

Sexuality and Socialism

History, Politics, and Theory
of LGBT Liberation

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CHAPTER THREE

The Myth of Marxist Homophobia

The argument that Marxism either ignores or relegates issues of oppression to the back burner because it “privileges” class has become pervasive in recent decades. These ideas are put forward by those who want to separate class from oppression and see the two as running on different, parallel tracks. It has created a mythology of Marxism’s supposed blind spot—or even hostility—when it comes to attitudes and practices regarding homosexuality. At best, we are told, Marxists put off the question of sexual liberation until after the dilemma of workers’ power is resolved. At worst, the argument goes, Marxists are indifferent or unsympathetic to the oppression of sexual minorities.

One typical criticism is cited from the *Journal of Homosexuality* in the widely read online encyclopedia, Wikipedia:

[S]exuality and the problematic of femininity/masculinity were disowned as legitimate issues as Marxism came to dominate. Utopian socialism’s methods...were narrowed by Marxism to class struggle; utopian socialism’s goal—new social relationships between people—was restricted to a new economic order and redistribution of material goods.¹

Lenin and Leninism are subjected to particular criticism. "Leninism, which dominated left political discourse, 'rejected many of the feminist and sex-radical traditions' of the pre-war left,"² write anarchist historians on the Bolsheviks after the First World War. "The Communist Party was—especially when compared to the pre-war anarchists—a redoubt of heteronormative attitudes."³ As with similar historiographies, the anarchist history of homosexuality in the United States in which these quotes are cited, *Free Comrades*, completely ignores the radical sexual gains of the revolution in which Lenin played a leading role (detailed below), while repeating well-worn hearsay and conflating the Stalinist legacy with that of Marxism.

The treatment of LGBT people in Stalinist and Maoist states in the twentieth century has served to mask the earlier record of the socialist movement regarding sexual freedom. Sexual minorities under Stalin and later Mao and Castro were imprisoned, tormented, and generally targeted for abuse in states that falsely claimed the mantle of socialism. Tragically, many Westerners on the far left—though not all—defended these abuses or rationalized attitudes and behaviors that are anathema to the commitment to human liberation that lies at heart of Marxism. In addition, the legacy of McCarthyite anticommunism in the United States in particular, combined with the middle-class outlook that often dominates in academia and modern gay movements, serve to discredit, dismiss, and distort the contributions of socialists and the liberating potential of the Marxist tradition on this question. Let us set the record straight, so to speak.

Marxism and oppression

Because the ruling class under capitalism is a small minority of the population, it must use the institutional and ideological tools at its disposal to divide the mass of the population against itself in order to prevent the majority of exploited peoples of the world from uniting and rising in unison to take back what is rightfully theirs. Homophobic, sexist, racist, nationalist, and other divisions in modern society reflect the needs of the class that owns and controls capital. The Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass put it aptly when he said of the slaveholders, "They divided both to conquer each."⁴

Contrary to the dominant myth of socialism prevalent in the academy, Marxists do not reduce the oppression of sexual minorities—or anyone else—to the issue of class. Rather, Marxists locate the source of racial, gender, sexual, and all other oppressions within the framework of capitalist class relations. As the earlier discussion of the nuclear family showed, women's oppression derives from the structure of the family, in which the reproduction and maintenance (child care, housework, cooking, etc.) of the current and future generations of workers are foisted upon individual families rather than being the responsibility of society. Capitalism depends on privatized reproduction to raise the next generation of workers at little expense to itself. Likewise, the oppression of LGBT people stems from the implicit challenge that sexual minorities pose to the nuclear family and its gender norms.

Far from subordinating the issue of fighting homophobia and transphobia to the class struggle, Marxists cannot conceive of the liberation of the exploited without the liberation of the oppressed. As any cursory look at the modern working

class will show, class unity is inconceivable so long as these divisions are allowed to fester among working-class people who are themselves Black, transgender, immigrant, and members of every other oppressed group. Even straight, white, male workers under capitalism experience oppression in the form of the denial of decent health care, affordable housing, good education, adequate leisure time, and any number of grievous conditions imposed on them by the class that owns and controls the means of production—that is, the ruling class.

LGBT people—like women and Blacks—experience a special oppression in that they can be denied jobs and housing (often legally), are subject to verbal and physical harassment, and are treated as second-class citizens when it comes to marriage and health care. They experience daily humiliations like being accosted in public toilets for appearing to be the “wrong” gender.

Socialists oppose oppression of every sort, no matter who is affected. As Russian revolutionary leader Lenin wrote in *What Is to Be Done?*:

Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected.... The [socialist's] ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects.⁵

It is for this reason that socialists have been found in the forefront of struggles for sexual liberation from the nineteenth century to the present day. The absence of freedoms for LGBT people in countries such as the former Soviet

Union, Cuba, and China is not, as will be shown, an example of socialism's blind spot to the oppression of gays but an indication of the distance that separates these societies from genuine socialism.

Marxism, if it's about anything at all, is about the oppressed and exploited taking control of society and running it in their own interests. To argue, as do some academics, anarchists, and a few on the broad left, that those who are sexually oppressed are theoretically and organizationally left outside of socialists' vision for a new society is a serious charge. The facts, however, tell a different story.

“The queer Marx loved to hate”

There is an argument that the original sin of socialism lies with the authors of *The Communist Manifesto* themselves, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. The most frequently cited evidence for this comes from a brief exchange of personal communication between Marx and Engels in 1869. The letters concern a text by the sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs that Marx passed on to Engels for comment about the rights of Uranians (the supposed “third sex”). These letters have been popularized online⁶ and snippets appear in queer theory texts today. On June 22, 1869, Engels wrote Marx:

The Urning [title of Ulrichs's work and his term for ‘a female psyche in a male body,’ whose attraction is to other men] you sent me is a very curious thing. These are extremely unnatural revelations. The pederasts [homosexual pedophiles] are beginning to count themselves, and discover that they are a power in the state. Only organization was lacking, but according to this source it apparently already exists in secret. And since they have such important men in all the old par-

ties and even in the new ones, from Rosing to Schweitzer, they cannot fail to triumph. *Guerre aux cons, paix aux trouss-de-cul* [war on the cunts, peace to the assholes] will now be the slogan. It is a bit of luck that we, personally, are too old to have to fear that, when this party wins, we shall have to pay physical tribute to the victors. But the younger generation! Incidentally it is only in Germany that a fellow like this can possibly come forward, convert this smut into a theory, and offer the invitation: *introite* [enter], etc.⁷

Marx replied regarding the aforementioned von Schweitzer, "You must arrange for a few jokes about him to reach Siebel, for him to hawk around to the various papers."⁸

There is no sense in attempting to polish a turd here, as there is nothing politically enlightened or progressive about these comments between the two leading figures of the International Workingmen's Association. Though it might be asserted that neither man ever intended his personal letters to become a matter of public record—most of us would cringe at the exposure of the modern equivalent of our correspondence, e-mails, and iChats—it is worth considering both the historical context and actual behavior of these two architects of revolutionary socialism.

It is insufficient, however, to argue that Marx and Engels were merely prisoners of the era in which they lived, though they were undoubtedly influenced by the dominant Victorian morals of the early Industrial Revolution. These two men eschewed the racial, gender, and ethnic stereotypes of their day to champion Black and women's liberation, and they spent their lives exposing and organizing against oppression and exploitation.

