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Gay Left

by Jeffrey Escoffier

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The Gay Left refers to a cluster of positions on the political spectrum that has existed within the lesbian and gay rights movement at least since the Stonewall riots.

Modern gay and lesbian politics dates from the Stonewall riots of 1969, when a police raid on a Greenwich Village bar called the Stonewall Inn provoked a series of riots that mobilized drag queens, street hustlers, lesbians, and gay men, many of whom had been politicized by the movement against the war in Vietnam.

By the time of the Stonewall riots, there were already signs that homosexuals were in the process of creating a civil rights movement. Inspired, in part, by the black struggles of the 1960s, the Stonewall riots crystallized a broad grass-roots mobilization across the country. Many early participants in the movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people's rights were also involved in the various leftist causes of the 1960s, including the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the student movement, and the feminist movement.

The first political organization formed in wake of the Stonewall riots was the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). The organization was named in honor of the National Liberation Front, the Vietnamese resistance movement, and as a gesture toward the unity of the struggles of blacks, the poor, the colonized in the Third World, and women.

One early flyer, distributed in the Bay Area in January 1970, announced that "The Gay Liberation Front is a nation-wide coalition of revolutionary homosexual organizations creating a radical Counter Culture within the homosexual lifestyles. Politically it's part of the radical 'Movement' working to suppress and eliminate discrimination and oppression against homosexuals in industry, the mass media, government, schools and churches."

In 1969, Carl Wittman, a former activist in the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society, wrote *A Gay Manifesto*, one of the founding documents of the nascent gay liberation movement. "By the tens of thousands," Wittman announced, "we fled small towns where to be ourselves would endanger our jobs and any hope of decent life; we have fled from blackmailing cops, from families who disowned or tolerated us; we have been drummed out of the armed services, thrown out of schools, fired from jobs, beaten by punks and policemen."

In the period immediately after the Stonewall riots, the gay and lesbian movement did not at first focus on the question of identity, or even strictly on civil rights--though the question of black civil rights was, most certainly, on the political horizon--but on sexual liberation.

The sexual revolution had been underway since the early 1960s and that, along with the student anti-war movement, which had mobilized millions of Americans against the war in Vietnam, influenced how gay activists framed their political struggles. Sexuality was defined as a central political issue. One early radical group, the Red Butterfly, GLF's "cell" of Marxist intellectuals, invoked the conclusion of Herbert Marcuse's

1966 "Political Preface" to *Eros and Civilization* (and echoed Auden's great political poem "Spain, 1937"):
"Today the fight for Eros, the fight for life, is the political fight."

The Historical Origins of the Gay Left

The "Gay Left" that emerged in the 1970s sprang directly from the radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. But the fight for acceptance of homosexuality and political recognition of homosexuals' right to sexual freedom has a long lineage on the left and can be traced back to political movements and activists on the left in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States.

The 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde sparked many homosexuals and progressives to undertake intellectual and political defenses of homosexuality. In the years following Oscar Wilde's trials, a number of socialists in Germany and England began to champion homosexual rights. Wilde himself wrote a series of essays on political-aesthetic themes that implicitly defended homosexual rights, titling the collection "The Soul of Man under Socialism."

Between the time of Wilde's trials and World War I, Edward Carpenter, a leading English author on sexuality and socialism, wrote about homosexuality, gender, and identity in *The Intermediate Sex* (1906) and defended feminism and homosexuality in his best-selling book, *Love's Coming of Age* (1896). In addition, the great sexologist Havelock Ellis, with the aid of art historian and biographer John Addington Symonds, published to great controversy *Sexual Inversion* (1897), the first major study of homosexuality to draw upon extensive case histories of ordinary homosexuals rather than clinical data or psychiatric patients.

One of the first and most significant connections between the cause of homosexual rights and political movements on the Left emerged in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. The Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (*Wissenschaftlich-Humantitäres Komitee*), the first homosexual rights movement, founded in Germany by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1897, was closely allied with the Social Democratic Party, the leading German socialist party.

In the United States, political activists on the Left were often among the earliest proponents of homosexual rights. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the great anarchist and feminist leader, Emma Goldman, argued for the acceptance of homosexuals in her speeches and writings.

During World War II, the well-known poet Robert Duncan published the first political analysis of the status of homosexuals in American society in Dwight MacDonal's non-sectarian leftist/anarchist journal *Politics*. Poet, therapist, and novelist Paul Goodman, who identified as an anarchist, explored in his social criticism (such as *Growing Up Absurd*, 1960) and in his fiction (such as *Making Do*, 1963) the role of homosexuality in contemporary life.

After the war, the first efforts to organize homosexuals were undertaken--in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York--by war veterans and by members, acting privately, of the Communist Party. The homophile movement that emerged in the 1950s was founded by former members of the Communist party who drew upon their organizing skills to establish the first gay rights organization, the Mattachine Society.

