

opinion and analysis

Linking the left and gay movements

by DAVID THORSTAD

The present wave of gay liberation is now 10 years old. A decade after the New York Stonewall rebellion, which gave birth to a new homosexual activism and militancy, it may be worthwhile to assess the impact this movement has had on the left.

How has the left responded to the new and historic challenge of the gay liberation movement? In three words: slowly, hesitatingly and unevenly.

Ten years ago, virtually no left-wing group paid any attention to homosexuality. Most leftists viewed it through the same heterosexist glasses as did the bourgeoisie. Homosexuals themselves, whether they were active in the left or not, by and large did not regard their sexual oppression as a political matter.

But the new activism, tinged with political radicalism, that emerged following Stonewall set into motion a broader assault on bourgeois morality and homosexual oppression than anything yet seen. This movement soon began to be felt in the political arena, as well as others.

Once even bourgeois politicians began to express some support for gay rights, some left groups began to follow suit. Today, the list of radical and revolutionary groups that support equal rights for homosexuals is much longer than it was 10 years ago. They encompass most groups, with the exception of the Communist Party and some "Maoist" groups. This generalization, however, must be tempered.

Virtually no leftist newspaper—with the recent exception of the Guardian—makes a point of covering gay liberation in every issue. Some, such as Workers World, Freedom Socialist, and the Torch—all papers with limited influence—do cover the movement on a more or less regular basis. Others do so periodically. But by and large, U.S. left-wing readers must still look to the bourgeois press or the gay press for information on this area of struggle.

How many left-wing groups regard gay liberation as important enough to the struggle for social change to allocate forces to help build and provide leadership to the movement? Practically none. The relationship of most of the left is still characterized by abstention and occasional reportage, with the exception of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (which has just ended another brief period of flirtation with the organized gay liberation movement), International Socialists, the Revolutionary Socialist League, and the Youth Against War and Fascism.

The striking lack of organized involvement

in gay liberation by the left cannot be explained by anticommunist sentiment in the gay movement, though it exists, nor even by exaggerated suspicions of radical groups. The belief is widespread among gay activists that leftist groups whose paths do sometimes intersect with that of the movement are motivated more by opportunism than by genuine commitment to sexual liberation. I believe the failure of the left to make any real impact on gay liberation lies elsewhere.

It lies in a refusal to understand that the struggle for sexual freedom is an integral part of the overall struggle to overthrow capitalism and to replace it with a society of freedom for all. It lies, too, in the failure of most of the organized left to overcome the puritanism toward sex matters that has run like a thread through much of the radical history of the past century.

The left has far more to learn from homosexuals about gay oppression than the gay movement has to learn from the left. But it is in the area of explaining the roots of homosexual oppression, and in putting forward a revolutionary strategy for ending it, that the left has the most to offer. However, it is precisely in this area that the left has made the least progress during the past decade. . . .

The theoretical understanding of gay oppression and liberation is still in a very rudimentary state on the left. What advances have been made in this department have, in my opinion, been the result more of struggle by homosexuals themselves (including those within left groups) than by Marxist insight and understanding.

The most progressive positions on gay liberation on the left tend to see it as a struggle merely for equal rights before the law with heterosexuals. The gay movement itself has tended often to define its struggle in such terms—usually because struggles around such issues have proven useful in sensitizing society at large to gay oppression.

A MUDDY WINDOW

But this window on gay liberation is a muddy one indeed. The view it offers obscures the fact that homosexual behavior is not something that affects only a minority of persons who are defined as gay. Rather, it is an inherent potential of the human animal. If this were not so, how would we be able to explain the universality of the fears about homosexuality, and the deeply ingrained hostility to same-sex behavior, including within the revolutionary movement?

Both the gay reformists and most of the left appear to agree that homosexuals are a

distinct social minority—usually referred to as "gay people"—who are merely trying to achieve equal status with heterosexuals. According to this view, some people are gay and some people are straight. But to define gay liberation in this way is to trivialize it.

The gay liberation movement is struggling ultimately for sexual freedom for all. Certainly, it seeks to defend and extend the rights of those persons who define themselves as gay. But the full impact of this struggle is not limited to such a perspective. All reputable scientific evidence, as well as common sense, shows that human beings have the capacity to express love and affection for persons of either sex. Yet the capacity for same-sex love remains locked up and stifled in our society. It has been shackled by a taboo on homoerotic behavior. The freedom of everybody to explore and choose their sexuality freely is main casualty of this taboo.

Gay liberation will not be achieved until the sexuality of everybody has been freed from the sex-negative restrictions imposed by the church, the family, the state, and other institutions that uphold the status quo. This struggle has already begun thanks to the women's liberation movement and the gay liberation movement. It can only be achieved through a revolutionary transformation of capitalist society. Only a socialist revolution will make it possible to pull American morality out of the horse-and-buggy era and into the space age.

Yet the history of socialist revolutions in the 20th Century shows that socialist revolution is not enough to guarantee sexual freedom. No socialist revolution has yet occurred in which homosexuals played an organized part. One need only point to the Russian, Chinese, and Cuban revolutions for evidence that an organized, mass movement for homosexual emancipation will be necessary both before and after a socialist revolution, whether in the U.S. or anywhere else. The singular failure itself of such historic revolutions to grant sexual freedom presents the revolutionary left with a historic challenge. . . .

The very left-wing groups that busy themselves with cooking up arguments against greater involvement in gay liberation—one would have to say that they constitute the majority of such groups—should ask themselves why it is that gay liberation has made a greater impact on U.S. society (and is having an increasing impact in European and other societies) than all the U.S. left-wing groups put together.

A failure to respond to the challenge of gay liberation in a revolutionary, Marxist

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fashion can only be regarded as symptomatic of a deeper failure to move beyond the chapel mentality of inveterate sectarians.

The challenge of gay liberation is not one that can be easily dismissed. It is not going to go away.

After 10 years of renewed struggle, homosexuals have had only a small taste of freedom. They have a vision—not always well-defined, to be sure—of a society of freedom. But unlike many straight leftists, they see their homosexuality not as the result of something gone haywire somewhere, but as a gift to be cherished, to be defended at all costs.

In the early 1970s, one often heard a slogan, "No revolution without us!" Some leftists have progressed to the point where they are no longer horrified at the prospect of homosexuals being part of the socialist revolution. But most still seem content with a routinist and unimaginative approach to making the revolution. Nobody believes that homosexuals will make a revolution on their own. But some leftists still believe that a revolution will be made without homosexuals. In this they are mistaken.

So long as they persist in this workist and heterosexist myopia, in this adaptation to bourgeois prejudice, in this refusal to recognize that sexual oppression is a significant aspect of the oppression of the working class as a whole, they will be condemning themselves to a continuing role of only marginal influence.

Marxists must champion the rights of all the oppressed. We must attempt to link the struggles of all the oppressed against their common enemy—capitalism and its heterosexist dictatorship. We must seek to make our vision of the socialist future of mankind the shared vision of the working class in its entirety, straight or gay. Yet, in all candor, it must be stated that as we approach the end of the 1970s, our accomplishments in the arena of sexual liberation have been meager indeed.

The Marxist method provides us with the tools for understanding and combatting sexual oppression—as well as all other forms of oppression under class society. It is our elementary duty to polish up those tools, to strip our approach of all prejudices fostered by the ruling class. Unless we do, our vision of freedom will be seriously tarnished.

Our goal should be to win the gay liberation movement to Marxism, and the Marxist movement to gay liberation. The left has had 10 years to prepare to carry out this historic task. It remains to be seen whether or not it will succeed.