During the American Civil War, Marx and Engels unequivocally sided with the North against the slave-holding South,

arguing, "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."⁹ In Marx's opus on economics, *Capital*, he skewered capitalism for creating the horrors of slavery and racism:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginning of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins.... Capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.¹⁰

Even anti-Irish racism, central to the nineteenth-century British Empire, came under fierce attack by Marx and Engels, who argued for British workers to side with Irish independence as a precondition for unified class struggle among the ethnically divided workforce. Engels's *Origins of the Family, State and Private Property* laid the essential groundwork for a Marxist understanding of the roots of women's oppression. By applying a materialist analysis to the family, Marx and Engels showed how women's oppression arises out of historically specific phenomena—the shift from classless, communal societies without states to the rise of elaborate divisions of labor and states to safeguard the accumulation of wealth by a newly developing ruling class. *Origins of the Family* explained how with the rise of capitalism women's unpaid labor in the home became central, and with that, women's labor outside the home became devalued. As Dana Cloud, a Marxist professor of communications, notes, "The ideology of domesticity not only burdens women with the tasks of reproduction and nurturance, but also justifies wage differentials in the productive economy, according to which women can be paid less than men."¹¹

All this refutes definitively the argument that Marxism is interested only in questions of class. Marx and Engels's body of writings and life's pursuit have influenced generations of revolutionaries who have fought for a better world, including a sexually liberated one. Yet there is no reason to defend every utterance and act as if they were infallible gods instead of living men, warts and all. Nonetheless, why were Marx and Engels essentially un-Marxist in their approach to the situation of gays?

The year of this exchange is noteworthy, since 1869 is the date when the word "homosexual" was first coined by Austrian-Hungarian writer Karl-Maria Kertbeny at the start of his campaign against the Prussian law criminalizing those with—in his words—"abnormal tastes." This was the Victorian era when the dominant medical texts still argued that masturbation caused idiocy and even death, and it was more than twenty-five years before the Oscar Wilde trial, which brought the concept of homosexuality into international news for the first time in history. This period marked the dawn of industrializing countries' creation of the social space for autonomous living outside the nuclear family that allowed for a self-identified gay community to develop. In addition, there are the sticky facts regarding the ways that gays thought of and referred to their own sexuality, as well as the historical record regarding the target of the letters, German politician and poet Johann Baptiste von Schweitzer.

Modern historians and activists who attack the language used by Marx and Engels apply contemporary sensitivities to an era one century before the modern gay movement exploded onto the scene. For example, the flamboyant Wilde described himself as "sick" and "abnormal." It was he who popularized

homosexuality as "the love that dare not speak its name."¹² Even in France, where the Napoleonic Code of 1810 wiped away all laws against sodomy, gay men called themselves the French terms for "fag" or "queer," while lesbians referred to themselves as "amazon," "dyke," or "tribad," in the rare instances they'd speak of their sexual proclivities at all.¹³

Though von Schweitzer is referred to by historian Hubert Kennedy as "the queer Marx loved to hate,"¹⁴ the facts surrounding the case tell a different story. For one, von Schweitzer was in fact a convicted pederast, as Engels called him—that is, a man who seduces boys. More than once he was arrested for soliciting sex with a boy under the age of fourteen. Whatever the wrongs of age-of-consent legislation that carry over into the modern era, it should stand as a basic socialist principle that sex between two people must be consensual. It is incompatible for genuine consent devoid of the inequality of power to be given by a child to a man of thirty.

The most glaring aspect of the characterization of Marx's enmity toward von Schweitzer is the confusion of Marx's political hostility with personal contempt. Von Schweitzer was a right-wing social democrat who identified with the Lassallean current of social democracy that aimed to reform and not overthrow the state, as Marx and his adherents advocated. Despite these differences, Marx was happy to collaborate with von Schweitzer after Lassalle's death. Regarding a popular account of Marx's *Capital* that von Schweitzer wrote, Marx told Engels in 1868: "[H]e is unquestionably the most intelligent and most energetic of all the present workers' leaders in Germany." And Marx goes on to say he will argue with von Schweitzer that "he must choose between a 'sect' and a 'class.'"¹⁵ At the time of the reactionary epistolary exchange

between Marx and Engels, von Schweitzer was openly advocating collaboration with the aristocratic prime minister of Prussia who went on to become the first chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismarck, known as the "iron chancellor." In 1870, according to Kennedy, von Schweitzer veered decisively away from any claim to pro-working-class politics by voting for war with France. By 1878, Bismarck had outlawed all socialist activity in Germany.

None of this evidence is to forgive the decidedly backward slurs from Marx and Engels about von Schweitzer. After all, socialists must oppose oppression no matter what class it affects and no matter what the political bent of the advocate. But reducing the dispute between them to a snarky private exchange of homophobic bigotry ignores the historical record of political collaboration with von Schweitzer that ended with an ideological split. Whatever Victorian notions Marx and Engels may have held toward homosexuality, historians present no evidence that this affected their political practice.

In fact, it is quite striking how dismissive many modern-day queer academics often are of some of the earliest attempts at theorizing the history of human sexual and class relations, put forth in 1884 in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. In one oft-quoted passage, Engels refers to "the abominable practice of sodomy,"¹⁶ of which gay historian Jeffrey Weeks has accurately surmised, "It would have been extraordinary in the early 1880s if Engels had thought otherwise."¹⁶ But in another one that is generally ignored, Engels speculates about what human sexual relations might be like in a future socialist society:

What we can now conjecture about the way in which sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of

capitalist production is mainly of a negative character, limited for the most part to what will disappear. But what will there be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up: a generation of men who never in their lives have known what it is to buy a woman's surrender with money or any other social instrument of power; a generation of women who have never known what it is to give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love or to refuse to give themselves to their lover from fear of the economic consequences. When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion of their practice of each individual—and that will be the end of it.¹⁸

While here Engels is explicit about how heterosexual relations would undoubtedly be transformed by a socialist revolution, his broader point is that by removing the material obstacles to sexual freedom the ideological barriers can fall. This raises far-reaching possibilities for a genuine sexual revolution on all fronts.

Sexuality and early socialists

Far more revealing of the attitude and practice of Marxists toward gays is the position that organized socialists took once industrial states accelerated their attacks on the earliest visible LGBT populations in urban centers. The first politician anywhere in the world to speak on record on the floor of a national legislature for the rights of gays was August Bebel, leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), who addressed the German Reichstag on January 13, 1898.¹⁹ Though many socialists broke with this mass workers' party fifteen years later when

they voted for German entry into the First World War, there is no denying the political significance of the openly pro-gay attitude of many members of the world's largest socialist party up to that time. Not only did leading SPD members such as Karl Kautsky and Finance Minister Rudolf Hilferding sign a petition demanding the repeal of the German anti-sodomy law, Paragraph 175, but they also helped circulate the petition and encouraged thousands to add their names. Bebel argued:

The number of these persons [gays] is so great and reaches so deeply into all social circles, from the lowest to the highest, that if the police dutifully did what they were supposed to, the Prussian state would immediately be obliged to build two new penitentiaries just to handle the number of violations against Paragraph 175 committed within the confines of Berlin alone.²⁰

Even earlier, the most prominent socialist journal, *Die Neue Zeit*, defended the Irish writer Oscar Wilde in his 1895 trial for sexual relations with the son of a well-known aristocrat. Eduard Bernstein wrote in the journal that bourgeois attacks on homosexual acts as “unnatural” were reactionary. Instead, he argued for sympathetic language such as “not the norm” since “*moral attitudes are historical phenomena.*”²¹ Wilde himself was drawn to socialism and describes the potential for sexual liberation in his essay, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.”²²