The Left vs. Homosexual Desire

While the Gay Left that emerged after Stonewall had roots in the left's great tradition of emancipatory thought as reflected in the writing of progressive writers and thinkers such as Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Emma Goldman, Edward Carpenter, and André Gide, it also encountered fierce opposition from the left, and there is also a long history of leftist anti-gay sentiment.

During the Russian Revolution (1914-1919), as the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich discussed in his famous book *The Sexual Revolution* (1951), progressive legislation was passed legalizing abortion, liberalizing the laws

affecting marriage and divorce, and revoking the laws against homosexuality. Unfortunately, with the rise of Joseph Stalin in the late 1920s, this phase of progressive legislation was soon followed by a period of harsh sexual repression and, in 1934, the reinstatement of anti-homosexual laws.

In the wake of the Soviet Union's repression of homosexuals, Communist Parties (usually directed and funded by the Soviet Union) also adopted harsh measures against their homosexual members and allies. Homosexuals were expelled from Communist-sponsored political organizations (just as they were from conservative institutions) and homosexuality was widely characterized as "bourgeois decadence." Many of the early activists who helped establish the Mattachine Society had been purged or encouraged to leave the Communist Party of the U.S.A.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 was widely championed by the New Left during the 1960s and 1970s, but like its Soviet predecessors, the Cuban government also expelled homosexuals from political organizations. It also imposed harsh penalties, including imprisonment in concentration camps, for homosexual activity.

Most Gay Leftists took strong stands against the Soviet and Cuban governments' policies towards homosexuality. As a result, the Gay Left emerged as a distinct current on the left that opposed totalitarian and undemocratic forms of socialism, but which continued to exist in a marginalized relationship to the main currents of left political activity.

Gay Marxism: Homosexuality, Power, and Politics

In the early 1970s, many political discussion and consciousness-raising groups in the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Argentina, and Brazil sought to create a synthesis between Gay Liberation and Marxism. In a number of instances, these discussions took place in or on the fringes of established political parties and organizations.

In the autumn of 1975, a publication called *Gay Left* appeared in Britain, published by a collective. The Gay Left group produced an ambitious and theoretically coherent argument about the ways in which political and ideological power shaped the lives of homosexuals and enforced their sexual oppression.

Over the next five years, until *Gay Left* ceased publication in 1980, the Gay Left collective sought to articulate a radical politics of the left in which the gains of the women's and gay movements would be fully integrated. Drawing on the work of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, and philosopher Michel Foucault (whose theories they anticipated to some degree), they wrote about the development of sexual oppression under capitalism, the forms of political resistance to it, the integration of sexual politics into political organizations on the left, the nature of the new gay and lesbian culture, the role of consumerism, and the emergence of lesbian and gay political identities.

Many members of the Gay Left collective became influential writers and thinkers in the following decades: Jeffrey Weeks on the history of sexuality; Frank Mort on the history of health, medicine, and the regulation of sexuality; Richard Dyer on film and gay culture; Simon Watney on the impact of media and on the politics of HIV/AIDS; and Bob Cant on the integration of sexual politics into the left. Writers such as Mary McIntosh (in Great Britain), Dennis Altman (in Australia), and Amber Hollibaugh (in the U.S.)--all loosely affiliated with the British group--made their own contributions to the Gay Left perspective.

While many sexual radicals, feminists, and gay activists at the time turned to the work of Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse--the Freudian left--for insights into sexuality, the Freudian left's dependence on a notion of biological instincts (and other forms of essentialism) was politically and intellectually unacceptable to the Gay Left. The "interactionist" tradition of sociology (as articulated in the writings of George Herbert Mead, John Gagnon, William Simon, and Erving Goffman), which stressed the importance of social interactions and the reflexive interpretation of human actions, offered an alternative in which, as Jeffrey Weeks noted, "nothing is intrinsically sexual, or rather that anything can be

sexualized."

This position emerged during the 1980s as the "social constructionist" approach to sexuality and identity that combined insights of John Gagnon and William Simon's "interactionist" sociology of sex with the Marxist analysis of large-scale historical processes. Later Jeffrey Weeks noted that this sociological tradition and the school of thought represented by Michel Foucault had in common the recognition that sexuality is shaped by the social environment, human interaction, the varied erotic possibilities of the body, and the different forms of expression that "sex" can represent.

One of the most significant intellectual contributions of the Gay Left group was a historical account of the emergence of homosexual identity. In his early book on the history of homosexual politics in Britain, *Coming Out* (1977), Weeks explored the implications of Mary McIntosh's 1968 essay on "the homosexual role" in which McIntosh proposed that a homosexual "role" or "identity" had evolved in various historical periods. Weeks, Kenneth Plummer, and other Gay Left historians identified the specific social and economic conditions that permitted the growth of a homosexual subculture and its psychological-political outgrowth--the modern lesbian and gay male identity. They saw sexual identity as the result of a historical process, not a predetermined "natural" process.

