

T H E N E W G A Y R A D I C A L I Z A T I O N

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It's opportune that this conference brings together people who are concerned about socialism and homosexuality, because when we look around at Australian politics today we see very few instances of discussion of socialism and its relevance to our lives. The radicalization of many, especially young, people in the late 1960s, early 1970s has receded. In the ebb we can see traces of its impact, the political movements and social issues left behind, some relatively well embedded in new political awareness, many others a token gesture to dissent. Socialists have even less political clout than they did five years ago, the hard times have dimmed the vision of many of those who want to keep the struggle going OR reduced the educative work of others to babbling.

But the idea of a society in which exploitation and oppression are absent, where the producers receive the full product of the labor, where democracy is understood as self-management not as Westminster charades, where the concept of individual freedom will not be denigrated by the hypocrisy of liberals, this is still worth fighting for. The question is, whether the partisans of socialism have anything new to offer. Beyond slogans and cliches which have already been ignored. If we honestly asked ourselves whether we understand the society we live in, the way forward to liberation, then we would have to admit we do not. A scientific analysis of capitalism, a strategy for transition, these are elusive. The problem is not insurmountable, but let's not kid ourselves.

The problems gay radicals are feeling about the state of the left-wing of the gay movement are an aspect of this. The broad gay movement is alive and well, it has not suffered the setbacks experienced by movements with similar New Left origins. Nevertheless its left-wing isn't in a healthy state, is still basking in the glow of Gay Liberation, may even have little else to contribute to the ongoing struggle of homosexuals. That's an immediate problem for socialists, it's not an immediate problem for the gay movement or homosexuals. I hope this conference can address itself to some of these questions.

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In Sydney 1978 was a key point in the politicization of homosexuals. It also saw the real beginning of the burgeoning of the commercial framework of the gay male sub-culture, and a period of tension between the gay movement and the male sub-culture. Which dissolved only with two events this year, the Gay Pride Mardi Gras in March and the law repeal campaign in March-April.

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We can say a number of things about the gay male sub-culture today. It is:

1. Commercially-oriented. There seem to be a number of reasons for this - cynical or indifferent recognition of a previously untapped market, desire of gay people to run their own businesses as a result of the growth of gay consciousness, the desire of gay men to live in a gay milieu. The commercial expansion is not simply the result of a campaign by corporate interests to move in, though this is a factor in some cases, but a response to the consciousness of many male homosexuals themselves. That is, the system responding to homosexuals not just homosexuals getting into the system.

2. Expanding, with a capacity to grow further. Not just bars, the traditional heart of the sub-culture, but many aspects of daily life can be gay.

3. Fragmented. The expansion allows for diversity. In so far as the sub-culture allows a 'free space' for a gay identity, that space allows for differing expressions of that identity.

4. Relatively proletarianized. Historically the embryonic gay male sub-cultures were in the aristocratic mode, the property of the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia. Their creation of a gay male identity, as camp, is still dominant today. But with the steady development of the male sub-cultures in the West since World War 2, they have broadened out sociologically. Within that massive class, the new petit-bourgeoisie, the personnel of the male sub-culture has shifted from its upper layers to its lower. The commercial framework of the sub-culture itself seems to cater for the lower petit-bourgeoisie. The working class has made few inroads, but they are there. That's why the proletarianization is relative, its historical reference point is a century or so.

This has been the background to the challenge by 'macho clones' to the image of the male homosexual under capitalism. They rupture the class and gender images of a queen that have been dominant since the category of HOMOSEXUAL was created in the nineteenth century. From aristocratic and feminine (camp) to proletarian and masculine (clone). The clone phenomenon seems to be associated with the lower petit-bourgeoisie (and in San Francisco with the lumpen petit-bourgeoisie).

5. 'Ethnicized'. The clone phenomenon among male homosexuals, and the similar image of feminist lesbians, can in a sense be seen as a creation of an 'ethnic identity', as a coming out of a minority group. The other factor in the new ethnicity of homosexuals is the modelling of political forms of ethnic minorities: formation of community-wide federations (Adelaide Homosexual Alliance, abortive federations of social and political groups in Melbourne 1977 and Sydney 1978, NSW Council of Gay Groups, the quasi-community nature of the Victorian Gay Legal Rights Coalition and the Sydney Gay Rights Lobby), and development of an ideology of community. This modelling is wishful thinking and mystificatory so long as the essential element of a community is lacking, namely solidarity. An effective solidarity means effectivity as a political force, the fusion of the sub-culture with the broad gay movement. This has not yet happened though in Sydney it's well underway since the events of March-April. Melbourne seems to be moving in this direction too, spurred on by the law repeal campaign and its aftermath (Gay Day). A quick aside: Law repeal campaigns seem to have been able to unite/politicize the male sub-culture more than other contestations; perhaps the Campaign for Homosexual Equality in Queensland will have a similar galvanizing effect on Brisbane's male sub-culture.