The SPD's newspaper, *Vorwärts*, popularized gay issues in its pages. In preparation for a 1905 parliamentary debate on gay issues, SPD member August Thiele did research using works from the library of the first openly gay movement, the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. Included in his thirty-four pages of speeches in the Reichstag is this insightful nugget that many members of today's U.S. Congress would never

admit: Anti-gay legislation is the legacy of “priestly cruelty and intolerance” that “reminds one of the period of the Middle Ages, of that time when witches were burned, heretics were tortured, and proceedings against the dissenters were conducted with the wheel and gallows.”²³

Some leading SPD figures, however, used the unpardonable tactic of attempting to slur the Nazis as promoters of homosexuality. This was partially an expression of the SPD's heterogeneous character—it had a right wing that supported German imperialism and a focus on winning elections, which renders its members' advocacy for homosexual rights that much more impressive given the unpopularity of the cause. The prominent Nazi storm trooper, Captain Ernst Röhm, was a gay man, as were several of the elite Nazi SS of the early 1930s. Before Röhm's downfall, led by Hitler in the Night of the Long Knives, some leftists engaged in outing members of his fascist Nazi Party. This backward strategy of exposing closeted gays who advocated a right-wing agenda only fed the atmosphere of witch hunts and calumny against lesbians and gays. One radical courageously took on his comrades in a lengthy attack on gay-baiting in 1932: “We are fighting against the infamous Paragraph 175 in whatever way we can, but we have no right to join in with the chorus of those who would prefer to outlaw a man simply because he is homosexual.”²⁴ Jokes and denunciations of Röhm helped stoke the danger of blowback on the very same sexual minorities who were targeted by the Nazis and thrown into concentration camps by the thousands during the Second World War. It is one thing to expose the hypocrisy of right-wingers for acting in defiance of their own codes, but the left can never defend itself by using the reactionary ideas of the right.

One of the earliest openly gay men, Edward Carpenter lived with his lover George Merrill in England and was an influential socialist from the 1870s till his death in 1928. He was perhaps the world's first hippie socialist—a socialist bohemian (and avid sandal-wearer) influenced as much by Walt Whitman as by Karl Marx. His radical rejection of Victorian capitalism, sexism, and sexual repression drove him to a life of writing and organizing alongside William Morris, Eleanor Marx (Karl's daughter), and other leading British socialists of his day.²⁵

Finding "civilization" oppressive and soulless, Carpenter's politics veered at times toward the Utopian or anarchist wings of early British socialism. His vegetarianism and advocacy for nudity would have placed him in happy company with modern hippies, though his activities organizing the unemployed and writings advocating women's liberation through the dismantling of class society kept him in the socialist camp throughout much of his life.

At the height of his popularity, in the early twentieth century, Carpenter spoke before audiences of thousands. Writing and speaking in a society where not only was homosexuality illegal but the Oscar Wilde trial of the mid-1890s had also raised hackles against same-sex love, Carpenter unabashedly drew the connections between a system based on economic competition and the breeding of a culture of sexual repression. He argued that an intermediate-sex spirit—or as he put it, "Uranian" spirit—was possible in everyone and that socialism's vanguard might even be a gay movement.²⁶

Alfred Kinsey, the mid-twentieth-century American sexologist, acknowledged Carpenter along with his contemporary social-democratic ally Havelock Ellis as forerunners in the theorization of the natural variety of human sexuality.

Ellis was an early advocate for birth control, legal abortion, and women's sexual liberation. He married a lesbian who was as free as he was in their relationship to engage in open affairs with women.²⁷

The illegality of publishing explicit material about homosexuality in Britain forced Ellis to publish his seven-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (the first volume on homosexuality was entitled *Sexual Inversion*) in the United States. His aim in studying sexual variation and "anomalies" was not only to prove that all human sexuality is natural, found elsewhere in nature, but also to undermine the scientific pretexts used to legally persecute those who deviate in any way from the sexual norm. While he rejected Carpenter's assertion of homosexuality as a "third sex," he contended that sexual "inversion" was a "quirk of nature."²⁸

Despite Ellis's ardent defense of the naturalness of human sexual variation and his open discussion about and defense of lesbianism and masturbation under the tyrannical moral code of Victorian England, some of his arguments were tenuous and even led to reactionary conclusions. For example, he defended eugenics, the science of biological engineering, though Ellis died before the Nazis put selective breeding into horrific practice. As a middle-class reformer who remained outside the socialist movement—though he influenced a range of activists from the socialist Carpenter to the anarchist Emma Goldman—Ellis's sexual radicalism was limited by his biological determinism. As historian Jeffrey Weeks argues, Ellis's ideological "weakness was [his] inability to ask *why* societies have continued to control sexuality and persecute sexual minorities throughout the ages; and as a result [his] eventual absorption into capitalist value structures."²⁹

This theoretical inquiry went largely unexplored until workers took control for the first time in history in 1917.

The sexual revolution in Russia

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 was a mass struggle of ordinary people led by workers in a largely peasant society. American journalist John Reed reported on the revolution from Russia: "This is the revolution, the class struggle, with the proletariat, the soldiers and peasants lined up against the bourgeoisie. Last February was only the preliminary revolution.... The extraordinary and immense power of the Bolsheviks lies in the fact that the Kerensky government absolutely ignored the desires of the masses as expressed in the Bolshevik program of peace, land and workers' control of industry."³⁰ Russian peasants were steeped in religious superstition and society was a mix of semifeudal relations amid booming industrialism. Yet, the revolution achieved reforms that most modern LGBT people still fight for. The Russian Revolution upended all previous structures of society, including the most intimate relations between people. When that revolution was overturned by economic isolation, war, and reaction those gains were jettisoned.

There are some who try to denigrate the enormity of advances for LGBT people in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.³¹ Russian historian Igor Kon, for example, writes, "Bolshevism abolished, on the one hand, God, ecclesiastical marriage, and absolute moral values, and, on the other, the individual's right to personal self-determination and love that might stand higher than all social duties."³² But facts are stubborn things. In 1917, all laws against homosexuality were

struck down by the new revolutionary government along with the rest of the tsarist criminal code. Consensual sex was deemed a private matter and not only were gays free to live as they chose without state intervention, but the Soviet courts also approved of marriage between homosexuals and, extraordinarily, there are even recorded instances of sex change operations in the 1920s. In other words, the revolution accomplished this grandiose social-sexual leap three years before American women achieved the right to vote and nearly ninety years before the Supreme Court of the United States finally struck down all sodomy laws.³³

In defending the record of extraordinary improvements for sexual minorities in the early Soviet Union, it is important to grasp the context in which these gains were achieved. Russia was a semifeudal, culturally backward, and predominantly rural society upon which capitalist industry was grafted in a few industrial centers like St. Petersburg. Only vulgar Marxists dare assert that under such conditions could a society leap in a seamless, unwavering line from repression to liberation. Social progress is more complicated and dialectical than linear evolution suggests. Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky accurately summed up the state of prerevolutionary Russia:

Russia's development is first of all notable for its backwardness. But historical backwardness does not mean a mere retracing of the course of the advanced countries a hundred or two hundred years later. Rather it gives rise to an utterly different "combined" social formation, in which the most highly developed achievements of capitalist technique and structure are integrated into the social relations of feudal and pre-feudal barbarism, transforming and dominating them, fashioning a unique relationship of classes.³⁴

This character of “combined and uneven development” that Trotsky describes as existing in Russia necessitated the Bolsheviks’ call for spreading the revolution internationally, to more industrially and culturally advanced nations. The international character of a successful revolution was central to Lenin’s and Trotsky’s understanding of how the initial advances could be expanded, lest the first shoots of a new order be destroyed by civil war, isolation, and privation. In the end, it was not the Bolsheviks’ bad politics but the strangling of the revolution by imperialism that led to the impasse and rise of Stalin.

