mieli dismisses men who fuck queers without themselves identifying as gay as repressed closet cases. My own work among others suggests instead that Mieli was living in a time of transition between an older, originally 19th century model of “sexual inversion,” in which “inverts” were expected to have sex with “real men” rather than each other, and a later, post-Second World War model of a more inclusive gay community. [5]

Missing Perspective

Lacking much sense of historical change, Mieli seems puzzled by the contrast between ancient Greek and Roman sexuality and the rigid heterosexuality of his own time and place. Understandably enraged at the Catholic Church, he suggests that the taboo on homosexuality “would appear to be of Hebrew origin.” (61) But he admits to having no idea why the taboo originated.

He makes no link between gay oppression and capitalism, or class society in general — an odd stance for a self-proclaimed Marxist. And despite his expressions of solidarity with women and his attacks on the family, he says nothing about the role of women’s labor in the family in reproducing capitalism.

In fact, for a self-proclaimed Marxist, Mieli has extraordinarily little use for other Marxists. In this respect he exemplifies some of the worst sectarianism of his otherwise exciting time. Someone who knew him from the London Gay Liberation Front in 1971-72 remembers that Mieli always had to be the most revolutionary, and that anyone who disagreed with him risked being written off as “so bourgeois.”

Contempt for the Italian far left in particular disfigures the pages of Mieli’s book. Translator Evan Calder Williams points out that Mieli identified particularly with the tiny ultraleft current descended from Italian Communist Party founder Amadeo Bordiga (a major adversary of Gramsci). (xxx) This may help account for the venom with which Mieli attacks larger far left currents like *Il Manifesto*, the soft Maoist *Lotta Continua* and the Trotskyists — all worthy of more attention and respect than his polemics against them suggest.

His attachment to Bordiga does not fully explain, however, why by 1977 he concluded that “homosexuals are revolutionary today in as much as we have overcome politics.” (175)

Mieli’s conception of Marxism didn’t leave much room for labor organizing: he called on gays to come out at work only to “reject a labour that no longer has any reason to exist.” (249) Today’s queer radical campaigns in solidarity with Black and Palestinian struggles would not fit in his vision either. By 1979, in fact, he would declare that he was “no longer part of the gay movement.” (xxii)

This recital of Mieli’s sectarian excesses may make people wonder why they should bother reading the book at all. But they should. His justified fury at bigots, his merciless exposure of “normality,” his celebration of freedom and what Williams calls his “bracing gust of laughter” (xxvii) are all delights. If today’s queer Marxists can combine Mieli’s joyous sexual and gender deviance with more careful attention to history, economics and politics, then the writing of *Towards a Gay Communism* will not have been in vain.

Peter Drucker

P.S.

- Against the Current n° 201, July-August 2019:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/201/review-of-mario-mieli/>

Footnotes

- [1] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.
- [2] Colin Wilson, "Review: Towards a Gay Communism," 15 December 2018,
<https://www.rs21.org.uk/2018/12/15/review-towards-a-gay-communism/>
- [3] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Volume I: An Introduction, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- [4] John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in Ann Snitow et al. eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983.
- [5] See Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket, 2015.