

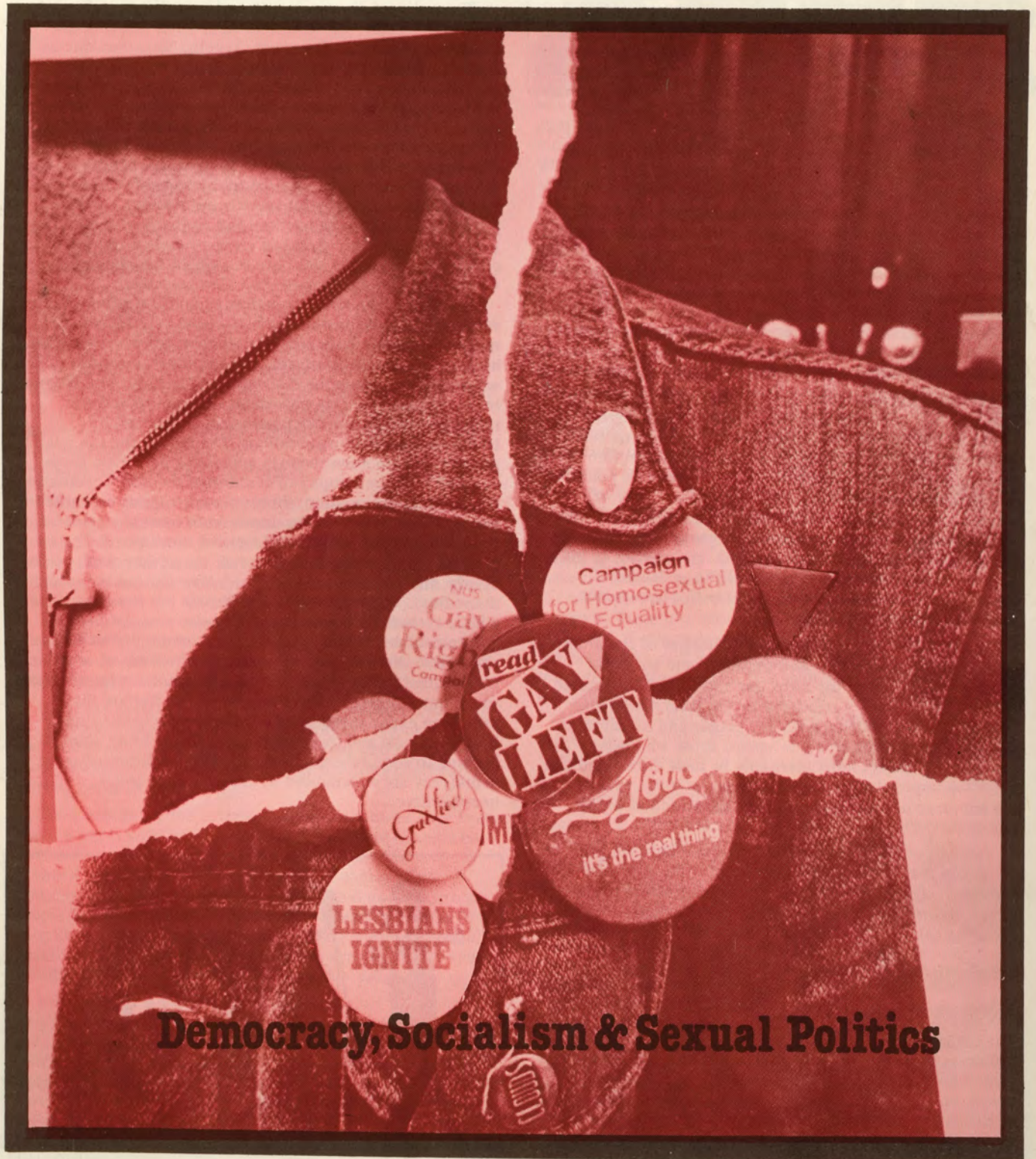
A Gay Socialist Journal

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GAY LEFT

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Democracy, Socialism & Sexual Politics

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ME COLLECTIVE STATEMENT

With this tenth issue of *Gay Left*, we have completed five years of publication. Throughout these years, in every issue, we have attempted to develop a coherent political position, both in the editorials written by the Collective, and in the selection of articles. This does not mean that during this period we have not developed our ideas or changed our minds: neither have we necessarily completely agreed, as a Collective, with all the articles published, or indeed with each other. But our policy has always been to publish material which would contribute to what we have expressed since our first editorial as our prime tasks: to develop an analysis of sexual politics and its relation to socialism; to help make the gay community aware of the relevance of socialist politics; and to contribute to the development of a socialist politics, which would embrace, and hence be transformed by, the experiences and ideas of the feminist and gay movements. To do this we have tried to explore a series of issues ranging from the structural forms which shape the oppressive categorisation of homosexuality, through the subcultural changes of the past ten years which have substantially changed the possibilities of being gay in our society, to the ostensibly "individual" issues which nevertheless sharply illuminate the ways in which the multiple forms of power limit the possibilities of "new ways of living".

Recently, the project of *Gay Left* has come under sharp attack. A number of lesbian feminists have challenged us for accepting too readily and hiding behind the cultural vestments of 'masculinity'. They have seen in our rejection of what we termed in the last editorial as a moralistic politics a refusal to contemplate the possibility and necessity of personal change. We have also been criticised by some gay socialists who work within Far Left organisations for being too individualistic, too concerned with 'the politics of the personal', and ignoring the massive Right onslaught of Thatcherism. We publish two letters in this issue which clearly put this latter position.

We are aware as any outside the Collective of the problems of being both gay activists and socialists, and about the problematic nature of the term 'gay socialist'. Nonetheless, we still feel there is a relevance to the label which goes beyond the fact of being both gay people and socialists. In this editorial we wish to argue against those who believe that any socialist project must inevitably be male dominated and therefore oppressive, *and* against those socialists who deny the relevance of exploring the social construction of the personal.

The idea of socialism does not involve a uniform programme nor a preordained hierarchy of tasks. Advanced capitalist society produces various types of power relation which in turn give rise to varying levels of struggle. For us, socialism demands changes to be in both the personal and in the structural relations of power. To ignore the former is actually to inhibit the latter.

Problems of socialism

The criticisms of *Gay Left* nevertheless highlight real problems faced by the Left, resulting from a fundamental lack of coherence within the socialist project as currently posed. This incoherence is manifest at all levels: theoretical, strategic, organisational. Unlike previous periods there is no longer a simple choice between two total views and strategies which compete for dominance on the Left, as there was for

example in the interwar years between the Communist Party and the ideology of Labourism. Today, we are faced with multiple and incompatible visions of what society is, what its alternatives are and how we move from the present to a more democratic future.

There is an absence of a single legitimated and generally accepted socialist strategy. Neither the Labour Left, the Eurocommunist tendencies within the CP nor the Far Left groupings offer an adequate and comprehensive account of the dynamics of this phase of capitalism which can be accepted by the others. Within each of these groupings there are different and often antagonistic theories each advanced with much energy and fervour, but all failing to reach more than a tiny section of the population. The traditional Left alternatives have failed to provide new socialist visions to fill the crucial space opened by the political collapse of social democracy.

This political disarray is matched by a disintegration of the unitary theory of Marxism. Marxist and non-Marxist thinkers as diverse as Fernando Claudin, Nicos Poulantzas, Rudolph Bahro, Edward Thompson and Michel Foucault have contributed to the creation of conflicting schools within Marxism, by reformulating such concepts as the State, power, political organisation, class, the nature of already existing socialism and history. The result is an apparent dissonance within Left theory. Adding to the confusion is the production within autonomous movements of theories which claim to account for specific oppressions but which are at the same time generalised and contend with Marxism for total explanatory status. A clear example is the use of the concept of patriarchy not only to explain the oppression of women but also the genesis of all class societies.

In an otherwise static or regressing political situation, the autonomous movements have often been very successful in mobilising people both around particular issues such as race, housing and the environment, and the wider questions of the relationship between the individual and society. The Women's movement and the Gay movement have politicised and radicalised sections of the population untouched by traditional socialist organisations. The fact of the relative success of these movements in expressing perceived needs coupled with the atrophy of traditional socialist organisations poses the major question; should these struggles be unified and if so how: what can be drawn from these struggles for the revitalising of the broader socialist movement? These questions are pressing in that, for all the advances of socialist theory, the popular images of socialism are bankrupt and discredited. Social Democracy in Britain has *been* socialism and its systematic failure through twelve years of Labour government has destroyed the general credibility of a socialist alternative. Nationalised industries have not meant workers' involvement in control and organisation nor a responsiveness to community needs. Many aspects of the Welfare State have been experienced as huge bureaucratic institutions — both by clients and those working in them. From council housing to comprehensive education, the reforms of social democracy are experienced as undemocratic and unresponsive.



The failure of Social Democratic politics with this unappetising emphasis on bureaucratic efficiency and statism, provided the base for the new Thatcherite bloc to seize the initiative. Its selective call for individualism, its demagogic attack on the Welfare State and Trade Unionism offered a reactionary response to real problems. Not surprisingly it has been all too easy to draw analogies between social democratic paternalism and the bureaucratic formations of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The success of anti-socialist propaganda is built on a real popular distrust of authoritarian communism and its apparent parallels within Welfare Statism.

The socialist alternative has to be built in opposition to both the authoritarian populism of a precarious capitalism and to the paternalistic state of social democracy. This has to be done in a climate of increasing social anxiety which leads to the closing of ideological space — that space in which new perspectives can be developed. It is harder now to rethink political conceptions, harder to find points of access to the political process. There is an entrenchment of old ideas and an atrophy of innovative practice at all levels, as concerns about employment, housing and education come to pre-occupy most people in their daily lives. The stage management of this anxiety by the Right, its focussing on 'scroungers', 'reds', 'deviants', is one of the most frightening achievements of Thatcherism, and the one the Left seems least able to counter. The existing forms of socialism fail to speak clearly to people's needs and in that failure abandon the political and social terrain to domination by reactionary images, models and philosophies. The continued repetition of slogans calling for example for a general strike, is limited and idealist in so far as it fails to connect to how people really see their lives. It is true that the Thatcherite offensive will create new points of resistance, new areas of struggle, as it cuts back the material basis of people's lives but the co-ordination of these struggles and their conceptualising into a new model of socialist politics requires strategies and tactics which have yet to be agreed on and developed. Whether, and how, people struggle is as much a question of how they see themselves as of their being propelled into action simply by their material circumstances.

The Significance of Gay Politics

This is where the significance of gay politics lies. The oppressive regulation of homosexuality has been a feature of society for a very long time, yet it is only in the last ten years that the struggle for redefinition of our sexuality and sexual practices has scored major victories. The central focus of gay politics has been the attempt to redefine sexuality, and hence to take control over our own bodies, our own pleasures and the direction of our own lives. The struggle for definition, within the established categories, yet transcending them is a model for, at least some, aspects of the new socialist project.

It has involved collective action, and a transformation of self through a variety of political practices. In reaching out for control of the institutions that produce and reproduce those definitions and categories, these practices challenge the existing order in a basic way.

The grounds for the changes in sexual attitudes have been developments within capitalism itself, yet these changes have not been automatic and there is no immediate identity between our struggle and the interests of capital. True, capitalists, straight and gay, have intervened in the space gay people have created but it would be fatalistic to assume the cooption of the gay struggle. Rather there is a shifting and unstable relation between our interests as gays and the space, facilities and constant redefinitions created for us by capital.

Capitalism is a complex unity that does not work with a single agency or effect. One of the failures of the theories of the Left has been the inability to conceptualise politics in other than dualistic terms. Right/Left, Capitalist/Socialist, Good/Bad, Reformist/Revolutionary: static dichotomies that barely describe let alone prescribe the ways struggle actually goes on. Capitalism, in its multiplicity of contradictions, is not something that can be abolished overnight, nor is it



something that produces its own antithesis, fully formed, pure and innocent, awaiting its historic destiny. There is an innumerable series of struggles and points of opposition which interact to produce shifting configurations of power, advantage — gains and losses.

Sexual politics opened up new areas of struggle, conceptualised anew the forces acting on members of society, especially in the rubric "the personal is political". What we mean by this, is not that every action we perform is political, but rather that our 'private' lives, our selves and our desires, are targets for intervention by social forces — definitions, models, rules, woven in ideology and lived by us. In opening up that area as one of struggle, gay politics has also revealed the necessary antagonisms that operate within apparently homogeneous categories: the divisions between lesbians and gay men and the dissonance of those interests; the operation of race and class as lines of power within the gay world; the hierarchies contradictorily constructed around age: — all these have surfaced as gay liberation has developed, and these problems — of intimate power relations — continue to be the concern of personal politics.

Perhaps, our signal contribution to the redefinition of socialism is the insight that the transformation of our most intimate desires, and of the conditions of their satisfaction, has to be part and parcel of the new society for which we are working. Those intimate needs, wishes, fantasies are the substance of struggle — why we fight in the first place. Gay politics speaks with a sensitivity to our felt needs and the felt restriction of those needs. It is with a similar sensitivity that we conceive of a socialist politics gaining mass legitimacy. That legitimacy will be built through time and within capitalism. It is not a luxury, nor something that can wait until after the seizure of power by a self-elected vanguard.

Rethinking Socialism

Socialism is offered as an alternative to the capitalist organisation of social and economic life. In the classic Marxist version it is the necessary, and in some variants, almost pre-ordained antithesis of capitalism. But what it is more than that is left vague. Marxism has been traditionally hostile to Utopian system building. So when the self-described Marxist regimes have captured state power with popular backing (Russia, China, Yugoslavia) been elected to it (Chile) or simply been imposed on countries (Czechoslovakia etc) they have faced the problem of what to do with it. Different and often appalling results have followed, and socialists outside those countries have often been unsure of their reactions: is 'defence of the revolution' more important than defence of democracy? Is state planning to transform an undeveloped economy more relevant than workers control? Is the control of sexual relations in the interests of building socialism more vital than the 'right to choose'? Such questions are to the

fore over Afghanistan. Many socialists think it more important to defend the 'building of socialism' there even if it is being enforced by Soviet troops. Others feel that the defence of the right of a nation to self-determination is more important. In other words, there is no simple series of ultimate goals which can be used as guides through the maze of current political dilemmas. Hence the attraction of a socialist politics which concentrates on an easily delineated (if elusively difficult) task: the attainment of power.

We would affirm the necessity of developing a socialist vision as against the aridity of what passes for marxist analysis, and against the concentration on party building in which the immediate task obscures the ultimate goal. But this does not remove from all of us who describe ourselves as socialists, the task of understanding the actual workings of capitalism. For we would agree that a socialist politics cannot be a simple opposition to all things capitalist, but has to be a product of the struggles actually produced within capitalism: that is capitalism is not a single entity to which can be counterposed another, socialism. It is a highly complex set of relations: economic, social, geographical, ethical and gender.

Whilst the workings of the economic and social relations define the parameters of possible actions, there is no unitary determination of beliefs, behaviour, ideology or sexual forms. Multiple struggles develop at all levels of this complex structure, at all points of power. They have one thing in common in that they are attempts to resist and challenge the workings of the relations of power and to gain control over them. We would argue that the main task of socialists is to ensure that this struggle for control is democratic in all its phases, that the goal of the socialist project is the democratisation of all social processes in order to gain popular control of the shaping of individual and collective existence.

The possibilities of democratic control are inhibited in society as it exists now, despite its calling itself democratic. Bourgeois democracy rests on a representative parliamentary form which actively discourages people from taking decisions and initiatives themselves. Real economic power and decisions remain outside of even these limited democratic forms. The anarchic, crisis-ridden market forces of capitalism and the power of multi-national corporations are not accountable to us as producers, consumers or 'citizens'. Real democratic control of the workings of the economy is therefore a prime task for socialists. At the same time we cannot ignore the level of the state. The state, though, is not simply a clique of the ruling class: it is more a space of power than a single source of domination. It is always a potential site for intervention and contestation. But this does not mean that the repressive state apparatus, military, police, judiciary, can be wished away. Processes of democratisation can be reversed or halted by these agencies and the various forms of class domination, as the example of Chile all too clearly shows. Ultimate control of the state by democratic forces is vital. The exact form that the process of gaining democratic control will entail, and the political forces that can achieve it (party or parties for example) lies at the heart of contemporary socialist debate. All we can say is that

socialists who ignore the moment of state power are in danger of losing their socialism — and perhaps their very lives.

The struggle for democratisation requires more than the establishment of a 'socialist state': it requires the building of effective popular control in all aspects of social existence. This means that challenges must be made at all points of oppression, which cannot be reduced to a pale reflection of bigger oppressions, and must not be subordinated to a 'more important' struggle. They are the struggles with which people can identify, the oppressions they feel in all areas of their lives. If socialists fail to recognise the validity of the micro-struggles at the point of oppression, the discontents that give rise to them will be taken up, colonised and utilised by the Right. This is what is happening under Thatcherism and other forms of Right populism in various parts of the world.

Control of our Bodies

Feminist and Gay politics are an essential part of people gaining control over their lives, the part of the process whose aim is control over decisions concerning our bodies and identities. The sexual political movements have pinpointed these areas as crucial for democratic struggle, and they have offered a series of insights into the ways this can be done in collective activity, often in small, pluralistic struggles. Beginning with the immediate experience of oppression, they are responsive to felt needs rather than guided by abstract slogans. There are, however, problems. Pluralism can often lead to a total lack of coherence. Success in one area can have totally demobilising effects in others. One of the effects of the early Gay Movement was a major expansion in the sub-culture, which achieved some of the aims of GLF, though on a different basis, and very many gays fail to see the need for further struggles.

But, we believe that the many struggles around sexuality have been very important in pointing to two issues central to any socialist project. Firstly they have underlined the vital importance of understanding the ways in which the different forms of power shape and inform individual meanings and identities. Secondly they illuminate the determined ways in which individuals can resist and begin to transform oppressive definitions. There is a third point: in our very marginalisation we have attempted to work out different ways of living relationships and sexuality which question many basic attitudes that cement existing patterns. Feminist and Gay politics provide a subversive challenge to conventional ideologies and aspirations, and socialism cannot grow without such challenges.

We have only touched briefly upon wider issues which are central to socialist advance, particularly the unification of disparate struggles and the necessary incompatibilities within them. This never going to be easy to hold together such complex unities as 'sexual politics' and 'socialist politics'. We believe that criticisms that stress our inability to offer a simple strategy are misplaced. All we can offer is an investigation of the problems as we see them. These problems — whether of our sexual lives or of the political allegiances of our sexual radicalism — will not disappear. They still have to be explored. And if gay socialists don't do this, who will?



Work place politics: Gay politics

by Nigel Young

In March a Gay Rights at Work Conference was held in London to discuss and organise a new gay rights at work campaign. A conference motion was put forward which is printed here in full. The Conference and the motion raised important issues about a gay rights at work campaign and its relationship to the gay movement. This article looks at gay rights at work and the wider issues involved.

Gay Left has printed in previous issues a series of articles on lesbians and gay men's experience in the work place. These articles have looked at the problems and successes of individual lesbians and gay men who have come out at work. These "personal" accounts have also spoken to our own and others' experience — enabling us to comprehend the myriad ways we can be oppressed at work and influencing how we can fight that oppression. What is also interesting about those articles is that the gay movement which helps to shape part of our consciousness and is the major force behind us saying, "No, I'm not going to hide any more, no I'm not frightened or ashamed to come out" is taken for granted. In one sense this implicit acceptance of the gay movement is fine; it suggests security, a feeling that the movement has been around for ten years and whatever its current problems, it won't disappear overnight. In another sense, though, this implicit acceptance is dangerous because without consistently placing the messages, critiques and questions of the women's and gay movements into our accounts of our workplace struggles, we lose sight of those things in future campaigns and organisations around gay rights at work — we lose a part of our history.

In this article I want to concentrate on some of the questions those individual experiences beg especially in the light of a new gay rights at work campaign and organisation. I also want to try to restate for us as gay socialists the role of autonomous movements in relation to any new campaigns around gay rights at work, and finally I want to explain my opposition to the Gay Rights at Work conference motion and the politics which lie behind that motion.

Difficult questions

Any gay rights at work campaign has to ask itself a whole set of difficult questions: what are the different ways we experience oppression in the work place? Where does that oppression come from? Are there different categories of oppression, for instance, between lesbians and gay men? Are there class differences? Are there regional differences? In response to these questions we are led to more general ones like, what does this imply about the way we struggle? Is it the same regardless of the situation?

At the same time as trying to answer these questions we have to look at the structure and the nature of the work place and the trade union movement. They cannot be accepted as perfect — as if in some magical way, during the struggle for gay rights, lesbians and gay men will no longer have to deal with sexist and oppressive work places and trade unions. Nor if we go around as tireless gay activists supporting every trade union struggle will homophobia and sexism be expunged from the labour movement. Without an overall critique and a movement to support us we, as individuals, can't hope to change people's sexist and homophobic attitudes. Those attitudes are formed and supported by an ideological system which goes far beyond the workplace and far beyond what we can counter as individuals.

There are no easy answers to these questions or problems, and it is certainly wrong to suggest that the answers lie solely in work place and trade union struggles. For a start some people might feel too isolated to ask any of these questions, their needs may be best met through self-help groups. Others may be aware of the questions but feel too unsupported in

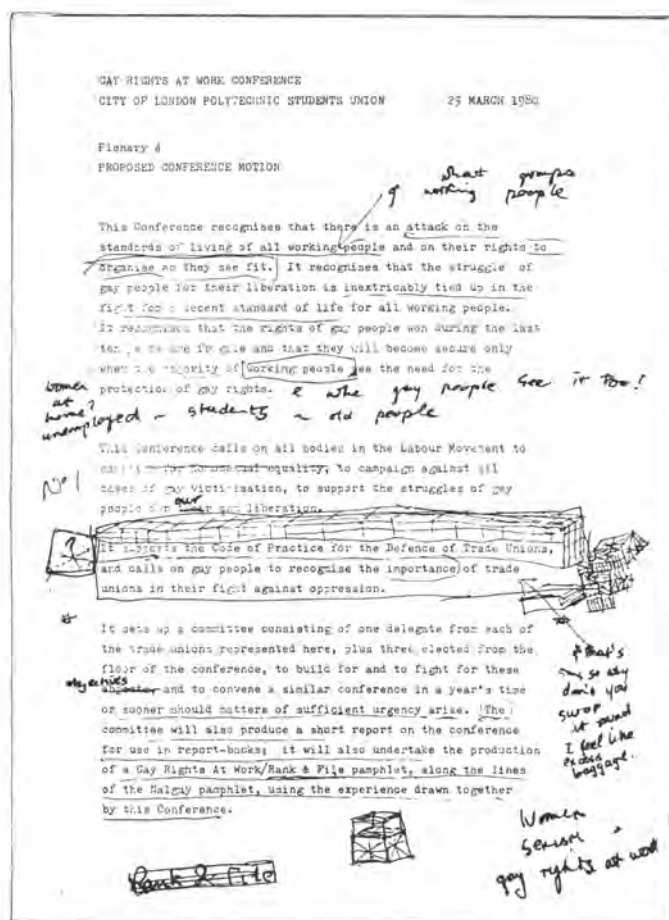
their job or in the region they work in to act upon them. The union might be too weak, too oppressive or non-existent for any of these questions to be relevant. Many lesbians and gay men, in the home, the unemployed, young people and old people have no rights as far as trade union organisations are concerned; you only have rights in these terms as long as you have labour which you sell and you can withdraw.

Conference debates

So when the Gay Rights at Work Conference was being organised, I expected some of these difficult questions to be raised and some attempts made to look at the central problem of what the relationship between a gay movement and a gay rights at work campaign and organisation should be.

I went to that conference as a committed trade-unionist and someone who has worked as a socialist/activist in the gay movement for seven years, and as a militant trade unionist for even longer. Therefore the question wasn't an academic one for me; it is part of a very difficult problematic — because although I'm aware of the need and a believer in a strong rank and file trade union movement, I'm also aware of the importance of a strong women's and gay movements which have quite rightly criticised the oppressive and sexist structures of the trade union movement and the oppressive and sexist nature of most work situations.

Unfortunately this central problematic was never addressed. Actually that isn't quite true. It was addressed, but with such a furious side swipe at the gay movement by



many delegates, that at times those of us who saw ourselves as having a major commitment to that movement might have wondered how we'd achieved anything in the last ten years because we would have been too busy "chatting, having cups of tea, or socialising". If I wanted to be as dismissive as many of those delegates, I might say that perhaps the Left has failed to reach the masses in the last ten years precisely because it refuses to see the importance, within the context of political activity, of "chatting, socialising and having cups of tea".

It is not my intention to go through the ins and outs of what went on at the conference because that won't mean a lot to those who were not there, but what I do want to try and do here is say why I and many others were opposed to the conference motion which was passed by a narrow but not an overall majority.

One important aspect of the conference was that those delegates who spoke earlier in the day and supported the motion later on, mirrored the attitudes and priorities reflected in the motion. This is of course no mere accident, just as it was no mere accident that so many delegates dismissed the gay movement as being an irrelevance, consistently told us about all the other struggles we had to support as trade unionists before we could expect other trade unionists to take up the struggle for gay rights, consistently reduced all struggle to the level of trade union and workplace struggles, consistently patronised us, "I don't know if you've heard of Derek Robinson" one delegate asked us, and finally totally ignored in the agenda presented to us the vital question of sexism in the workplace and the trade union movement.

What this motion and many delegates fail to recognise is that the oppression which lesbians and gay men face is not formed in the workplace but reflected and reinforced both in the workplace and in the trade union movement. Thus without strong women's and gay movements we are being asked to work in organisations which are oppressive because of their sexism, and at the same time we are asked to believe that either sexism is irrelevant to the struggle for gay rights or as I stated earlier will disappear with gay rights campaigns. A cursory look at the last ten years tells us this isn't so. I know of no attempts by the traditional left to take up sexual politics unless they have been forced to do so by those working in the women's and gay movements. It has only been at our insistence, that sexual politics are an essential strand in any socialist practice that the left has responded. It has never initiated a single campaign around gay rights at work, let alone the more difficult critiques of the rampant sexism of the labour movement and its structures and organisations.

However what I am not saying is that we should ignore the labour movement or not bother with workplace struggles because they are sexist. Obviously most lesbians and gay men are discriminated against in the workplace and obviously non discriminatory clauses protect us against the worst excesses of homophobia and help to raise people's consciousness while we fight for them. I also recognise that a lot of support has been given in some union struggles by the far left and this support has enabled us to mount much more effective campaigns than we could possibly manage on our own. But because the fight for gay rights at work can only deal with a part of the oppression we face, we have to take our sexual politics we have learnt in autonomous movements with us.

The importance of the gay movement

In so far as the motion of the Gay Rights at Work Conference is concerned, I would argue that a commitment to autonomous movements in general and the gay movement in particular is a priority and should come first in any motion on gay rights at work. If it were not for the gay movement we would not have the identity or consciousness necessary to demand gay rights in the first place; it is not the trade union movement or the workplace which has enabled us to even begin to think about the need and importance of coming out at work, or the importance of fighting victimisations; our involvements in the gay movement has given us this strength.

The movement has also taught those of us who are socialists the need to make connections between the struggle for the control of our lives with the struggles of other people. Paragraph two of the motion, in an oblique way, suggests an understanding of that relationship for it calls on the labour movement "to support the struggles of gay people for their own liberation". It would be meaningless to call on the labour movement to do this if the struggles of both movements didn't in many ways complement each other. This is another necessary reason for making a strong statement of support of the gay movement and its role in the struggle for gay rights at work come first in any gay rights at work conference motion.



This recognition of the importance of the gay movement also underpins my criticisms of the final paragraph of the motion. One of the strengths of the gay movement has been its concern with ways of creating groups in which people can work together around various campaigns in a more open and relaxed way. This doesn't mean we believe in no programmes, no structures, no charring or no agendas, but it does mean we want to encourage people with varying abilities and varying needs to feel more able to become involved in a campaign, and more able to communicate ideas from one's own experience, even if that experience doesn't appear to be the most "right on" ever stated. The other strength of gay movement meetings is the implicit belief, because of the history of the gay movement, that meetings are not just about activists coming together, working out a plan of action and then going home to a "private life". In the best sense they're about creating political *and* personal meeting points in our lives. This bringing together of what is generally considered two separate parts of our life leads to a much more supportive atmosphere and I think this enables people to become involved in things who would otherwise feel too nervous, or too unsure. We need to be aware therefore of the myriad points of oppression we face as lesbians and gay men and work out structures which give us personal support *and* enable us to continue with our campaigning.

The success of this approach can be seen in the dozens of groups listed in *Gay News* and though we may raise our eyebrows and sigh a little that few if any of these groups are explicitly socialist, they have spawned and survived in a way that gay socialist groupings never have. Why this is so can't simply be explained by a put down of the gay movement as

being petit bourgeois — it does have something to do with people's perceived needs. Obviously dozens of listings in *Gay News* doesn't signify the imminent downfall of capitalism. Neither is there much cohesion between groups. The gay movement *is* fragmented and the co-option of the movement into a gay consciousness "a la capitalism" has to do with our inabilities as gay socialists to connect our politics and campaigns to the needs of the thousands of lesbians and gay men who participate in the movement. Thus an understanding of those structures and the need for them would certainly help us.

The final paragraph of the motion shows no comprehension of this problem. The calling for representatives and delegates in itself doesn't guarantee commitment or discipline — those things cannot be imposed by some conference organising committee, they are more likely to arise out of people's own recognition of the need for a gay rights at work campaign, and that recognition has to be cultivated within the dozens of groups which comprise the gay movement.