A groundbreaking history by Dan Healey of sex and sexuality in Russia before, during, and after the revolutionary period provides fresh evidence of the enormous societal shifts on questions of sexuality that the revolution engendered.³⁵ Legal, political, and medical records of that era strike down the antisex image of Bolshevism popularized by Hollywood films such as the 1939 classic *Ninotchka*, in which the dour and humorless Soviet apparatchik portrayed by Greta Garbo is wooed by the charm and wit of a dashing American. Given the depth of historical distortion and outright lies, it is worth quoting at length from the 1923 pamphlet *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, written by Dr. Grigorii Batkis, director of the Moscow Institute of Social Hygiene:

The present sexual legislation in the Soviet Union is the work of the October Revolution. This revolution is important not only as a political phenomenon, which secures the political rule of the working class. But also for the revolutions which emanating from it reach out into all areas of life...

The social legislation of the Russian communist revolution does not intend to be a product of pure theoretical knowledge, but rather represents the outcome of experience. After the successful revolution, after the triumph of practice over

theory, people first strove for new, firm regulations along economic lines. Along with this were created models governing family life and forms of sexual relations responding to the needs and natural demands of the people....

The war set in motion the broad masses, the 100 million peasants. New circumstances brought with them a new life and new outlook. In the first period of the war, women won economic independence both in the factory and in the country—but the October Revolution first cut the Gordian knot, and instead of mere reform, it completely revolutionized the laws. The revolution let nothing remain of the old despotic and infinitely unscientific laws; it did not tread the path of reformist bourgeois legislation which, with juristic subtlety, still hangs onto the concept of property in the sexual sphere, and ultimately demands that the double standard hold sway over sexual life. These laws always come about by disregarding science.

The Soviet legislation proceeded along a new and previously untrodden path, in order to satisfy the new goals and tasks of the social revolution...

Now by taking into account all these aspects of the transition period, Soviet legislation bases itself on the following principle:

It declares the absolute noninterference of the state and society into sexual matters, so long as nobody is injured, and no one's interests are encroached upon. [Emphasis in original.]

Concerning homosexuality, sodomy, and various other forms of sexual gratification, which are set down in European legislation as offenses against public morality—Soviet legislation treats these exactly the same as so-called “natural” intercourse. All forms of sexual intercourse are private matters. Only when there's use of force or duress, as in general when there's an injury or encroachment upon the rights of another person, is there a question of criminal prosecution.³⁶ [Emphasis author's.]

This is a rather extraordinary statement of principles for any society, no less for one that in the midst of a global conflagration undertook revolution and endured civil war in which millions died, starvation was rampant, and industrialization was catapulted back to the level of the eighteenth century.

Prior to the revolution, a weak bourgeoisie that owned and ran industry under the tsar largely outlawed, yet tolerated, a commercial sex trade of various sorts in the bathhouses and brothels of major cities, according to Healey.³⁷ An illegal gay subculture emerged in the latter years of the nineteenth century in St. Petersburg and Moscow after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 brought vast numbers of mostly young men to these cities for employment in industry, where they lived in same-sex housing away from family and largely segregated from women.³⁷ Most recorded instances of lesbianism occurred among women in Russian brothels who served the cities' male population, though a tiny number of wealthy women also purchased sex from women for hire.³⁹ But outside of rare couplings between upper-class men who lived together, homosexuality in prerevolutionary Russia was generally a closeted affair and sex was most often purchased by older or wealthier men from younger and poorer ones. However, even consensual sodomy between men was punishable by exile to Siberia, including hard labor if a minor were involved. Misogynistic conceptions of women's sexuality, as in Europe, left lesbianism unlegislated; the constraints of nuclear family life rendered it nearly inconceivable.

The revolution changed all that. Dr. Batkis's pamphlet was not merely a toothless statement of intent: genuine changes in sexual attitudes and behavior—beyond the elimination of the penal code—did take place as a result of the Bolshevik Revolu-

tion in 1917. One indication was in the choice of individuals to represent the revolution internationally—the openly gay commissar of public affairs was Grigorii Chicherin, who served at this post from 1918 till illness forced his retirement in 1930.⁴⁰ This was not some back room bean-counter but a man who worked alongside Red Army leader Leon Trotsky in negotiating peace with Germany at Brest-Litovsk and was entrusted to be a prominent face of the revolution abroad. Chicherin was an aristocratic-born diplomat who was lifelong friends with the most prominent Russian gay poet, Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin, the flamboyantly campy author of the first known gay-positive novel in any language, *Wings*.⁴¹

Much is often made of the supposed debate on the importance of sex and sexual freedom between revolutionary leader Lenin and Commissar for Social Welfare Alexandra Kollontai, who advocated “free love.” Even Healey joins in the opprobrium in his remarks: “The implication of his [Lenin's] remarks for a politics of homosexual emancipation under socialism was that this particular ‘freedom of love’ should wait (as would all sexuality) until a proletarian revolution reconstructed the material order.”⁴² This seems a rather stilted reading of Lenin's thoughts that conforms to the Cold War—and Stalinist—caricature of Lenin as a teetotaling ascetic, despite his enjoyment of wine, sport, and, yes, even the intimate company of women. In Lenin's 1915 letters to the woman with whom he was having an affair, Inessa Armand, he wrote that the revolution would free love from “the constraints of religious prejudice, patriarchal and social strictures, the law, police, and courts.”⁴³ When he argues against privileging the organizing of female prostitutes above other women, his critics presume Victorian rigidity on his part.

Socialist Duncan Hallas describes the conditions in the years following the revolution:

By May 1919 Russian industry was reduced to 10 percent of its normal fuel supply. By the end of that year 79 percent of the total railway track mileage was out of action—and this in a huge country where motor transport was practically nonexistent. By the end of 1920 the output of all manufactured goods had fallen to 12.9 percent of the 1913 level.

The effect on the working class was catastrophic. As early as December 1918 the number of workers in Petrograd had fallen to half the level of two years earlier. By December 1920 that city had lost 57.5 percent of its *total* population. In the same three years Moscow lost 44.5 percent.... War, famine, typhus, forced requisitioning by red and white alike, the disappearance of even such manufactured goods as matches, paraffin and thread—this was the reality in the Russia of 1920–21. According to Trotsky even cannibalism was reported from several provinces.⁴⁴

In context, Lenin's sentiments appear reasonable.