In the late 1970s, centers of Gay Left thinking emerged in North America. Among the most important of these centers were *The Body Politic* in Toronto (whose writers and editors included James Steakley, John D'Emilio, Michael Lynch, and Tom Waugh); *Gay Community News* in Boston (whose contributors included Michael Bronski, Urvashi Vaid, Sue Hyde, Amy Hoffman, and Ellen Herman); the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project (whose participants included Amber Hollibaugh, Gayle Rubin, Allan Bérubé, and Jeffrey Escoffier); and a series of study groups on sexuality in New York City (whose participants included John D'Emilio, Jonathan Ned Katz, Lisa Duggan, and Nan Hunter).

Gay Left Political Perspectives

In the United States, the Gay Left perspective has repeatedly addressed certain key issues, such as coalition building and solidarity with other minorities, the role of sexuality, and the goal of economic equality.

Since the founding of the GLF, the Gay Left as a political tendency has maintained that political freedom for homosexual and transgendered people must take place within the context of promoting the rights of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and oppressed people around the world. Differences between this "rainbow" approach and a "single issue" approach have frequently been the subject of major political debates within the movement. In fact, the demise of the GLF was due to a series of divisions within the organization around this question.

The Rainbow Coalition that was formed by Jesse Jackson and played a major role in his 1984 campaign for the Democratic Party's Presidential nomination was the realization of the long-held dream of a gay and lesbian political alliance with progressive forces in other minority communities. Gbltq communities include people from many other minorities and thus include those who have helped to build bridges to other ethnic and social groups that support the "rainbow" as the symbol of community. The Gay Left has stressed the importance of these ties and the political alliances they make possible.

The second central tenet of the Gay Left is sexual freedom, the idea that consenting sexual activity is the basis for the social and political rights of all gbltq people. The early gay and lesbian rights movement emerged in the context of the sexual revolution, and so did the early opposition to the gay rights movement, right-wing fundamentalism. The issue of sexuality has also generated an ongoing series of debates within the gbltq rights movement, about the rights of sexual minorities within the gbltq movement such as the leather community and transgendered people, the issue of promiscuity, the role of pornography, and the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

The social constructionist approach to sexuality played an important role in the political debates on pornography in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The anti-pornography movement and the work of its leading theorists, including Andrea Dworkin, Susan Griffin, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Catherine MacKinnon, often drew upon essentialist and naturalist definitions of sexuality and gender. Many the feminist and gay critics of the anti-pornography movement such as Carole Vance, Gayle Rubin, Amber Hollibaugh, Ellen Willis, Joan Nestle, Deirdre English, and Cherríe Moraga had been active on the left and held to the social constructionist understanding of sexuality.

With the advent of AIDS, the social constructionist approach to sexual behavior, championed by the Gay Left, gained a new urgency. The social approach to sexuality facilitated the ability of activists and researchers to identify the social conditions that shaped sexual conduct and the spread of HIV infection among gay men and enabled them to suggest social strategies to prevent HIV. The promulgation of safer sex was closely tied to the intellectual contributions of Gay Left thinkers, many of whom--Jeffrey Weeks, Simon Watney, and Amber Hollibaugh, for example--became AIDS activists.

The third issue that the Gay Left has addressed is the "traditional" one of the relationship of homosexuality to capitalism, social class, and the economic forms of oppression. The Gay Left has long challenged the myth that the glbtq community is an economically privileged elite. Gay left writers have explored the ways that the economy has shaped the lives of glbtq people who come from all social classes and occupations. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed's pioneering anthology, *Homo Economics* (1997), brings together many of these perspectives.

Right-wing groups in the U.S. have opposed the civil rights of glbtq people with the argument that the glbtq community is wealthier and more prosperous than the average American family and that glbtq people are therefore in no need of any "special" civil rights to participate in the economy or have an opportunity to hold a decent job.

Conservatives made such an argument in 1996 before the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Romer v. Evans*, concerning an amendment to the Colorado state constitution that barred the passage of any gay and lesbian civil rights legislation. However, economist Lee Badgett and progressive activists developed the argument and the data to counter the right-wing's claim. Their argument may have been influential on the Court's majority in the historic ruling in *Romer v. Evans*, though conservative Associate Justice Antonin Scalia mouthed the right-wing's line in his bitter dissent when he fulminated that "those who engage in homosexual conduct tend to reside in disproportionate numbers in certain communities, have high disposable income, and . . . possess political power much greater than their numbers, both locally and statewide."

In addition, during the 1990s many large corporations developed high-powered marketing campaigns targeting glbtq communities. Many of these campaigns have promoted narrow standards of beauty, restricted social needs, and fostered a limited social expression that operates within mainstream consumerism. The Gay Left has critiqued the effects of such consumerism on glbtq communities and political tactics.

New formations on the Gay Left have also emerged to address the inequalities of income and opportunity that affect glbtq people from minority and working-class backgrounds.

While Gay Left has not had an enduring institutional presence in glbtq communities, its political and intellectual perspectives have been influential for many decades.

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