

USA: Review of Communists in Closets

Friday 27 January 2023, by [SONNENBERG Martha](#) (Date first published: 23 January 2023).

“...new forces and new passions spring up in the bosom of society; but the old social organization fetters them and keeps them down.” Karl Marx [1]

The recent shooting at a LGBTQ bar in Colorado once again brought to light the hate crimes that the LGBTQ community endures. Homophobia is certainly not new, but there has been an escalation of these attacks over the last decade and particularly since Trump gave legitimacy to hate crimes. And while the most well-known aspects of homophobia come from both the political mainstream and the radical right, the Left has its own dark history of homophobia, leading to the harassment and denigration of many of its members. [2]

In 2008 and 2009, *New Politics* sponsored a comprehensive symposium on “Gays and the Left” [3] exploring the troubled and often tragic aspects of that relationship. Bettina Aptheker contributed to that symposium with her article, “Keeping the Communist Party Straight, 1940’s-1980’s”, discussing the homophobia specific to the Communist Party [4]. Aptheker has expanded that discussion in her newly published *Communists in Closets: Queering the History 1930s-1990s* [5]. The result of Aptheker’s extensive interviews and archival research, this book looks deeply into the radical commitment and contributions of many gay and lesbian members of the Communist Party (CP and CPUSA). The book provides an opening salvo to a wider discussion of how, or even *if*, the Left has responded to the “new forces and new passions” present in the LGBTQ liberation movement, and whether this has affected the concept of social transformation.

Aptheker, daughter of the Communist theoretician and historian, Herbert Aptheker [6], was a member of the CPUSA from 1962-1981. She was literally born into the CP and grew up in the center of the CP community. For many years she felt “emotionally congruent” with her family and friends. That congruency turned into its opposite, emotional turmoil and fear, as Aptheker came to terms with her own lesbianism in a Party that forbade membership to homosexuals. Early on she was unable to acknowledge her sexuality: “I had no words to articulate who I was”, bringing to mind novelist Thomas Mann’s statement, “It is possible to be in a plot and not understand it” [7]. It took *time* for her to understand herself and to acknowledge the plot she was in, which was the political repressiveness of the CPUSA’s homophobia.

Aptheker traces the CP’s characterization of homosexuals as “degenerates” to its 1938 constitution which stated:

“Party members found to be strikebreakers, degenerates, habitual drunkards, betrayers of Party confidence, provocateurs, advocates of terrorism and violence as a method of Party procedure, or members whose actions are determined to be detrimental to the Party and the working class shall be summarily dismissed from positions of responsibility, expelled from the Party and exposed before the general public” [8].

Even after the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, the CP characterized the gay liberation movement as “racist, petit-bourgeois and diversionary.” As late as 1978, the Party Central Committee disavowed

gay liberation as a legitimate claim: “We oppose all efforts to weaken the family by way of attacks upon women and promotion of ‘alternative’ sexual lifestyles, nor in any way which encourages or promotes homosexual relationships as an alternative to sound, healthy, male-female relationships.” [9] It wasn’t until 1991 that the CP ended its ban on gay and lesbian membership—and not until 2005 when there was a resolution to support LGBTQ rights.

Learning from LGBTQ

Aptheker’s book is not the first discussion of homophobia on the Left. Others have stressed the oppression of gays and suppression of their rights, often portraying homosexuals as the victims of bad policies. Aptheker’s book differs in that she presents people, not as victims, but as agents of history. The people profiled in this book are active and complex beings, thinking and conscious beings, processing contradictory feelings and actions around their dual commitment to what they saw as revolutionary politics and their identity as gay and lesbian people. While Aptheker discusses the harm that the CP’s homophobia caused—the internalization of homophobia, the sense of shame, the fear of being found out, the attempts to be “cured” of their homosexuality, the depression, the sense of isolation—she never portrays people as passive. On the contrary, she demonstrates the agency of people like Harry Hay (founder of the Mattachine Society), Betty Boynton Millard (activist, author of *Women Against Myth*, a book which preceded Simone De Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* by a year), Eleanor Flexner (Author of *Century of Struggle*), Lorraine Hansberry (playwright author of *Raisin in the Sun*), as subjects of their individual and collective histories *despite* the personal harm they experienced as a result of the Party’s homophobic policies.