Lenin's infamous 1920 letter to revolutionary leader Clara Zetkin decries some of the chaos of adolescent sex lives under the revolution. He wrote that sexual gratification should not be "as simple and inconsequential as drinking a glass of water."⁴⁵ Lenin argued that Marxists should strive instead for social responsibility and honesty in intimate relations. In a stark rebuke to his detractors, Lenin commented, "Communism is not supposed to bring asceticism but joy in life and vitality by means of a gratified love life."⁴⁶ Wilhelm Reich, an early twentieth-century psychoanalyst who was an advocate of sexual liberation and Marxism at the beginning of his career, challenged the notion that Lenin's ideas were prudish. Reich described the eruption under the Bolsheviks of debate about issues concerning

sexuality and writes about the frustrations expressed by workers and Bolshevik leaders alike at not being able to put theoretical questions of the sexual revolution to the test due to material limitations imposed by Russia's isolation and poverty.⁴⁷

Even if Lenin's critics were accurate about his personal opinions, and I believe they are not, it doesn't erase the enormous progress the revolution brought. In fact if the charges are correct, they only give further credence to the reality that the revolution was not some coup by Lenin and a small cabal—as is often claimed—but a mass phenomenon, in which debates and open disagreements about how to run a new society dominated all political life.

When a new criminal code was written in 1922, sodomy, incest, and age-of-consent laws were left out entirely. "Sexual maturity" was to be determined on a case-by-case basis according to medical opinion.⁴⁸ Prostitution became a matter of public health, not a crime, and a health commission was instituted to combat sexually transmitted diseases; policies of social assistance were enacted to provide women and young men with alternatives to the sex trade in terms of employment and living arrangements.

Contrast the treatment of Lenin and the Bolsheviks with that of the anarchist Emma Goldman, who is regularly lionized as the uncompromising sex radical of her day. In a letter to Havelock Ellis in 1924, Goldman attacked the "narrowness" of some of the lesbians she encountered, whom she called a "'crazy lot' whose fixation on the conditions of their own oppression to the exclusion of all other matters grated on her."⁴⁹ Those quick to condemn every critical utterance of Lenin—often snagged out of historical context—readily provide justification for what may have been Goldman's perfectly

reasonable critique in the context of wider forces engaging in revolutionary upheavals in her day.

Typical of the commentary about the revolutionary leaders' supposed ascetic ideal that dominates most historians' work is Aileen Kelly's comment that "The revolutionary was to turn himself into a flawless monolith by suppressing all private emotions, interests, and aspirations.... Not only art, literature, and personal relations, but all intellectual enquiry, when not directly relevant to the cause, were prohibited as the futile pastimes of superfluous men."⁵⁰ How does this square with the fact that Red Army leader Leon Trotsky, Lenin's closest collaborator during the revolution, wrote essays on art and literature published by the Soviet government in 1924, later released as the book *Literature and Revolution*? In this work Trotsky, a full-time revolutionary, expresses startling familiarity with poetry, literature, and all manner of artistic expression. Trotsky assesses the writings of openly gay poets like Nicolai Kliuev without ever commenting one way or the other on their sexuality. Is not the right to be judged on the content of one's work and not on one's sexuality a definitive and positive break from long-standing bourgeois tradition?

Revolutionary Russia also sought to break out of the narrowness of its feudal traditions by engaging with those outside the country who had studied and agitated around questions of sexual freedom for years. A delegation of Soviet physicians and researchers traveled to Berlin in 1923 for a visit with sex reformer Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld at his Institute for Sex Research. There they requested a screening of a documentary about same-sex love, which the Russians were surprised to discover had been banned. Hirschfeld's journal records the impressions of health commissar Samashko: "[He] stated how

pleased he was that in the new Russia, the former penalty against homosexuals has been completely abolished."⁵¹

Cross-dressing women who served in the Red Army, often passing as men, were given positions of authority. The director of the Institute of Neuro-psychiatric Prophylaxis in Moscow in the 1920s, Lev Rozenstein, invited "Lesbians, militiawomen and Red Armyists" to provide him with their life stories, and he claimed that "women [in Soviet Russia] may legally take men's names and live as men."⁵² Rozenstein thought it was his job as a psychologist to help his patients accept their same-sex desire, a position way ahead of its day—in contrast, the American Psychiatric Association maintained homosexuality on its books as a mental disorder until 1973.

Soviet officials appear to have looked more favorably upon women who dressed as men and acted in stereotypically masculine ways than they did upon men who dressed as women and mimicked "feminine" behavior; nonetheless, same-sex marriage was approved in the courts. Male femininity was seen as socially backward by some, but the law did not intervene to stifle those who expressed themselves in that manner.⁵³ Clinical psychologists openly discussed some physicians' practices of performing sex-change operations. The Moscow health department in 1928 discovered a "huge quantity of cases" of one doctor who "changed sex and made women of men and vice versa, using rather primitive surgical operations."⁵⁴ They seem to have been mostly concerned with the ethical and physiological ramifications of this practice, but did not pursue the issue as a legal matter.

Bolshevik leader Alexandra Kollontai described the explosive changes in sexual relationships in 1921: "History has never seen such a variety of personal relationships—indissoluble

marriage with its 'stable family,' 'free unions,' secret adultery; a girl living quite openly with her lover in so-called 'wild marriage'; pair marriage, marriage in threes and even the complicated marriage of four people—not to talk of the various forms of commercial prostitution."⁵⁵

Within weeks of the Bolsheviks taking power in 1917, they abrogated patriarchal power in family life through edicts such as "On the Dissolution of Family Life," which "took away the man's right to a dominating position in the family, gave the woman full economic and sexual self-determination, and declared it to be self-evident that the woman could freely determine her name, domicile, and citizenship."⁵⁶ Abolishing the family in law was relatively simple, but it could only go so far without a wider and longer-term struggle to change the culture and material conditions. Some communal kitchens and child-care centers to free women from the home were established by the revolutionary state, but many women whose lives had previously centered on taking care of children and the home were left feeling inconsolable, their lives empty of purpose.⁵⁷

Wilhelm Reich argued that part of the sexual revolution in Russia was stunted by the limited time and material conditions necessary to restructure "the mass psyche" because "the subjective factor is not just a product of economic forces" but also "their motor force."⁵⁸ In other words, there is a dynamic relationship between ideas and reality and neither time nor conditions existed to fully realize revolutionary aspirations. Attempts to remake family life under a new economic and social order were not limited by the Bolsheviks' Marxist vision, but by prevailing material and social realities. Trotsky reflected on the family in revolutionary Russia in *Problems of Everyday Life*: "You cannot 'abolish' the family; you have to replace it. The ac-

tual liberation of women is unrealizable on the basis of 'generalized want.'"⁵⁹ The alternatives to the traditional family were inadequate because they lacked the resources to provide the kind of public child care, kitchens, laundries, and other means necessary to construct a new society.

The degeneration of the revolution from its original goals—including sexual liberation—was not due to some original sin of Leninist or Bolshevik ideology, but rather to the impossible conditions that revolutionaries faced. Years of isolation from any other successful socialist revolution in an advanced industrial state and the backwardness of Soviet industry combined to deteriorate all gains of the revolution by the 1930s. All the original leading Bolsheviks were either dead, executed, in exile, or in prison, with the sole exception of Joseph Stalin, who gave political expression and leadership to what was effectively a counterrevolution in the USSR. Mass deindustrialization due to war, famine, homelessness, and deprivation marked daily life for most working people.

