

Sex and Society – pride and prejudice

Lesbian and Gay oppression

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The emergence of AIDS as a major disease since 1979 has allowed the Tories to capitalise on a social climate of hostility. Theories have developed which postulate that certain sexual practices cause disease AND that certain types of sex ARE diseases. AIDS was first identified as a homosexual affliction; referred to as the ‘the gay plague’, this association between homosexuality and AIDS has given rise to new forms of anti homosexual behaviour such as the refusal of medics to treat AIDS patients, undertakers to bury the dead, prison officers refusing to move prisoners and so on. Furthermore, ‘deviant’ sex and race categories have become interwoven with disease: The Public Health (Infectious diseases) Regulation of 1985 has led to screening of visitors to Britain from Central Africa.¹

In 1979, the Conservative Digest stated that,

“The New Right are looking for issues that people care about, and social issues, at least for the present, fit the bill.”

The triumph of the right has been its recognition that interventions on traditionally personal and private issues can capture significant support for a wide -ranging social and political agenda. The resurgence of defenders of traditional norms occurs against a backdrop of moral panics around sex and reproductive rights. CLAUSE 28 was a glaring attempt to whip up prejudice following the Tories anti-gay campaign during the 1987 General Election. Together with AIDS scapegoating, the Tories have launched a moral offensive against the gay community and have created a climate where the repression of homosexuality is considered normal.

History proves that different cultures and societies have had different social, hence sexual, relationships. Homosexual were not simply tolerated but actually encouraged. Bigots and moralists are obsessed with what they deem to be ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ behaviour. Diverse sexual codes in matters throughout history illustrate the futility of such arguments. The West is almost alone in tabooing all forms of homosexual behaviour. The sodomy laws were the main source of homosexual repression in Britain, across western Europe and North America. Christianity did much to change attitudes towards homosexuality in Western Europe, however, homosexual acts were treated in the same way as other ‘sexual sins’; fornication, bestiality, adultery and so on. The

¹ Joe Dolce: The politics of fear AIDS Disease, and Haitians.

concept of the homosexual role or identity was absent until the late 19th century. Previously, types of behaviour had been controlled by the law. Acts, not persons were regulated. By the second part of the 19th century, Britain, Germany, and the United States had enforced new legal controls on male homosexual behaviour. The oppression of homosexuals as a distinct and 'problematic' category of people separate from 'normal' society must be seen as a feature specific to capitalist society.

By the middle of the 18th century, within bourgeois ideology, the monogamous, heterosexual family unit increasingly stressed as the basic unit of society. Initially, capital accumulation depended on the break-up of the old extended families and the incorporation of women and children into the labour force. However, the liberal reforms of the mid 19th century (Mines Acts and Factory Acts) which protect women and children from much productive work were passed to serve the interests of capital. These reforms helped prevent the physical elimination of the labour force. "Family responsibilities" and the division of the labour force today help maintain the status quo and hinder the ability of workers to organise in the interests of the class.

Homosexuality was the most clearly defined deviance from the bourgeoisie's natural order; consequently thousands of gay men have suffered at the hands of the Gross Indecency Laws. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 contained a liberal clause which made "gross indecency" between men a crime. The law was defended as a means of penalising the procurement of boys as that of girls; nevertheless, in a climate of moral panic, male homosexuals became the principle victims of this clause. We cannot look to the Law lords to solve the problems of sexual oppression; the law is open to interpretation by the courts and used in ways not always envisaged by reformers and do-gooders. Male homosexuality has never been decriminalised in this country. Each year two thousand gay men are arrested because of their sexuality. Lesbians and gays are discriminated against at work, by the police, the courts, and violently assaulted by bigots. The liberal Wolfenden Report of 1957 and its partial enactment in 1967 as the Sexual Offences Act, have been viewed as a relaxation of the regulation of male homosexuality. The report in fact, was a response to the growing numbers of court cases against gay men and set about controlling gay sexuality in a subtler fashion. The Act represented a change in the official definition of homosexuality rather than an acceptance of homosexuality. The recommendations of the Wolfenden report still define the current position of gay men, making a distinction between the public sphere and the private, penalties against homosexual relations conducted in private between men over the age of 21, were removed. This 'decriminalised' an 'offence' for which gay men were rarely prosecuted. The Act encouraged men to conduct their relationships in privacy, pushing them further into secrecy and isolation.

Lesbianism has never been recognised by the law, but discrimination exists because of the assumptions law makes about women. Lesbians tend to be viewed as socially problematic and the legal system's particular regard for lesbian mothers as artificial mothers reinforces attitudes in society at large. The idea of the 'pretended family' which is the label given to lesbian mothers and gay fathers, has also been used against black people trying to bring partners and children into Britain.