Political positions

Earlier I stated that the line which dominated the Gay Rights at Work Conference was no mere accident and of course neither is this reply. These two political positions occur within a political climate in which the spaces created by all of us, the rights which have been hard won by various groups since the advent of the welfare state, are under attack. What we need to be clear about within this context, is that the arguments here, reflected in the conference but obviously going beyond them, are *not* about the need to defend those space and rights. Nor are the arguments about the need to create working relationships between different groups of oppressed and exploited people. We, as gay socialists, are all aware of that regardless of our disagreements. For instance, as a teacher and a National Union of Teachers member, I am no less aware than a miner or a woman in a factory, of employers harassing and victimising workers; no less aware of lousy wage negotiations which divide workforces or are insufficient to live on; no less aware of infringements by employers of agreed policies; no less aware that at all times, but especially now, with cuts, rising unemployment and the attack on all workers of the right to effective picketing and striking that a strong union calling on all members to organise against those attacks is essential.

But what I am arguing about is that however important an understanding of and organised opposition to the above is, it is not the source of all of our oppression. It has been this latter message which has been at the forefront of the struggles of all autonomous movements and those movements have spoken in an urgent and creative way to the needs of thousands of people who were and still aren't reached by traditional left politics. The needs of people to understand more about the ways society shapes our consciousness and at the same time inhibits our ability to question, challenge, organise and fight back, in every institution in society and in all spheres of our life, is no less important now than it was in the early seventies. The need to turn to other lesbians and gay men when mechanistic, workerist politics either exhausts us or doesn't appear relevant to our particular needs is no less important now either. The need to define for ourselves our own areas of work and our different structures to deal with that work is equally valid now. The need to assert that the criticisms of the women's movement and the gay movement about the sexism and heterosexism, which *is* oppressive, in the workplace and the unions is needed more now than ever before. Because if that oppressive power isn't eradicated many struggles will be lost as people say, "why should I bother? The people are cold, and oppressive, I don't understand the jargon, the struggle doesn't appear to connect to my needs".

What I am arguing against is the politics reflected in the motion passed at the Gay Rights at Work Conference which elevates one type of crude workerist politics, within the context of the workplace, as the essential politics, indeed as the only politics. What I am also arguing against, and which I



—think is also heavily implied in the motion, is a shopping list approach to gay rights at work campaigns and a sort of politics which says "if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours". Why should we as lesbians and gay men always have our demands framed within the context of "be good trade unionists and revolutionaries on everything else, then workers, trade unionists and the far left will recognise your rights"? Our rights and our criticisms shouldn't depend on that approach. After all blacks and women don't figure greatly in trade union organisations or as militant workers, but I've never heard trade unionists or the far left ever say we're not going to recognise the needs of women or blacks until they start coming to trade union meetings, support a thousand other struggles, or join far left organisations — that type of racism and sexism would be totally unacceptable. But when it comes to gay rights, our rights never stand for themselves. Somehow it seems we're not quite acceptable, or our rights aren't, until we've gone around exhausting ourselves as rubber stamp revolutionaries. And even if we do that and win a non-discriminatory clause from our unions, there is no guarantee that it will be anything more than a paper motion, sat on by executives and ignored by other workers, trade unionists, and the left until *we* as lesbians and gay men say once again, why isn't it being advertised, talked about and implemented. I would argue that the only guarantee against that happening is not through the motion passed, but by strong and angry women's and gay movements proclaiming very long and very loud that the issues we raise about our oppression in the workplace affect everyone. Gay rights at work will then mean something.

How we achieve a strong and angry gay movement with a socialist current running through it, especially as the movement is so fragmented at present, is a difficult area to think through. I don't feel as an individual writing this article in my kitchen, on my own, that I can provide the answer. However I think that debate needs to be started and I think all of us as gay socialists have a responsibility to make sure that autonomous movement politics and their vital messages are not lost. Our politics can and must inform everyone, not only in defensive battles against a right wing Tory government, but in demands about what we expect during any struggle for socialism, and what we want our present and future lives to be like. For as I stated in a personal-political article in *Gay Left* No. 8: "... I feel that only by piecing together our gayness and our socialism and combining it with collective action can we defend and advance the gains of the gay and women's movements. I can't say capitalism will crumble tomorrow, next week or in a year because of our action, but I know that without it 'Socialism and the New Life' will remain a mere slogan." That message seems more important now than a year ago. The responsibility for seeing it put into effect lies with us.

Socialism, Feminism & Socialist Feminism

by Ros Coward

This article was originally written as a discussion paper for a women's caucus. Though addressing itself specifically to the question of socialist feminism, it raises issues which are central to the concerns of gay socialists and to the left generally.

Introduction

'That we need a "new perspective on socialist politics" has almost become a commonplace on the left. That socialist feminism might provide the solution, or at least the model, for what this new perspective might be is no less common an opinion. Witness the enthusiasm which greets the possibility of a new alliance between libertarian leftists and socialist feminists around the perspective suggested by Sheila Rowbotham in *Beyond the Fragments*.

But while many feminists themselves believe that socialist feminism will be a necessary direction for any effective socialist politics, the relish for this perspective from male leftists seems to many like a strange state of affairs. It is strange for two reasons. First of all, many feminists have returned to mixed socialist groups and campaigns because of the political climate, only to be confronted with the realisation that very little has changed in the years of our absence. Not only do many left groups proceed in their old ways — often bureaucratic, always pleasureless — but also we find that the issues which have been so central to feminism, — questions of sexual relations and practices, contesting of ideological forms — are still not central to the projects of many left groups. Not surprisingly women continue to find these ways of working not only oppressive but offensive too. In short, we are still angry.

Secondly, it is strange for socialist feminists to find themselves promoted to holding the potential solution by British socialism at this moment. If we championed that confidently before, it is quite clear that our own movement is now in some kind of a crisis too. It's that sense of a crisis which I want to consider because it can tell us what are the problems confronting socialist feminism, what is distinctive about socialist feminism and whether this distinctive path can at this stage be compatible with left and libertarian groupings.

The crisis of socialist feminism

Many socialist feminists feel that the movement is in some kind of crisis, because of a crisis of fragmentation, of the lack of any overall demands or network by which a series of feminist issues can be put together or find a unified expression. This crisis is experienced as more or less serious by various groupings depending quite a lot on political positions but it is rare to find anyone who does not acknowledge some kind of lack. The disintegration of various information networks, the disappearance of the large conferences and the turbulence of the realm of women's theory have generated a gargantuan nostalgia for the days of 'the Women's movement'. Whether or not the Women's movement ever was a coherent entity as we sometimes dispute doesn't seem relevant here. The fact is that nostalgia is an expression of a wish and clearly the majority of us recognise the need for more contact between groups, more co-ordination over campaigns and indeed the need for a specifically feminist / socialist-feminist perspective on politics in general. After all, it is the promise of such a perspective, combined with the supportive structures, which are the grounds for many of us remaining almost exclusively in feminist politics rather than working as feminists in mixed groups.

Yet at the same time, it is possible to find just as many socialist-feminists who dread the thought of returning to the

open conferences and meetings which had no more point of unification or common objectives than just being a woman. Faced with that dread, the fragmentation into specific areas of work and politics — Women in Entertainment, Women in Housing etc — are welcomed developments, where women can discuss political perspectives as feminists, but starting from problems arising out of a particular area of struggle. Here at last are structures where political aims and objectives are not given in advance by some general theory of 'capitalism' or 'male oppression'. Simultaneously, though, women acknowledge the need to overcome the isolation of these particular campaigns or issue-conferences. Even if you may not hanker after the return to women's conferences, you nevertheless recognise that there *are* points of contact between the various issues, and what is more important, that *there should be*. We continue to identify an overall problem, variously designated as 'the position of women in general' or 'sexism in society' which requires overall, co-ordinated solutions. It requires still a politics which can formulate and express what we recognise to be an overall problem. The cosy vision of a world populated by the small socialist feminist groups can't deal with the wider political questions. It can neither fuel immediate campaigns which need broader support nor can it transform existing politics, if it never presents itself as a wider based political movement.

These contradictory feelings among socialist feminists point to the crux of the matter. And that is the unresolved state of what feminist objectives actually are. The story of the dilemma of socialist feminism is too old to be worth repeating here. Everyone knows the problems of a political position which refuses to just be about women, but also refuses to just add on women's issues to existing left strategies and objectives. Once you make the claim to have a perspective that will actually transform the existing ways of working and existing objectives on the left, *and* decide that autonomous women's groups or caucuses are the ways to achieve this, then you are committed to some notion, however minimal, that being a woman *is* a basis for political action. And this is still our problem as socialist feminists: we don't know quite how to understand or what to do with that potential basis for unification.

I want to suggest that it is very important, perhaps our most important political task, that we do confront this problem because it seems to me to condense a whole number of other political questions.

The political problem

What are these political questions? And why should defining women's politics be so crucial for them?

They relate to questions of alliances between groups. For example the objectives of one political movement, the women's movement might be, for the time being, quite different from those of an existing left group. The problem then is, should these objectives be merged to produce new socialist feminist objectives; if that seems tactically unwise should either movement seek unity with the other; and finally how could this form of alliance ever be achieved?

The issue raised here seems to be one of what kind of political theory we have. This is an important question because it is the lack of an effective political theory which to some extent underpins a general crisis in socialism at the moment. Disillusion with the idea of a socialist party (either a traditional marxist leninist or a labourist idea or an avant-gardist notion) is now quite widespread. Most socialists now recognise that the reason why socialist parties do not have any real mass support is because socialism itself is now dis-

credited, and the blame for this cannot be laid exclusively at the door of Tory controlled media. Existing socialist programmes seem not to arise from the facts of people's existences nor answer people's needs in any real way. In this context, virtually anything written on socialism now includes the index of approved activities — extra-parliamentary, popular activities — which are recognised to be bringing other issues into the arena of 'the political' and are capable of mobilising some kind of mass-support, eg anti nuclear campaigning, tenants groups, the women's movement etc.

Although these activities are now recognised as 'political', and no longer consigned to the scrap heap of bourgeois deviation and marginality, people still go on talking about a crisis on the left, a crisis of fragmentation — the problem of how to articulate these various activities into a perspective for socialism. Once we have travelled along this road in agreement, then all hell breaks loose. Because the routes out of here are multiple. Do we need broad democratic alliances between interest groups; do we need a party to articulate these various interest groups in some kind of hierarchy; should politics be completely rethought in a way that bypasses the question of the party and its relation to parliament? All this at first may seem to be a diversion from the questions which I first raised of what are feminist objectives from a position of socialist feminism and what is the relation of feminism to being a woman, but they are not such radically different issues. For in thrashing out what feminist objectives are and how they might be achieved we precisely confront the question of what is the basis of alliances between various groups and the question of whether any of these political movements has the capacity or the desire to translate itself into an overall political perspective.

The bases of feminism

I would contend right from the start, against some positions now prevalent amongst socialist feminists that feminism as a politics is about being a woman, whether we like it or not. In fleeing from the Scylla of the radical feminist 'womanhood' as the basis for political action, socialist feminists have been sucked into Charybdis, the whirlpool where concrete men and women disappear, to be spewed out as 'categories' produced in discourse. The political concomitant of this has been to say that what feminism has raised politically are not questions of 'the oppression of women' but issues about 'the domestic', 'the social', the arrangement of the home and the hierarchies of relations within the home (a position exemplified by the journal *M/F*). We need not think, according to this argument, that there is any pre-given antagonism between men and women, resulting from the fact that they are anatomically men and women.

This is a sympathetic political position for socialist feminists. For one thing, socialist feminists have always seen the contradiction/antagonism between men and women as one contradiction amongst many, and not the only source of oppression in this society. For another, it is quite clearly the case that 'men' and 'women' are not produced the same in all discourses. Even within the same institution, the mass media for example, there are a variety of ways of interpellating or addressing 'womanhood', ranging from 'mother' to 'sex-object'. What's more, the difference between these various categories of womanhood can be the very source of contradiction, and provide the basis of women's politicisation. Thus the position which argues against any idea of essential men and women, and argues instead for the theorisation of sexual difference and its effect in a variety of social practices seems an initially attractive description of what socialist feminism is about.

There are two major related problems with this position. First of all, it doesn't accurately reflect how feminism or socialist feminism have operated as political movements. Secondly, because of this, it has dangerous political implications in actually dissolving all that was most radical about women's politics.

In spite of the wealth of literature on personal politics, and the need to rethink domestic relations and divisions

between private and public, effective feminist politics have never really raised issues in the way suggested by this approach, ie as a strategic lever to a broadening out of political issues in general. Instead we have had classical divisions between campaigns dealing with parliamentary legislations and reforms on the one hand (discrimination against women), and women's issue campaigns on the other (abortion etc). The other issues, though present, have largely been a matter for discussion, for theory or for construction of utopias. Moreover, the effectivity of all these politics has precisely been based on women constituting themselves as women, in women's groups, as women's caucuses in mixed groups. In other words, feminism has constructed itself as a gendered movement, even to the extent that most of us have sat through embarrassing occasions where the expulsion of transvestites from women's conferences/groups has been discussed. I have already said that many of us dislike a politics which assumes that 'being an anatomical woman' is enough. But the fact that feminism has constituted itself as a movement based on gender is not the same as this at all. It has constituted itself as a gendered movement in response to a real problem, out there in society. Because this society *does* recognise anatomical basis and construct basis *and* division on that difference. This is not to deny that different discourses produce different representations of men and women but it is completely misguided to assume that all discourses are totally distinct from each other and are not just constructed as distinct by our theorisation of them as discourses.



Once we recognise that discourses and practices do not take place in isolation from one another but are constituted in their inter-relation, a striking feature appears. While various discourses and practices may interpellate men and women differently, all discourses in our society nevertheless construct 'man' and 'woman' as *significant* differences. That central difference bears witness to the way in which in our society a gendered distinction is attributed with immense significance. It is perhaps the most significant distinction by which identities are presupposed. *Society constantly recognises us as gendered subjects, albeit in a variety of very different ways.*

A man can walk around at night alone, a woman can't. If a man walks down the street in the day, different things happen or don't happen. Anatomical women are constantly and continuously recognised as women. We are still, decades after Simone de Beauvoir, the gendered minority. What we do is explainable by our behaviour as a minority. All our achievements are done in the name of our sex, and all our failures and peculiarities are the effect of being 'the sex'. We are 'the sex' because we are sexed, while men are the univer-

sal, mankind, the subject which does not have to be sexed. So, I think, feminism has arisen again over the last decade as a response to this constitution of us as gendered, and oppressed as a result of gender. The various discourses and practices may do it differently, indeed many of us would admit that our constitution as women in some institutions and practices does give us advantages. But the fact is, in general, we are recognised by our anatomy as women, and in general this leads to our treatment as an inferior group.

That's the first point: the unavoidability of gendered subjects. But as we all know, that's where the women's movement started and the story after that has been long and complex. I've already said that women are not treated homogeneously in all social practices, and women may get more advantages in one area than others, like their treatment in work. Because of this complexity, feminist politics has touched on a whole variety of issues and struggles not reducible to issues of antagonism between gendered subjects. *Beyond the Fragments* has drawn attention to the way in which feminist politics have coincided with or initiated a whole series of democratic struggles about work-place and community care, challenging traditional hierarchies and exploring the question of what kinds of life style might break down these hierarchies. But again, it is worth pondering for a moment what these anti-authoritarian perspectives on questions of private/public divisions, organisation of leisure etc have been based on. And here we come up against something interesting. Much of what is distinctive about feminist and socialist-feminist politics has its origin in the possibilities opened up by the deconstruction of gendered identity which feminism began to explore.

I would claim that contemporary feminism does have certain distinctive features. They become very apparent whenever you attend meetings about 'women's issues' that aren't organised by feminists. For example, Labour Party meetings on women's rights, while informed by and often attended by feminists, tend to have no real language about 'sexism' in general. Every so often, there will be enraged complaints about representations of women, or the degrading language used against Margaret Thatcher as a result of her being a woman. These comments have no real place; they came like unexpected squalls and buffet the discussion about. Women's movement meetings tend to know that it is precisely these questions that are under scrutiny. The 'outside' of legislation and policy — representations, languages, attitudes — these are precisely our problems. And this distinctiveness is premised on a confrontation of our construction as women. What this confrontation has made possible are the first tentative steps onto the no-man's land of socialist politics — questions of identity, the unconscious, pleasure, needs. It is this which has made feminism defiantly open to the idea that the socialist tradition may now have got it wrong about what are the sources of conflict and antagonism amongst people.

The question of identity

There are several ways in which the deconstruction of identity has become and is an issue. Firstly, having said that feminism is premised on the idea of gendered subjectivity, it should simultaneously be acknowledged that feminist politics and theory is also the place where the *naturalness* and inevitability of that subjectivity has been questioned. From a variety of perspectives, not all psychoanalytic, women have confronted the precariousness of the coincidence between anatomy and female identity. Confronting our pasts is always a confrontation with a multitude of identities which have been refused, peopling our memories like the partially dead in purgatory. Society may recognise us because we are anatomically women, but that's no guarantee that the riot of emotions, of aggressivity, of dominance and so on, can be beaten into correspondence with the presumed identity of anatomical women. In fact the closer you looked the more everything would disintegrate. Could you really say unequivocally that you were heterosexual or homosexual; could you really say unequivocally that you were very "feminine" or actually quite "masculine"? Weren't these options a whole



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series of constructs with which you temporarily coincided only to suffer the return of the repressed in other areas of your life? In fact, couldn't we begin to think about identity as something formed only in a given context, in a process of exchange with another person?

The inevitable question then arose: why was it that the construct of identity in sexual relations with men could be the basis for forms of oppressive actions and experiences in society in general? Such a question could and has provoked a mass of answers and comments. Not all women experience sexual relations with men as oppressive, although most feminists recognise the thin dividing line between the politics of representation and the politics of the bedroom. But perhaps most striking about the responses to such questions was the recognition of our own complicity in the identity formed in our exchange with men, the recognition that perhaps certain needs and desires were being satisfied that lead us into conflict and antagonism elsewhere. As Barbara Taylor and Sally Alexander so felicitously put it in their article in the *New Statesman*

Did not Freud help us to understand that in learning to love men we learn also to subordinate ourselves to them? The ropes which bind women are the hardest to cut, because they are woven with so many of our own desires.

It is this line of enquiry that has led many feminists into conflict with existing socialist organisations and perspectives. We may agree with much that male socialists say and do; we may even love them. But they are also a source of conflict and danger. Given the average male leftist's resistance to an exploration of what is involved in style and identity, in modes of talking, and resistance to exploring what is implied in the language and images they use, they are also potential enemies. They are the bearers potentially of forms of identity on which hierarchies of domination and subordination are constructed. Where this logic does *not* go, from a feminist perspective, is to 'men, the main enemy'. We are ready to acknowledge that power relations are constructed just as readily within gay relations, and interestingly not just through the adoption of masculine and feminine roles within those relationships. What we have begun to recognise for example is that many of the problems of submission arise from the exclusivity of sexual love and passion. For women, many of the problems of feeling oppressed within relationships are not so much because men treat women badly but because of the disappointments and dangers entailed in the desire to love and be loved totally. And that trajectory is as likely to construct dangers and inequalities between two people of the same sex.

All that knowledge was there in the early days of the modern women's movement, with its critique of monogamy, but our resentful retreat from the fray as a movement is witness to the terrible problems and threats which that trajectory awakened. Very few people have been able to break with the needs and desires, the dependency and possessiveness that a sexual relationship constructs within this society. Where they have, they are as often as not branded as exploitative. Confronted with these often harrowing encounters with the forms of oppression connected with the construction of sexual identity, the responses have been multiple within feminism. There has been the emergence of political lesbianism, not the worse for being political, in that it registered a protest against men; there have been various more or less successful attempts at collective living; perhaps the least painful and most successful response to these questions has been the affirmation of female friendship, in the context of political work, an example of the non-hierarchical challenge to identity



Feminism and socialism


What all of these have raised implicitly is a protest against an uncritical acceptance of the identities and styles which society has moulded us in. That then is one of the reasons why feminism is always in a potentially antagonistic relation to traditional socialist groups. For issues such as these have never been of any priority within socialism. And it is for this reason that a feminist perspective potentially opens out onto

a different perspective as to what the sources of discontent and misery within society may be. Because it does not assume that all conflicts are given within and derive from economic relations, it may also be open to the possibility that hierarchies of power and instances of oppression are by no means confined to economic inequalities. It is a reductionist view of socialism to assume that socialism is only concerned with economic inequalities. Anyone could disprove that assertion. Except in its most statist form socialism has regularly presented itself as the vision of a society where all areas of life are democratised. Socialism's problem is another one. It hasn't developed a way of hearing what the sources of discontent are; it hasn't developed a vision or a politics which either explores these or offers any alternatives. And the rejection of the element within feminism which seeks to do just that is only another instance of socialism taking the wrong turning.

In this piece I've argued almost deliberately (but also compulsively) from what might be construed more as a radical feminist than a socialist feminist perspective. I've not considered all the areas in which socialist feminism has traditionally intervened, and its obvious interrelation with traditional left groups. This is not because I don't think all that is vitally important. It is because I think that the kind of issues raised by confronting the problem of what are women's politics in their specificity, as being an effect of relations with men, are perhaps those issues which hint at the new perspectives for socialist regeneration. This is not to suggest that the future of socialist feminism is either exclusively the small group, or has nothing to do with parliamentary forms or parties. It is not a vision of the left transformed into a vast consciousness raising group. It is an argument that insists that the issues raised by considering what are 'men' and 'women', what do their relationships do to each other, how do those relationships get inscribed and reinforced in various institutions and practices, may well be the way to learning about how to think about needs in general. And it is this which we must consider if we are to produce a politics which has any chance of capturing anybody's imagination.

Conclusion

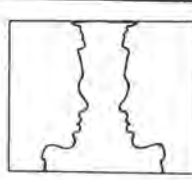
It would seem that the assumptions now current that the time is ripe for a socialist feminist regeneration of the left are perhaps problematic. For they seem to be based on a playing down of those areas of enquiry which have given feminism its specific colour, which have themselves arisen as a response to social pressures. A regrouping of the left which fails to take on board these areas of enquiry will only repeat the mistakes of its predecessors.



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Geoff Brighton: Anatomy of a Campaign

by Peter Bradley

On Friday December 7th 1979, as I was preparing to go out for a bop, Geoff Brighton phoned and told me about his medical examination the day before. When I put the phone down, I had heard a clear, horrifying case of discrimination against a gay person in education and one that needed fighting. As I write this (in May 1980) the campaign to defend Geoff is to all intents over and won. I think it's worth examining this campaign, for I'm sure it will not be the last time gays will need to organise to defend an individual.

Geoff Brighton is a final year student in agricultural science at Leeds University, taking his finals in summer 1980. Wishing to become a teacher, he applied to do a Post-graduate Certificate of Education, again at Leeds, starting in autumn 1980. Leeds University Department of Education accepted Geoff conditional upon his passing his finals and the routine medical examination. On December 6th he was examined by a Dr Ryan of Leeds University Student Health (LUSH), who pronounced him medically fit to teach but sent him for a routine blood test. Then Geoff was unexpectedly asked to return to LUSH, where Dr Ryan said that he had in the interim noticed on Geoff's medical record that Geoff was a homosexual in 1978. When Geoff confirmed that he is still homosexual, Dr Ryan said that this cast a different light upon things and that Dr Ryan would not issue a medical certificate until Geoff had been examined by a psychiatrist. Geoff had long been openly gay, active in the University Gaysoc and in the local gay community (he had casually mentioned his gayness to a doctor at LUSH in 1978, which is how it was on file) and argued at length with Dr Ryan. In the end Dr Ryan delivered the ultimatum: no psychiatric examination — no teaching career.

Isolated, Geoff gave in. However, going home, he talked it over with Martin, with whom he lives, and decided to fight (John Warburton went through a similar change of decision the day *his* storm broke). Having decided to fight, Geoff sought support — from Leeds Law Centre, the NCCL, and the London Gay Teachers' Group — which is how I, as its secretary, came in.

When such a blatant injustice occurs, there is a temptation immediately to rush into campaigning; but I believe this should be firmly resisted. Campaigns are important: won, they build the strength of the gay community; even lost campaigns teach us things about our position in society that we learn no other way. But a full-blown campaign lasting months or years against an entrenched opposition can devastate the campaigners: 'too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart'. The person around whom the campaign is being fought particularly needs great strength to withstand the pressure of meetings, demos, media coverage and the toll on one's personal life.

So we didn't rush into a campaign. Instead Geoff went back several times to reason with Dr Fraser (head of LUSH, on whose orders Dr Ryan had been acting). If Dr Fraser had reversed his decision then it would have been a mute, inglorious end but it would have got Geoff on his chosen course as an openly gay person, a not insignificant victory. To rush into a campaign for battle-lust and without caring for the needs of the individual for whom you claim to be fighting is monstrously irresponsible.

Only when Dr Fraser confirmed as immutable his original



referral of Geoff to the psychiatrist did the serious choice arise: to comply with Dr Fraser's demands, or to challenge them. It was important that that decision be Geoff's alone, as he would have to live with its consequences. It's also important that anyone faced with such a decision should be assured of support by the gay community, *whether that decision is yes or no*; and if the injustice is great, it's often difficult for gay activists to accept and respect the fact that there will be people who will say no. On the other hand, where someone is willing to fight, they should be assured of support. It is one very real measure of our strength in this country that someone like Geoff can feel able to take a stand, knowing he'll be supported; it was not always so. Geoff did decide to fight, and I believe his was an informed decision — that is, as informed as anyone's can be before one has actually undergone the experience.

The modern gay movement wants to redefine what it means to be gay. Starting from the premise that gay is good we assert that for gays our happiness, well-being and sanity depend on coming out: integrating our gayness into all areas of our lives. The whole movement and groups within it are important in this process but we often also advance through the achievements of individuals. Like the black woman in Alabama who refused to go to the back of the bus, sparking off a civil rights struggle, when John Warburton refuses to promise not to discuss gayness in class and Geoff Brighton refuses to go to the psychiatrist, they extend the range of possible ways of being gay, and reduce the number of ways we can be oppressed, for all gay people. Because individual cases can strengthen the whole gay community. As in Geoff's case, such challenges become a testing ground for society's attitudes, and the fight to make that gay person's challenge successful can turn into a campaign with widespread ramifications — with the establishment closing ranks to defend the status quo — and calling on great efforts from the gay community.

Campaign: organisation, aims, materials

The London Gay Teachers' Group learned many things from the John Warburton campaign which could be applied to fighting Geoff's case. One big lesson was that a campaign



should be speedy — John's went on for over two years, exhausting all participants. In Geoff's case we had an Easter deadline for work in the university, a major area of the campaign, since student activism evaporates in the summer term because of exams. A second big lesson of the Warburton campaign concerned the importance of good organisation and co-ordination as opposed to a haphazard reacting to events. The Geoff Brighton campaign then was co-ordinated by a Leeds-based committee, the Leeds Campaign for the Defence of Gay Students, of which I was a member. Internally, the Committee was well-organised — a box number address, a treasurer and bank account, and the minutes of meetings so that progress on promises could be monitored. It first met eight days after Geoff's initial interview with the doctor and drew up a list of aims and outlined areas for campaigning in remarkable fullness.

From the outset it was decided that our campaign should not just seek justice for Geoff but raise broader issues, and that we should aim (a) at getting LUSH to adopt a positive position on gay students' needs, and (b) at raising locally and nationally the general issues e.g. medicine's role in oppressing homosexuality. However, although we planned our campaign as best we could, many things couldn't be foreseen and the realities of campaigning often altered our tidy plan!

All material produced by LCDGS was designed with a double purpose — firstly to inform, then to suggest courses of action. There was a poster, and a more detailed information sheet. Individuals were invited to sign a petition groups to pass a resolution. One interesting feature of this resolution was that all who passed it were asked to notify the fact to: (a) Lord Boyle, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University, (b) Dr Fraser of LUSH, (c) the BMA, (d) the GMC and (e) the LCDGS. I believe it's difficult to overestimate the value of this: the cumulative effect of so many groups notifying these organisations/individuals of their support for Geoff was enormous, keeping up a constant pressure on all the points of conflict. I believe that the threat of continuing bad publicity that this represented was a significant factor in prompting the university's eventual climb-down.

Launching the campaign

We wanted Geoff's story to have a big initial impact, both locally and nationally. This precluded a haphazard release of the story to the local press with the hope that the nationals would take it up. Instead we planned a single co-ordinated press release. January 10th 1980 was the date chosen, (a) to avoid Geoff Brighton competing with Jingle Bells and, (b) because it was *Gay News'* first issue date of the new year. Barry Jackson wrote an excellent press release and issued it in CHE's name. There was good coverage in Leeds of course but also nationally because, by a stroke of good luck, the Press Association took up the story. The story was not only widely but, on the whole, fairly, even sympathetically, reported. Afterwards, only the local media covered the story consistently, although there were radio mentions and Geoff appeared on the *Gay Life* gay teachers programme. The national press didn't follow up the story: an event is newsworthy, a process is not. We worked closely with *Gay News* and generally their coverage was detailed and of a high standard. Occasionally they needed prodding and sometimes the conflict between their search for the newsworthy and our need for regular supportive reporting of progress led to what I considered inadequate coverage.

In retrospect, it's clear that our targeted campaigning divided into two types: (a) Seeking support, (b) Applying pressure.

SEEKING SUPPORT

(i) The Gay Movement

CHE emerges from this campaign with credit at every level. Barry Jackson worked hard on relations with the media and with the Discrimination Commission in the huge area of lobbying the medical profession. CHE National Council's

passing of the resolution and a generous donation on December 15th were a tremendous boost at the start of the campaign. We were able to save postage by sending campaign material through the CHE Groups' Mailing. And many CHE groups did pass the resolution; apparently such a small thing, yet indicating to us how much support we had, and one more way of impressing, on Leeds University the extent of opposition.

I have already spoken of the crucial role played by *Gay News* in breaking the story and keeping interest in it alive. Gay Activists' Alliance, Gaysocs, Gay Teachers' Groups, GLFs, the IGA and FUORI were among the many gay groups, nationally and internationally, who supported us and maintained pressure, so that the Registrar at Leeds could point to a pile of correspondence and sneer, 'Do only gay groups support you?'