A major insight of this book is Aptheker’s understanding that the experience of a Communist identity and a gay identity reflect *intersectional* politics, and as she points out, not only intersectional, but an “intrasexual way of thinking.” There has been much written about intersectional politics regarding race, class, gender, etc., but Aptheker’s concept of “intrasexual” means that she explores not just the fact of intersection but what really happens *inside* that intersection on a personal and emotional level. Looking at history through this intrasexual lens, and through her own political/sexual journey, makes the internal contradictions felt by gays and lesbians in the CP in particular, and in the Left in general, visceral and real. Thus, she shows how Harry Hay joined the CP because he saw it as the “cutting edge of the international struggle against fascism.” He tried to “cure” himself of his gayness, and even married. Finally realizing that he could not make himself anything other than a “degenerate” in the Party, he resigned from the CP in 1951, only to be formally expelled a year later ensuring that he could never rejoin the Party. As part of what he felt was a “culturally oppressed minority”, Hay continued trying to change the CP policy by writing articles about what he called the “Dialectics of Homosexual Directions,” showing that gay and lesbian people, because of their outsider status, had the potential to develop a consciousness that could enhance radical understanding of class and racial oppression. Hay was a strong proponent of the self-activity of the homosexual minority in creating its own cultural integrity [10]. Betty Millard also tried to change her sexual orientation to fit the Party’s demands. Unable to do so, she wrote essays on feminism, she joined in the gay culture of Greenwich Village, realizing that the gays with Communist affiliation “formed a sort of sub-culture in the Party.” Betty finally left the Party in 1956 after the Khrushchev revelations about Stalin, leaving her without political mooring, and in the midst of profound depression. Aptheker notes that *all* the people she profiles left the Party in 1956 or 57, but all continued their commitment to social justice.

That this book focuses on homophobia within the CP should not lead to political ‘schadenfreude’ on the part of non-CP leftists. There is ample history showing that homophobia was alive and well in the socialist and Trotskyist movements, especially in the 1940’s and 1950’s. H.L. Small, member of the Norman Thomas Socialist Party, wrote a relatively unknown article, “Socialism and Sex” in 1952, [11] opposing SP strictures against same sex relationships. The growth of socialism in the U.S.

was, he wrote, “hampered by a lack of imagination of the leaders of socialist thought.” Lifting the strictures would make people more aware of socialism as a “constructive force in the social transformation of America...”. James P. Cannon, leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), discouraged *any* non-conformity, “...people of this type are not going to be suitable for approaching the ordinary American worker.” [12] George Novack, another SWP leader, recommended that a homosexual member “temporarily resign and get “cured.” David McReynolds recalls that the label of “homosexual” was never used against him “except by some of those around Max Shactman” [13]. The general position of the SWP was that “Homosexuality is a reflection of a system which is in decay” [14].

Politics, identity and subjective history

Though Aptheker’s book tells the stories of people who were closeted as a result of the CP’s policy, it is her own personal journey toward reconciliation of her lesbianism and her politics that makes this book unique and of interest to all political people willing to acknowledge the complex interaction between one’s sense of self and one’s political identity. Bettina Aptheker’s changing relationship with the Communist Party and her travels “through the contradictions of the Communist world”, is the thread that runs throughout this book.

Aptheker felt pride and purpose as the Party challenged fascism, racism and poverty. But coming to terms with her sexuality, and recognition of the Party’s homophobic policies opened her to a more critical stance regarding the Party; “What had been hidden from me started to emerge.” “I struggled hard while I was in the Party on two fronts. The first was hiding my sexuality. The second challenge arose as I developed my own political voice and understandings and began to strongly disagree with some of the politics the Party adopted and some of the actions it took” [15]. She opposed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. She thought about leaving the party then and questions, with honesty and humility, why she did not leave at that time: “I thought seriously about leaving the party then, but I didn’t. Out of loyalty to my family? Pit of fear to be without a political mooring? Out of panic about my true sexual identity? Out of sheer cowardice?” [16]. She finally left the Party in 1981. Such personal and political soul-searching reveals, with compelling authenticity, the complex processes involved in changing one’s political consciousness.

Aptheker’s book combines two aspects of historiography about the CPUSA. [17] In focusing on the CP’s homophobic policy, Aptheker uses an *objective* and political history which sees CPUSA as a reflection of Soviet policy. In revealing her own CP experiences, however, as well as those of the “closeted” CP members, she uses *subjective* history—looking at history from the perspective of the people who lived it. In this sense her book is a contribution to a subjective historiography, a bottom-up historiography, which tells us more about the everyday experiences of the actual CP rank and file members than political historiography which focuses on CP leadership, bureaucracy, and policy.