6. Politicizing. A new gay activism is emerging from the male sub-culture. The recent campaign by the Gay Rights Lobby in Sydney for homosexual law repeal was able, in a time period of less than 3 weeks, to: (a) involve social groups which previously had rejected politics - through personnel and money. This process will continue. (b) arouse the interest and support of patrons of bars. These people with their supporters of the social groups will be the source of the new activists of the 1980s now that the counter-culture's decline has eroded the base for the gay left. (c) attract financial support from the owners of four gay bars who also put their names to a leaflet calling for a rally. (d) 'legitimate' political activism in the male sub-culture by showing gay activists were prepared to attempt to utilize liberal-democratic institutions.

* This idea was suggested to me by Lex Watson.

(e) transform the Gay Rightst Lobby into a defacto coalitoon representing a cross-section of the broad gay movement.

(f) use the male sub-culture as a base for intervening in mainstream politics effectively.

That was only one stage in one campaign. It had its problems. It has however changed the composition of gay politics in Sydney completely. It seems to me that this is sign of something new and it could happen in other cities too.

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"The bars, pubs and clubs form the main social networks for most lesbian women. 'Political' lesbians - the minority - have formed an extensive network which takes care of social, ideological and frequently employment needs. ...

"It was the opening night of Yvonne Oakey's new bar in Kensington. ... There are still the women in the button-down collars, the flared men's pants and the odd tattoo, but the place seemed overrun with what would once have been described as 'femmes' - longer hair, a lot of make-up, knitted see-through dresses, or tight leather trousers and stilettos, and they were cruising each other. ...

"The women I had spoken to in and in the bars and clubs were unanimous in their condemnation of the women's movement and lesbian feminists. Their chief objections, after 'the overalls and crewcuts', were that feminists took part in 'rough demonstrations', 'drew attention to themselves' beyond the confines of bars and were 'political'." (Pritchard, 1981: 34-35)

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The feminist lesbian sub-culture has developed along different paths to the gay male sub-culture. This reminds us of the need to recognize the plurality of sub-cultures among homosexuals. Among lesbians the feminist sub-culture is separate from the apolitical sub-culture, the latter consisting of those more closetted lesbians who, like male homosexuals, have their dinner party scenes; their bar scenes or their social group scenes - each of which may be distinct. Perhaps the only thing these latter scenes have in common is their resistance to politicization, including feminist politicization. The feminist lesbian sub-culture/movement does not seem to have made as much impact on this sub-culture as the broad gay movement has had on the gay male sub-culture. The gay male sub-culture is not divided into 'alternative' and apolitical wings like the lesbian sub-cultures because political male homosexuals have not been successful in developing an alternative cultural space. In the early 1970s perhaps this was because feminist lesbians had no cultural references to relate to apart from male ones and therefore started from scratch; male homosexuals at least had cultural reference points within the mainstream culture (the Judy Garland syndrome). In the late 1970s, male homosexuals had the temptations of capitalist enticement which seems to be able to organize leisure/pleasure better and more enjoyably.

What this means is that the male gay sub-culture and potentially the apolitical lesbian sub-culture may more readily be located into a capitalist framework. Of course the other side of this is, as Christine Riddiough (1979) points out, that gay culture is a culture of resistance and a culture of subversion to some extent.

The feminist lesbian sub-culture has a relative autonomy from mainstream culture. Like most counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, 1970s its explicitly political dimension is limited.

Like the new settlers at Nimbin, it does not offer a strategy for liberation. The creation of 'alternative' institutions in the terrain of culture is an important one, and which has been neglected by the labor movement. But it's not by creation of alternatives that social change is achieved but in recognizing the potential in different expressions of gay culture. This is the point made by Cohen and Dyer (1980): a socialist political practise must listen to a variety of gay cultural voices - radical, traditional and mainstream.

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The gay liberation movement emerged as part of the radicalization of the late 1960s, early 1970s. As such it did not have to go through the stages of political development experienced by the New Left movements of the 1960s - liberal, protest, radical. It began as a subjectively revolutionary movement. But the New Left movements and the counter-culture have waned, leaving a distinct legacy. One of these in gay liberation's case is the new gay consciousness - proud, out, upfront. It is this which has enabled the expansion of gay male commercial institutions (incongruous as this may seem). The bearers of the new gay consciousness have not however been through the political education of the New Left. They cannot be expected to accept a radical analysis. The politicizing sub-cultures have to learn their own paths to struggle, they will not be rushed, and they will adopt tactics suited to the social circumstances of the times not those developed in 1970. This may not preclude militant or mass struggle, or confrontations with the state, but I expect all the options will be explored and used.