(ii) Students

I was dismayed that Geoff seriously doubted if he'd receive the support of his own union. Yet with its Tory President and a generally more conservative student mood, Leeds Student Union did indeed threaten to leave Geoff isolated in his own university. Fortunately, Dr Fraser came to the rescue, saying in an interview with the Union President that Geoff reminded the good doctor of 'homosexual tarts' he had known in the forces and that he would 'probably' not have referred Geoff to a psychiatrist if Geoff had been heterosexual. From then on the Student Union played a major part in the campaign on campus, publicising the story indefatigably, organising meetings, pickets, lobbying, an occupation, sometimes with more energy than gay political awareness, but at least acting like a union should!

Outside the university, student unions throughout Leeds area and over twenty unions in the UK passed the resolution. NUS nationally? Sound and fury signifying nothing, and not very much of that. With NUS on the verge of dropping its gay liberation campaign, that is not surprising: it is nonetheless depressing that the next gay discriminated against can be assured of a firm policy of no support from National NUS.

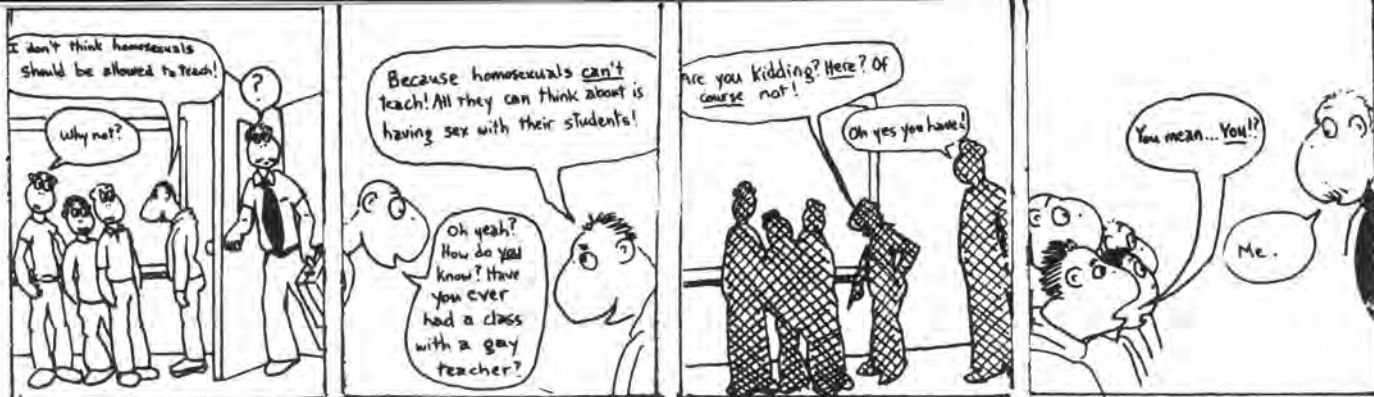
(iii) Trade Unions

It was hoped to get broad support among the trade unions on campus and in Leeds. It was hoped ... Lord Boyle filibustered a Leeds University AUT meeting so the resolution wasn't reached. Leeds NUT made haste slowly. The campus unions passed motions in support, then their representatives on the LUSH Advisory Committee voted against raising Geoff's case. It was a story of delay where speedy support would have been appreciated and of homophobes preventing discussion: in short, a pretty accurate reflection of current attitudes to gay rights in the British trade union movement.

The union most work was done in was the NUT. The issue was obviously relevant; most activist gay teachers are NUT activists too, and, largely as a result of their work, the left in the NUT (Rank & File, Socialist Teachers) has begun to take up gay questions. Half a dozen Local Associations passed the resolution. The National Executive, despite a vigorous lobby at NUT Headquarters, washed their hands of it because Geoff wasn't a member. Interestingly, the Leeds representative on the NEC said he would have supported Geoff but no one had asked him; what you learn in the course of a campaign! In the London Committee, Dick North suggested asking local NUT Associations to affiliate to the LCDGS, in return for a newsletter, suggestions for action etc. Before this could be put into effect, Geoff won his case. It's sobering to think how much more would have been achieved had we done this early on.

(iv) Party political

This was the area in which least was done, reflecting the fact that the people most closely involved in the campaign are not involved in conventional politics or are simply disillusioned with them. Knowing their record on the ground, Geoff was slow to approach local MPs. Local Labour Parties in



Leeds and elsewhere were similar to trade unions in their reactions — gay rights are not a priority. Left groups on campus were generally supportive. One shining exception to the general sloth and apathy was the Liberal Party, whose National Committee passed a resolution supporting Geoff the day after it was contacted. That this was due to the personal energy of its openly gay President, Michael Steed speaks volumes. Had the campaign been prolonged, we would have sought MPs' help more. The NCCL, supportive throughout, has a strong Parliamentary Civil Liberties Group of MPs, to whom we could have turned. It is pointless to speculate now how things might have evolved had we contacted MPs earlier: it was a big campaign — we didn't have the energy to tap properly every source of support from the start.

(v) London Committee

A month after the story broke, the London Gay Teachers' Group decided to call all interested parties to join a committee to see what could be done in London to further the Leeds campaign. With representatives from CHE, GAA, NCCL, STA, R&F, and various London gay groups, the committee worked in a number of areas before being overtaken by events in Leeds, with the successful conclusion of the campaign.

(vi) Legal

This illustrates the proverb that where you leave no avenues unexplored, one of them will turn out to be a cul-de-sac. We wondered if Dr Fraser could be challenged legally: GLAD and others quickly advised us that a doctor's clinical judgement cannot be. It *was* a relief not to have to add a lawsuit to the other battles ...

APPLYING PRESSURE

(a) The Medical Profession

This section of the campaign began of course with Dr Fraser and the not-so-luscious LUSH. We had formulated very clear aims here, asking Fraser to drop the referral to the psychiatrist, and LUSH to adopt positive policies for dealing with gay students. Despite enormous pressure, Fraser never conceded these demands and to this extent we failed. However the extraordinary changes in attitudes to gayness in the university have created a climate which will render virtually impossible a repetition by Fraser of his treatment of Geoff, and will I hope lead in time to changes even in LUSH.

Aside from LUSH, the main medical targets for campaigning were the General Medical Council and the British Medical Association, both to be notified by every group passing the resolution. Again, the short-term results were nugatory. The GMC's position was that it could take no position. The BMA upheld Fraser's clinical judgement. However, it also firmly asserted that doctors should not hold anti-gay prejudices, and this is a pointer to what may turn out to be the long-term results of the campaign. The medical and particularly the psychiatric professions have long been used to oppress gay people. This campaign, with openly gay doctors writing to the BMA, and the CHE Discrimination Commission's lobbying have deepened the debate on the role of medicine and gays.

(b) The University

The campaign among the academic and administrative staff

of the university followed a troubled course. Initially, many academics supported Geoff. When it became national news, the whole of the administrative apparatus, in a campaign orchestrated by Lord Boyle, was swung behind Dr Fraser. Staff withdrew support (Privately I'm with you, publicly I must vote against you); a campaign of disinformation was waged; university bodies at all levels blocked any criticism of Fraser or expression of support for Geoff. Stalemated, we changed tactics, asking the university, if it would not discuss Geoff's particular case, to make a general statement that it opposed discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. If passed, this would be a powerful, if oblique, criticism of Fraser. With a strong rearguard action by Lord Boyle it seemed that even this would prove too much. After four months of campaigning we were exhausted and, it appeared, had nothing to show for it: before us still the brick wall of bureaucratic intransigence.

Suddenly the facade cracked. University Council passed a resolution opposing discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. They set up an inquiry to define the areas of responsibility proper to a doctor and an education department in determining admission to a teacher-training course. University Senate voted to seek amendments to the University Charter banning discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, the first university in the UK to do so. Geoff was seen by another Medical Officer who passed Geoff fit without referral to a psychiatrist. Dr Fraser, through whom this certificate had to be routed, passed it on without comment to Leeds University Department of Education who finally accepted him for the course (let him not fail his finals now!).

Some final points: reading through the above — X letters written, Y petitions signed, Z resolutions passed — it is easy to forget how much sheer, slogging effort by so many people resulted in those bald statistics, and what a rich diversity of resources available in the gay community and elsewhere that they point to. It is difficult too to convey how in a campaign you learn, slowly and piecemeal, the details of the geography of oppression and how best to tackle it. You learn a lot about people — yourself and others. There are days of depression and days of elation; days when you drop out of it all. How good you feel when people pass a resolution or send a letter; how bad when you get disinterest or denigration. There was my anger that individuals and institutions could tolerate blatant prejudice; my admiration for Geoff's energy, cheerfulness and perseverance through an awful time.

The issue of gay people and the young is the most sensitive single issue determining attitudes to gays in our society. Lesbian custody cases, the prejudice against gay teachers, point to this. John Warburton, 'Ms X', John Saunders, Richie McMullen: many of the gays discriminated against in the last five years have worked with the young; and it is frightening to contemplate the implications for all gays of the forthcoming PIE Trial. This campaign achieved a lot, and not just for Geoff. But in a wider context, one campaign about a student in Leeds getting onto a teacher-training course, barely dents all these prejudices. We have a lot to do: building the strength of the gay community, coming out more, campaigning in trade unions, at work, creating better curricula, fighting sexism, seeking allies and ourselves giving support. Fortunately, this work is going on. But alongside all this, feeding and being fed by it, there must always be space for fighting for individuals like Geoff: their fight's our fight.

'GAY LIFE'

DESIRE, DEMOGRAPHY AND DISAPPOINTMENT

by Mandy Merck

In February 1980, London Weekend Television debuted their much-anticipated current affairs series, *Gay Life*. It was to attract, in the words of one LWT executive, 'something no other British television team has ever encountered — a concerted boycott by a number of those who were supposed to be regular contributors to the programmes'. But ultimately many gay militants — including members of the Gay Left collective — chose to lend the project a measure of critical support. In the aftermath, Mandy Merck considers the contradictions.

'Broadcaster should recognise that the whole audience is made up of the sum of its parts.' -- John Birt, Controller of Features and Current Affairs, London Weekend Television.

In early 1978, the Gays in Media group invited broadcasting notables to a panel discussion at the Gay Times Festival in London's Drill Hall. No one arrived from the BBC, and the independent companies fielded a force of precisely two — Jeremy Isaacs, then Head of Programming at Thames, and John Birt, Controller of Features and Current Affairs at London Weekend — 'men of liberal goodwill both', as Peter Fiddick put it in his *Guardian* report.

The two execs faced a barrage of criticism about TV's treatment of homosexuals, criticism which, to cite Fiddick again, focused on two major concerns, the medium's antagonism to and neglect of homosexuals: 'the way homosexuals are portrayed on the box, (and) the attention that television gives to the problems, interests, even let's face it, the existence of the gays in our society.'

Neither programmer promised any improvements, but a few weeks later Birt noted 'growing pressure from special interest groups about the lack of attention they get from television' when he announced a new Minorities Programmes Unit within LWT's Current Affairs division. The programmes were pegged for the Sunday lunchtime slot occupied by Janet Street-Porter's much-praised series for teenagers, the *London Weekend Show*, and were to include series on blacks, teenagers, and gays. 'But I think,' Birt declared at the time, 'we shall be finding some other time for the gays' (11.30-12.00 on Sunday night, as it turned out).

In retrospect, it seems almost inevitable that Britain's first gay current affairs series would emanate from LWT. The company had a reputation for 'serious' reportage consolidated by Birt and Peter Jay's work on the *Weekend World* series and their manifesto

series and their manifesto, 'The Bias Against Understanding', which slated television journalism for being 'slick, fast, personalised, pictorial and down to earth' (words to ponder when watching *Gay Life*). The *London Weekend Show* included two programmes on homosexuality for its young viewers (at Sunday lunchtime!). *A Question of Sex* (produced by the later Editor of the Minorities Unit, Jane Hewland) covered gender roles (although stylistically it veered between sexist light entertainment repartee; game-show audience participation — 'All right, now hold up your weekly intercourse score sheets'; and a satire on television's presentation of science — 'This may look like a Christmas tree covered with ping-pong balls, but actually it's a chromosome'.)

Then the co-compere of *A Question of Sex* moved into light entertainment proper with *Agony*, a comedy series about an Anna Raeburnesque advice columnist which purported to deal progressively with TV's hitherto stereotypical (or unmentionable) hinterlands — feminism, impotence, the gay couple living next door, etc. (But Anna Raeburn resigned from the show in its second season, when LWT foisted a more conventional male writing team upon her in place of gay co-writer Len Richmond, who'd returned to the USA.

This fact was not noted when *Gay Life* praised the series' anti-stereotypical attitudes in programme 8.)

Finally, in 1979, John Birt delivered an influential address to the Edinburgh Television Festival propounding the doctrine of 'minority programming':

'Most television programmes made for the peak-time viewer assume that there is a single and homogeneous audience with a single cultural identity and with a single set of values. In consequence, television fails to make proper provision for the delicate interplay of tastes, ideologies and interests which constitute our variegated, infinitely complex, rapidly changing and very interesting society ... Broadcasters should recognise that the whole audience is made up of the sum of its parts. They should put aside the singular vision in favour of a pluralist one, in which all significant voices are given a chance to be heard ...'

(Left-wing exponents of this programming philosophy should take note of its efficiency in delivering target audiences to the advertisers, and also the following caveat from Birt's own lecture:)



'A pluralist approach — if adopted — would mean that activists should no longer attempt to persuade broadcasters or the authorities to halt, for example, programmes like *Are You Being Served?* because they are offended by its gay stereotype; or to abandon advertisements or dramas or entertainments which buttress the traditional view of women; or, if you are another kind of activist, to stop dramas which show explicit sex ... The more fruitful way for activists to proceed is to argue for other programmes — factual, entertainment and drama — which will express their beliefs and outlooks, but which

will coexist with other programmes. Such new programmes, if they are convincing, will cause makers of existing programmes to adapt, not only because their appreciation will become more sophisticated, but also because so will the appreciation of the audience, which will cease to be amused by older fare. Crude stereotypes and traditional views, if that is what they be, might thus wither away.'

In pursuit of this pluralism, the London Minorities Unit hung out its shingle, appointed 'out' LWT staffer Mike Attwell producer of *Gay Life* and recruited three black and two gay (but no lesbian) researchers. Such a laudable effort to hire blacks and gays is virtually unknown in the media, but LWT's career structure, in which researchers are the 'lowliest' (to quote Jane Hewland) of the professional programme-makers, means that an important reportorial role (it's not just research) is undertaken by young, inexperienced journalists whose contacts with black and gay groups and policies are often minimal. When I, as a lesbian journalist with five years experience on *Time Out* and considerable interest in the media's treatment of sexual politics, approached LWT about working on the series, I was discouraged from applying as journalistically and politically over-qualified!

Nonetheless, LWT's unusual efforts suggest that British television is not the monolith it's often made out to be — a point made in slightly more plaintive tones by the *Gay Life* staff, who really did sincerely attempt — what? — 'the most exciting, rewarding and important television either of us has ever made', 'the greatest service we could do gay people ... to begin dispelling the ignorance and prejudice against them from the straight world' (Jane Hewland and Michael Attwell in *Gay News*, April 3, '80).

In 1976, Thames Television (sophisticated, metropolitan London's other independent company) pulled its seven-part documentary *Sex In Our Time* out of its schedules, despite a chorus of protest from its own employees, critics, gays and feminists. Television documentaries have a generic licence to be 'partial' which current affairs series like *Gay Life* lack (see below), and *Sex* was only intermittently partial. Often, as in its very selective choice of featured interviews (e.g. the woman who'd apparently been rendered hysterically frigid by supposed feminist injunctions to sleep around !!??) the Thames series surveyed 'changing social mores' with the chilly hauteur of Lady Bracknell considering the number of engagements in Hertfordshire. (Co-compere Sarah Dickinson to feminist therapist Elearnor Stephens: 'Do you all lie on the floor and masturbate?')

Nonetheless, the very inclusion of matter such as feminists viewing slides of female genitalia displeased the watchdogs of the Independent Broadcasting Authority and the Thames management. In the supposed interests of 'taste, decency and public feeling' the shows were scrapped.

And as for the British Broadcasting Corporation, a body which traditionally regards itself as the arbiter of the range of debate appropriate to the general commonweal is hardly likely to endorse Birt's proposals for the dissolution of its audience into disparate, opposing, constituencies.

Differing corporate policies, differing conventions of representation, differing practices of professional personnel, create a space for intervention within television. It's a space

bounded, in Stuart Hall's terms, by capital determining 'the structured field in which individuals compete to be heard', but that determination leaves a fair field for profitability (particularly with the licensed monopolies afforded British broadcasters). The first eight editions of *Gay Life* garnered a rating of 8 (350,000 homes viewing) when a figure of 2 (80,000 homes) is considered respectable for 11.30 pm Sunday. (It's tempting to imagine a more radical set of programmes securing even larger audiences for the advertisers, simply because the narrow constraints of current programming render any departure sensational.)

But if television is not a unified expression of a conspiratorial bourgeois patriarchy, different companies, genres and programmes are nonetheless affected by factors such as legal requirements, stylistic conventions, projected audience reactions, and professional ethics. These factors structure 'the field in which individuals compete to be heard' so subtly that the programme-makers are often the last to recognise them.

'We've got to accept the framework of LWT.' LMU Editor Jane Hewland to *Time Out*, February 8th, 1980.

The way the LMU staff see it, *Gay Life* was always beleaguered by the contradiction between its subject (homosexuals) and its intended audience (homosexuals and heterosexuals). The very fact of this contradiction suggests that the Birt 'horses for courses' formula was not, and perhaps cannot be, practised within current legislative and corporate restrictions. If minority programming involves in Birt's phrase, 'programmes ... which will express (activists') beliefs and outlooks', it cannot also be required, to cite LWT Current Affairs chief Barry Cox, to have 'understood all points of view and ... fairly reproduced them'. Cox's defence of *Gay Life* (*The Listener*, May 8th 1980) pleaded the restrictions of 'broadcasting in its present state — a publicly regulated scarce resource' and the Television Act. Neither of these restrictions is immutable (despite state and capitalist arguments to the contrary, the ozone can accommodate an immense number of competing channels, and 'due impartiality' need not be obligatory in either a state-controlled or privately broadcast medium).

At any rate, the 'for and about' issue was interpreted by the *Gay Life* team (and to be fair, by some of their critics) as a question of absolute gay access versus LWT-researched 'truth'. As Cox put it:

'We were bitterly criticised for including Mary Whitehouse in *Gay Life* and the police in *Skin* on the grounds that they had more than enough access to the media already without being included in 'our' shows: the journalists' counter-argument — that these attitudes were an important part of the processes and relationships under examination — went unregarded. It was this resistance to mainstream television concepts of balance and comprehensive inquiry that precipitated the brief boycott of *Gay Life*.'

There are at least two problems with this formulation: first, the objections raised about Whitehouse's appearance in *Gay Life* were much more sophisticated than Cox apparently realised; secondly there is no single 'mainstream' of television concepts of balance and comprehensiveness, but a varied set of practices relevant to particular programme-makers and television genres.



From the very start, the Minorities Unit programmes were established within LWT's Current Affairs department. They shouldn't have been. As the IBA guide, *Television and Radio 1980* argues, the job of newscasting is to report 'what is happening at any given time . . . the function of current affairs programming is to help viewers *understand* what is happening.' News magazines like Granada's *World In Action* and LWT's *Weekend World* tend to enlarge upon the events reported in the news, and the criteria for such 'newsworthiness' rarely admit any material about kids or gays, and remarkably little about blacks. A 'riot' in Southall, or at some British equivalent of the Stonewall might make *News at 10*, the daily harassment of Asians and gays would not. So much the better, one might conclude, to give these minorities the 'coverage' they lack. The problem is whether the current affairs genre, with its nose for news, is appropriate to that task.

The 11 Gay Life programmes covered the following subjects:

February 10	Security Vetting
February 17	Male Gay Lifestyles
February 24	Child Custody and Adoption
March 2	Police Harassment of Gay Males
March 9	Gay Relationships
March 16	Discrimination against Gay Teachers
March 23	Gays in Heterosexual Marriages
March 30	Media Stereotyping
April 20	Young Lesbians
April 27	Gays in the Armed Forces
May 4	Gay Political Organisation

With the possible exception of the Blunt affair, none of these programmes ad ties to current stories on television or in the national press. Many of them weren't based on any particular 'story' at all. Nonetheless, they all got the current affairs treatment, involving:

1. The relatively tiny budget and tight schedule deemed appropriate to a series which would simply react to topical events, rather than the planning, and research and shooting time available to documentaries.
2. The legal obligations on news programmes to present material with 'due accuracy and impartiality'. Documentary programmes are legally and conventionally permitted far more latitude in style, topicality and partiality, e.g. *Thames' Superman and the Bride* on gender and the media; or *Gone For A Soldier*, a passionate attack on British imperialism, including its current role in Ireland, ironically broadcast by BBC 2 opposite *Gay Life* on March 9. Meanwhile *Gay Life* was setting up and then knocking down its own evidence on police harassment and the unwarranted judicial bias against lesbian custody, in the interest of providing 'a version of events which persuades . . . straights and gays, that it has understood all points of view and has fairly represented them' (Cox). E.g. the notorious voice-over concluding the custody programme — 'But the courts and the adoption agencies have in their custody the future lives of children. Until such time that more research is available and public attitudes have changed, we can hardly be surprised if they opt for caution; despite the distress to gay parents.'
3. The current affairs 'style': an authoritative voice-over for exposition, 'talking head' interviews and lots of 'sexy' location shots for illustration. *Gay Life's* interviews adhered to traditional TV news conventions: on-site, and often noisy and uncomfortable locations for the protagonists; professional surroundings for the experts. Often, though not invariably, gays fell into the former category. Thus Bob Cant, acquitted for importuning, told his story seated in the sleaziest of cafes, while other gays in the police harassment programme 'reconstructed' their arrests while ambling atmospherically down streets or through parks (that dirty old man in the bushes was actually a *Gay Life* researcher!). Some choices almost slipped into comedy: *Zipper* editor Bryan Derbyshire filmed next to an enormous motorbike and the ex-sailor interviewed in front of the defunct HMS Belfast moored on the Thames. Then there was the young lesbian who wished to become a model — 'discovered' posing for a



very Blow-Up style photo session: 'A little more to the left, darling! (click) Swing your hair! (click) Yes! (click) Marvellous! (click) etc.' (A relatively expensive and elaborate set-up to establish this young lesbian as feminine and to make something happen on a talky programme.)

Meanwhile, 'experts', varying from barrister Sadie Roberts (custody) to Susan Harris, writer of LWT's *Soap* (stereotyping) to *Gay News* staffer Alison Hennegan (several programmes) were shot in a quiet room, often near signs of expertise like books, desks and typewriters. In the last programme Jeff Weeks was filmed against a window inside LWT's Thames-side tower, his panorama of 11 years in gay liberation majestically (but no doubt accidentally) reflected in the lofty perspective behind him. Mary Whitehouse didn't get quite so exalted a treatment on the gay teachers programme, but she certainly wasn't interviewed in a greasy spoon. Her on-camera appearance in quiet surroundings effectively legitimised her views far more than a simple quotation of them might have done.

Broadcasters don't consciously inscribe such codings into their programmes: factors like location are supposedly chosen to inject 'colour' and 'authenticity' into the proceedings. Indeed the latter consideration is so important in choosing interviewees — if you don't get the major protagonists, you scrap the story — that *Gay Life* changed their lesbian custody programme into one about lesbian custody and male gay adoption after they discovered that few lesbian mothers would be filmed. When, at their March 10 meeting with critical gay militants, someone suggested that they film a friend of an embattled mother explaining why she couldn't risk appearing (good telly, n'est-ce pas?) the team's look of bewilderment was quite remarkable.

Nor is it likely that they deliberately included the series sub-text of little dramas (the couple who lost custody pacing the square outside their home; the young lesbian nervously turning a lighter in her tattooed hand as the camera goes in for a close-up). But in a genre based on filming the *visible event*, it's not surprising that such moments creep in. This penchant for the picturesque was further supported by the Minorities Unit's effective definition of homosexuality as a *population* rather than a *practice*. Non-whites and teenagers may constitute numerical minorities in Britain; although, as

Julia McIymont argued in the March *Leveller*, being a minority need not be the same as being marginal to some ultimately reinforced white norm. Desire is even more difficult to accommodate to demography. How can a Minorities Unit treat bi-sexuality? Are homosexual practices/attractions/lifestyles specific only to the series' oft-described 'gay community'? (A community invariably treated as homogeneous until it split over whether to support the series, whereupon the *Gay Life* team suddenly discovered a militant minority and a quiescent majority.)

Programme two featured drag acts as a 'gay lifestyle', despite acknowledging the entertainment's roots in pantomime and working class culture generally (the Salford police *en pointe*). What about the heterosexual audience for pub drag? What about straight transvestites? Significantly, the working title for that programme was 'Gay Geography', suggested by the team's conclusion that London's male gay commercial culture divided into drag in the working-class South, leather in the Wild West of Earls Court, and 'clones' in up-market discos like Charing Cross's *Heaven*. Again the lure of the picturesque produced a rather limited — and to many gays, oppressive — picture of male homosexuality (people who frequent peculiar night-clubs in peculiar costumes). Demi-mondes are easy to map, sexuality is rather more difficult to locate and visualize.

If *Gay Life* hadn't been tied down to current affairs conventions, more adventurous techniques and themes might have been essayed. The series' single example of such experiment occurred in the stereotyping programme, when the screen was left blank for a moment to indicate the paucity of lesbian representations on TV. In the context of the rest of the programme, it looked like a transmission fault. Compare that with the opening of the suppressed *Sex In Our Time* programme on homosexuality:

Compere Tony Bilbow introduced a studio discussion about coming out between a fiery Scottish gay militant and an unlit gentleman who refused to give his name. It wasn't that he was embarrassed to be gay, explained Mr X; after all, homosexuality gave the world Shakespeare and Wilde. It was simply that it was a private matter. The Scottish militant went berserk and practically tried to throttle his closeted opponent, while a frantic Bilbow laboured furiously to separate them. Finally the lights went up to reveal 'Mr X' as Gay Sweatshop actor Drew Griffiths, author of the play by the same name.

In that brief sequence, *Sex In Our Time* not only introduced the debate about coming out in an arresting manner, it also took the precious decorum and authority of the studio discussion and its arbiter, the on-camera presenter, and sent them up rotten. It was *Gay Life's* insistence on maintaining precisely that authority for Atwell's voice-overs that provoked the boycott against the show. In these off-camera expositions the gay producer veered constantly between what was termed 'society's view' (invariably seen as anti-gay) and a very ambiguous 'we'. At the March 10 meeting between gays (from organisations spanning Sappho, Wages Due Lesbians, FRIEND, Gay Legal Advice, CHE, Gay Teachers, Gay Left) and programme-makers Atwell, Hewland, Cox and researcher Simone Mondesir, one gay man recalled the voice-over's consideration of the possibility that gay parents might 'corrupt' (i.e. influence towards homosexuality) their children. Who, another asked, was meant to be speaking? 'Is it LWT, patriarchy, or what?' Would a gay person regard homosexuality as corruption?

To redress this 'impartial' expression of anti-gay views and the first four programmes' neglect of lesbians, the gay women's organisations demanded certain conditions for their participation in a projected programme on lesbian feminism:

1. An all-woman crew as far as possible.
2. A woman's voice-over instead of Atwell's (or none at all).
3. Editorial consultation on the use of their interviews and the final script.

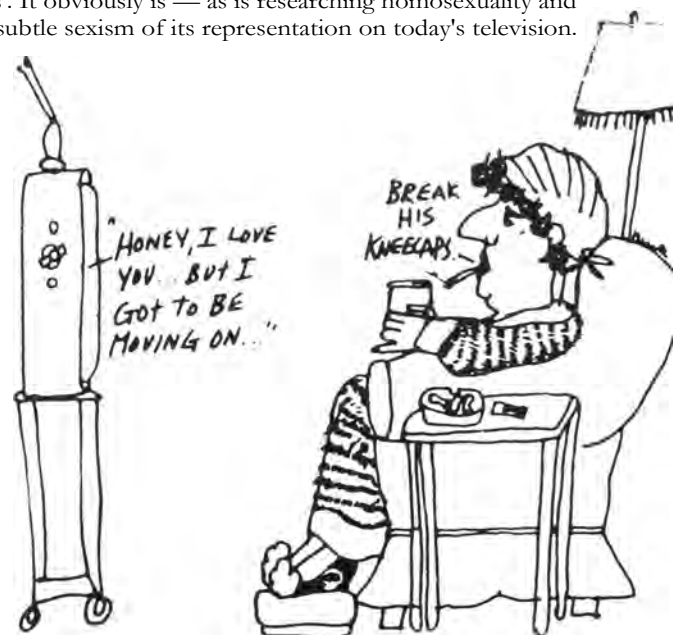
The Minorities Unit seemed willing to concede points one and three, and briefly even considered the second. But no TV journalist, Editor Hewland ultimately concluded, should be seen to concede such points to pressure groups (the spectre of right-wing requests was appropriately dangled). 'If I'd given way on this,' she told *Time Out*, 'I'd have been setting a precedent for journalists everywhere ... we made it clear to them that this was not an "access" slot.'

'We are not naive; we know Gay Life is not an access programme, but we also know that ordinary programmes have ceased making racist and sexist comments under pressure.'
A Lesbian Line collective member speaking to LWT programmers, March 10, 1980).

But despite two subsequent meetings (including one in which LWT proposed that the lesbians agree to on-camera interviews with Atwell — some solution!) the Minorities Unit never met those demands. Subsequently many gay groups (including Gay Left) called off their boycott and LWT declared that it had collapsed ('partly because those who had led the attack had run too far ahead of their own supporters, partly because most gay activists came to feel that *Gay Life*, whatever its flaws, was better than no series at all' — Cox). But none of the lesbian groups who'd originally applied the boycott appeared on subsequent programmes, and no edition on lesbian feminism went out.