Lesbian and gay oppression is directly linked to the oppression of women; the isolated family household is the material basis for these forms of oppression in its crucial role as provider of the labour force. Women have not been forced from the workplace back to the household as many feminists predicted following the elections of the Tories in 1979. Instead an ideological back to the family drive has meant that the working class family pays for the crisis in capitalism through

child care and care of the sick and elderly. Women are not driven out of work but segregated more and more in part time work, 'twilight shifts', and homeworking, fitting in work around family responsibilities. The deeper the crisis, the more invaluable the family becomes. The fight for lesbian and gay liberation must be rooted in the class struggle — only the working class, as the exploited class, has everything to gain and nothing to lose in fighting oppression. The bourgeois and middle classes will always have something to gain from the oppression of others.

Lesbians and gay men's responses to their own oppression have been, for the most part a defensive reaction to the homophobia of the reformist labour movement. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) played a significant role in lesbian and gay liberation history. Formed in 1969 in New York, the GLF inspired new radical ideas about gay oppression in the U.S. and across Europe. The movement was to give lesbians and gays a political identity as well as personal self-identification. However, this 'movement' became more concerned with personal change, and provided the setting for a complete counter-culture. The GLF's ideological emphasis on the individual act of 'coming out' meant that a class-based movement did not develop. This theory was based on the assumption that homophobia would be overcome if increasing numbers of lesbians and gays 'came out'. The GLF called itself a 'revolutionary organisation'; for the GLF "choosing homosexuality is itself an act of rebellion, a revolutionary stance." (See "Gay Liberation Front Manifesto"(1971)

Class analysis was left behind, since lesbians and gays were evidently left out of class analysis.

Section 28 was dismissed by some lesbian and gay groups due to the government's disclosure that technically it would be difficult to enforce, particularly to censure sex education in schools or to intimidate teachers for their sexuality. Despite this, reactionaries may now use the law to justify attacks on lesbians and gays. Before the section was law a Bradford teacher was sacked for being gay. The threat of all out strike action succeeded in his reinstatement. Before the section was law Strathclyde Education Authority threatened to withdraw financial support for unions that funded lesbian and gay groups. Labour councils were called upon to defend lesbian and gay rights by anti-section campaigns. It would be dangerous and misleading to hold illusions in the willingness of labour councils to defy the law and it must be remembered that certain labour councils attempted to enforce the section before it was enacted. In 1985, for the first time, the TUC and Labour Party conferences passed resolutions supporting lesbian and gay rights. Legislation for lesbian and gay rights: A Manifesto drafted by the Labour Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Rights was passed in modified form by the Labour Party conference. However the introduction to the manifesto itself admits its shortcomings and inadequacies;

"Our proposal is restricted to dealing with the role of the law in specifically oppressing lesbian and gay men."²

The manifesto expresses a desire to see an end to police harassment of lesbians and gays;

"but this harassment mostly involves abuse of very general police powers and so to eliminate it would require a general reform of the police... to take it on would blunt the edge of our demand that laws that are specifically hetero sexist should be abolished."³

² LEGISLATION FOR LESBIANS AND GAY RIGHTS: A MANIFESTO.

³ Op cit.

There is a distinct failure here to recognise that a bourgeois state whether Labour or Tory hold office will always enforce the laws and enact laws in accordance with its moral codes and in its own interests.

Lesbian and gay liberation must be a intrinsic part of the programme for libertarian communism, not treated as a focus for the recruitment of lesbians and gay men and then submerged as irrelevant. Hoping that ideological change will miraculously occur within the labour movement, through intensified struggle leads to tail ending the current 'trade union consciousness'. Lesbian and gay equality must be argued for within the workplace and trade unions. Trade Unionists Against Section 28 (TUAS28) was an attempt to organise against the clause within the labour movement. The 'Out At Work' pack produced by TUAS28 reveals strong recognition that it is in the interests of all workers to fight oppression "fighting against racism, sexism, attacks on the welfare state and the ability of workers to organise effectively. Solidarity!" The perspective of taking the struggle into the workplace had a notable predecessor. Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners formed in 1984, gave unconditional support to the striking miners and underlined the potential of working class lesbians and gays to challenge the reactionary ideas of fellow workers. Furthermore the strength of LGSM lay in its class analysis of capitalist society and its recognition that working class unity is the first step towards the creation of a revolutionary society as a foundation for human relationships.

It would be unwise, however, to blame the oppressed for their own oppression or make them responsible for their own liberation; this would lead to placing the burden on individuals to 'come out, something the SWP have been guilty. Discussion of lesbian and gay oppression at Marxism '88 gave rise to arguments from the SWP that gays should not be blamed for their own oppression but they (the SWP) would encourage all their lesbian and gay members to 'come out' in their workplace. This merely reinforces the notion that lesbians and gays must fight for their own liberation on their own. Revolutionaries, regardless of their sexuality must fight for lesbian and gay rights. Moreover the must win the working class to take a stand on this issue. Campaigns must be based on the demands for the complete decriminalisation of homosexuality, the abolition of the age of consent, obscenity and blasphemy laws and all forms of censorship. We must challenge all forms of discrimination at work and in the statute books.

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