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Gay politics in the mid-1970s focussed on 'the campaign'. Its agent was 'the activist'. As the sub-cultures politicize, the agent of struggle for gay rights will not be an 'activist' but an 'organizer'. A decisive factor of the success for gay struggles (not of course the only one: alliances with other social forces, including the labor movement, feminists and radical-liberals will be important) will be the extent to which the sub-cultures organize themselves and then develop their own political voice. This is a role for gay radicals: help in the unification/solidification of the gay sub-cultures, help them to explore their way politically and to develop clout. That is, build a gay community.

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The gay movement has only just begun to address itself to the question of the nature of sexuality in a serious way. For the bulk of the 1970s it was satisfied with a simplistic radical-feminist/gay liberationist synthesis which had the advantage of appearing to explain all. This view is dominant still today. Now, and this has been trickling through over the last couple of years, the work of some of the European sex theorists is being recognized as of interest and not simply to be left to the anti-marxist Foucault/semiotics tendency (or to academics). This is why the Gay Left book, Homosexuality: Power and Politics, is so important. It goes beyond the Freudo-Marxist 'repression hypothesis' and opens up the possibility of a new, rigorous analysis. We can no longer be content with saying the oppression of homosexuals is the function of the need to maintain rigid gender roles.

We are seeing what could be an intellectual renaissance in the broad gay movement. The expansion of the gay media, including commercial, has been crucial to this.

But the key factor has been the conjuncture itself. On the one hand, the inadequacy of marxist orthodoxies as analysis. The expansion of the space in which homosexuals operate has only been explained by economic reductionism - manipulation of a gay market. This is the same economic reductionism which, paradoxically, argues that the emergence of the moral right's anti-gay crusade (and some gay men's 'macho' image) are the result of a general shift to the right in society caused by the economic recession.

On the other hand, the growth of the gay male sub-culture and the reconstruction of the image of some male homosexuals, in which the assertion of sexuality has been important. These developments have irked the radical wing of the gay movement influenced as it is by radical-feminism (hence the controversies over clones, pornography, S&M, pedophilia).

The broad gay movement has challenged what it means to be a sexed being, what desire is all about. The 'fringe sexualities' challenge the gay movement's own conceptions of what the gay movement should be about.

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If the oppression of lesbians and male homosexuals operates for different reasons and in different ways, this specificity of the oppressions may mean political lesbians and political make homosexuals could have different priorities for analysis and political work. For lesbians, gender. For male homosexuals, sexuality. Both are oppressed however as homosexuals. In the struggle for gay rights - which type of gay struggle will probably predominate for some time given the nature of the Australian social formation - there should therefore be many opportunities for common political work in a broad gay movement.

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The arguments around gay rights versus liberation have often been falsely polarized. The problem is always integration versus isolation. The position of homosexuals is characterized by marginalization. For some this takes the form of ghettoization. To what extent the free spaces we create for ourselves become containment rather than focus for social change cannot be determined in advance, only assessed in particular conjunctures. A gay sub-culture which is a ghetto rather than a community which necessarily impacts the wider society would be contained; perhaps the separatist, radical-feminist lesbian sub-culture has fallen into this trap. How does one avoid the perils of 'lifestylism', that horror of horrors to the gay left, without neglecting a politics of culture? The gay male sub-culture is not presented as a politics in the way the feminist-lesbian sub-culture is. It does have the potential to be a political base for gay power. This will be uneven, because of its internal contradictions and the commercial framework within which it operates. Yet to achieve ~~that~~ would be a major advance for homosexuals.

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A strategy for liberation should be an integrated whole involving:

1. agitational and educational work in and alliance with the labor movement
2. democratic rights campaigns
3. developing gay media (including commercial)
4. analysis and theory of sexuality and promoting general discussion of it
5. gay services in welfare, health, legal aid
6. gay intervention in film, music, theater, painting, photography
7. alliances with other social movements.

To achieve this without the politicizing gay sub-cultures as a base would be myopic. A popular radicalism is possible. A popular radicalism is emerging. It is doing so independently of the gay left. The question is no longer what analysis socialists have of the sub-cultures, but what the people in the sub-cultures think of socialists. The gay communities are developing, limitations and all. Does the gay left have anything constructive to contribute?

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