Over the last three years London gay groups (particularly the lesbian ones) have become seasoned exponents of direct action against media sexism. Their January 1978 sit-in at the *Evening News* after its concerted attack on AID for lesbian mothers (Dr. Strangelove) secured considerable public support and the right of reply within the paper's news (not just letters) pages. It is widely regarded as exemplary by many sections of the left. With even the NUJ withdrawing from the Press Council on the grounds that it's a toothless front for the proprietors, and the IBA held in similar contempt, it's difficult to know how else to exert pressure on the media. Furthermore, the demands made to LWT by the lesbian groups (and the support they got from gay men) expressed an increasingly sophisticated understanding of TV institutions and representations (so much so that Cox and company may not have understood them).

Political abstention (particularly a non-unanimous abstention) is a controversial tactic, invariably attracting accusations of purism. And the *Gay Life* team's self-acknowledged gays and feminists share no values with the gutterpress sexists of the *Evening News* ... except for a strong belief in their own professional competence and independence. But London Weekend needs the co-operation of London's lesbian groups if their projected 1981 *Gay Life* series is to be successful. They have the time to improve their liaison with London gays, and more importantly, to begin to understand their sexual politics. John Birt once declared that 'researching blacks is no different from researching SALT talks'. It obviously is — as is researching homosexuality and the subtle sexism of its representation on today's television.



Gay Liberation in Central America

by David Fernbach

Good reasons can be given as to why the gay liberation movement started in the most advanced capitalist countries. The general change in sexual culture following the spread of contraception, for example, and the greater social space for a life not centred around the family. But the great issue of gender that the contemporary women's and gay movements have raised is certainly not something relevant only to this particular corner of the globe. It is especially interesting, therefore, to see how, a decade after the beginnings of gay liberation in North America and Western Europe, our movement is now beginning to take root in the Third World.

The Mexican gay movement must be set in the context of Mexico's particular social and political system. On the one hand, there is a chasm between rich and poor in the cities, and another gulf between the urban sector and the 'Indian' peasants in the countryside. Gross disparities of income are protected by a vast and effective repressive apparatus. On the other hand, there is a very extensive middle class, a proportion of university students as high as in Western Europe, and a rudimentary system of social welfare. There is a formal framework of democracy, and opposition parties can now campaign quite freely; yet effective power is held by the Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI), which by its grip on the state bureaucracy has managed for almost half a century to gather 80 per cent or more of the popular vote and appoint the country's powerful president.

In the late 1960s, a strong New Left grew up among Mexico's young intellectuals, but was crushed following demonstrations during the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, with several hundred students killed by the police. It took several years for the climate of repression to relax somewhat, but by the mid 1970s the left was again on the offensive.

The first Mexican gay liberationists met together as far back as August 1971. Interestingly, the new ideas reached them not from the USA, but from a Mexican student at Essex university. Regular discussion meetings were held in private apartments, and awareness groups set up explicitly after the model of the English GLF. At its peak, some 60 or 70 people were involved, and the movement went through many of the same ideological developments as elsewhere. The lesbians, for example, left to start a separate group. Yet this all took place completely in private. The combination of *machismo* culture and political repression still made it impossible for gay people to come out in the open.

Mexican law does not proscribe homosexuality as such. But the gender system is far more rigid and extreme than in the advanced capitalist countries. Among the popular classes, independent female sexuality is severely repressed, while boys unable to adopt the masculine role very generally go in for transvestism as the only option open to them. If you can't be a proper man, the only alternative is to try and be a proper woman. In the cities, at least, there is a certain space for gays to be tolerated in this marginal role. Transvestites will regularly attend dances and bars in the working-class quarters of Mexico City, and be accepted as viable partners by 'straight' men. (I wouldn't call them 'drag queens', as that seems to imply a degree of freedom in the role that is precisely lacking.) Slightly higher up the social scale, spectacular drag balls and beauty contests a la 'Miss Universe' became increasingly common in the 1960s and 1970s.

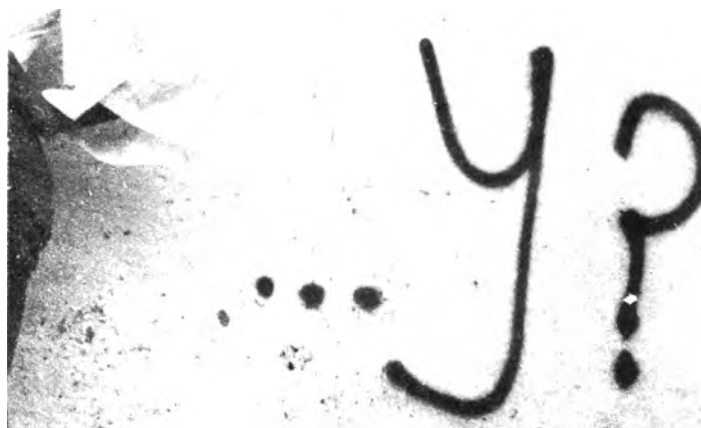
These gay transvestites are particularly prey to the everyday violence of *macho* society, and to the more specialized violence of the police. Around 80 gay men are murdered per year in Mexico City alone. Many transvestites get into prostitution (for 'straight' men, again) as the only way to make a living. The police drag them off and rape them in their cars, then demand a 500-peso (= £100) fine for soliciting, as the alternative to fifteen days in jail. (The rape figure for women in Mexico City is estimated at around 100,000 per year, perhaps half the assaults being committed by policemen.)

By 1978, with a certain political liberalization, a new push forward by the left and the development of a vigorous women's movement, the Mexican gay liberationists saw that the time was ripe to start a public campaign. They formed the Frente Homosexual de Accion Revolucionaria (FHAR), the same title as used by the first French and Spanish gay liberation movements. In May, Juan Jacobo Hernandez, a university teacher, became Mexico's first gay and proud public figure when he sent a letter to a newspaper attacking anti-homosexual attitudes on the left. On 26 July, the FHAR took part in a march to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the 1968 student movement, and in September it held the first action of its own, a demonstration against police abuses, which was widely publicized.

The response of the public authorities to the FHAR's activities was characteristic of the Mexican political system. The interior ministry called in the Communist and Trotskyist parties to ask them about the FHAR, and were told that these were 'serious' people. The established left, in fact, were quick to support at least the right of gay people to organize; they were aware that this development had already taken place elsewhere in the world. The FHAR was defined as 'political', and has so far been tolerated by the state. On the other hand, the Mexico City police chief declared all-out war on the gay community, and the winter of 1978-79 was marked by raids on bars and clubs, mass arrests of transvestites, and the illegal exaction of 5000-peso fines. (The law actually provides for only a 300-peso fine, or 36 hours in jail, for 'immorality'.)

The FHAR reacted very courageously, holding pickets outside police stations, and attempting (unsuccessfully) to bring legal proceedings against the police. The best result was that gays on the street learned for the first time what their rights under the law actually were, and when a new wave of arrests took place a few months later, spontaneous demonstrations took place without any initiative from the FHAR.

This first attempt to intimidate the gay population thus proved counterproductive, and was called off; presumably on ministerial instructions, the Mexican government typically seeking to 'manage' a social conflict by selective use of repression and concession. In the last year, the social space for gay people has definitely widened. New bars and clubs have opened, some run in the traditional way by Mafia-type elements, but others for the first time by honest gay capitalists. FHAR groups have also been founded in several smaller cities; there is a new lesbian magazine, *A mazona*, and a Christian gay group, Sebastian. In June 1979, some 3000 people showed up for Mexico's first gay pride celebration. The effect of lesbians and gay men openly parading through the streets is far more shattering for straight spectators than it ever was in Britain or the USA, and this event also gained a



good deal of press coverage — more favourable on the whole than expected. A similar march is planned for June this year.

There are signs, however, that a new wave of police repression may be on the way. In mid-March there was a large raid on a popular gay bar in one of the working-class districts of Mexico City, and many people were arrested. But this did not prevent FHAR from successfully holding a dance to commemorate its second anniversary, a militant celebration attended by over 1200 lesbians and gay men from all age groups and all walks of life, the first openly advertized gay dance that Mexico has ever known.

The FHAR collective, with a core group of about 30 in Mexico City, and many more supporters, are explicitly anti-capitalist, and seek the integration of homosexuality into a future socialist society rather than into the present Mexican social formation. They want to avoid the reformist direction that the gay movement has taken in the advanced capitalist countries, above all in the USA, and indeed, it is unlikely that anything like the 'post-Stonewall' gay community of the North American metropolises could develop in Mexican conditions. What is interesting, however, is that the staunchly revolutionary FHAR has been challenged for leadership of the Mexican gay movement not by a reformist, civil-rights-only campaign such as successfully took over from GLF in the United States and Britain, but by a rival Marxist group, LAMDA.

LAMDA was founded and is led by activists in the PRT, the largest of Mexico's three Trotskyist parties. Very commendably, LAMDA takes a strong stand in support of women's liberation and against all forms of sexism in the gay movement. Its committees all have equal numbers of women and men. Like the FHAR, it is militant and oriented to mass struggle, and has indeed worked together with FHAR on various issues. LAMDA criticizes FHAR, however, for countenancing transvestism (seen as anti-woman), and especially for using drag and make-up in its political activity. (FHAR raised money, for example, and political capital too, from their production of *Eva Peron*, a French satire quite unrelated to *Evita*, with male lead.)

FHAR, on the other hand, see LAMDA's politics as seeking to be 'right on' in formal terms, but lacking any mass line, and possibly having a false conception of what being gay is all about. LAMDA seem all too eager to denounce effeminate men and butch women, and too anxious to promote a gay image that is 'respectable' in straight terms. Like the early GLF, the French FHAR and the Italian FUORI!, FHAR very definitely do see gay-ness as subverting the categories of gender, so that drag and make-up, properly used, can be revolutionary weapons. They don't see the traditional gay subculture as purely negative, or themselves as a vanguard having all the 'correct' answers. They aim rather to develop in an organic relationship with the gay population, and are attempting to create a viable alternative subculture with their own discos, dances and parties, also a bookshop and coffee bar which they are in the process of setting up.

With both FHAR and LAMDA, though, the Mexican gay movement is still decisively led by radicals, and, in conditions where reformist integration would seem far more difficult, it seems set to maintain its revolutionary course for a good while. Both groups are very aware of the importance of international links. They took part in the Conference of Third World Homosexuals and Lesbians in Washington, DC last October, as part of the Latin American Homosexual Bloc (BHOLA). But they found the context of the March on Washington rather unhelpful, and hope to hold a specifically gay-socialist international conference in Mexico some time in 1981. If this comes off, it should certainly be a stimulating experience.

Guatemala

Between Mexico and Central America there is a big political and cultural divide. Mexico, for all its poverty and repression, has a tradition of popular revolution to which the PRI regime must still pay allegiance, and which does bring certain tangible benefits to the people. The Central American countries, on the other hand, are the classical 'banana repub-

lics' — dominated by landed oligarchies, traditionally backed up by the North American big brother.

But Central America is now in the throes of change. The Nicaraguan revolution, already steering towards socialism, has stimulated class struggle throughout the region. Full-scale civil war is developing in El Salvador, while the Guatemalan dictatorship is digging its heels in for a last-ditch stand against any kind of democratic reform. In Guatemala City, 2000 trade unionists and other opposition figures were murdered last autumn, while police with sub-machine-guns stand guard on street corners.

It's surprising, then, that there should be an open gay group in Guatemala, Grupo Lamda (no relation to its Mexican namesake). This has existed since 1974, even publishing pamphlets and articles in such alternative press as exists. Yet in Guatemala, political repression does not go hand in hand with sexual repression.

The main factor here is undoubtedly the sharp cultural change that is already apparent in south-east Mexico, in the region of Mayan civilization that stretches from here down into Honduras. Women are at least somewhat less ground down than in central Mexico, and there is more sensuality and less violence in interpersonal relationships. Male homosexuality, here, is less sharply tabooed. There is less pressure on men to marry, and even sex with adolescent boys is not seen as particularly scandalous. In Merida or Guatemala City, you rarely see transvestites on the streets, while 'regular' homosexual cruising is far more open. Even in Guatemala, this is not harassed by the police. Indeed, Grupo Lamda actually enjoys good relations with the police, and can call on them for help in such cases of queer-bashing as do arise. In return, Lamda has to take on a quasi-policing role of its own. It keeps tabs on Guatemala City's two public gay bars, making sure there's no dope or violence.

The precondition for Grupo Lamda to exist is that it plays the system. It does not hold public demonstrations, it doesn't use words such as 'liberation', far less 'revolution' — whereas in Mexico even the government is 'revolutionary'. Instead it cultivates good relations with sympathetic Congressmen (in Guatemala's rubber-stamp parliament) and bishops. (In class politics, the Guatemalan hierarchy is extremely reactionary, denouncing the guerrilla movement without a word against the violence of the state; whereas in El Salvador the archbishop himself supported the revolutionary movement.) When there was a move in Congress for homosexuality to be included in a new penal code, Grupo Lamda was able to mobilize its friends in high places to have this dropped. And among its members it still includes both extreme right and far left, even while armed struggle is already under way.

Nicaragua

What will happen to gays in Guatemala as the country lurches towards revolution is impossible to predict. The example of Nicaragua, however, is a favourable indication. Nicaraguan gays exiled in the United States played a significant role in mobilizing foreign support for the struggle against Somoza, and their 'Gay People for Nicaragua' has been publicly thanked by the new Nicaraguan consul in San Francisco. Some of them are now returning to their country, hoping both to join in the work of reconstruction and to advance the position of Nicaraguan gays in the process. Thanks to the international development of the gay movement, this time gays have found themselves on the right side of the barricades, unlike the ambiguous position of the Cuban gay community at the time of revolution there. Let us hope this stands them in good stead in the storms that are still to come.

Cuba

The situation of gay people in Cuba continues to be extremely grim. True, it is not as bad as in the 1960s, when gay men were simply rounded up and sent to punitive labour camps. Yet under a regime structured almost completely along Soviet lines, there is no possibility in the foreseeable future

for even a minimal emancipation. Anti-gay propaganda continues, one form now favoured being selective quotation from the North American gay press, designed to confirm the official view of homosexuality as a product of capitalist decadence. Thus an article in the mass-circulation Cuban magazine *Opina* (November 1979) quotes small ads from the New York *After Dark*, going on to claim that *yanqui* monopoly capital is preparing to export homosexuality on the world market, in the train of slavery, the arms race, child prostitution, etc.

The Mexican FHAR was hoping that its credentials as a revolutionary gay movement in Latin America would make some kind of dialogue with the Cuban authorities possible, and sent a reply to this article. But how poor the prospects for this really are has since been shown again by the Cuban presentation of the recent mass refugee exodus. Castro himself set the tone by railing against the refugees as 'degenerates, drug addicts, criminals and homosexuals'. (By definition, homosexuals are criminals and degenerates, so why not throw in 'drug addict' as well?) It certainly seems that both lesbians and gay men are making use of the occasion to escape from the prison that Castro's Cuba undoubtedly is for any homosexual. Once again, the Soviet model of 'non-capitalist development' has shown that it offers not the slightest space for gay people.



Dykes in the Granite City

AN ARTICLE ABOUT LESBIANS WORKING IN ABERDEEN

An article about lesbians working in Aberdeen
by Caroline Airs

When I first began to think about writing an article about 'lesbians working in Aberdeen' I thought it would be an opportunity to sit back and take a distanced view of Aberdeen. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realised that it is not so easy for me to be objective about Aberdeen. I have become a part of Aberdeen and identify myself as such. A lot of the things I know about Aberdeen could well be true of other places — I can only talk about my own experiences and leave other people to draw their own conclusions.

Early days

I suppose the first things likely to be noticed about Aberdeen are the granite walls, the climate, the dialect, and the number of down-and-outs around the lower end of Union Street. My first impressions when I arrived were of a cold, wet, grey city. Being English, I felt an outsider, and soon became aware of the language problem and of the nationalism (which is quite common, and some of which has rubbed off on me over the last three years). I felt depressed, and for the first time I experienced the kind of loneliness so many other gay people must experience so much more intensely — there I was with the woman I was living with at the time, alone in a hostile environment — the feeling of not knowing another gay person to talk to was alarming. My first instinct was to turn around and go back to Lancaster, but that would be both cowardly and impractical.

We tried both bars listed in *Gay News* — the first was full of stereotyped gay men; the second was also full of men, but very heavy types. We went back to the first, Jeans Bar, and met one woman: The men turned out to be very friendly and more or less adopted us, but they had no awareness of feminism, and we had no understanding of what it meant to

have grown up a gay man in Aberdeen. It was a long time before we learned to understand and relate to the women, and we still don't relate to the men too well on anything more than a superficial level, but I have always been very grateful for their friendliness and hospitality. However, we needed to find more people who would understand what we believed in, so we set about looking for 'radical' gay people, particularly lesbians. Aberdeen is not exactly teeming with radicals now, but communications are a lot easier. In those days it took a fairly round about route to eventually track down two women who were about to set up a Lesbian Left group, and without that group I don't know if I would have survived the first year or so in Aberdeen.

When we first arrived in Aberdeen, there was the bar; there were discos once a month, run alternately by SHRG and GaySoc; there was SHRG; and there was GaySoc. We tried SHRG first, and it was just what we expected — all men, all very middle class and respectable. Of course, they all paid lip-service to anti-sexism, but lip-service has never convinced me. Our first major argument with them was over the price of disco tickets. We maintained that students and claimants should get the same reduction as SHRG members, and won the decision, despite claims that anyone could afford a pound. (The decision was finally implemented months later, but was recently reversed because they were in financial difficulty). After a few niggling arguments, our final argument was over their attitude to a few of us who mounted a successful publicity campaign against a pub which banned us because we were gay. The main confrontation came at a meeting, where we put it to them that what they were saying was that gay people deserved to be thrown out of pubs if they wore badges and held hands or were at all obvious. They actually agreed that that was what they were saying, so we walked out.

After this episode we realised that what that group of very bourgeois men were most concerned with was protecting their right to be gay in their own male, middle class, respectable, quiet way. Although they are less open about it now, I think as a national organisation SHRG has not changed much, and, while local committees change, this

attitude still permeates much of what they do. They can cope with more radical men by letting them have their say, smiling paternally, and patting them on the head; but at the time they didn't know what to do when faced with two very aggressive women. Some of them still don't, but others have hardened their attitudes. Recently a gay man of the SHRG mould said he would not go to a meeting we tried to organise for all gay people, because he thought that if he went he would get so angry he would end up screwing a glass into my face. (This he said to a man whose ideas are not too far removed from my own.) It seems that some of the men are a little afraid of myself and the women who share my attitudes, and my aggression. (One man once referred to us as "the heavy mob".) There are a few out and out misogynists, but most of the men seem to have the notion that they should be nice to women — they just can't cope with women who don't act like women should. Twice over the last six months fights have broken out amongst lesbians at discos. The men mutter things about the women always starting the trouble; or make comments like "this is what really degrades women" (as opposed to drag); or come out with statements like, "This is supposed to be a gay disco — women shouldn't be allowed in anyway." I'm sure these things happen everywhere, but I really do believe that the ideas of Women's Liberation, and even the tokenism that goes with it, are taking longer to filter through to Aberdeen than to places further south.

The Lesbian Left group was always very small, but provided some much-needed support in the face of these male attitudes. With the advent of Aberdeen Gay Switchboard, it was suggested that the group drop the "Left" from the title — as it was the only group for lesbians in Aberdeen, some of us thought it should be open to all lesbians, not just those with left wing ideas. There was a lot of discussion about this, and eventually the name was changed to Aberdeen Lesbian Group. Some of the original members left the group, identifying more with the Women's Movement. It was sad to lose them, but with the change of name the whole nature of the group changed — it could no longer be assumed that all the women present shared certain attitudes. The group has expanded, and is expanding, which means, as women who have only just come out join us, we find we often go over the same ground more than once. It can be frustrating for those of us who have been attending discussions regularly for some years, but as the people involved differ each time, the discussion is slightly different each time; plus we are forced to explain our own assumptions, which is a good thing. As the group has expanded, it has also lost much of its intellectualism, which I think is a very good thing.

One thing about Aberdeen that is different from Lancaster and a lot of other towns, is that the gay 'community' is *not* student/university dominated. I know a lot of socialists, feminists and gay activists who take a very intellectual approach towards everything because a large part of their lives has been devoted to academia, and I often feel that they are living in a dream, in a vacuum that has no relevance and less appeal to the people they are trying to 'mobilise'. I can't lose my background and I can't lose my degree, but since I came to Aberdeen, where I have been working in an 'ordinary' job, I have learnt two things: first, that most people have little time for intellectuals, assuming (often rightly) that they are all snobs and feel themselves to be superior to the world around them; and second, that most intellectuals have little or no understanding of the 'masses' they claim to want to liberate. While the intellectuals are discussing theory, the rest of us are out sweating to earn a living — O.K. so it's a hackneyed, stereotyped idea — but it's also true. I'm not saying that discussion is a Waste of time — I think it is valuable and essential before any campaigns can start — but it has to be kept within context, within reality, which means the participants have to be able to see reality. It's all very well for students to talk about the importance of coming out at work, but those of us who do work have to spend 40 hours a week with the same people, and our jobs

are not always wonderfully exciting, so we can't afford to risk total isolation by alienating all the people we work with. I've been lucky in that I work with a crowd of very friendly people, most of whom know that I'm gay and have not reacted against me. However, they are still basically sexist, racist and conservative Labour voters. If I pick them up on every sexist or racist comment and give them a daily lecture on the evils of capitalism, they're going to stop sitting near me in the canteen, and they're going to start switching off every time I open my mouth. In situations like these we have to tread gently. And, as I said, I've been lucky, a lot of people have worse jobs with more difficult work-mates; and of course a lot of gay people live at home. I think family ties are stronger in Aberdeen than in England — people seem far more likely to live at home until they get married, and then move a couple of streets away. This makes life even more difficult for gay people here, which our imported radicals (and I was one once) don't seem to realise. The Lesbian Group has a fair cross-section of women in it now, which helps us all to understand each other's positions. Women seem to be more capable of listening to each other, understanding each other and supporting each other than men are, which is probably one reason why women get fed up with male-dominated groups.

Which could raise the question, why do I put so much effort and hope into GAA — a male-dominated group, which tends to be full of young, intellectual men. Except in Aberdeen, where it has been female-dominated since it began two years ago, and where the intellectual side doesn't hold quite so much sway.

The only reason I can think of for my consistent refusal to completely turn my back on gay men, is the way in which I came out, some four years ago, back in Lancaster. When I came out I had no real knowledge of feminism — so far as I was concerned I was gay, people were often anti-gay, and we had to change that — so I joined Lancaster University Gay-Soc. There was only one other woman involved in GaySoc, but that didn't worry me too much, and the men tried to explain to me why there was a separate Lesbian Soc but I didn't really understand. I was lucky in the men I came across, and hold a great affection for them still. Basically, my feminist consciousness was raised by gay men, and for that



reason I always feel that there must be some hope left for political/radical gay men. In Aberdeen there has never been a similar group of radical men, although I've found one or two, and I can work with other men on projects such as Gay Switchboard. I think as time has passed I have become both more critical of men and more tolerant of them — critical because I now have a group of women around me and I can feel the difference between working with them and working with men; tolerant because the things I believe to be important necessitate working with men and trying to educate them.

Because of limitations in terms of time and energy, it seems that lesbians have to choose between the Women's Movement and the Gay Movement. Those who choose either tend to choose the Women's Movement, but I haven't, and I seem to have taken the women in Aberdeen with me. There are problems in working with men, but I have a women's support group in Aberdeen to help me cope with that; and I think that while there are common features and common causes to both women's oppression and gay oppression, there is something different about lesbian oppression which my heterosexual feminist sisters don't always understand.

Aberdeen has its own special problems. The Church still seems to be quite influential; the city is fairly isolated in that it is a long way North and all the decent roads in Scotland end at Dundee — this makes it quite parochial in its outlook and slows down change. It is a small city, with two local daily papers, which will pick up anything of note that a local person might do, from winning a competition to appearing in court. People do not, as a rule, move away from the city, which means that those who were born and bred here are always in danger of meeting old friends and neighbours. It is also largely a working class city, and the oil boom has not made it as prosperous as people may think — it is certainly not the Aberdonians who are benefiting from North Sea Oil, unless a cost of living equivalent to that in London is considered a benefit! As I have become aware of all this, I have changed my approach to politics. I have realised that it is no good rushing in here full of Lancaster or London ideas and expecting to be welcomed as a new messiah. Things happen slowly here, and activists have to accept that. Aberdeen has changed me, and I have been through personal changes since I have lived here (my first relationship with a woman has broken up after three years, with a lot of pain and guilt involved; I have entered more than once on the shaky ground of non-monogamy; I have also chosen to work amongst "the working classes" and become a closet graduate) — all these things together have made me more understanding of a lot of things. I believe that not only in Aberdeen, but everywhere,



we have to take things slowly — we have to think more of each other and other people, we have to show a great deal more understanding.

My beliefs, ideals and principles haven't changed, but my methods have. I have realised that it's all a question of balance — balance between keeping my principles, and still listening to what other people think and feel, and understanding why; balance between attempting to provide a reasonable social environment for all gay people, and trying to make political steps forward which will alienate many; balance between political argument and personal friendship; and behind it all, the balance between political commitment to the 'cause' and personal commitment to friends and lovers. It's very easy to get the balance wrong, and then you hurt your friends and lovers, or feel guilty because you are not upholding your principles, or lose contact with the rest of the the gay community because you are not giving enough time to them. I know my balance is wrong more than it's right, but fortunately Aberdeen provides me with enough support, both political and personal, to stand me up again and set me on my way.

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EINE ZEITUNG DER SCHWULEN BEWEGUNG

Groping in the dark

by Derek Cohen

Anne and I lay motionless in my small, unlit, college room bed. We had been going out with each other for a year and the time had come when I felt that the proper thing to do next was to have sex with her. It was 1969, we were both about 20 years old, and it was our first sexual experience with another person. My knowledge of sex was limited to what I had read in a few rather inadequate, coy books, and had picked up from other boys at school. Neither of these sources had prepared me for what happened the first time I had sex. Nothing. I didn't have "an erect penis" to move with "thrusting movements" in and out of the totally unknown, but supposedly complementarily designed, vagina of my girl friend. And I didn't know what else to do except kiss her deeply and hope that would trigger some response in one or both of us. Her body was a total mystery to me. I had read descriptions of female sexual organs but never seen them in real life or photographs, only inadequate line drawings. My meagre sex education had also omitted to mention anything about foreplay, different erogenous zones, or anything except the quickest way to achieve a simultaneous orgasm.

Because I was the 'man' in the relationship I was supposed to know it all. I didn't really know anything, and we were living proof that there is nothing instinctive and natural about sexual activity. We had simply failed to learn what to do. In the end we did what *did* seem instinctive and comfortable: to be supportive and apologetic to each other and go to sleep. We never tried again and soon afterwards our relationship ended. That night's events had touched a little too close to what I knew *did* arouse my body — thoughts of men. The college doctor, to whom I mentioned nothing about my sexual attractions, diagnosed guilt and tension and prescribed a weekend in a hotel. I took a strong dose of celibacy for the next three years and then the pattern repeated itself a couple of times.

When I decided that my attractions to other men would not disappear, and I resolved to start accepting my homosexuality, I found myself getting into a similar situation. By now, somewhat too late, I had better ideas about what could go on between men and women, and it was possible for me to transfer some of this to my relationships with men. My first sexual encounter with another man — at the age of 25 — was fortunately with a caring, experienced acquaintance. He tried to fuck me, but I was far too tense and shook with nervousness for about 20 minutes. In the morning I sucked him off, which was all I could think of doing to 'give him an orgasm' (one of many heterosexist notions I carried around with me).

My early sexual experiences with men were, on the whole, non-orgasmic on my part. I felt comfortable sharing in various activities, and enjoyed the sex, but none of them were exciting enough to produce anything but fleeting arousal in me. I became quite good at engaging in 'whole body eroticism', licking, kissing, biting, rubbing, stroking, massage — an endless list of things. Yet while I sought to value these experiences and defend them as valid and pleasurable in themselves, deep down I felt I was missing out on the big O. Orgasms were what I had afterwards, on my own, wanking and thinking of the sorts of sexual fantasies I'd had since I'd had any sexual fantasies at all — of men on motorcycles, of bondage and other sorts of domination. None of these things were ever mentioned in any of the sex books I had read, nor talked about seriously by anyone I knew. A friend of mine did say he fantasised about women with whips and boots, but he didn't want to act those fantasies out. It has taken me a long time to be able to own these fantasies, to feel that I control them rather than them me; to feel that I



can act them out when I want and not repress them, playing them across the TV screen of my mind while I engage in more socially acceptable sorts of gay sex.

Read all about it

There was another side to my sexual education — the books I read. In the late 60s and early 70s I was an avid reader of *Forum* and *Playboy*, about the only places I read anything positive about homosexuality. Yet the risqué reputation of these magazines also militated against their power of validation as compared with the other things I read at the time, which were more serious, more authoritative. An example was David Reuben's infamous *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex*.

"Homosexuality seems to have a compelling urgency about it. A homosexual walks into the men's washroom and spots another homosexual. One drops to his knees, the other unzips his pants, and a few moments later, it's all over. No names, no faces, no emotions. A masturbation machine might do it better."

I did look further afield — the public libraries were a safe place to look up forbidden subjects such as *homosexuality* and *masturbation* in the indices of books I wouldn't be seen reading publicly. (The public libraries can be a lot more private than most people's homes!) They all said the same thing — homosexuality was a phase I would grow out of (or should have done) and masturbation was OK if not done to excess (though none said what the correct frequency was) and so on.