Along with the reaffirmation of the sanctity of the nuclear family and conventional gender norms came the reintroduction of anti-sodomy legislation in 1934. Stalin looked to his cultural spokesman Maxim Gorky to provide written justification for the reversal in the daily *Pravda*. Justifying the recriminalization of homosexuality as "a form of bourgeois degeneracy," Gorky argued, "Destroy the homosexuals—Fascism will disappear."⁶⁰

The rise of Stalinism heralded the end of workers' power and along with it the reversal of material gains that allowed for sexual minorities and women to lead free lives. Because the USSR was in competition with the West militarily and industrially, it needed more labor power, which required higher birth rates and, therefore, a return to the nuclear family. Women

were given medals for having more children and along with this came the inevitable reversal of sexual freedoms that challenged the procreative sexual function that implies enforced heterosexuality. All workers' lives were diminished and constrained and gays were sent back into the closet.

Because of the internal degeneration of debate and democracy inside the world's communist parties (CPs), which increasingly saw their role as defending the interests of Moscow and not that of the working class, the CPs around the world, including in the United States, promoted the same narrow-minded and reactionary policies that the Soviet regime practiced. To oppose the Communist Party's antigay policies from this period on is *not* to go against Marxism, but rather to oppose its bloody antithesis, state capitalism—that is, a state-controlled economy where workers do not control the state.

Stalinism, Maoism, and homophobia

While the genuine Marxist tradition has stood squarely in favor of sexual liberation, most states claiming the socialist moniker in the twentieth century have failed to deliver any real alternative to the sexual repression of capitalist societies. These states—and the political organizations that have supported them—used the language of socialism to justify practices that are its opposite.

In the new political climate of the 1930s under Stalin, Soviet social policies promoted “compulsory motherhood, compulsory families, [and] compulsory heterosexuality.”⁶¹ Women were needed in the factories and on the land to help Russia industrialize and compete more effectively with the West, and

Soviet legislation simultaneously drove women into the workforce in unprecedented numbers, while banning abortion and curbing access to birth control. The late-thirties' drive toward war necessitated both higher production levels and a reversal of low birth rates. As Healey recounts, “a cult of motherhood was celebrated, reaching proportions critical observers found grotesque, as the lives of mothers of seven, eight, or ten children were vaunted as examples of patriotism,” and the pages of *Pravda* condemned “so-called free love and all disorderly sex life.”⁶²

The homophobic policies of the American CP, like its other policy decisions, toed the line of the central authority in Moscow. There were official purges of LGBT people in the American CP, whose ideological impact cannot be underestimated. It was the nation's largest left-wing party, which at its height in the thirties had tens of thousands of members, many of whom played key roles organizing unions and fighting racial segregation. But rather than exposing the antisocialist political underpinnings of a party that defended the pact between Stalin and Hitler, the gulag work camps for dissidents, the crushing of workers' rebellions, most famously in Hungary in 1956 and Prague in 1968; gave support for the internment of U.S. citizens of Japanese descent during World War II; and openly embraced the bourgeois Democratic Party, the purges of LGBT members have been conflated with somehow representing a socialist perspective on sexuality. With the notable exception of the American CP's seventy-year alliance with the Democrats, however, both the left and the right have equated the CP's reactionary practices with socialism over the decades. For critics on the right, the oppression and unenviable living standards of most workers in the USSR

and its satellite empire in Eastern Europe exposed the undesirability of revolution; for those on the left, the rise of Stalinism led to the conclusion that revolutions inevitably fail. Either way, the experience of the so-called socialist states gave rise to the notion that workers' liberation—and sexual liberation by extension—could not be won through revolution, discrediting the project of revolutionary socialism for generations of left-wing militants. The inability of states like China, Cuba, and the former Soviet Union to deliver on their promises also led a generation of leftists to reject the working class as the agent of change in society (the topic of chapter 6 on postmodernism, identity politics, and queer theory).

In the summer 2008 issue of *New Politics*, Bettina Aptheker, the lesbian daughter of former American CP leader Herbert Aptheker, writes about how through the Second World War and the fifties and sixties gays and lesbians were driven out of the CP as security risks, especially during the height of the McCarthy period of the fifties. She corroborates her own recollections of the purges with an account by sociologist Ellen Kay Trimberger:

The Party leadership made a decision to drop all homosexuals from the Party because of their presumed openness to blackmail as state repression increased. A local organizer was asked to speak to several known lesbians to request their resignations. These lesbians were friends of the organizer, although she never discussed their sexual preference with them. When she met them, they all cried, but the lesbians "obeyed" and resigned. Looking back on this incident this activist says that neither she nor the lesbians, although some may have questioned the assumption, ever considered opposing the Party decision.⁶³

Decades later, Aptheker's own position paper for the party's Women's Commission was rejected due to her inclusion of lesbian women in a historical account of early twentieth-century organizing of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Bettina Aptheker describes an unstated "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the party by the late seventies, and the pervasive hostility to open discussion of the nature of sexuality under capitalism continued under the guise that it would be a "diversion" from class politics.⁶⁴

While Mao's China never officially banned homosexuality, there is no doubt that sexual and gender conformity and hostility toward and imprisonment of lesbians and gays were the norm there and as a result sexual minorities were driven underground. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), homosexuals faced what is estimated to have been the worst period of persecution in Chinese history. Police regularly rounded up gays and lesbians, who were charged with "hooliganism" or disturbing public order, and threw them into prisons where some were tortured and disappeared for years. Up until 2001, the Chinese CP considered homosexuality a mental disorder—it's now been upgraded to a possible cause of depression—and some Chinese officials continue to deny the existence of gays in that society and even, despite obvious scientific evidence, the existence of AIDS.⁶⁵

Integration in the world capitalist market for the last three decades and widespread access to international communications and travel have led to the possibility of hundreds of millions of Chinese living independently of families and expressing their sexuality openly. Today middle-class Chinese can socialize at dozens of gay and lesbian venues in major urban centers.⁶⁶ This is not because embracing the capitalist market has been

sexually liberating; rather, in China as in the United States, middle-class gays and lesbians are treated as a market niche where profit can be made. As with the Soviet bloc, China's totalitarian regime brooks no official independent political initiative by workers gay or straight—undermining any claims to having established a “worker's state.” The most glaring example of its intolerance of democratic demands was projected on television sets around the world with the massacre of workers and students at Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Cuba: island of freedom?

In Cuba, though the 1959 revolution ushered in a number of positive educational and land reforms, homosexuality was banned. Homosexuality in Cuba was not illegal prior to the revolution, but afterward LGBT people were openly repressed and even sent to concentration camps from 1965–68 or forced into exile with other “criminals” and “scum” in the Mariel Boat exodus of 125,000 Cubans in 1980. It is estimated that up to 60,000 LGBT people, mostly gay men, were sent to the Military Units to Aid Production (UMAPs) where, surrounded by barbed wire, they were forced to cut sugarcane or marble under a tropical sun for twelve to sixteen hours a day in order to meet unrealistic production levels.⁶⁷ While the UMAPs were a temporary phenomenon, the ongoing arrests and torments of artists such as Renaldo Areinas, author of *Before Night Falls*, and others led to the “ever-present fear that at any moment there might be a knock on the door to report for an interrogation, or simply to be perfunctorily shipped out by truck-load to the countryside.”⁶⁸

Under the American-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista, Havana was turned into a sexual playground for wealthy

Cubans and American tourists; this was used by revolutionary leader Fidel Castro to justify the repression of anyone who did not conform to gender norms in dress and manner or who partook in same-sex activities, whether in private or public. In a taped interview with American journalist Lee Lockwood in 1965, Castro defends barring “deviant” homosexuals from jobs where they could influence young people and argues, “we would never come to believe that a homosexual could embody the conditions and requirements of conduct that would enable us to consider him a true Revolutionary, a true Communist militant.”⁶⁹ In 1971, the First National Congress on Education and Culture reiterated the state's position on “the social pathological character of homosexual deviations” and resolved “that all manifestations of homosexual deviations are to be firmly rejected and prevented from spreading.”⁷⁰

Cuba's sexual policies, more so than any of the other so-called socialist states, have had an enormous impact on the American left and left-wing LGBT people in the United States. The American Empire's five-decade embargo and its attempts to overthrow and discredit the Castro regime for having the temerity to nationalize former U.S. properties in Cuba and to thumb its nose at imperial arrogance rightly earned Cuba the support and respect of anti-imperialists. However, it is one thing to oppose imperialist aggression toward Cuba—as any leftist must—and quite another to paint its economic and social policies as socialist. Cuba is a one-party state in which independent political activity—even by defenders of the revolution—as well as independent unions and strikes are barred and the governing party claims to rule *in the name of* the working class.