As part of the objective, political history, Aptheker traces the CP’s homophobic policy to the 1938 decree of the CP constitution noted above. It is important, however, to put that decree in the historical context of the Stalinist counter-revolution. Often CP policies and the legacy of Stalinism are conflated with Marxism with the assumption that Marxism and Bolshevism were also homophobic [18]. In fact, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution *eliminated* all laws against homosexuality. Consensual sex was felt to be a private matter, and courts upheld marriage between homosexuals [19]. There was an openly gay commissar of public affairs, who worked alongside Trotsky in the negotiation and signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty. Soviet physicians visited the German sex reformer, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld at his Institute for Sex Research in Berlin. A psychiatrist, Lev Rozenstein, held sex education courses and programs aiming to “assist patients to accept same sex desire.” [20] All of this ended with the ascendance of Stalin, who re-introduced anti-sodomy laws and liquidated all the social and political advances of the 1917 revolution. Stalin’s

legislation included imprisonment and hard labor for homosexuals. It was Stalin who characterized homosexuals as “degenerate”, a position which the CPUSA then perpetuated. [21]

Aptheker says that writing this book was a ‘labor of love’. In this spirit, her book urges *all* the Left not to limit our understanding of the LGBTQ movement to rights and reforms, but rather to appreciate the “skill, ingenuity, grit, and sometimes considerable humor, the marshalled courage” that has been manifest in the LGBTQ movement. She asks us to pay heed to the creativity, the experiences and the insights that gay liberation offers to the Left, and the potential for its fusion with other liberation struggles. She asks that we not separate ourselves from the vibrancy of the gay radical tradition and that we inform ourselves about LGBTQ history, work, culture and community. Ultimately Aptheker’s book suggests that the LGBTQ liberation experience should be an integral part of how we think about changing the world.

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P.S.

New Politics

<https://newpol.org/review-of-communists-in-closets/>

Footnotes

[1] Marx, Karl, *Capital*, Vol 1, p.835, Charles H. Kerr and Company, Chicago, 1906

[2] Both the FBI and the CP used concerns about “security” to justify their homophobic policies; each feared that homosexuals, if exposed, would be become informers.

[3] “Symposium on Gays and the Left (Parts I and II), *New Politics*, Summer 2008 and 2009.

[4] Aptheker’s article drew from a paper she presented for a panel on “Queering the Left in U.S. History,” at the American Studies Association National Conference, Oct.13, 2006.

[5] Aptheker, Bettina, *Communists in Closets: Queering the History, 1930s-1990’s*, Routledge, 2023, New York and London.

[6] Herbert Aptheker’s book, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, was prominently placed on my parents’ bookshelf, even though they left the CP in 1939.

[7] Mann, Thomas, *Joseph and His Brothers*, translated by John G. Woods, Knopf, 1948, quoted in Zornberg, Aviva, *The Beginning of Desire*, Schocken Press, 1995.

[8] Aptheker, p 2.

[9] Aptheker, p. 60.

[10] Aptheker, pp. 90-93.

[11] Phelps, Christopher, "On Socialism and Sex: An Introduction", *New Politics*, Summer 2008 and Small, H.L., "Socialism and Sex", *New Politics*, Summer 2008.

[12] Wald, Alan, "Cannonite Bohemians After World War II", *Against the Current*, July/August 2112, #159

[13] McReynolds, David, "Queer Reflections," *New Politics*, Summer, 2008.

[14] Wald, Alan as above.

[15] Aptheker, p.247.

[16] Aptheker, p.243

[17] Barrett, James R., "The History of American Communism and Our Understanding of Stalinism," *American Communist History*, Vol. 2, No.2, 2003, pp 175-182. Barrett discusses the historiography of the New Anti-Communists, and that of New Left historians.

[18] Masha Gesson, self-styled expert on Russia, and founder of the Pink Triangle Campaign, has said the Bolsheviks never had progressive views on homosexuality, and that the Bolshevik Revolution was worse than the Tsarist regime, mentioned in Halifax, Noel, "The Bolsheviks and Sexual Liberation" *International Socialism*, Oct 13, 2017.

[19] Wolf, Sherry, "The Myth of Marxist Homophobia, in *Sexuality and Socialism*, Chapter 3, pp. 73-115, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2006.

[20] Guzvica, Stefan, "What Happened When a Gay Communist Wrote to Stalin," <https://thecollector.com>, May 5, 2022

[21] Gay Communists challenged Stalin's policy to no avail. See Whyte, Harry, "Letter to Stalin: Can a Homosexual be in the Communist Party?", thecharnelhouse.org, 2015. Stalin's response to Whyte's letter was "Archive. An idiot and a degenerate." See also Hiller, Kurt, "An Early Activist Critique of Stalin's 1934 Antihomosexual Law: A Chapter of Russian Reaction", in *MRonline*, David Thorstad, Jan 5, 1015. Similar homophobic policies, following the Stalinist model, were implemented in China under Mao and Cuba under Fidel.