Eventually *The Joy of Sex* and its successors arrived. I don't now remember if I read any of them. Those sort of books were tending to make tokenistic references to homosexuality as something not to be frightened of, something to be coped with in threesomes, and how to refuse a homosexual advance. I could get better validation from the gay pamphlets I was reading at the time. Yet nowhere was there much about what gay sex was about, I had to find it all out by experience. For a very long time I had the idea that there were certain sorts of activities (sucking, fucking) that I ought to be doing, it should be that I would know how to take part in these activities, and that I would necessarily enjoy them. I lacked any idea that I might explore my own and my lovers' sexualities; that I might try different sorts of sexual activity.

When I read the pamphlet, *Growing Up Homosexual*, probably around 1975, it was a revelation. It actually said that I could enjoy masturbating throughout my life, rather than making me feel guilty or inadequate because of my prime sexual enjoyment. It said something I have yet to find in *any* sex manual — gay or straight — something so devasta-



ting I have never forgotten it: "The most obvious way of having sex with another person is for you to masturbate one another." Every other sexual guide starts off with what seem, by comparison, complicated and strange techniques — fucking, 69, earth-moving simultaneous climaxes. But this pamphlet, despite its limited size and scope, was more powerful than anything I'd read for a long time, and was comparable only with the effect of discovering gay porn.

Despite, or maybe because of, the usually ageist and racist imagery of most pornography, many of the stories and illustrations in pornography gave me ideas about the breadths of sexual activity possible between men. They fed both my fantasies and my practices. They gave me the permission I felt I needed to explore the less conventional aspects of my sexuality. Also there was one essential element in the sex portrayed in these magazines — sex was fun.

This year's models

This year I have read two books that have once again stunned me with their coverage of gay sex for men. *The Joy of Gay Sex* and *Men Loving Men* come from very different sorts of publishers. The former is published by Simon and Schuster, New York, though the book was originated in England by Mitchell Beazley, who have not published it here. The latter book is published by Gay Sunshine Press, California. Both are available as imports — if you're lucky — but more of that later.

The Joy of Gay Sex is written by two gay activists, Charles Silverstein, and Edmund White, and is modelled on Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex*. Its 200 pages of alphabetically arranged topics include many gems of gay writing as well as a few things that would be better left out. Some sections are worth describing in detail. The 'Introduction' gives a good summary of the situation of gay men today, placing us in both a historical and a political context, the latter being more gay liberationist than socialist. The section on 'Coming Out' I found really moving. It consists not of abstract considerations of why people should come out or concessions to why some don't but of two detailed personal accounts — one the first time a man has sex with another man, the other how a gay man recognises his closeness and belonging to a wider gay community. The importance of coming out to the ethos behind the book is shown by the fact that this is by far the longest section in the book. Both accounts recognise that coming out is not a single event but a continuous process in which sex is neither everything nor nothing, but an integral part of discovering our sexuality.

'Enemies From Within' identifies the ways in which we have grown up to have negative attitudes to homosexuality,

while 'Guilt' astounded me with the detailed way in which it described the tiny facets of our/my everyday behaviour which signify that somewhere I still believe that gay is not quite as good as straight. The origins of these feelings are not really explained, however, and guilt comes across as just one of those things we experience and have to deal with.

The section called 'First Time' on having sex for the first time reinforced all the things traditional attitudes to sex education deny — that sex has to be learnt, that there are no right and wrong ways of doing it, and places the importance of patience, time, communication and relationships in a radical rather than a traditional context.

Despite the alphabetical listing of the entries in the book I really benefited from reading it all the way through (after my initial dipping in at various entries). That way I read sections (such as 'Coming Out' and 'First Time') that I might have otherwise skipped as being "no longer relevant"; I still seem to have the illusion that it is possible to pass proficiency tests in being sexual, in being gay.

The illustrations by Michael Leonard, Ian Beck and Julian Graddon are delightful and are informative in themselves as opposed to being mere illustrations to a self-explanatory text. The grainy texture of Michael Leonard's colour paintings adds to their eroticism, while Ian Beck's pastiches on classical art forms reinforce the replacing of gay men in a history of culture that has often excised us. Julian Graddon's line drawings, unlike the other two sets of pictures, are scattered throughout the text, relating to specific entries. I found them rather too reinforcing of the idea that all the gay men who have fun are perfectly proportioned 20-40 year olds.

Some of the text also suggests that gay men are, on the whole, middle class and affluent — free facilities for meeting and having sex are not included in the advantages of either cruising or cottaging ('Tea Room Trade'). While the illustrations do show a black man, a section on racism and its relationship to gay struggles would have been useful, as would one on sexism. Lesbians and women in general seem to be considered only in the context of bisexuality in men, and children appear only in a five line section on custody (paedophilia doesn't even make the index).



Yet despite its flaws this book was far better than I expected from a commercial, profit motivated publisher — though of course publishers make profits from producing good books. It is mainly about sex — which is what it aims to do — "An Intimate Guide for Gay Men to the Pleasures of a Gay Lifestyle" is the subtitle — but it places sex in the context of pleasure, pride and a wider gay politics.

Men Loving Men is arranged quite differently from *The Joy of Gay Sex*, though it, too, is an attempt to correct the omissions of Alex Comfort's original. It has a long historical introduction, four long sections on 'Masturbation', 'Fellatio', 'Anal Intercourse' and 'Group Sex, S&M and Other Scenes', followed by sections on 'Gay Health Problems' and 'Love and Gay Consciousness'. The large amount of space dedicated to each topic means that each is covered in considerable depth, each section starting with more specific histories and quotes from literature. But somehow the interrelatedness and interchangeability of different sexual activities loses out in this format, and the grouping of all non-conventional gay sex into one section reinforces the idea that there is right-on and not-right-on sex, even if the text doesn't say this. The historical contexts came across to me rather as ways of validating the present, while I believe that we have to validate ourselves in terms of our own current situation, not by comparison with Greeks and Ancient Celts.

The section on 'Love and Gay Consciousness' provides a wider political statement than appears in *The Joy of Gay Sex*, but it delves rather deeply into the mystical for my taste, seeming to rely upon a "secret gay love-source" and ignoring the real divisions that society creates between gay men.

Censored!

Getting hold of these books has been a difficult task. They are both published in America. Mitchell Beazley, though English publishers, took the advice of their solicitor who said that they stood a risk of being prosecuted for obscenity if they published *The Joy of Gay Sex* in the present moral climate. We are in a situation where the "contamination" theory of the cause of homosexuality is gaining ground, and anything which is seen to promote, explain and demystify homosexuality is likely to be given a hard time. A prosecution is possible, but the gay community could support its challenge.

Even those mail order and bookshop services which have tried to import the books have had copies confiscated by H M Customs (who are not obliged to explain or defend their actions). This has been particularly the case where that shop is known to sell gay or other radical material. *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*, a parallel volume, has not been seized, and the arrival of ransacked packets with the gay men's books missing and the lesbian ones remaining says more about the role of lesbian sex as straight men's fantasy pornography than for the custom men's support for lesbians. It is possible to appeal



against such seizures, but such proceedings are expensive, and only relate to specific shipments, there are no precedents set by winning.

Those who believe that information is power are correct. My own lack of knowledge about the specifics of sexual activity with both men and women certainly played a large part in my sexual repression. *The Joy of Gay Sex*, *Men Loving Men* and books like them could certainly help many gay men to feel easier and more confident about their sexuality, to push some, maybe, over the hurdle into having their first sexual experience with another man; into an awareness of the political nature of being gay; out of their closets. The lack of availability of these particular books, and the absence of more books like them, I do not see as part of some great conspiracy to keep us underground, but I do not see it as an accident either, unrelated to other forms of gay and wider sexual oppression. For me reading these books this year has been an important event; six years ago they would have been devastating. They are available in this country to those who know where to find them — larger bookshops, gay mail-order services, and at a price (about £6). They ought to be both freely available and possibly free. Books are weapons, and these two could be useful tools in the fight against the isolation and ignorance that are integral parts of our oppression.

Growing Up Homosexual. Birmingham Gay Education Group 1975.

The Joy of Gay Sex by Charles Silverstein and Edmund White, Simon & Schuster, 1977.

Men Loving Men by Mitch Walker, Gay Sunshine Press, 1977.

Against Public Morals

Campaign Against Public Morals

Last July, several members of the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE) were arrested. They are charged with 'conspiracy to corrupt public morals' and their case is expected to come up at the Old Bailey early next year. CAPM is a group set up around this, and the issues raised by the trial, seeing the charges as an attack on freedom of speech and association, but also as more profoundly reactionary. Conspiracy to corrupt public morals does not require that the purpose itself be unlawful: a sentence for life is possible for conspiring to do something which isn't criminal!

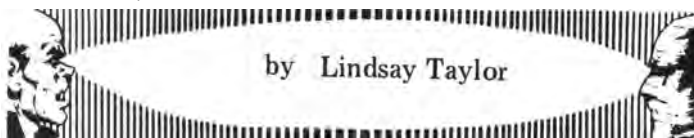
'Conspiracy' can be used to regulate a number of possible actions, and even bourgeois jurists have recommended the abolition of the Common Law charge.

CAPM demands that the laws against PIE be dropped and that the Conspiracy charge should be scrapped.

But even with all that CAPM might do, and with the efforts of those who support its aims, it seems likely that the PIE trial will happen and that it will be the occasion for the orchestration of a major moral panic. We hope in the next issue of *Gay Left* to discuss the implications of the trial and the way it could be used to cut back the ideological space in which 'dangerous' subjects like child sexuality could be discussed, as well as the havoc that it will produce in the lives of self-professed paedophiles and of other perceived 'deviant' adults.

CAPM itself can be contacted through:
CAPM, BM 1151, London WC1.

The Hunt, Hunter and Hunted



I've always felt that one of the blessings of the gay men's movement has been its freedom from having too many "correct lines". Ideological warfare between groups may be rampant, but on few controversial issues does one tendency impose its point of view to the exclusion of all others. When we agree with one another it's usually because we really are convinced, and not because we're afraid to say the wrong thing. Perhaps this is the result of having to work out most things for ourselves; few of us, until the last ten years or so, had worked out even the meaning of our own sexuality, let alone a politics that would explain the significance of gay oppression in general.

Whatever the reason for the diversity of opinion among gay men, I was very forcibly struck by its absence — for once — when I was doing some preliminary reading for this article. There seemed to be a complete unanimity about the frustrations, dangers and political incorrectness of going out to cruise for sex partners. Even Dennis Altman, generally the most positive about it, threw in a few references that implied regret at the amount of time spent on the prowling which could be more "constructively" utilised. Personal accounts were usually written in a tone of very real anguish about the cruelty with which gay men sometimes treat one another. The opening paragraph of Perry Brass's "Cruising: Games Men Play" is a typical instance:

"The games people play go on and on and on. This is especially true of that cruellest of human games known as cruising. In cruising, the hunt is on and the hunter becomes the hunted. Eventually the tension becomes so high that the whole aspect of meeting someone with the prospect of an evening, a week, or even a lifetime of satisfaction, or even pleasure, becomes lost in the confrontation of wills. Cruising is one of the great male chauvinist games: I can be tougher than you can be. I can hold out longer than you can hold out. I don't need you. I can't open up to you until you open up to me."

And then the political theorists developed this line of thought into an attack on masculinist attitudes in general, as in this terse extract from the "Effeminate Manifesto": "We must therefore strive to detect and expose every embodiment of The Male Principle, no matter how and where it may be enshrined and glorified, including the arenas of faggot objectification (baths, bars, docks, parks) where power-dominance, as it operates in the selecting of roles and objects, is known as 'cruising'."

What I found particularly surprising about this agreement among writers of many political viewpoints was that it was completely at variance with the opinions of most of the gay men I knew. Even allowing for the eternal gap between the things that movement activists say and the things that the majority of gay men actually do, I found the discrepancy puzzling. And then I came across a column in the Canadian gay liberation magazine, *Body Politic*. Gerald Hannon and Bill Lewis are both gay activists who are certainly aware of the attitudes I've already mentioned. Their piece about cruising in the parks of Toronto shows, however, little of the negativity that the others did. Rather, its tone is completely matter-of-fact, and the authors obviously share the belief of many open, urban gay men that cruising is a recreational activity like going to a restaurant or pub:

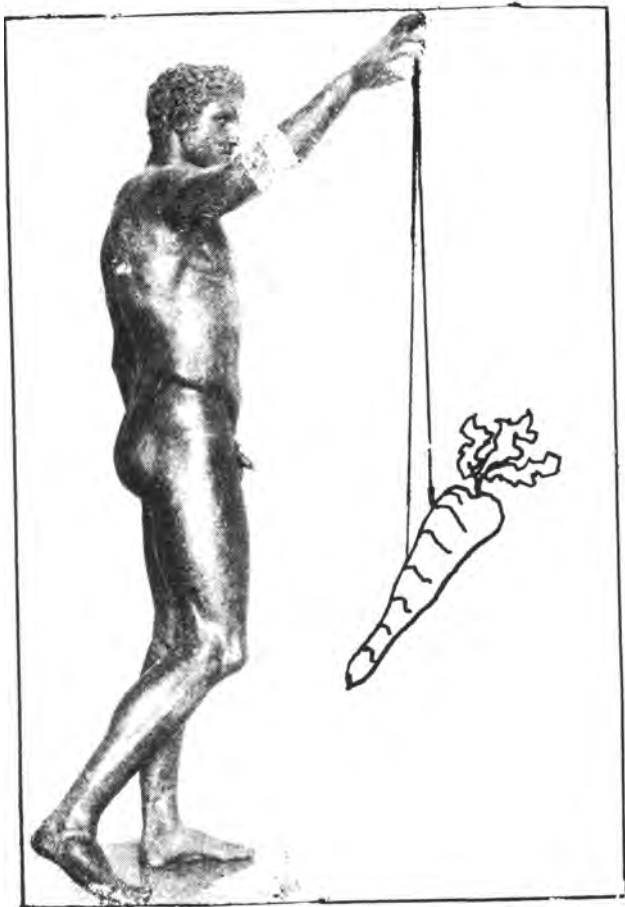
"Here, you can spend time with men you never say a word to, or you can talk before, during or after, you can meet people who are just coming out as well as men you've seen in every bar and bath in town, you can even ask someone to come home with you — and he'll come. You can also

cruise for half an hour and not meet anybody, or get turned down by everybody you meet. That's rare though. People are not so picky in parks. I've spent time with men whose glance would have frozen the beer in my glass if I'd cruised them in a bar."

Now the *Body Politic* article was written last year, and most of the other articles I read and have quoted date from the early days of gay liberation — the 1970-74 period. This, I think, is relevant. I'm not trying to claim that cruising was once what the sociologists often said it was — the resort of lonely and desperate faggots in raincoats — and is now the pursuit of aware men who keep non-objectifying relationships uppermost in their minds even in a railway station cottage. But I do believe that cruising, like everything else about the gay world, has changed significantly in the last ten years. In this article, I want to have a look at some of those changes and at the reasons why much gay movement thinking about cruising isn't adequate to explain the realities of it.

I'm restricting my discussion to the kind of cruising that occurs in public places such as parks and cottages, and not that which occurs in pubs, discos and movement meetings. I have two reasons for doing this. First, the motives and actions of people are different in the two situations. If you go out cruising in a park, then you go almost entirely for one reason: to meet a sexual partner. It is possible and common to have sex with him on the spot, and not to talk to him or find out anything about him — for him to be, in short, nothing but a partner in a sexual act. In a pub or disco, it's different. You're quite likely to want to talk with your friends, drink and dance as well as cruise; and if you do meet someone then you have to relate to him intellectually as well as physically, even if it's only to decide whether you're going to his place or yours. More importantly, the very act of going to a pub or club implies being at least part of the way out of the closet. Consequently, it's dangerous to make generalisations about gay men based on the behaviour of people in these places. In a cottage, however, you'll find virtually every type of gay man, from the most fearful and closeted to the most public of activists — men that is, who have nothing in common apart from their sex and their sexuality.





This still does not mean, of course, that assumptions about gay male sexuality can be drawn from the actions of those men who go cruising. But the fact that all types of gay men do it, whereas lesbians don't, seems to be a useful starting point for a discussion. Indeed, most criticism of cruising uses this very point as a basis for the argument that it's not merely a *gay* activity but is specifically *male*, with all the destructive and oppressive hallmarks of male sexuality. The argument, briefly, is that gay men are men first and gay only second; and that their sexuality has common features that transcend differences in politics and lifestyle. A gay male activist, for instance, shares many convictions with his lesbian counterpart; and yet his sexuality will have less in common with hers than it does with that of a closeted and politically conservative gay man, or with that of a heterosexual man for that matter.

It isn't necessary to get involved in the debate on the degree to which the differences between men's and women's sexuality are biologically inherent or socially conditioned. Whatever the truth, we can say there are general characteristics that distinguish them. (Always bearing in mind that direct comparisons are difficult because women are not permitted to *express* their sexuality as freely as men are.) Men's sexuality is basically genitally oriented: when we say that we "need a fuck", then we mean that we want a genital orgasm. It's urgent and insistent — we get erections in response to direct sexual stimulation, and the erection demands attention *now*. It is — to use a much-abused word — promiscuous. That is, it's directed not only at those whom we know well emotionally and intellectually, but at anyone who has whatever physical attributes — sometimes only details like hair colour or dress — that we find attractive. And, lastly, it's connected with aggression. Aggression is most readily apparent in rape but is much commoner in more subtle ways: it can be expressed as hostility to our partners or as competition with other men to see who can be sexually most successful.

These characteristics are common to both gay and straight men, though perhaps the emphases are different (urban gay men often have more opportunity for sex with large numbers of partners than straight men, for example). Gay men's

sexuality, however, differs from straight men's in a fundamental way. It is socially repressed, and can be expressed only under very limited conditions. For the very closeted man, these conditions include complete anonymity and secrecy at all times. Even very open gays are rarely able to meet one another under normal circumstances: the romance in the office or the darts team is usually not for us. In urban areas with large and open gay populations, visibly gay men can meet in such places as railway platforms, streets and theatres. More often, however, we're restricted to the commercial scene or parks and cottages.

Given these characteristics of gay men's sexuality, it's easy to see how closely attuned to men's sexual needs cruising is, and how it can be modified according to the degree to which a man identifies himself as gay. The very closeted man, usually married, can go to cottages for purely physical, wordless encounters that will not disturb the normal routine of his life. Another type of closet gay, the one hung up about his masculinity, can just "get his rocks off" without the self-identification as homosexual that more emotional relationships would imply. And then there's the kind of macho one-upmanship that Perry Brass describes, often associated with the pressure to prove one's desirability as a Hot Number by getting laid as often as possible.

It's also apparent that cruising of this sort can easily lead to objectification, power games, unwillingness to respond to a partner's needs, and all the other less pleasant aspects of casual sex. Ironically, since these are often the result of guilt and furtiveness, they may also occur in sophisticated urban gay society where everyone is well aware of the need to project an "image". Where gay subcultures are absent or undeveloped, gay men dress and act generally in accordance with straight norms. The businessman and the labourer are instantly recognisable as such, and even the raving queen is partly acting out straight expectations of gay behaviour. But in communities with large and visible gay subcultures this is not necessarily so. Many men dress to act out their fantasies, and to encourage others to do likewise — hence the proliferation of hard hats, motorcycle gear, uniforms and so on. When men dressed in this way meet, they may often have exciting and satisfying sex as long as the encounter remains brief and impersonal. Once the partners get to know each other better, even to the extent of going home together, the illusion, and hence the excitement, is often destroyed. The bedenimed hunk is revealed as an art director who collects Dresden shepherdesses, and the cosmopolitan sophisticate as a British Rail clerk from Neasden. There is consequently a very strong incentive not to get to know partners too well. The alternative, which is even less desirable but increasingly common, is to create a whole new personality to go with one's appearance. Instead of merely looking macho, some gay men choose to act it as well, often in the crudest and most stereotyped ways. Too often this means that by taking their masculinity seriously they begin to play the same games that straight-identified gays have always done ("If you're a good boy, I'll let you give me a blowjob"). Inevitably, this leads to further depersonalising and objectification of their sexual partners.

Cruising, then, can often be what its critics claim it to be: an expression of predatory or frustrated male sexuality. Analysis of it only at this level is, however, dangerously incomplete. Although such an analysis shows what cruising has in common with other expressions of male sexuality, it fails to explain what is specific and particular about it. Objectification, for example, is common to all types of male sexuality. But objectification of one man by another is not the same as objectification of a woman by a man because power inequality is not inherent. Even when it exists, it may be reversed: the most desirable of men can never be sure that he won't feel the desolation of being a rejected object, as John Rechy eloquently attests in *The Sexual Outlaw*.

Moreover, many of the assumptions made about objectification are misleadingly sweeping. It's generally taken for granted that because men cruising sum one another up largely on the basis of physical attractiveness, then the old,

the ugly, and the socially awkward are liable always to lose out. This simply isn't true; it may in fact be their only way of making sexual contact. I'm thinking particularly of a fiftyish man I used to know, who once explained to me that Tuesday was his big night out. After going to a gay liberation meeting early in the evening, he would pay a visit to his favourite cottage. He never once met anyone in the gay group who would go to be with him — though he was well-known and liked — but rarely failed to make a pickup in the toilets. As he put it (and who can blame him?): "I dearly love all the guys in the group in a brotherly way, but somehow it just isn't enough to get a hug at the door from them when things are over and I know that a lot of them will be going home to bed together." Even for this man, who was far more open about his sexuality than most of his generation, and who mixed with people who were far more aware of ageism than most, cruising was the only way of finding sexual relationships. And until significant numbers of people start to pay more than lip service to the problems of gay men who aren't conventionally attractive, it's likely to remain so.

Equally importantly, conventional analyses of cruising are inadequate precisely because they ignore the type of response typified by the *Body Politic* article. During the last ten years, thousands of gay men, including many who consider themselves to be completely apolitical, have rejected secrecy, furtiveness and role-playing. They're well aware that the very act of going out specifically to look for sexual partners is essentially sexist, and that in the liberated future cruising will be a strange and unwanted anachronism. But to accuse gay men who acknowledge this fact and yet still cruise of hypocrisy is to be hopelessly liberal-minded. It's strongly reminiscent of the argument that, because the commercial gay scene is exploitative, it should be totally rejected: theoretically true but, given the lack of alternatives, not particularly helpful. I think the problem is that too many theorists (and I'm not referring solely to gay liberationists here) do not sufficiently realise that our needs and attitudes are no less real for being conditioned into us. Perhaps, in fact, our conditioned needs may be *more* real to us than some of our "natural" ones, simply because we take the latter for granted but are likely to feel that there's something wrong with us if we don't feel the former. (Many men with low sex drives, for example, are convinced that there must be something wrong with their hormones.) This is particularly true of sexual politics, where intellectual convictions are often way ahead of emotions. We all know the contradictory situations that can result: the gay activist men who are appallingly ageist, or the feminists who are totally masochistic in their personal relationships.

Most of the gay men I know who are aware of an inconsistency between their anti-sexist beliefs and the realities of their sex lives make the point that the attitudes they bring to cruising make a difference that amounts to far more than merely a reduction in guilt and furtiveness. Openly gay men are often much more inclined than their closeted brothers to see sex as play and recreation, as mutual agreement with another person to share a good time. It's often much easier to achieve this by wandering around a park late at night than it is in ordinary situations where the normal social rules of introducing yourself, making small talk, and so on, apply. I think this "social" aspect of cruising has been too little commented on, as most writers seem to believe that the actual sex act is much the same for all men, closeted or not.

Even an acute observer like Jack Babuscio (in his book, *We Speak for Ourselves*) explains cruising as follows: "Generally speaking, cottages are particularly well suited to men whose immediate interest is focused upon genital contacts ... Of course, there are also gay men who, long after they have rejected feelings of guilt and shame, will continue to cottage, simply because they have learned, through conditioning and habit, to enjoy it. For such people, cottaging has two important advantages: first, it can provide sexually satisfying and emotionally non-involving encounters; second, the risks involved, though potentially disastrous to one's

domestic life and professional career, may heighten the sense of sexual excitement."

As far as this comment goes, there's little to disagree with. The only thing I'd seriously dispute is the assertion that many gay men find danger exciting; in my own experience, the prospect of the arrival of the police, far from being an aphrodisiac, is likely to cause temporary impotence. I believe, however, that Jack Babuscio does not sufficiently explain *why* openly gay men come to enjoy cottaging, bearing in mind all of the risks. Sex itself, in such circumstances, can be extremely satisfying but often isn't, especially in physically uncomfortable surroundings. I think that the enjoyment of cruising comes rather from the variety of men you're likely to meet, and the *ease* with which it's possible to make contact with them — not merely sexually but (with other openly gay men) socially as well.

Cruising has, of course, an unwritten but strict set of rules to which most people are forced to adhere. You are, for example, risking either hostility or utter consternation if you approach a man and make it plain that you'd rather talk than fuck. But, paradoxically, cruising also reverses many of the rules that govern ordinary social situations. Rather than hide behind a barrier of social niceties, you are permitted and even expected to be direct in your approaches. It's often struck me that one of the reasons why the English, as compared with, say Australasians or North Americans, are such inveterate cruisers is that English social rules are so much more rigid. At any rate, you can't fail to notice the astonishing alteration in the behaviour of some gay men who maintain the iciest of reserve in pubs and discos, and yet start flashing blatantly the moment they get into the loo.

It seems to me that the ease of meeting other men in this way is particularly attractive to the gay who goes out cruising for much the same reason as he'd go out drinking — for an evening's pleasure. And despite the extreme casualness of sex in these circumstances, it's often not at all impersonal. Indeed, many affairs and friendships begin with sex in a cottage or park because it's often a lot easier to talk to someone after having sex with him than by walking up to him in a bar and attempting to start a conversation out of thin air, often under the critical gaze of one's friends who are appraising both one's choice of partner and one's success in trying to chat him up.

I'm well aware that the attitudes to cruising that I've been discussing in the latter part of this article are restricted to a very small minority of gay men. Even among open gays, cruising is too often merely an activity by which one can obtain a quick fuck with an anonymous hole in the dark. But I've been trying to make the point that cruising *can* be more than that, and for an increasing number of gay men *is* a pleasure rather than a compulsive need, largely because they have rejected both guilt and power games. I think we have to regard cruising as we regard everything else about the gay world as it currently exists: dialectically. On the one hand, we recognise it to be a product of male sexuality at a particular time and place — and that as such it will eventually disappear as our sexuality evolves into something different. On the other, we should also realise that sexual encounters are just as easily based on mutual agreement and respect as on the "power-oriented selection of objects" that we routinely denounce. The principle that separates the two — rejection of selfishness and acknowledgement of the needs of others — is surely just a personal dose of the medicine that we prescribe for society as a whole.



Lindsay Taylor was also the author of *Gay Politics in New Zealand* and not Lindsay Turner as credited. (Gay Left 9)

35 into the 80's

THIRTY FIVE INTO THE EIGHTIES

by Bob Cant

At the age of 35, I find myself thinking more and more about ageing. I do not feel old and I know that my position as an openly gay, employed person in a European country is far more favourable than that of many other 35 year olds throughout the world. Nonetheless, I feel myself constrained in several ways because of my age.

One such constraint is the change — or even decline — in the state of my body. I never really used to consider it very much at all. It was just there. Now I feel increasingly unfit; I run out of wind when I try to catch distant buses; I put on weight very quickly; I sometimes find it difficult to maintain an erection when I have been drinking; my hair is turning grey; I have crowns on some of my teeth. I have to be aware of my body now. I have to think about what I eat and drink.

This pre-occupation with my physical well-being quickly extends to my physical appearance and the way that affects me on the gay male scene. I have always had mixed feelings about the scene, sometimes finding it friendly and supportive, but sometimes finding it predatory. Previously, however, I never felt obliged to alter my image. It was not that I had risen above images but I conformed to one of them (Gay Radical Man, London, early '70s) without realising that I was doing so. Because I feel comfortable with that kind of image, I stick to it and so I often find that I look out of place. My image is from a different period and, therefore, I feel as if I am older and less desirable. Sometimes, I make concessions to the '80s images; sometimes, I obstinately foster the one from the '70s; but whatever I do I know that I cannot escape from the fact my image makes me a commodity and, therefore, affects my relationship with the gay male scene. Since this is an important way of meeting other gay men in London I have no doubt that I will continue to pay attention to my image. Given the value attached to a youthful appearance, I would be remarkable if I did not try to foster that.

Another important result of these physical changes is that I am less energetic than I was. I simply cannot do as much as once I did. I have to pace myself and to make sure that I rest. I have to be extremely careful about how I choose to use my time and, politically, I have to be much more selective. I still retain a world view, albeit a jumbled one, but my activity is now a fraction of what it once was. I work for London Gay Switchboard; I am Action Officer in my union branch; I do a course in Trade Union Studies which includes research on discrimination against gays at work. All these activities are characterised by clearly defined limitations on my personal responsibility. The current political climate plus my loss of energy has left me to confine my responsibilities in such a way that I do not take on leadership roles. I do what I can with groups of other like-minded people.

And as I look around at my friends of a similar age, this specialization seems not uncommon. We may continue to regard ourselves as committed to an overall transformation of society but many of us are involved, to a great extent, with one issue. With some it is a political organization; with some it is their career; with me it is the trade union movement. I feel concerned about this in two ways.

Firstly, it is very easy to rationalize one's lack of energy into a new set of political beliefs. Thus, we may find ourselves believing, 'Because this is all I can do, this is all that needs to be done'. Secondly, we may become so sucked into the structure of our particular organization that we give priority to the survival of the organization rather than to its aims. I sometimes fear in my union branch that because I understand the procedures better than anyone else I am beginning to think on the same terms as our bureaucratic

leadership. I worry that I may be seen as a conservative force. I still believe in the principles of direct action and self-emancipation but it is difficult to hold to such values when there is little opportunity or will to put them into practice.