Left-wing organizations in the United States that worshipped the Cuban Revolution as socialist, despite the lack of

workers' control and social policies they would have raged against at home, defended Cuba's earlier record of abuse against sexual minorities or simply ignored it. Similarly, regarding the Eastern Bloc countries, these leftists turned their backs not only on the struggle for gay liberation, but on the essence of Marxism—the self-emancipation of the working class. From the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), which until 2001 held that gays were counterrevolutionary by nature, to the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which for a time banned not only gays but also transvestites from its membership, many leftists jettisoned the liberatory core of socialism and engaged in torturous verbal calisthenics to defend repression in the name of Marxism. In order to argue that Cuba or China or the Eastern Bloc was somehow socialist, they had to either deny the repression of gays or defend it, and many groups vacillated between these two practices.

The Workers World Party (WWP)—one current spinoff group is the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL)—has been quite active and vocal in LGBT struggles from the seventies to the current day. Award-winning novelist and transgender activist Leslie Feinberg is one of WWP's most prominent members. But WWP/PSL's uncompromising defense of virtually every country claiming to be socialist—from Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Kim il-Sung's North Korea to modern China (including a hearty defense of the Tiananmen Square massacre)⁷¹ and Castro's Cuba—leads to a bafflingly simplistic gauge of these societies' sexual policies and attitudes. To raise criticisms in any way of these bureaucratic and often tyrannical regimes, in WWP/PSL's philosophically dualistic view, is to place oneself at the service of empire. This

has left them in the curious position of promoting countries as workers' states that would imprison or torment some of the very members organizing within the United States to defend them! Workers World's paper explains:

There is no country in the world today that has an adequate position with regard to ending the oppression of homosexually inclined people. But to single out any of the socialist countries for special attack, as some leaders of the gay movement in the U.S. have done, is to cover over the important fact and, in addition, it lets the U.S. imperialists, the ones who have a real stake in the maintenance of racism, sexism, and anti-homosexual attitudes, off the hook.⁷²

Following three years of heated internal party debate over the question of homosexuality, a 1975 pamphlet on gay liberation by the SWP first makes the case for gay rights on the basis of civil liberties, but then argues that it would be "cultural imperialism" to impose those expectations on Cuba,⁷³ as if sexual liberation were somehow an imperialist value not to be imposed on so-called macho Latinos. Aside from its obvious analytical sleight of hand, there is a subtle racism in expecting Latinos to be heterosexuals who inherently embrace bourgeois gender stereotypes. Documentation, including popular films like the 1994 Oscar-nominated *Strawberry and Chocolate*, explores same-sex relations in Cuba, provides ample evidence of sexual variation in Cuban society as rich as anywhere.

Historian and activist David Thorstad, who was an SWP member for six years before resigning over their politics regarding sexuality and the gay movement, collected the internal documents from the debate that raged from 1970–73. At the time the SWP was America's largest Trotskyist organization,

though its adherence to notions that the Eastern Bloc was made up of “degenerated workers’ states” and their starry-eyed enthusiasm for Cuban “socialism” expressed their own conflation of state ownership with Marxism, akin to the outlook of Stalinism. Shockingly, just after the 1969 Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village provided the opening shot of the modern gay liberation movement, they “unofficially” banned gays from the party, and their youth group, the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), did in fact officially ban gays and lesbians in August 1970.⁷⁴ While the ban ended soon afterward—party leader Jack Barnes insisted it was “unenforceable”⁷⁵ and it alienated them from radicalizing youth—the debate around the nature of homosexuality was shelved by the leadership and a sort of don’t-step-on-the-grass-policy perspective was put forward. Fears of alienating workers by projecting an “exotic” or “far-out”⁷⁶ image through cross-dressing or same-sex canoodling at party gatherings took hold and drove internal policing measures around party members’ behavior. At the same time, internal critics argued that if a revolutionary party were to gauge its other positions and behavior according to what conservative workers thought, then fighting racism or even engaging in any of the countercultural behaviors of the day would be nixed as well. Despite the SWP’s initial reaction against gay and lesbian organizing and politics, the group undertook a three-year internal debate that expressed members’ regular involvement in the various gay movement struggles.

Few groups were as crude as the RCP’s precursor, the Revolutionary Union, in its rejection of homosexuality in the late sixties. Its 1969 position paper is mind-bogglingly backward, illogical, and, to put it bluntly, insensitively stupid. While opposing the criminalization of homosexuality, the Rev-

olutionary Union argued against the nascent gay rights movement on the basis that:

- 1) Because homosexuality is rooted in individualism it is a feature of petty bourgeois ideology which puts forth the idea that there are individual solutions to social problems.
- 2) Because homosexuality is based on petty bourgeois ideology and deals with the contradictions between men and women by turning its back to it (at least in intimate personal relationships), homosexuals cannot be Communists, that is, belong to communist organizations where people are committed to struggle against *all* forms of individualism, in *all* aspects of their lives.
- 3) Gay liberation in its putting forth of gayness as a strategy for revolution in this country is a reactionary ideology and can lead us only down the road of demoralization and defeat.⁷⁷

The impact of Cuba on New Leftists of the late sixties and early seventies, at the start of the explosion of the modern LGBT movement, was profound. Despite the travel ban to Cuba, many American radicals organized young people to go on work trips to cut sugarcane and pick fruit on the island to help meet export quotas from Cuba to the USSR. The Venceremos Brigades began in 1969 and included hundreds of former activists from Students for a Democratic Society and others, including gay militants Allen Young and Leslie Cagan, a leading figure in today’s liberal antiwar movement. Stories of the bitterly homophobic treatment meted out to many lesbians and gays by other *brigadistas*, as well as by some Cubans, made their way into the newly emergent gay press in the United States. Gays who protested the homophobia of the Cuban government were claimed to have taken part in a “cultural imperialist offensive” against the revolution, according to Young.⁷⁸ Though Cagan and well-known lesbian folk singer

Holly Near were barred along with other LGBT folks from returning on future trips, many militants continued to defend the Cubans' policies, arguing there was no "material basis for the oppression of homosexuals."⁷⁹