The other principal constraint which makes me think about ageing is increased isolation. The fact that I am involved in fewer activities than I was means that I meet fewer people. The political impasse of this period means that there is a lack of ideas and activities to stimulate me. Because I have less energy I spend more time at home. The most important relationship I have is with the man I share a house with. Although we are not a couple and we are both opposed to monogamy, I am afraid of the relationship becoming too stifling. I do not want to break the relationship but I do not know how to break the privatization. Answering ads in Lonely Hearts columns might be one way of meeting like-minded people, but I feel if I had enough energy and courage to go through with that properly I might have succeeded in getting out of the spiral of privatization already.

The lack of new stimuli, however, has thrown me back on myself in ways which seem quite positive. I have had to accept who I am — and not just the parts that I like but also the irritation and the paranoia. I have also had to consider the way my ego affects my behaviour; the way I protect myself from rejection by shyness; the way I bear grudges; the way I am reluctant to disagree and so bottle up my anger. None of these will go away but I am dealing with them better than I have ever done before. Life now does seem too short to continue fostering these feelings. It might not last for long but I do seem better able to accept myself as I am and others as I find them. I understand why some people turn to Freudian therapy or Buddhism to explain the inescapable in their lives. I understand why others seek solace in their allotments or in overeating. Perhaps that is why I write articles for Gay Left.

There are two points that I want to finish on. They are not conclusions but they do not seem to fit in elsewhere. The only thing about my ageing which makes me really despair is the near total lack of collective memory in the gay male scene and sometimes in the gay movement. It is easy to become nostalgic about the Gay Liberation Front of the early '70s but many of us did learn a lot from that period. When we see these lessons being ignored by our younger brothers, it is difficult not to feel useless and hopeless. It is even more difficult — and more important — not to say, 'I told you so' afterwards.

One thing, on the other hand, which makes me feel very positive about ageing is the loss of naivete. I miss the energy and the enthusiasm that I used to have 15 years ago — even five years ago, but the naivete is well gone. My hopes and dreams in the '50s were fed by politicians who promised us never-ending material blessings; they were also fed by pop songs which pedalled an insidious, romantic, monogamous pulp. It took a long time to rid myself of these illusions. I do not feel cynical or blasé; although my dreams and hopes are as unattainable as ever, at least they do not screw me up like they used to do.



Eros Denied

EROS DENIED, OR THE REVOLUTION BETRAYED

White Hero, Black Beast. Racism, Sexism, and the Mask of Masculinity by Paul Hoch (Pluto Press 1979, £3.95)

Homosexuality and Liberation. Elements of a Gay Critique by Mario Mieli (Gay Men's Press 1980, £3.95)

Army of Lovers by Rosa von Praunheim (Gay Men's Press 1980, £3.95)

Reviewed by Jeffrey Weeks

These books under review raise central questions about the nature of sexual politics, particularly as all touch on the relationship of sexuality to wider social forms. Their appearance is therefore extremely welcome. Paul Hoch's book is one of the very few which have directly confronted the issue of the social construction of masculinity and its political consequences, and will I hope stimulate a lively debate. Even though I do not agree with much of its theoretical underpinning, I found it lively and in many ways enlightening. Coincidentally, its perspective is quite close to Mieli's book, while many of the assumptions of both works are also written into Rosa von Praunheim's collection of interviews with American gay activists, and are apparent in the book and in the film of the same title on which it is based. The three books, I would suggest, have a common project: is a sort of resurrectionary politics, a surprising revival of the often millenarian theories and utopian hopes of the late 1960s and early 1970s. So rather than write a straight forward review I want to offer a common critique, taking up some of the themes rather than assessing each book as a single unity.

Before doing this though I also want to say something about the publishing politics these works represent. Those of us involved in sexual politics have been indebted to Pluto for some time for their publications in this area. Though their list is rather eclectic, alone of the left publishers they have sought to involve themselves in sexual politics, and they are to be congratulated now on producing Hoch's book. The Gay Men's Press represent a more specialist publishing intervention; it is also a major event in British gay politics. The development of the gay movement depends on an extension of debate and constant growth in our understanding of the oppressive regulation of sexuality. This has always been central to the project of *Gay Left* over the past five years — indeed the left elements in the gay movement have survived only because small pockets of socialists throughout the country have maintained an engagement with issues relating to sexual oppression, often against the odds and in conditions of some isolation. If I criticise the current publications it is not because I do not welcome very warmly their appearance. On the contrary, their publication has enabled me to reconsider my own views and given me the opportunity to set out my political disagreements in I hope a constructive way.

The three books have a common origin in a politics of moral criticism which at times becomes a moralistic politics. This may seem a strange thing to say about two books (Hoch's and Mieli's) which are ostensibly materialist accounts of gay oppression and masculinity respectively, and even stranger about a collection of interviews. Indeed the moralism is not overtly strong in Rosa von Praunheim's book, though it comes over loud and heavy in the film. And in the other two books the moral stance is clear but superficially at least subordinate to a theoretical perspective. But I believe their real value comes from their moral critique of existing relations rather than from any new theoretical insights they offer. In fact their theory has a common root: the radical attempts at a synthesis of Marx and Freud so central to the 'liberation' movements of the late 60s and

early 70s, and best epitomised by the work of Marcuse. What these attempts did was to delineate the problem in passionate terms and to offer an essentially moral statement of why it was necessary to decipher the fit between psychic structures and the perpetuation of the rule of capital. But the actual explanations offered relied on a series of metaphysical statements which owed more to poetry than to materialism, and which make a politics, (that is a practice leading to a transformation of the relation of power) virtually impossible.

The core of the theory is the belief that the repression of sexuality (capitalised in Mieli's book as Eros) is integral to the perpetuation of capital. The corollary of this is that gay oppression and the structures of male dominance are *necessary* aspects of the rule of capital; and that the gay struggle and the challenge to patriarchal dominance are in their different ways essential aspects of the struggle against the rule of capital. Both Hoch's book and Mieli's share, that is to say, a cosmic functionalism. Thus Mieli:

the dogma of procreation as the sole true goal of sexuality grew up historically ... as a justification for the condemnation placed by society on all other libidinal tendencies, with a view to sublimating them into the economic sphere.

And Hoch:

the sexual fulfilment promised at the end of the rainbow is used as the ultimate carrot to keep men in competition in war and production. This partial impotence syndrome has thus enabled societies with our form of family structure to divert a greater and greater amount of what would otherwise be libidinal energy into acquisitive competition for masculinity in work, warfare and consumption.

The actual mechanisms by which the intentionality of capital organises and controls the dynamism of Eros are never spelt out. For Mieli the process is related to the Judaeo-Christian tradition and the way in which this provides the basis for the automaton that is capitalism (a view that is perhaps explicable in an Italian faced by the complicity between



authoritarian catholicism and the bourgeois order). For Hoch there is a clear relationship between the growth of private property and the structuration of repressive masculine character traits, but though he offers very suggestive links (such as in his fascinating discussion of the racist and dualist metaphor so common in our culture of the white hero struggling against the black beast of other cultures/classes) the accounts of the specific historical moments of political appropriation are conspicuously absent. But given a totalising theory in which there is a necessary congruence between all the parts of the social machine, one level built on an other like a pyramid of tin cans, a transparent political message can be offered. 'If homosexuality is liberated', Mario Mieli writes, 'then it ceases to sustain this system, comes into conflict with it and contributes to its collapse.' A revolutionary gay politics, that is to say is a key to the subversion of the whole social order. Paul Hoch's book is less millenarian; he merely suggests the relevance of critique of male chauvinism to a wider (largely ecological and moral) attack on capital. But the close articulation between the various aspects of social oppression and economic exploitation is again suggested.

Now, this approach is intensely appealing. I personally would like to be able to embrace a holistic theory in which all social phenomena can be explained by a series of inter-related concepts. Unfortunately, I find it difficult to accept the theories offered here, and believe in fact that the search for such fully articulated theories to be misguided. I want to underline some particular points of disagreement, concentrating for convenience on Mieli's book, though the points I make also have relevance for Hoch's.

1 The nature of sexuality

Basic to Mieli's approach is the belief in the existence of Eros as a transexual, originally undifferentiated desire which our culture attempts to force into the mould of compulsive heterosexuality. Homosexuality, which by its nature is a refusal of this repression is therefore close to the underlying transexuality of desire. Its liberation in everyone will release the elements of intercommunication between people for 'Communism is the rediscovery of bodies and their fundamental communicative function, their polymorphous potential for love'. Not only therefore is gay liberation revolutionary but even the everyday actions of gays (or at least gay men) contribute to the challenge to the heterosexual Norm: 'anal intercourse is itself a significant revolutionary force'.

Much of this is close, superficially at least, to positions I hold. I believe that the body is potentially both bisexual and polymorphous as Freud suggested, and I agree that categories such as heterosexuality and homosexuality are social restrictions on the flux of desire. But it is wrong, I believe, to apostrophise these bodily potentials as if they were a transhistorical, transpersonal, biological force which apparently preexists the entry into culture of the human child. This is to give metaphysical status to a series of possibilities. As recent work in psychoanalysis has suggested, desire does not preexist the cultural acquisitions of masculinity and femininity but is shaped in the process of those acquisitions. What is suppressed, therefore, is not a given amount of sexual energy (the sexual essence) but a series of wishes that cannot be allowed access to consciousness.

The concept of repression poses further problems, partly because it so easily slides from an individual to a social context. What it constantly evokes is the damming of a pre-given essential force, suggesting as its antithesis a 'liberation', a release of this energy to shatter all hitherto existing restrictive norms. But as Michel Foucault and others have suggested, this 'repressive hypothesis' actually obscures the real mechanisms at work. The organisation of sexuality does not proceed through the physical control of a rebellious energy but through the regulation, categorisation, discursive ordering and defining of a series of possibilities. Sexuality,

that is to say, is riot inhibited, in a straightforward way, through social control; on the contrary, social mechanisms construct sexualities. All this implies that we must rethink what we mean by sexual politics. If it cannot be about releasing sex from restraint, then we must accept the political consequences of seeing it as being about redefining what is socially possible. 'Transexuality' cannot be 'liberated'; it can only be created out of the possibilities of the body as socially mediated.

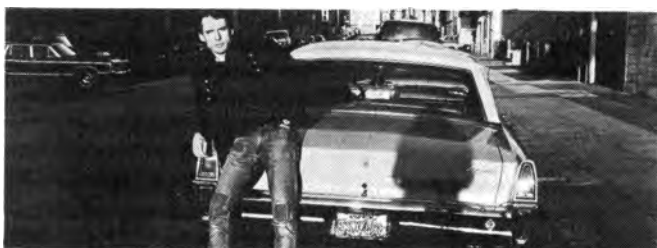
2 The relationship of sexual oppression to class society

This approach means that we cannot fruitfully see the relationship between sexual oppression and class society as having any unilinear effectivity. Capitalism does not work with coherence or intention to produce a sexed being which fulfils its needs, either in terms of gender characteristics or sexual orientation. What we must now develop, as a matter of political urgency, is a greater awareness of the complexities of the ways in which sexuality is organised and regulated in a class society: the congruities, and contradictions, the strategic relationships and the conjunctural interventions. That means revisiting that much despised activity, historical analysis. It means understanding both the symbolic significance given to sexuality in our culture and the various strategies through which this has been realised. It means not subordinating our theorisations to notions of a pre-determined connection between one social phenomenon and another. It means above all being aware of the various potentialities for change, the points of contradiction and the opportunities for resistance. It is on this terrain that sexual politics has to work, not on the mega-plain of transcendental aspiration.



3 Political Practice

This in turn has important implications for political practice. A major theme of Mieli's book is the distinction he suggests between the revolutionary gay, who refuses any accommodation with the existing society, and the reformist, who lies back and thinks that all is for the best of all possible worlds in our consumer paradise. We are sternly warned, however, that 'Tolerance is repressive' and that 'the purpose of liberalisation, for the present system, is above all to prevent and block any genuine liberation'. But the actual 'revolutionary action proposed turns out in the end to be our old friend *épater le bourgeois*: drag, street theatre, counter cultural resistance and the schizophrenic trip; all no doubt important for the individuals or groups involved, but leaving all the power to define, to regulate, to oppress, unworried, untouched, supreme. In fact the real gains of the past ten years have been achieved not by those who have simply done their own thing, nor by those who retreated from the fray lamenting a revolution that failed. They have been won by those despised so called 'reformists' who have battled on reshaping our own self concepts, and bit by bit challenging the oppressive categorisations and practices which inhibit the play of sexuality. Despised activities such as befriending, publishing, cultural activities etc have actually begun to transform what it means to be gay and sexual in our society. The interviews in *Army of Lovers* amply illustrate the changes that have taken place, in all their ambiguity.



This does not mean that all is well, that all that remains to do is tidy up the edges. But it does mean that we must move away from the all or nothing approach, the 'total liberation of desire' or the 'sell out'. And that means moving away from those comfortable categories which give us comfort in the dark nights of the soul, but have little matching in the concrete world: the absolute split supposed, for instance between 'reform' and 'revolution'. We must begin to explore oppression and exploitation in their complexities, and to develop strategies and tactics which are alert to the mobility and elusiveness of power relations. We need to understand gay oppression in its specific context, and be aware of the inherent difficulties of a gay politics, as well as the possibilities for radical transformation. Some of the essays in the forthcoming book edited by the Gay Left Collective, *Homosexuality, Power and Politics*, do this much more subtly than Mieli precisely because they start from a different theoretical and political base: no less committed to changing the relations of sex, but aware that the choice is not between total freedom or defeat, 'transsexual desire' or commercial exploitation.

What I am trying to suggest is that a radical sexual politics does not depend on an assumed automatic relationship between one structure of oppression and another, nor on a politics which believes there is a hidden nature that can be beneficently released. It depends rather more mundanely on continuing efforts to gain influence over those institutions that have the power to define and regulate oppressively, and on constant interventions to shift the locus of categorisation in favour of our declared aims. That means recognising that these institutions have their preconditions in wide social and economic and political relations of power. It means constantly bringing home the moral critique that is at the heart of the gay and women's movement. And above all it means moving away from the politics of nostalgia, to seek a socialist politics that is alive to people's aspirations and aware of the possibilities for a renewed advance.

GAY LEFT BOOK

**HOMOSEXUALITY
Power and Politics**

Edited by
Gay Left Collective

CONTENTS

Introduction	Gay Left Collective
Capitalism and the Organisation of Sex	Jeffrey Weeks
The Struggle for Femininity	Margaret Coulson
Sexuality: Regulation and Contestation	Frank Mort
What Changed in the Seventies?	Dennis Altman
The Ideology of GLF	Simon Watney
The Politics of Tea and Sympathy	John Marshall
The Politics of Autonomy	Keith Birch
Bringing it all back home, Lesbian Feminist morality	Sue Cartledge
Sects and Sexuality	Philip Derbyshire
New Politics, Old Struggles	Bob Cant and Nigel Young
Lesbian, Socialist, Feminist	Margaret Jackson and Pat Mahony
Two Steps Forward, One Step Back	John Shiers
Horrific Practices, How Lesbians were presented in the newspapers of 1978	Susan Hemmings
The Politics of Gay Culture	Derek Cohen and Richard Dyer
Here, who are you calling a lesbian?	Alison Hennegan
Gay Activism	Stephen Gee
Right to Rebel	Amber Hollibaugh

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Gay's The Word



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Facing The Crisis

by Dave Landau

There are few on the left today who subscribe to the simple theory that in a period of economic crisis, the capitalist class is thrown into disarray, there is increased class polarisation and working class militancy and hence an automatic shift in the relationship of forces in favour of the oppressed. It has been recognised by most radicals that such a crisis is a dangerous period for all classes in society — there is a greater likelihood for intense violent battles, the results of which cannot be assessed in advance.

Nevertheless, it is *not* generally recognised that there are features intrinsic to an economic crisis which are politically favourable to Capital, i.e., make it easier for the class to rule. It is my thesis that the period we have now entered is a crisis in which these features are accentuated and that the present government is cognisant, at least empirically, with these features, and capable of exploiting them. Further, I intend to show that as a consequence gay people specifically, are going to face a very dangerous and critical twelve months.

Economic competition

It is in the very nature of an economic crisis that the material resources available to the oppressed is significantly decreased. Throughout the history of capitalism this has been expressed as cuts in the real value of wages and increased unemployment. In modern capitalism it involves considerably more than that, because of the resources provided by the Welfare State — cuts in housing, social services, funding to help organisations (including gay counselling bodies), increased rents and rates, education cuts etc.

It follows inevitably that there is a tendency towards competition between sectors of the oppressed for a slice of the considerably diminished cake. In the old days this competition was mainly around jobs and wage differentials. Today there is far more to squabble over; which parts of public expenditure should be cut the most, which geographical areas

need subsidising, rent increases, versus rate increases versus cuts etc.

Of course, this increased competition is a tendency. There is no social law saying that it has to become the dominant feature. It has, however, been very apparent over the last year and I would suggest it is likely to become more apparent over the coming years.

Hierarchy of power

One of the most important features of our society is that it is not merely stratified in terms of class. This is too often forgotten by the left, particularly the parties of the left. There are very definite hierarchies of relative power operating within and between the oppressed. Some of these are constructed completely by the workings of Capital itself. For example, the system of wage differentials, the formation of an aristocracy of labour, the reserve pool of labour, the international division of labour by imperialism and its expression in terms of immigrant and migrant labour within the imperialist heartlands.

There are other hierarchies which started their lives long before capitalism. Most significant amongst these are those associated with patriarchy. The power of men over women, of adults over children, the divisions between intellectual and manual labour, and the divisions between both of these and domestic labour. Far from being atavistic hangovers from the past, they are pre-capitalist *foundations* of capital and have been developed and reconstructed by the development of capitalism, institutionalised in the modern nuclear family, legislation, and more recently in state education, health, patterns of employment etc.

From these divisions are founded pernicious ideologies and hence pernicious ideological practices which in turn generate further hierarchies and divisions. The most significant of these are, of course, racism and sexism.

Dependence and identity

It might seem sufficient to relate this notion of hierarchy of powers back immediately to the situation of crisis driven internecine competition to see how they compound one another. To see the full impact of this, however, it is necessary to dwell a little more on the question of consciousness.

Any distinct type of society is characterised by a set of relations by which individuals and groups of individuals survive within it. These relationships are described by Marxists as the 'social relations of production' or the 'economic base', though these expressions are liable to give rise to misinterpretation (I would suggest that Marx and latter Marxists deliberately suggest these misinterpretations but that is another matter). Classes and distinct fractions of classes are defined by the fact that their members survive in essentially the same way, and that this method of survival is *mutually dependent* on the way in which another group survives.

Thus to take the most well known example there is a mutual dependence between capitalists and workers. The capitalist survives by virtue of the surplus value created by labour. The working class survives by virtue of the wages it is paid by Capital. I don't have to, *Left* that this relationship, while mutually dependent is essentially unequal. However this more obviously 'economic' relationship of mutual dependence for survival is not the only one fundamental to this society. The relationship between housewives to their husbands is another such relationship and all these various relationships are woven together to form the 'base'.

The reason for my little excursion here into what is, after all, a re-definition of 'historical materialism' is to illuminate two basic points. The first is that the class relations and other relations of oppression are entered into by individuals in order to survive and they are therefore dependent upon them. The second is that these relationships are therefore not chosen, are not consciously constructed. The state may consciously intervene to repair, reinforce, and occasionally reconstruct them, but for the oppressed in particular, they are no more and no less than a way of life and what appears to be the only way of living.

What I believe follows from this (and my argument here is inevitably schematic) is that the individuals' sense of self identity, their emotional and intellectual framework, is an internalisation of how that individual experiences her/his process of survival. As the individual has played no part in consciously determining what this process consists of, from cradle to grave, this identity is largely unconscious and unarticulated. It is what the left calls false consciousness,

Now, of course, some of this identity will express itself articulately as a set of ideas, as ideology, but this is only the tip of the iceberg. The 'ideological practices' to which I referred earlier, are not simply practices directed according to the specifically ideological parts of consciousness, but practices based upon the whole and largely unarticulated components. Thus 'ideological practices' is a short hand phrase. Now this is no pedantic distinction. It is absolutely crucial when considering the politics of an economic crisis.

Without any global crisis at all every individual has to cope with a dramatic revolution in the dependent relations of survival. The change from childhood, to adulthood i.e. the change from dependence on parents to dependents upon employers and the resources of the state on the one hand and dependence upon a spouse on the other hand (that is if the adult develops 'normally' by which I mean more than simply that the adult is not gay but that the adult is committed to family life). This revolution goes under the name of adolescence. A whole series of institutions are provided to ensure that the individual survives this upheaval with a sense of identity intact i.e. a sufficient continuity is experienced to ensure that the adolescent doesn't come to realise the extent to which their identity is unconscious and dependent and based on things that are falling away and being replaced. For once that has been exposed the fact of powerlessness is discovered.

There are two essential responses to the discovery of powerlessness. One is to recognise its source in the social order itself and to struggle against that order. The other is to seek a niche in the existing hierarchy of power, asserting an identity as white, straight, male, or a combination of these depending upon the youth in question. By doing this one defines an identity as a negation of another, and power relative to the power of another. Both these responses explode when the agencies of continuity cease to be effective and can be seen to have a marked impact on the streets.

In an economic crisis we are all adolescents in this sense. As the social order fails to deliver the goods, as the relations through which we are dependent for survival, fall apart, so the unarticulated identities crumble exposing our powerlessness. In turn the two responses present themselves, but with a difference. They are compounded with the internecine economic competition engendered by the crisis. This reinforces the hierarchic response and creates an explosive mixture of devastating proportions. Naked racism, queer bashing, and misogyny manifest themselves in brutal fashion. The opposite revolutionary response also combines with the solidarity tendency of crisis. The question left open, is of course, which response dominates. This depends upon the specific nature of the crisis and in particular where it stands in relation to the period which has just preceded it. To a lesser extent it depends upon the strategies of the government of the day.

The end of an epoch

Since the end of the Second World War, successive governments, both Tory and Labour, have been openly committed to the expansion and maintenance of the Welfare State. They have espoused the philosophy of state provision, the philosophy of universal and ever improving educational and health facilities, the eradication of homelessness, poverty and unemployment, the protection of the weak and incapable and so on. The motivations behind these policies were not so philanthropic. The objective was to improve and control the way in which the essential social relations reproduce themselves.

The real break has come with the present government, informed no doubt by the escalating world recession. There are no pretences now. The epoch of welfare capital has been pronounced closed by the Thatcher Government. Stand on your own two feet. Lest there be any confusion, it should not be concluded that the whole edifice of post war society is being dismantled in this country. It isn't. The welfare state will continue, but it is being *qualitatively* reduced and restructured. What is entirely new, is that this is no longer a secret. Our society is identifying itself by a new name, and the rulers legitimising themselves in a new way for the first time since the war.

How have the specific features of the epoch of welfare shaped mass consciousness and what bearing does this have on the responses to the present crisis which marks its end.

- Proliferation of competitive sectors. The welfare state creates a diversity of resources. In a recession this gives rise to a greater number of potential interest groups fighting each other for a slice of the cake.
- Migrant labour, the epoch which has just ended has been the introduction of a large number of black people deliberately restricted to the bottom layers of the labour market accentuating the racist content of the hierarchy of powers.
- Before the war, the state presented itself as a neutral arbiter of conflicting interests. Since the war it has invited the individual to relate to a super-family. A new dimension of dependency consciousness has been constructed vis-a-vis the state as parent. Thus a collapse of this role throws the discovery of powerlessness into sharper relief than ever before. The failure of the state to provide defines sharp reactions. On the one hand an attack on state power in terms of self-determination and liberation. The other responses, however, have a greater potential virulence. There are greater opportunities to find an identity in the hierarchy of powers.

The material presence of the nuclear family, presents a ready-made universe to replace the vacuum created by the crisis. But perhaps the most significant point is that what we have defined as two opposite responses to powerlessness have the possibility of combining together into a new one situated firmly on the right.

In identifying the source of powerlessness in the paternalistic state one may oppose it by affirming an extreme individualism. This individualism, far from opposing the hierarchical response, breaks the old opposition and fuses with it, reinforcing the competitive tendency still more.

Thus, in summary, the present crisis brings forth three rather than two kinds of responses, the radical, the familial-hierarchical-competitive, and the individualist-hierarchical-competitive. This is what loads the dice in favour of reaction.

Right Populism (in and out of government)

We have examined the polarisation of responses within the oppressed to economic crisis. I call Right Populism the practice of a political tendency to exploit the reactionary responses. There are many kinds of right populist organisations; Fascism is the most extreme example. What makes Right Populism so important today is that it is a central plank of government strategy.

As early as 1975 a section of the Conservative Party recognised that right populism was not simply a way of gaining support, but that it was the best way in which to govern society in the coming period. If the welfare system is collapsing despite the policies of a Labour government, why not advocate its dismemberment, an economic necessity for Capital anyway, and mobilise those disaffected with it?

This wing of the party launched itself decisively when Sir Keith Joseph made his famous 'classes 4 and 5' speech. It seized control of the leadership remarkably quickly — in a few months Thatcher was Tory leader. For the next four years, the Tories adopted consistent right populist tactics. What most of the left felt at the time to be a desperate regression in defeat which would weaken the Tory base and alienate any working and lower middle class support they had, turned out to be an eminently correct strategy.

It took no great sophisticated political understanding to decide upon this strategy or to carry it through. It must be said, however, that as a matter of fact, the Thatcher-Joseph leadership are politically sophisticated. But their success did not really depend upon this sophistication. It's largely a

matter of following your nose and going after the main chance. The reactionary responses to the delapidated welfare state were expressing themselves in all kinds of individual and collective forms. Increase in racist violence, proliferation of male street gangs, increased protest against rates and taxes, calls for law and order, the growth of the NF etc. The Tories did not create these. It is doubtful that they understood what social forces linked them together. It was sufficient to recognise that they formed a whole, and propound a suitable political framework to give them a coherence as an organised political force. This the Tories did zealously, learning all the time from the successes and failures of the smaller right populist organisations. They championed the family and the individual against the paternal state, condemned inefficient bureaucracy, advocated reduction of taxes and rates, cuts in public expenditure to be replaced by more free enterprise, buy your own home, and identified the paternal state with communism and socialism. The left consistently played into their hands by failing to seriously reject this state and bureaucracy and being seen more and more to be identified with it.

Anti-immigration propaganda and harder policing also figured highly in their approach, linked together through racism.

Once in government, they have ruled in precisely the same way. They justify their economic policies in terms of the new individualism, seize on the competition engendered by these policies, to champion the bigotry of one section of the community against another, enshrining it in immigration legislation or initiating an attack on social security claimants. Finally they reap the rewards of the violence of the divisions they have nurtured, by using them to legitimate a qualitatively stronger police presence on the street. They have their cake and eat it. At the end of the day, when they make their serious assaults on wage and employment levels, they will have the upper hand. They aim to have the working class sufficiently divided, isolated and policed to win and institute a crushing defeat.

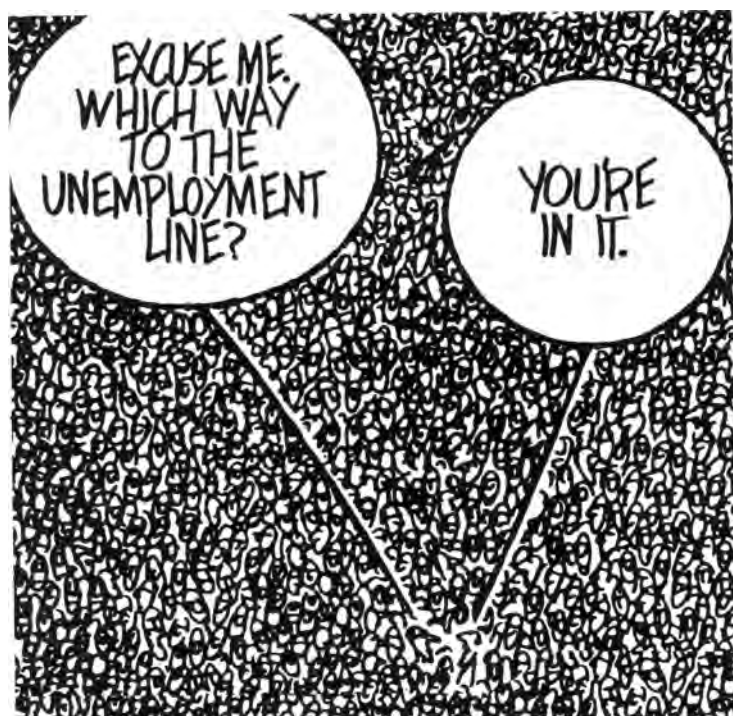
None of this presupposes a high level conspiracy of 'divide and rule'. Once the framework is established and accepted at all levels of the state, the tactical manoeuvres can be worked out quite empirically on a day-to-day basis by each department of the state almost independently. Why?, because it is a framework in which the economic imperatives of capital and the political methods used to achieve them, mutually reinforce one another.

The coming homophobic offensive

All this has very specific and dangerous implications for lesbians and gay men. The long and short of it is that all the reactionary responses to the crisis, encouraged by government converge upon us. We are another against which an identity can be defined. In the patriarchal hierarchy of powers we are near the bottom, it is against us that other powerless groups can define their power. Our place is not in the nuclear family, it can only be found in civil society as a whole, in the eyes of the nuclear world our place is therefore in the commy super-family which has failed to deliver the goods — and if anyone needs protecting by the forces of law and order it is the 'innocent children' who we threaten to rob from the family. The blacks and 'scroungers' were the first to be put in the pillory, we are the next in line, we are going to be fighting for our survival in the next twelve months; we will be facing an onslaught greater than anything since 1967 and probably since the war.