Much has changed in the last few years regarding sexuality in Cuba, though it is hardly a bastion of sexual freedom. Raúl Castro's daughter, Mariela Castro Espín, who directs the Cuban National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX), explained in 2004, "Yes, I believe that people are a little more relaxed about a homosexual presence, both in public and in the privacy of the family, but only a little bit relaxed, not more tolerant. We have much more work to do in our society for this 'relaxation' to mean real respect toward diversity."⁸⁰ In 1988 homosexuality was decriminalized, though enforced AIDS testing led to the compulsory quarantining of those who were HIV-positive, most of whom were gay men. A society in which people were free to express their sexual preferences would have approached the crisis with a massive education campaign and open discussion and debate about how to proceed, rather than impose coercive measures. Although Havana celebrated its first International Day Against Homophobia in May 2008, one month later the first-ever unofficial Cuban Gay Pride March was cancelled minutes before it was to start and organizers were arrested for demanding an official apology for the past criminalization and poor treatment of gender and sex rebels in Cuba. This is in keeping with the crackdown on unofficial organizations and initiatives in Cuba. The 2009 "Diversity Is Natural" campaign launched by CENESEX is both a step forward and an open acknowledgment that discrimination and repression persist. Mariela Castro Espín says of the campaign's reform efforts to include gender identity and the rights of sexual

minorities in Cuba's Family Code, "The work that we are doing will help to ease the prejudices behind these processes."⁸¹

While Cubaphiles of the left argue that the progress that has occurred is the fruit of revolutionary developments, this explanation is incompatible with the facts. Fifty years have passed since the revolution initiated the open repression of LGBT people and decades later its worst aspects have been mitigated, but the state's denial of the democratic right to organize any independent movement for sexual liberation persists. As socialist Paul D'Amato argues, "Oppression is not the product of an unfinished revolution; oppression continues to exist in Cuba because exploitation continues.... A society that has not liberated the working class is incapable of achieving the full liberation of the oppressed either. The condition of one is the condition of the other."⁸²

The anti-Stalinist left and LGBT liberation

Narrowing the scope of the Marxist left to encompass only those groups that styled their politics after Stalinist or Maoist states, however, would negate the existence and organizing efforts of revolutionaries who stood apart from those traditions that distorted and debased Marxism. In the historiography of the left and LGBT liberation, this practice has served not only to erase the radical and liberatory core of Marxism and its early German and Bolshevik traditions, but also to deny the existence of a large swath of the postwar left that retained the commitment of Marxism to fighting gay and lesbian oppression.

Christopher Phelps recently uncovered a long-out-of-print document issued by members of the anti-Stalinist Young Peoples Socialist League (YPSL), originally published in *Young*

Socialist, "Socialism and Sex."⁸³ It was issued at the height of the McCarthy period in 1952, a time when, writer James Baldwin explained, "You weren't just in the closet, you were in the basement. Under the basement."⁸⁴ In his preface to the piece, Phelps recounts a conversation with the YPSL national chairperson at that time, who was asked to formulate a platform on the rights of sexual minorities. The author of "Socialism and Sex" wrote under the pseudonym, H. L. Small, because he or she would have surely lost his/her job in those years for writing a piece calling for "the freedom of the legally of-age adult of both sexes to have sexual relations with whomever he or she wishes of the same or opposite sex."⁸⁵ The author is careful to place the derogatory term "deviant" in quotes and explains that socialism can be a "constructive force in the transformation of America into a truly happy country where the individual rights of all its people (regardless of their departure from the Puritan 'norm') are both observed and respected."⁸⁶

The early seventies internal bulletin documents of the American revolutionary group, the International Socialists, show an evolution from the basic civil libertarian live-and-let-live sexual values they'd held prior to the 1969 rebellion. This group of several hundred revolutionary socialists cut their teeth in the Freedom Summer desegregation battles, Berkeley Free Speech Movement, anti-Vietnam War protests, and industrial workplace organizing struggles of that era. The debates in these documents take on the nature of sexual repression of heterosexuals as well as homosexuals under capitalism: "The struggle for homosexual liberation is in part a critique of the socialization characteristic of our society, with its rigid definitions of sex roles and prerogatives, and its rigid link-

ing of these to social roles—a socialization which is as limiting to all people as it is oppressive to homosexuals in particular."⁸⁷ They argue strategies for taking on homophobia in the working class as well as confronting a nascent gay separatism—later known as queer nationalism—within the movements in which they were involved. They explicitly reject the argument that LGBT politics should be placed on the back burner in deference to the class struggle: "The gay struggle...cannot afford to 'wait' for the new society and its promise of liberation.... Thus we are for an independent gay movement, as well as for a commitment to gay liberation by the revolutionary organization."⁸⁸ These blunt discussions reflect the experiences of LGBT members of the group as they plotted a path toward deeper engagement with the movements around them.

Among the most prominent Marxist gay circles in the English-speaking world was the Gay Left Collective (GLC) in London, whose most well-known member was historian Jeffrey Weeks. Their journal, *Gay Left*, which published from 1975–80, attempted to theorize how Marxists should approach questions and debates raised by the movement as well as how to correct the real failings of revolutionary groups on these issues. They go after leftists' attempts to whitewash Cuban homophobia, resurrect Engels's and Edward Carpenter's writings, and rightly take on the British SWP for its 1950s-style backwardness on sexuality—"homosexuality will disappear naturally"⁸⁹ under socialism, a position the SWP soon nixed—while foreseeing certain developments, like the attempt to co-opt the movement into a market niche: "Indeed the present requirements of capitalism are for privatized hedonism to maintain the extensive consumerism on which the system rests, and here homosexuals represent an attractive

market rather than a social threat."⁹⁰ While some of their writings appear to cave in to the developing gay separatism and identity politics that came into full bloom in later years, the GLC was adamant in their attempt to wed gay liberation with Marxism both in theory and practice.

In assessing the left's political orientation around LGBT politics, it is worth asserting that radicals too are impacted by developments in their midst, unless of course they operate as a sect. "It is not consciousness that determines life," Marx famously wrote, "but life that determines consciousness."⁹¹ By this, Marx meant that human society is shaped by neither some abstract system of morals nor the ideas of a few great women or men—but, on the contrary, that material conditions shape people's ideas and conceptions. Socialists too are shaped by the conditions and struggles around them and fashion their understanding of the world and how to change it by engaging with shifting forces and new phenomena.

For this reason it is hardly surprising that small groups of radicals facing the eruption of a new social movement would have to learn from the emerging struggles and think through new possibilities and ways of thinking and acting. No socialist, regardless of how brilliant or perceptive, can possibly think through all the implications of questions that inevitably arise as society changes and contradictions intensify. However, it is one thing for leftists to reflect aspects of conservatism prior to the eruption of struggles of the oppressed; it is quite another to disregard or belittle these political movements when they arise—or worse, to attack their legitimate demands, as many Stalinists and Maoists did. In recent decades, however, virtually the entire organized U.S. left has abandoned their old positions and taken up the fight

for LGBT civil rights, regardless of their varying analyses of pseudo-socialist societies.

The explosion of AIDS and queer activism in the late eighties and early nineties was a period of high involvement by sections of the far left in the United States, most visibly the International Socialist Organization (ISO). Founded in 1977, after much of the left began its decline, the ISO from its inception has stood for the liberation of lesbians and gays and continued to grow in size and youthful participation throughout the eighties and nineties and through the present period. Advocating a worldview of "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but Workers' Power East and West" enabled the ISO to weather the political storms that swept through much of the American left—that segment looked to Eastern Europe or other self-declared socialist states—in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the USSR.

As the economic crisis in U.S. society unravels alongside the right wing's old culture wars against sexual minorities, socialism is reemerging as a political touchstone for many students and workers. Marxism's real history and emancipatory potential can play a role not just in advancing LGBT civil rights in the modern era, but in advocating a broader vision for sexual liberation for all in the future.