Even under the Labour government in March 1979 the Northern Ireland Office presented, in its evidence to the European Commission on Human Rights against the NIGRA case, the argument that the decriminalisation of homosexuality endangers the family and children. Such an argument is clearly not specific to the "Six Counties".

If these ideas were around then, they are sure to be around under Thatcher. But the decisive thing is that there is



a peg around which an anti-gay offensive will naturally hang itself. That peg will be the trial of executive members of the Paedophile Information Exchange some time in the beginning of 1981. This trial will last for many weeks. The press will take it up day in and day out.

When the gutter press start spreading the dirt, back-benchers will start calling for tough measures, queer bashers will reach for their flick knives, there will be a public outcry which will give the police chiefs a long awaited chance to let all hell loose, conspiracy to corrupt public morals will for the first time have popular consent and the DPP will start investigating all gay organisations with a view to its possible application, a Judge faced with a lesbian mother will reel back with twice as much horror as before and finally the government itself will respond, the champion of populist bigotry once more. How it will respond is unclear, perhaps instructions to social administrators and education authorities to root out the gays who could be 'corrupting' children? Anti-gay legislation? There is no way of predicting precisely how they will react. They probably aren't aware of the trial yet. All one can be sure about is that when there is a bigoted outcry a right populist government ignores it at its peril and has everything to gain from responding to it.

Fighting back

I have painted a bleak picture. But is there anything we can do about it? I propose no strategy for the gay community here. The purpose of this article is to define the problems which any strategy must be designed to meet. However there are certain things which any such strategy must include.

In the first place it is a paramount necessity for the gay community to educate itself on the issues of child sexuality and paedophilia and to initiate a debate in the sexual politics movements, the left and ultimately the labour movement on these questions in preparation for the PIE trial. Secondly it is important for the gay community to be on the offensive with considerable outside support when that trial starts. If it is to be isolated and passive it will simply run for cover. Thirdly it is important that a comprehensive legal and physical defence apparatus is established within the gay community well before the trial begins.

The Campaign Against Public Morals exists to win support for the defendants in the trial and is very much concerned in the first task. It is very important that more gay activists involve themselves in the activities of this campaign.



As for the second task, NIGRA has provided us with an opportunity for an offensive gay campaign this year. It is almost certain that the European Commission has come out in favour of decriminalisation of homosexuality in the "Six Counties". It is equally certain that Thatcher will not be eager to implement that judgement. With a government in contravention of a Commission on human rights it should be possible to build a mass campaign for the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the "Six Counties" and in Scotland. Such a campaign could have significant labour movement support. It is winnable.

If we can force the government to implement these demands before the trial they will be far less likely to go on an all out offensive against us. Even if we don't, a campaign that has a mass character at the time of the trial will give the gay community that much more confidence and support to meet the challenge. It would be criminal in the present circumstances not to seize and make the most of this opportunity; criminal not only in terms of our responsibilities to our sisters and brothers in the "Six Counties", but also in terms of our own self-defence.

So all is not lost. This will be a critical period. We have to play our cards right or we will be sunk.



BLOOLIPS

MEN

McKay, Spanish Queen, cot

BRIXTON FAERIES are:

Judge, Policeman, Ambu

ter Bradley

Wyer, Am

Clifford

an, Cottage

Terry Crabtree

Lawyer, Davidson,

Richard McCance

Spanish Queen, C

Bill Thornycroft

Ian Towns

Jones and Ron Buge

ifford

THE SEXUAL OUTLAW

OVAL HOUSE PRESENTS

"MEN"

BY STEPHEN HOLT

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9.00 BRITISH PREMIERE OF STEPHEN HOLT'S 'MEN'

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Acting It Out

GAY COMMUNITY THEATRE

Emmanuel Cooper

No other area of gay culture has flourished quite so dramatically as gay theatre, most of which is deeply rooted in the gay community. It offers not only the collective strength and support for the people (mostly men) working in the theatre group, but also provides the opportunity for sexual and political themes to be explored which relate directly to the gay experience. In this article I want to look at some recent productions in London, the ideas they put forward and their contribution to our political consciousness.

That small scale, politically based fringe theatre should flourish at all at the time of recession and cut-backs is a further testament to the strength of the commitment. While West End commercial theatres stand empty for lack of suitable shows and keen audiences, or managements turn to small-scale cheap productions — "Establishment Fringe" — the committed fringe continues to draw crowds: irony of ironies — Wyndhams Theatre is currently showing (May 1980) 'Accidental Death of an Anarchist', the 'Belt and Braces' fringe production aimed originally at politicising audiences anywhere except in London's West End. Whatever its shortcomings as a play, it is a thousand times better than most junk on offer.

Political fringe and commercial theatre whether on a large, West End scale or on a low budget have very little in common. Unlike commercial productions, the actors, writers and helpers in the fringe and community theatre thrive on commitment rather than profit. Actors are rarely famous or 'stars', many have little or no professional training, but all perform in parts in which they believe: it is the theatre of life not of make-believe. In conventional theatre, fascists may speak socialist lines, racists may declare their lack of prejudice, a homosexual may play a heterosexual (all too often), but if such play-acting exists in the fringe it is done openly: there is a very different relationship between actor and play.

To start with groups come together through a series of shared beliefs even if these are not clearly stated. In *Gay Left* No. 7, members of Gay Sweatshop described why they were (or were not) members of the company. Though as

individuals they expressed different ideas, these overlapped in huge and important areas. All of them wanted their gayness to be central to the plays they were doing and they wanted to work with openly gay men and women. As the most established openly gay company, Gay Sweatshop has a reputation for well presented, innovative plays which touch upon areas of our lives in a direct and often moving way. Sweatshop also has a political commitment which is central to the work they do. This was particularly evident in the recent play 'Who Knows'.

Written and performed by women and men under 21, the play looked at the problems for young people of 'coming out' to friends and parents. It is a play aimed particularly at young people and intended to be performed in schools and youth clubs to question conventional notions of sexuality and the stereotyping of butch and femme. (Reviewed by Philip Derbyshire, *Gay Left* No. 9.)

"But aren't you just preaching to the converted?" was a comment from one member of the audience in the discussion after the performance I saw, as if we all felt so sure and smug about the tender and delicate areas with which the play was concerned, that we need not speak of it again. Rightly there were objections to this attitude — converted we may be, sure and confident we rarely are. Serious treatment given to the very real problems of 'Coming Out' is rare — and very welcome.

Like Sweatshop, "Bloopips" is a professional company who earn their living from their performances. The Bloopips production "Lust in Space" incorporates gay humour in a cabaret format. 'Lust' has a thin plot and though the title is clever, it does not have, like most of the gay fringe, even a hint of lust. "Six nutty men who have opted for a stockpot of pantomime, punk rock, ballet, Busby Berkely, Bette Davis and Bette Bourne" was the description in the press release, and seems fair and adequate. The all male company sings, dances and speaks to a plot of wild and zany fantasy, pausing only to adjust their exotic and improbable asexual space-like drag costumes culled from the tat of Portobello Road or the leftovers of a wild punk party.

Bloopips demand commitment: this is gay entertainment by a gay group for a gay audience. The tone is high, if tatty camp — no high class Chelsea Drag Ball numbers here — which exudes the sort of gutsy enthusiastic atmosphere to which we can relate. There is never the feeling of a gap between actors and audience which has to be bridged. We feel involved because this is a part of our lives we are watch-

ing even if it is disguised in fantasy and wrapped up in glittering tinsel.

Both of the other two groups 'Brixton Faeries' and 'Sexual Outlaw Workshop' are community based, and both perform works they have written centred on their own experience.

Brixton Faeries production 'Gents' employs much of the same sort of high camp as 'Bloodlips' but the theme is inter-leaved with more 'straight' theatre. Set in an old-fashioned underground gentlemen's toilet, 'Gents' is a direct political intervention which deals with areas of gay men's sexuality most people would like to forget; it looks at how gay men are lured, mesmerized and even terrified by cottages. It is probably true to say that cottaging is still the way most gay men make contact: for most of them cottaging is not a tremendously exciting liberating experience, but one fraught with fears — being seen by friends, arrested by the police, or perhaps most importantly an aspect of sexual expression they would rather suppress. Judging by the way many men scuttle away once orgasm is achieved, it does not give the sort of lingering pleasure we usually associate with sex.

For men who live in a supportive gay society and who feel reasonably confident about their sexuality, cottaging can offer the chance of a casual pick-up, a quick and exciting orgasm; a sort of icing sugar layer on a rich, and on the whole satisfying life. Cottaging can also be seen to challenge the assumptions we have about right and wrong sex, in or out of relationships (or bed) — an expression of the sexual outlaw, in total defiance of society's views on sex. Yet for most men, their expectations of cottaging is minimal even if their fantasies are high, and it remains a furtive and secret activity.

'Gents' is based in the utterance of a judge that "without police vigilance these gays will be holding parties in our public toilets", and it attempts to look at ways in which cottages have been — and still are — used and attitudes people have to them. The ending, logically enough, takes place in a toilet, now transformed by chandeliers and decorations, into the party of the year.

Rightly 'Gents' did not attempt to say that any aspect of cottaging is wrong, and its refusal to moralize was one of its greatest strengths. Equally, its exposure of methods of police entrapment and their condemnation was important. What 'Gents' did not do was deal with the problems and contradictions of men whose only contact with others is through cottaging. The celebratory ending, of a party in a dark and dank cottage seemed to me a long way from any sort of sexual liberation.

A similar theme was explored by the Sexual Outlaw Workshop: following the model of John Rechy's book 'The Sexual Outlaw', they set about comparing the ideas of police harassment and persecution of gay men with those of sexual liberation in a series of alternative sketches, posed and counter-posed, eliciting from the audience strong images of fear and pleasure. Beautifully presented, the Sexual Outlaw Workshop were setting out quite specifically to argue a political case. On the one hand, there was life as it could be such as the innocence and excitement of childhood sexuality, the joy of discovering that other people of the same sex could share your interests, or the thrills of a sexual encounter on Hampstead Heath. Opposed to this was the heavy hand of the parent, incurring anger and implanting guilt, or the harassment by the police of gays on Clapham Common, or the entrapment of men outside the Colcherne.

All the situations — beautiful or ugly — were based on actual incidents and elicited from the audience powerful emotional responses; yet, the content had been limited by the style and presentation of the piece. It left a feeling of impressions rather than a strongly argued case.

Which brings me to the final play presented by the Oval House, 'Men' by Stephen Holt. Like 'Bent' by Martin Shearman, which has been a success in the West End, 'Men' is a more conventional theatrical experience, with one credited author who has written a traditional play with a plot, which

leads us in, carries us along and brings us to a conclusion. It is not the form of 'Men' which challenges traditional theatre, but its content and the way it is produced. Unlike 'Bent' which is written by an openly gay man, but performed by men who did not state their sexuality, 'Men' was a specifically gay production and one to which we could respond without ambiguity.

Set in the seedy Broadway Central Hotel in New York in 1973, 'Men' describes the meeting of two men. One is young and handsome; a telephone worker who visits the 'men's room' of the hotel to meet men and have quick sex, or even (hopefully) to talk to and make friends with men. The other man is older — 'an aging queen'. He lives in the hotel, forced by circumstances to 'slum it'. Both men are presented very much as stereotypes — old/young, ugly/handsome, yet as the play progresses these stereotypes are busted wide apart. The 'old queen' is confident, kindly and sympathetic, the 'handsome youth' is lonely isolated and desperate. Gradually the two come to recognize their own needs, their own desires and, as in a traditional love story, go off together, not quite into a glorious sunset, but certainly into a 'happy ending'.

It is the way Stephen Holt has constructed his play, as well as its message which gives it such a positive glow. Scenes of the young man meeting studs and disappearing into the lavatory shows a character whose sexuality is anything but liberated. Everyone might like to use him, but no one wants to give him anything in return. It is a picture of the desperation of cottaging very different from that presented in 'Gents'. In 'Men' the scene is apparently set for the two types to hate each other. Each seems so hooked up with themselves that they cannot hook up to anyone else. Yet slowly they move together in a series of sideways lurches, and to our amazement and pleasure 'get it together'. It is a play deeply rooted in homosexual experience, which has been closely observed and lived.

With the exception of 'Men', Gay Sweatshop and Bloodlips, the other productions are by people whose relationship with theatre is non-professional. They choose theatre because it offers a framework for the statement of ideas and the exploration of new ways in which they can be expressed.

Do such plays and entertainments extend or deepen and affirm our political consciousness, and our awareness of ourselves as gay? I would strongly argue that they do — and they do this in two major ways. Firstly, they are deeply rooted in the gay movement. They look at our fears, desires, activities and feelings, and by openly expressing them enable us to recognize the areas we have in common, and so break down the isolation many of us experienced and still do experience. Such works speak to us directly as gays and help us gain collective support and recognition for ourselves and the 'identity' we choose to express.

Secondly, community based theatre challenges the conventional notion of culture in a capitalist society: it offers us a positive alternative not based on commerce or the images we find oppressive. There is a strong tradition of ordinary informal theatre stretching back to medieval street theatre, and encompassing en route the Globe and the Music Hall. It is this tradition, largely lost to commercial entrepreneurs and the expression of ideas and values of a bourgeois elite that low cost, community based theatre can regain.

All the productions I saw spoke directly and positively about being gay and all reflected the ideas of gay liberation and sexual politics. All are important "expressions of the hopes, aspirations, fears and gut feelings of gay people" which contribute to and enrich our lives.



Making It Gay

Nocturnes for the King of Naples

by Edmund White

Andre Deutsch, 1980, £3.95

Review by Simon Watney

In this year's Marx Memorial Lecture, Raymond Williams argued for a firm distinction between the concepts of commitment and alignment as they are applied to writing. He located the idea of 'commitment' within the context of the Romantic ideal of the artist/writer who demands freedom of expression, but only within the confines of a given market economy, which is simply identified with Society. The idea thus confuses a notion of creative autonomy with control over the conditions of creativity. It assumes a freedom to choose in the first place, as if the writer were somehow placing him or herself outside the historical constraints of language and its organisation into discrete literatures, or modes of writing.

Against this conveniently vague idea of abstract 'commitment' — (commitment to what?) — Williams counterposed the firmer concept of 'alignment', implying as it does the construction of the *social* individual in and through language. Alignment is thus understood as a *conscious* commitment to social reality, often painful and contradictory, by which the writer recognises that he or she is always held in a set of specific social relations, published or unpublished, celebrated or unknown. It thus signifies a positive proposition concerning the writer's relation to the actual market-place of literature and the rest of society — including language — rather than a merely individualistic assertion of an illusory independence.

I find this a particularly useful distinction when trying to think about the vexing question of Gay Literature as posed by Edmund White's *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*. In this review I want to consider some current attitudes towards gay and lesbian writing, and to see how they relate to this book.

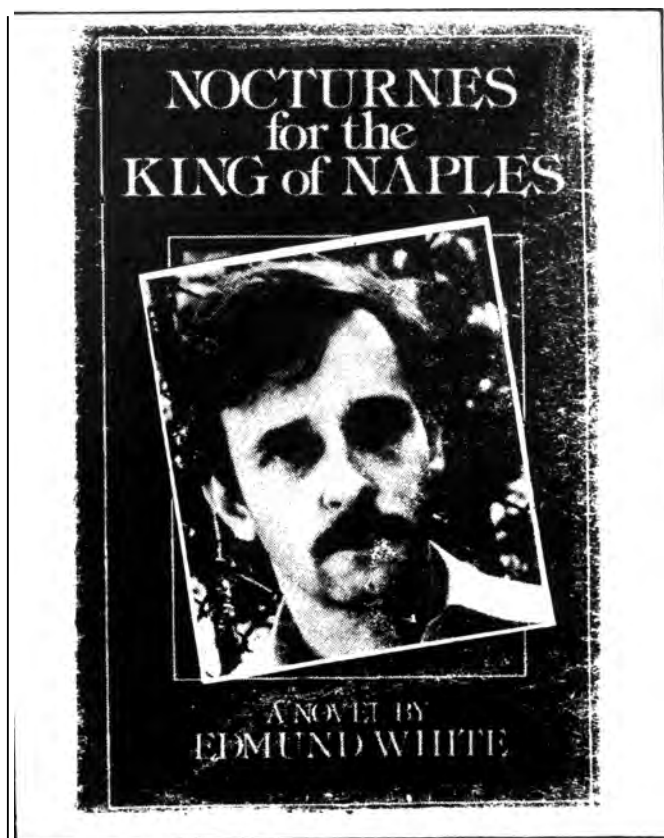
As the result of a particular series of readings of the work of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault it has become fashionable in some quarters to propose the existence of specific and self-sufficient homosexual 'discourses', or modes of thinking and writing (see for example the contributions of Serge Leclair, Helen Cixous and others in *Homosexualities and French Literature*, Cornell, 1980). There are two major shortcomings to this theory. Firstly, it requires a prior belief in some totally autonomous "homosexual consciousness", which Eric Bentley dismisses in his contribution to the above mentioned anthology, as an example of gay self-hatred which ultimately serves to justify and validate the exclusion of homosexuality as if this were the result of some universal, timeless, and linguistically constituted gay 'nature'. Following a particular direction in French feminist analysis, the use of language by gays is seen to be primarily determined by our attitudes to our bodies rather than our places in society.¹ The category of homosexuality is thus treated as if it were natural rather than historical, a view which is reinforced by a theory of linguistics which treats language as a set of laws which supposedly govern us entirely, as if language preceded society. The traditional omission of language from explanations of social structure and its determinants has become replaced with a model in which language is the fundamental determinant. And since language is believed to be biologically determined, all possibility of political action is ruled out.

Secondly this argument confuses the transformations of certain ranges of shared experience into recognisable styles of writing, with the notion of some kind of ontological gay literary essence. The styles of such widely differing writers as Ronald Firbank and Jean Genet for example might thus be

regarded as evidence of a shared and intrinsic gay 'discourse', rather than as responses to similar structures of oppression. It is in this context that I am sure that *Nocturnes* will be used to exemplify the thesis that there is in fact such a thing as a unitary homosexual style of writing, which could in turn be regarded as the lowest common denominator of an equally autonomous and unitary Gay Literature. This is the inevitable result of Structuralist criticism, which almost invariably privileges its quest for systematic rules or laws or structures in whatever material it is being applied to — film, poetry, the novel — over and above the more complex issues of actual usage and audience.

We need to ask then whether our utterances, written or spoken, are simply and mechanically generated by 'immutable' laws of language and biology. For at the heart of this approach to literature there lies an implicit yet fundamental distinction between the individual and the social. The traditional Romantic image of the 'committed' writer as someone who is utterly in control of language is inverted into a new but equally idealist picture in which the writer is utterly controlled by language. The individual and the social can never meet because the entire method of critical analysis is structured around the assumption of their separateness. The whole question of whether the 'committed' writer controls language, or whether the 'structure' of language controls the writer seems to me to be fundamentally misplaced. What we need to appreciate are the direct and indirect ways in which language, socially produced, controls and organises our various conflicting views of the world. We shape language, and through it we shape one another.

These are important considerations when coming on to consider a book which is as much concerned with style and language as this. White's *Nocturnes* are related by an anonymous narrator, and all concern his relationship with an older man, the King of Naples of the book's title. Each of the eight Nocturnes dramatises a different aspect of the younger man's identity, and chronicles his overwhelming and at times obsessive sense of loss, which is underlined by the fact that it was he who ended the relationship. For it was only after renouncing his pedagogic former lover that the 'kept-boy' falls in love with him. Not that he needs much keeping, since both men are possessed of seemingly limitless private incomes



(euphemism for inherited wealth), and are limitlessly free to roam around the globe repeating bon mots which are understood as evidence of "intellect", of which much is made.

The Nocturnes, then, constitute a series of reflections or meditations upon the not entirely unfamiliar themes of lost love, ageing, self-awareness, hedonism, and moral authority. All this is couched in a gorgeous language which luxuriates in metaphor, analogy, and more or less arcane cultural references — "myth". White's style amply corresponds to the aesthetic aspects of gay sexuality which he describes, and the way in which the actual conditions of our sexuality — exclusion, marginalisation, oppression, — are themselves so often aestheticised. The plenitude of language reflects the "congeries of bodies" with whom the narrator seeks temporary consolation throughout the book, consolation which we are obliged to consider false. For this is after all, a realist novel. The narrator is seen to learn, fitfully, from his experiences. Yet the language does not learn. It dominates: "My dear, since I left you I have heard so much talk, all studded with such a profusion of detail, gloves of mail slapping at my face". The talk may slap; the words continually caress. It seems as if there is almost an inverse ratio at work between the sparseness of the narrative and the cornucopia of styles, until one realises that it is precisely on the level of style that most of the book's meaning resides.

Nocturnes for the King of Naples is a book about style. From its very title we are unmistakably located within the domain of Chopin and of Whistler, both of whom produced "Nocturnes" — in music and in paint — which were specifically concerned with textures, with particular effects of musical and visual tonality, and their associated meanings. Edmund White has written elsewhere that gay identity "was once much more tenuous. It was an illegitimate existence that took refuge in language".² In the same essay he goes on to argue that gays today "have no need for indirection, now that their suffering has been eased and their place in society adumbrated if not secured ..." I'm not at all sure that I share his confidence, which would appear to reflect the relative security of the comfortable American ghettos rather than any real appreciation of the crucial roles which continue to be played by the sexual categorisations in our society.

Moreover, *Nocturnes* dramatically illustrates the difficulties of breaking with the learned habits of indirection of which, he argues, we have no need. Indeed, in many respects it represents a kind of apotheosis of the literature of indirection which gay writers in the past were obliged to construct between the interstices of the heterosexual world of publishing. Angela Carter has pointed out in *The London Review of Books* (17 April 1980) that "the fin has come a little early this siecle and anomie is all the rage ..." This is certainly the impression given by White's *Nocturnes*, with their studied air of 'Decadence'. Or is it simply that the voices of the last fin-de-siecle have not yet died away? On a literal level we find the narrator in *Nocturnes* actually helping one of his Italian friends with the unlikely task of translating Whistler's *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, that handbook of late nineteenth century 'Aesthetic Movement' style and values. Whistler of the title, Whistler of the Venetian nocturnes, Whistler whose art, however "exquisite" was the province of a small minority whose taste, as I have written elsewhere, "seemed to be evidence of their social superiority".³

This seems to me to be the danger in *Nocturnes*, of forging a kind of highest common denominator style from Proust, Genet, Firbank, and so on, which is then triumphantly proclaimed as "Gay" in some supposedly useful sense of the word. What we must realize is that such writers were not simply reflecting some shared "homosexual consciousness", but were signifying their individual alignments within differing yet equally oppressive societies and literary traditions. At the same time this ornately architected style fits uneasily with the more or less conventional tell-all realist gay novel plot around which it is bracketed. Oscar Wilde once observed that Art is above Ethics⁴ and Edmund White's deliberate

aestheticism seems at odds with the moral drift of the actual story, the achievement of self-knowledge, the shattering of illusions.

Across the text floats the unseen image of "you", endlessly regretted, alternately Tristan, Osiris, Sheherezade's Sultan — the absent King of Naples — the embodiment of Desire. Like the figure of Bernard in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, the King dominates the life of the book. Yet at the end it is the narrator, as the young Prince Ferdinand in *The Tempest*, who will in fact be King of Naples, thanks to the not so rough magic of the long departed Prospero figure, who is seen to have controlled events all along. For art is not, after all, above ethics. And perhaps that extreme aestheticism which is such a mark of Edmund White's extraordinary book has its own role, at least in the daemonology of contemporary American fiction.

For the narrow and ultimately illusory commitment to art for Art's sake may also involve a positive alignment to something else. The British playwright David Edgar has recently noted the emergence of a new form of right-wing consensus politics across traditional party lines in the United States. He argues (*The Listener*, 8 May 1980) that this new consensus is constructed around social rather than economic issues, such that "the Northern working class Democrat may well disagree with his Republican employer over social security and preserving jobs; but they will be at one in opposing affirmative action on gay rights" and so on. Very much the same process may be detected in Britain at the moment, and helps explain the tenacious popularity of the present Thatcher government. Hence the significance of contemporary attacks on "Decadence" and the trans-Atlantic stress on the 'traditional' values of hearth and home.⁵

It is in this context that White's *Nocturnes* become especially interesting. Far from being arbitrary or rule-bound, language is the most accurate and sensitive barometer of social change. In his seemingly perverse desire to reconstitute some kind of ersatz gay argot from the various indirect chroniclers of our collective oppression, it may well be that he is pointing the way towards a positive re-evaluation of the past. We do not sit down to write in a social vacuum. If style is the man, as the saying goes, then the man need not be a Romantic (or for that matter Neo-Conservative) Individualist. White's deliberate Aestheticism may take many of its sources from a period when culture was defined in opposition to any idea of social significance. This is not to say that these same sources cannot be refunctioned to present an almost Utopian vision, based on the actual experience of being gay, which, at least on the level of style, breaks through the average novel's dreary commitment to the collation of 'facts'. This is particularly challenging in Britain where, for reasons which are far from clear, Gay Liberation has stimulated almost no fictional work of any merit whatsoever.



Nocturnes for the King of Naples may be read, as I have suggested, in many different ways. As an exemplification of "homosexual consciousness", as a resuscitated attempt at Art for Art's Sake, as a highly 'literary' roman-a-clef, and so on. It may also be read as a significant break with the crudely 'committed' nature of so much gay fiction, which has rarely done more than piratise the conventions of traditional melodrama, as if one can transform a reactionary genre simply by 'making it gay'. Rather than wasting time looking for some imaginary pre-existent gay 'discourse', we need to create new literary forms which will be adequate to our new experience. *Nocturnes* seems to me to be a step in that direction.

Notes

- 1 See for example, *Women's Exile*, an interview with Luce Irigaray, in *Ideology and Consciousness*, No. 1, May 1977.

- 2 Edmund White, *The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality*, in *The State of the Language*, California, 1980.
 3 Simon Watney, *English Post Impressionism*, Studio Vista/Eastview, 1980.
 4 Oscar Wilde, *The Critic As Artist*, London, 1891.
 5 This is also reflected in the newly fashionable study of Sociobiology, which purports to trace the "instinctive" roots of such institutions as marriage, class, and so on. Not surprisingly perhaps it has recently come up with the obliging 'discovery' that homosexuality may not be unnatural after all. There seems to me to be a significant relation between this sociobiological picture of an instinctive homosexual human nature — a souped up Eugenics for the 1980's — and the Gay Structuralist quest for a "homosexual consciousness" with attendant 'discourses'.

Who Is Eddie Linden?

Who is Eddie Linden?

A Biography by Sebastian Barker

Reviewed by Tom Woodhouse

I once passed a pleasant hour at *Gay's The Word* bookshop drinking tea and watching the other customers. One of them was a rather febrile man with sandy hair and a thick Scottish accent. This was Eddie Linden, the subject of the book *Who is Eddie Linden?* He came to *Gay's The Word* quite a lot at one time and then suddenly never came back. That seems very like the story of his life as presented in his biography, latching on to something or someone, exhausting it or them and then leaving; Hampstead Heath, Piccadilly Circus, *The Partisan* in Soho culminating in his relentless pursuit of the young poet Brendan Brimfull. Brendan Brimfull is just one of a series of names that sound like characters out of an Anthony Trollope novel. Perhaps I'm a cynic but I was never very convinced of the reality of Sir Terence Tenderlight, Cruella Epstein, Dorothy Dawn et al.

Eddie Linden was the illegitimate son of an Irish labourer called Kelly and an unnamed Scottish woman. For eleven years he lived with foster parents, Eddie and Jennydale Linden, these were the happy years. From the age of eleven his adolescence was a series of moves from one institution to another. Having grown up an illiterate, Catholic bastard, he becomes a communist and finally a British Rail worker in London organising Catholics for Nuclear Disarmament — that other CND.

Who is Eddie Linden? is superficially the usual story about a kid with all the disadvantages in the world who overcomes them to achieve worldly success, in the case of Eddie Linden, founding and editing the poetry magazine *Aquarius*. There are elements of this theme in the book, the little man with the massive ego driven by his desire to return to his place of birth a "success". The title is *Who is Eddie Linden?* and the concern of the book is to create an identity for a man who feels he has no social identity. He fails in his attempts to discover that identity could be through institutions, his family (real and adopted), the Young Communist League, the Catholic Church, and the CND. Perhaps he resolved this dilemma through poetry, we aren't told this as the book ends on the night of the opening party for the new magazine. We are simply told that everyone is there, "the man from the Spectator held a motorcycle helmet under his arm and read comic books". The last line of the book is "I had found a foothold in the world". What that foothold was and what he made of it we are not to know.

If the concern of biography is simply to reveal the author's or in this case the author's subjects' personal view of themselves with little reference to their social and historical

situation then I cannot fault this book. As it is, I feel that biography fails in its task if it does not to some extent set its subject within his or her time. Eddie Linden lived within the homosexual subculture of the fifties and sixties but all what was a major part of his life is never described in any detail, just a few passing references and a moral condemnation of cruising on Hampstead Heath at night. "I saw that dark filthy wood, where all kinds of pornography was going on; and I saw all the men who dressed up to attract one another, to hide their fear of ugliness, their fear of growing old, their fear of rejection, their fear of turning into tramps." Eddie Linden was an activist in the CND but we hear little of that or of the Committee of 100 except "the middle-aged butch female summed up everything in my life that I hated most. What did I care about Pat Arrowsmith's point of view? ... But the Committee of 100 thought to go one better than music ... Pat Arrowsmith managed to get herself arrested".

Who is Eddie Linden? has been a much acclaimed biography. The story of an almost illiterate working class man who founded an influential poetry magazine is both amazing and applaudable. I read it as a gay socialist who found the bleak view of homosexuality and the juxtaposition of communism with Catholicism disconcerting. That for me the book holds out no hope cannot be a criticism of it. But that Eddie Linden seems to reject many of the things that I hold so dear was at least an opportunity to think again about what I do believe, and to affirm it all over again. Not a comfy read.



Caged In

La Cage Aux Folles — Edward Molinaro
Messidor — Alain Tanner

Review by Keith Birch

What do we expect from films that use gay people centrally as characters? No such film in the past few years has met with very positive responses even though we flood along to the cinemas to see them — *Fox*, *Sebastiane*, *Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, *Nighthawks*. It often seems that the wider the commercial audience appeal is meant to be, the more objectionable are the gay characters and relationships portrayed. The superficially 'liberal' approach of a film such as *A Different Story* is ultimately just as negative about gay sexuality.

Those films which have emerged from some political contact with the Gay Movement have usually had a narrow focus of object or intention and could not meet the demands placed on them to represent gays positively, as the criticisms of *Nighthawks* illustrated. Until the range of films that present gay characters and relationships is very much wider, our criticisms of the few images we get are bound to be strong.

La Cage Aux Folles has been a great commercial success. However, it has divided opinion amongst many of us about the way the characters are presented in terms of traditional stereotypes. The initial review that appeared in the magazine *Time Out* for example was a positive one, saying that the film was funny in the context of its traditional farce format and because of its sympathetic treatment of the stereotypes. After strong adverse reactions from some gay readers, a second reviewer now dismisses the film for being cheap camp and "very nearly very objectionable".

The most important criticism of the film is not so much the stereotyped nature of the two central characters, Zaza and Renato, and whether they are handled sympathetically or not. The problem stems more from the format itself, that of theatre farce, and the film very much shows its stage origins. What this form does is to reduce everything to one level of humour. The central gay characters, even though projected sympathetically (in fact much more so than the heterosexual couple), always remain the objects of the audience's laughter. Farce makes all its characters two dimensional by distancing real social contexts and causes. Everything is presented as natural, nothing is really challenged.

At a few moments the film does almost break out of this straitjacket and the humour operates on a much more subtle level. The scene in which the drag queen, Zaza, is being taught how to behave like a real man — how to butter his toast and how to walk like John Wayne — could be subversive and challenging to the 'natural' signs of masculinity. However, this is undermined within the terms of the film, so that in fact it is Zaza's failure which is presented as the object of the audience's laughter.

La Cage Aux Folles exposes clearly some of the conflicts within what could be described as traditional gay male culture. The use of camp can be challenging and self-affirming — but it can also be self-oppressive and despising in its attitudes towards women and 'femininity'. This film uses camp, particularly with regard to the latter point — making laughter of the supposed feminine emotions of Zaza and his perpetual near hysteria. The tight use of the masculine/feminine opposition in the relationship between Renato and Zaza, even though they are presented positively, means that it always comes across very much on heterosexual terms. In the end, the film's failure to challenge any of the values and ideas of heterosexuality makes it disappointing, though it could help to explain its great commercial success.



Zaza Albin (MICHEL SERRAULT), left, is astonished to find that the apartment has been redecorated by his friend, Renato Baldi (UGO TONAZZI), right, in this scene from "LA CAGE AUX FOLLES" ("Birds of a Feather"), a United Artists release. CAF-406

La Cage Aux Folles

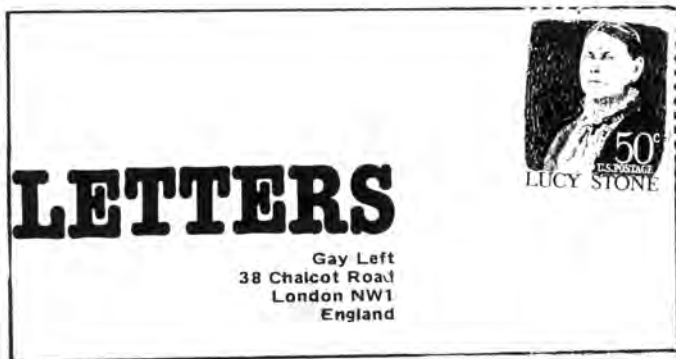


Messidor

Messidor is a very different kind of film, whose appeal may be sadly more limited. It tells almost no story at all, there being no strong narrative direction to the film. We observe the relationship of two young women who meet while hitch-hiking and decide to continue journeying together with no real aim. The film moves slowly as they talk and pass through the Swiss countryside. Their points of contact with other people form a critique of the bourgeois society they are trying to move away from. Jeanne is nearly raped after they take a lift with two men. Reward for other lifts is intimated to be sex. Begging for food is met with blind disbelief and rejection. The journey finally ends in a pointless tragedy of killing.

Its long, panning shots and seeming lack of narrative interest, however, concentrate attention on the development of the women's relationship. The effect is challenging and gripping in a strange way. The differing backgrounds of Jeanne and Marie are explored, one a middle class student, the other a shop assistant. Strong emotional bonds grow between them as they travel on the road and from their common alienation in a complacent society. Their relationship is almost shattered at one point when Jeanne tells Marie that she wants to make love with her. Marie violently rejects this, but they are soon reconciled and the film leaves the question open.

The two women are not social rebels in a positive sense at the beginning, either as feminists or through politics. But as they continue their journey, moving further outside the bounds of middle class Swiss society, they inevitably become 'criminals' and are on the run. Unlike the closed format of *La Cage Aux Folles*, *Messidor's* openness can present a challenge to its audience's assumptions.



Personal Politics

Dear Gay Left,

This letter has been provoked by 'Self and Self-Image' (GL No 10) in particular, and the general development of *Gay Left* over the past year. These comments are not a reply to the collective statement as such but a response to the trend away from 'politics' to moralistic individualism. The article in question was the extreme of this development, a development to the obsession of the individual to the exclusion of any analysis of the out-side world or suggestions of how we attempt to change society/our-selves.

What particularly irks me is that this seems to be happening at a time when it is most inappropriate. Here we are in 1980 with a Thatcher Government launching an attack on the left, gays and the working class, and all GL can do is ponder the contradiction of enjoying rough trade while being an avid fan of Edward Carpenter's concept of comradesly love. I'm not saying that this sort of discussion is irrelevant but I do feel that GL should have some form of priorities and political perspective on what issues are vital at this point of time.

The collective's statement's opening five paragraphs are the only attempt to give any political reasoning for the need for the article, when it moralistically tut-tuts at the organised left

"adopting a narrow class line on Women's issues, for example, restrictions on abortions are seen solely in terms of their effects on working class women, and gay politics are seen as no more than a matter of civil rights"

and righteously notes

"the first effects of Thatcherism have made themselves felt, and the left has found itself disarmed in the face of massive attacks ... There has been a tendency to turn away from considerations of subjectivity of how we live and experience our lives, and a reconstruction of traditional left campaigns that ignore whole realms of lived experience".

When I read this I ask myself who it is that's avoiding 'whole realms of lived experience' and who isn't. I would have thought that the effects of Thatcher's Government was quite effective in changing whole realms of lived experience.

To reduce the rise of Thatcherism and re-emergence of the family ideology et al as only notable for making the left less open to take up gay issues is to negate the responsibilities of a socialist gay magazine. The need to appraise, analyse and take part in a discussion on how we as gays are going to react to the present political climate is ignored. With whom and in what forms are we to fight back, GL, it seems, neither knows nor cares. In other words a political analysis of what it will mean for us and how we can best counter a right-wing backlash is totally lacking. I would have thought an appraisal of the rise of the family as an ideological weapon in the manner of Bob Cant's article in the latest issue of *Outcome* would be more appropriate.

GL is after all supposed to be a socialist magazine where the problems of linking the struggle for socialism and the fight for gay liberation are discussed. Most importantly I feel that GL have failed to understand that we are no longer living in a period of expanding liberal tolerance; the out-side world is becoming a lot colder and hostile both for us as socialists and as gays. The left has responded to this by a defensive stance as GL notes and by a debate among itself and with other European groups (the 'Debate of the Decade' is the most obvious of this, but also the latest issue of *International Socialism* carried a debate between the SWP with Spanish and French revolutionary groups). But this is not because the left has "been disarmed", whatever that is supposed to mean, but because they as a movement and as a part of the working class are under attack. In this debate of how to fight back I feel that gays give valuable and important insights and critiques of Thatcher ideology. Instead I fear that GL will

More on Disco Music

Dear Gay Left,

I would like to say a few words about the ongoing debate in *Gay Left* on disco music, which was started off by an article in GL No. 8 titled "In Defence of Disco", and then a letter in GL No. 9 by John Mumford.

Mumford seemed to suggest that there are certain types of music which we gay socialists should like, and certain types we shouldn't. According to him it's O.K. to like punk and reggae because they are "progressive" but we should not like disco because, he said, it is "perpetuative of reactionary, oppressive or exploitative behaviour" and that it has no "real origin amongst ordinary people as their cultural response to their lifestyles that is accessible and participatory".

What I can't understand is how somebody can categorise music in this way; when firstly there is enough overlap in punk/new wave stuff and disco (and in rock'n'roll, rockabilly, country 'n' western, r&b, blues, soul, ska, heavy, indian, classical etc to make it hard to categorise it in the first place; and secondly when music, which is essentially played by individuals and groups, who all differ, is such a personal thing — some individuals and groups like some stuff, others don't and some people hardly like music at all. I don't see why that because you're black you should like reggae, or if you're rebellious you should like punk, or if you're gay and you're a socialist you should like TRB; which is what Mumford is in danger of assuming.

The point is that Mumford fails to gather the central meaning of Dyer's article "In Defence of Disco" which is that capitalism as a mode of production is not a paranoid system of always reinforcing bourgeois values in all its commodities. But capitalism is a chaotic and contradictory system that creates chaos and contradictions with things and with people — like Mumford — and it is precisely for this reason that you can get irony, you get anti-capitalist books, films, music — capitalism can profit out of this in the same way as it can reactionary ideology.

Mumford's reactionary reply to Dyer annoys me because not only does he merely judge people on their cultural appearances, dislikes and likes, which in terms of music are really pretty harmless. But, he also believes that his own personal leisure activities — like listening to punk and reggae, which may for him be fine, ought to be adopted by everyone else if they want to develop "a life style that fits our politics and that draws others into our struggle". Well there must be something wrong with his politics if he holds such moralistic and narrow-minded points of view. And I don't think he'll draw many people into the struggle for socialism with ideas which on the surface may seem very progressive, socialist and libertarian etc but are in fact very authoritarian as regards "personal politics". Such ideas, commonly met on the left, are bound to merely confuse people and put them off politics generally.

No thanks, Mumford, I won't go out and buy a punk outfit, I'll do things "My Way".

Geoff Goss, Norwich

ignore the 'outside' debate and retreat into itself. Making it even more likely that gay issues are demoted by the left and that personal politics and socialist politics will become even more separated off than now. I believe this development is to be to the detriment of both, the straight left becoming just as the label says (Militant, the Maoists and WRP are and always were like this) with its analysis and tactics blunted and distorted by its omission. While the Gay movement will become isolated and inward-looking to a point where making the personal political becomes to mean that personal per se is thought to be 'political'.

When GL was first launched I saw it, and potentially still do, as a chance to clear the wooliness out of the left's debate on sexual politics, opening up the channels between gays and socialists. Now it seems to have retreated into an academic Gay Ghetto, cut off from the socialist debates, from any working class politics, and particularly sadly from the Gay community. I'm not saying that GL should become a GAY Socialist Worker but that it should be a more open and politically involved magazine than it is becoming. I find it increasingly difficult to see whom GL is aimed at. Is it aimed at a debate with the left, at non-socialist gays, clarifying discussion for gay socialists or what? To me the magazine seems to be playing an increasingly marginal role in any of these movements.

As a member of the SWP my political views can be surmised, and it is true that I am prone to defend 'my' organisation when attacked more than is useful or healthy. But I do fear the future both as a socialist and as a gay, and feel that unless channels of debate and discussions are opened up that there is a danger of isolation and defeat. But most importantly I fear the withdrawal of the left and GL from facing the harsher world outside, a retreat away from action and discussions to inward soul-searching of each other's defects. Limiting the potential audience to smaller and purer elites.

The Gay movement has in the past criticised much of the left for being elitist and writing to a small group of militant activists in trade-union jargon, instead in ordinary English and about issues outside the factory floor. It seems to me that this criticism today applies as much to GL as it does to the rest of the left. This is not the time for turning in on ourselves. I fully realise that the points that I make are not a full comprehensive analysis but I hope that they raise issues GL will respond to, of how we are going to react to a period of economic decline and toughening of the political climate.

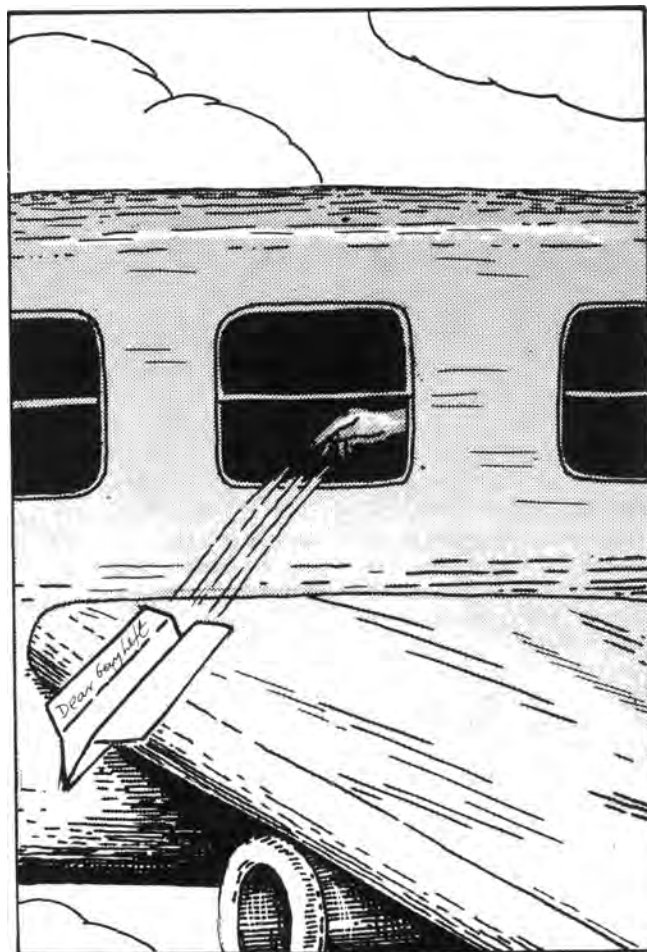
Noel Halifax, London N16

Political Pertinence

Dear Gay Left,

I should like to take issue with you regarding what I see as a shift in the political emphasis of GAY LEFT, particularly in numbers eight and nine. In No 8 you said that "it would be too easy to forget, to fall back into an increasingly strident Left orthodoxy which would make Women and Gays mere auxiliary troops in some romanticised attack on state power, or to try and escape into the dream world of individual solutions. The dialectic has to be maintained, between the personal and the political, between new ways of relating to each other now and the building of organisations that could effectively challenge and change the whole oppressive order. The beginnings of socialism can't wait till after the revolution; they have to happen now in our own immediate personal and political practice."

You found it necessary to repeat this patrician statement in No 9 with the addition that "the Left has found itself disarmed in the face of massive attacks on the gains won by working people over the last thirty years. There has been a tendency to turn away from considerations of subjectivity, of how we live and experience our lives, and a reconstitution of traditional Left campaigns that ignore whole realms of lived experience."



Walter Gurno

My first reaction is to ask: what is this abstraction which you call 'the Left'? It rings of the generalisation that the bourgeois media describe as 'the public' — a sort of autonomous bloc with a consistent and predictable political complexioin. And in what way has 'the Left' been disarmed? — You did not qualify this and I am interested to know what is the substance of your assumption. You then proceed to draw a false equation from the 'popularity' of the writing of Edward Thompson and Sheila Rowbotham without identifying the great political difference between Edward's work and Sheila's - as well as what the quarrel between Sheila and Trotskyism actually is. This is not helped in any way by Jeffrey Weeks' surprisingly cavalier review of Sheila's book. His throwaway comments about Trotskyists being 'eye-strained by the perusal of holy texts' (in comparison to his fine writing on Edward Carpenter) made me go off and read some Lenin and Trotsky to see what he was talking about. For although a member of a 'Leninist sect' I have never read any of this stuff before. I might add that Jeffrey's review did not in any way present Sheila's book in a credible light; instead it reads as an attack on Marxism on the scale of Bertrand Russell's equation:

Yahweh = Dialectical Materialism
 The Messiah = Marx
 The Elect = The Proletariat
 The Second Coming = The Revolution
 The Church = The Communist Party
 Hell = The Punishment of Capitalists
 The Millennium = The Communist Commonwealth

Jokes aside. The reason why I feel scandalised by your comments is that I am myself a member of a Trotskyist organisation and as such I am well aware of the difficulties that this entails. But unlike many people who have found themselves in this position I am not inclined to leave and then spend the rest of my life flinging shit from the sidelines. I am black, gay and born in Jamaica of a poor working class family and so I am not ignorant to the incredible marginalisation in revolutionary organisations of the issues that affect

me personally, and which are the prisms through which I experienced my politicisation. But I feel that I must fight for certain demands *within* the Leninist organisation, for where else do I go? At present, I am in the process of convening the first ever black caucus in the IMG. After being in the organisation for three years, and being very miserable for much of it, I have come to the conclusion that the political issues which I (and the other black comrades in the IMG) experience every day were being subordinated to something called the class struggle — which I always experience as white, male and heterosexual. And whenever there is a resolution on black liberation it is wrapped and packaged (by white comrades who have only an intellectual relation to my oppression) in the familiar trappings of class struggle. So I have come to the conclusion that it is us, black people ourselves, who must discuss, exchange views, political ideas and experiences, and only then will we be able to make effective political interventions and influence the organisation as a whole on ways of making Leninism more creative.

So what I have just described to you is an example of creative, intra-party struggle, where people are altering the parameters of Leninism — a million miles away from the orthodoxy which you insultingly describe as 'The Left', as if all far left organisations can be lumped together in a single category. You must not believe that the work that *Gay Left* is doing is sacrosanct. I, and many other people on the far left have a great deal of respect for the work that the Collective has done over the years, and since I have begun reading the journal my attitude to my own sexuality has changed, manifestly. But I see what I have learnt as something that *must* and *should* affect the political work that I do, and also the relation I have with my organisation. It is not, for me, a signal which at last releases me from the 'orthodoxy' of Trotskyism: it is something which gives me the confidence to make political interventions — such as form a caucus. This *is*

positive, I think, whereas the new emphasis of your journal is a sort of vituperative call for disaffection — as if there were an army from which to disaffect in the first place.

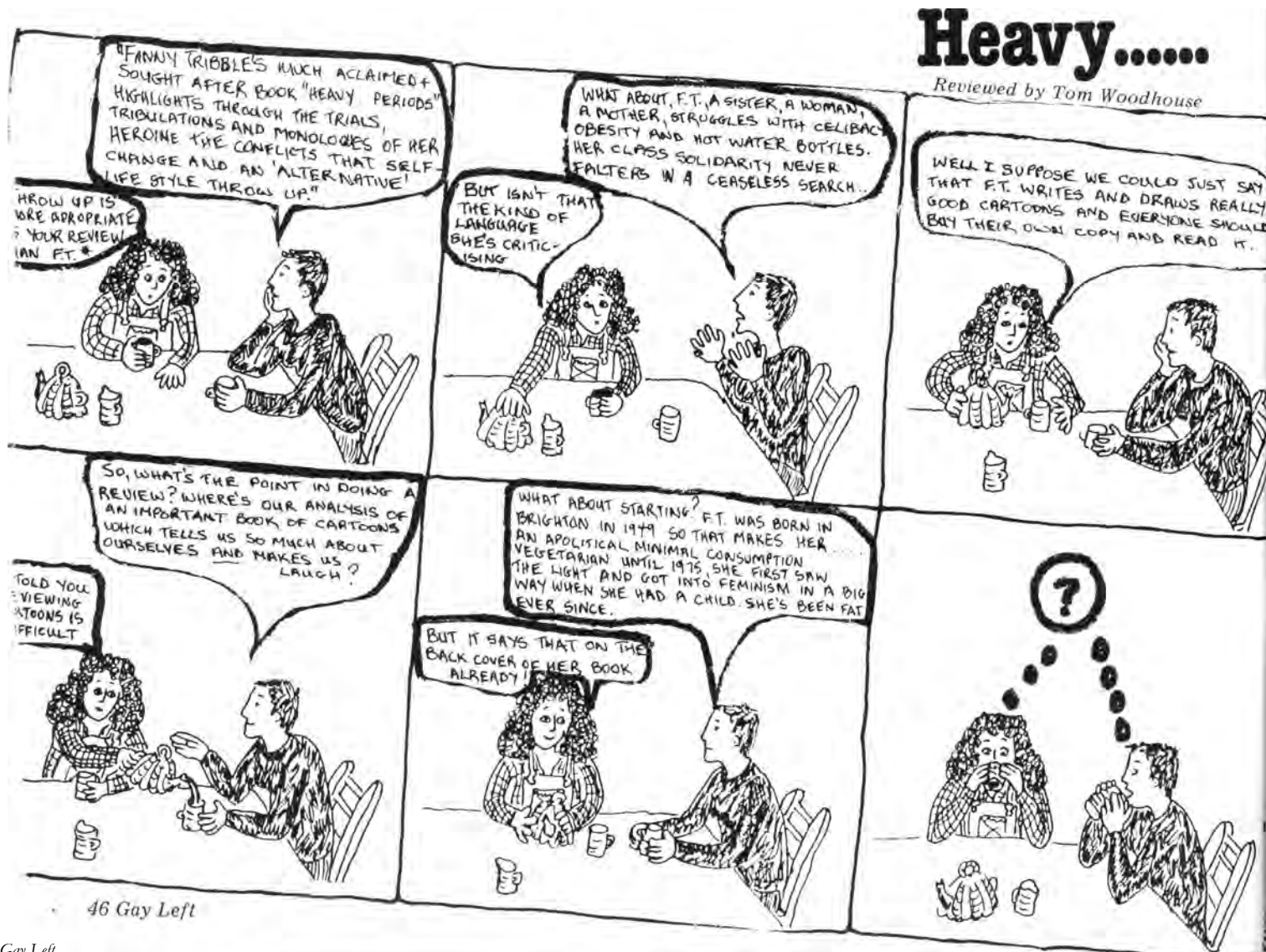
In GL No 8, this near sectarianism revealed itself in glaring contradiction. In the same number you had an article by Jamie Gough, himself a member of the 'orthodox Left' and in his own article saying that "the question of child sexuality points to the need for a socialist revolution. This is not to say that a 'campaign against the age of consent law is not important. A campaign led by young people themselves would be a very sharp way of challenging the whole reactionary ideology which surrounds child sexuality. It is never too soon to start!" This is not strident; nor is saying, as you accuse the left, that the revolution must come first.

As well as this you printed an interview with Pat Arrow-Smith, a pacifist, who stood as a *Socialist Unity* candidate! What is there orthodox about that? We were accused of abandoning Marxism!

So what I shall finally say is that you should reflect, very carefully, upon what exactly do you want *Gay Left* to be. Is it part of the autonomous gay movement which seeks to maintain its political independence as well as placing pressure upon the far left to alter its political perspective? Or is it just a collective devoted to the sacrosanct area of personal politics which is propagated only through the subjective consciousness of its eight members?

I think this is a very important debate for you to have, for it seems to me that the publication of *Beyond the Fragments* has provided fresh credence to your growing hostility to the far left in a way that would be detrimental to the political pertinence of your work.

Errol Francis, Manchester



CHE

CHE invited contributions from individuals and groups on the future of CHE. Gay Left Collective submitted this report.

1. CHE in the eighties needs to alter both its form and its perspectives to be an effective organisation, whatever aims it sets itself, to answer the needs of the gay community, whether social, legal — reform and custody for example, in employment and so on.
2. We feel the present Commission has to deal with the innate contradiction within CHE. Namely, on the one hand between a small group of people who understand and are prepared to campaign for the broader politics involved in any notion of homosexual equality in our society (equality with whom and on what basis is another issue) and, on the other a large percentage of members who need the support of an organisation like CHE as a social lifeline, but resist or feel unable to campaign. The importance of that social lifeline should not be underestimated, as without it most members of CHE would have very few social situations where they could meet other gay people.
3. It can only be by asserting the best of the traditions of an autonomous gay movement that CHE (or any other gay organisation) will be able to tackle the demands placed upon it in the eighties. Unfortunately, it is precisely in this area (the best traditions of autonomy, i.e. flexibility, spontaneity, urgency, anger, creativity and activity) that CHE has failed in the past.
4. The organisation appears top heavy with bureaucratic procedures and a constitution which in itself adds nothing to local initiatives. Indeed, local activity amongst CHE groups miraculously takes place despite an Executive which seems unable to carry through any campaigns effectively or with flair. Those campaigns and initiatives have nearly always occurred outside the framework of CHE. It is a fact that most activists, men and women, are not members of CHE and in trying to represent everybody and everything, CHE's resources are overstretched and eventually ineffective.
5. Because of the inherent contradictions which confront CHE as presently organised, we feel it would be better if CHE concentrated on what it has done best to date: provide a framework in which local groups can continue to meet. These groups should decide for themselves what campaigning they wish to undertake and what kind of central organisation, office and resources they need.
6. The question of what campaigns and what organisation would best be suited to advancing and defending the limited gains of the 70s requires a different organisation and structure to anything CHE could offer.
7. We feel that a federation of all campaigning and self-help groups, one of which would be CHE, would produce a more flexible and dynamic structure than exists within CHE. Groups would be able to affiliate to the main body. Conferences to share experiences, give support and advance campaigns should be called at least twice a year. Criteria for joining the new organisation could be worked out at a founding conference.
8. Gay Left broadly agrees with the closing comments of Jeffrey Weeks' "Come All You Gay Women, Come All You Gay Men" — Gay Left No 4. We believe that a national convention should be called to establish an organisation to replace CHE as a real national federation of groups and individuals. The new federation should be explicitly anti-sexist. It could invite the affiliation of women's groups and of anti-sexist groups on the socialist left (who believe in autonomous movements). But its prime function would be to provide a focus for unity in thought and defence in a gay movement based on creative diversity.

9. The gay movement would then have a two tier structure best adjusted to its present potentialities; a creative, radical, flexible grassroots movement, and a national outlet which would concentrate on the issues which unite rather than divide. The result would not be a panacea. But it might ensure a more secure unity based on differentiation and specialisation in the first place, but working towards a more secure sense of solidarity ultimately.

10. The Federation model would maximise our resources of unity in which groups and individuals could feed their concerns and energies and be an effective campaigning/co-ordinating body. Such an organisation could, we feel, meet the needs of lesbians and gay men in the 80s.

BACK ISSUES

Gay Left No 3

Women in Gay Left, Gays and Class, IS Gay Group, Gay Workers' Movement and usual reviews etc.

Gay Left No 5

Why Marxism, Images of Homosexuality in Film, Lesbian Invisibility, Gays and Fascism, Gay Theatre Past and Present, Politics & Ideology, Gay History, Future of the Gay Movement.

Gay Left No 6

(Gays) In the Balance, The State Repression and Sexuality, Looking At Pornography, Working Class Lesbians, Gays at Work, Motherhood, Fighting Fascism.

Gay Left No 7

Paedophilia Examined, Gay Art, Greece, Northern Ireland, Camp, Tom Robinson, Gay Sweatshop, Nighthawks, Chemical Castration, Reviews.

Gay Left No 8

Personal Politics, In Defence of Disco, Childhood Sexuality and Paedophilia, and Living With Indecency.

Gay Left No 9

Self & Self Image, New Zealand, Gay Activism in California, Hocquenghem, Lesbians in Literature, Masters & Johnson, Fighting Fascism, Gays in Ireland, Reviews of *Faggots*, *Dancer from the Dance*, *Outrageous*, *Word is Out*, *Bent*.

GAY SOCIALIST CONFERENCE

Another Gay Socialist Conference is being planned by the Gay Left Collective for later this year. We hope it will provide a useful forum for exchanging experiences about the projects people are involved in and for discussing the issues and campaigns that confront us. It is one of the few opportunities for lesbians and gay men to discuss the wider context of our activities outside of specific issues. Further details will be available later this autumn in the gay and radical press. It will be held on the weekend of November 22nd-23rd 1980 at Caxton House, St John's Way, London N19.

GAY LEFT 38 CHALCOT ROAD LONDON NW1

GAY LEFT RATES

Inland	£1.00 each
Overseas Airmail	£1.50 or \$3 (Sterling, US or Canadian cheques only)

Make all cheques (Sterling or US or Canadian dollars only) payable to Gay Left, 38 Chalcot Road, London NW1 England.

EDITORIAL NOTE

This issue of *Gay Left* marks something of a watershed for the collective. With some changes in membership we have been meeting now on at least a weekly basis for five years. We have produced ten issues of the magazine at approximately six monthly intervals, as well as editing a book, running workshops and readers' meetings and speaking at numerous group meetings of other organisations.

During these five years the need for a magazine like *Gay Left* has not diminished, and as we say in the editorial in this issue, the need for a socialist current in the gay movement is as strong as ever. We, as individuals, have gained great benefit from meeting as a collective of gay and socialist men, but we cannot assume that we can carry on meeting indefinitely. Our book, *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*, provided many of us with the opportunity to write articles which would not easily fit into the magazine. In addition many members of the collective have written for other gay and non-gay periodicals and other publications, and of course we have all been involved in many other political activities such as in our unions, and in other organisations.

We have now reached a stage where we want to rethink what we want to do next, and we are taking the opportunity, with the publication of this, our tenth, issue to reassess our work in *Gay Left*. We are aware that the need for the magazine is as vital as ever, yet we cannot assume that it still represents what we as a collective want to be doing either all the time, or at all. There are many possibilities: to continue to produce *Gay Left* as it is, but possibly to produce pamphlets and more books; to produce a different sort of magazine or magazines; to stay together or to split up. Without pre-empting the many discussions that will take place over the months after the publication of this issue, it seems certain that something will appear, though not necessarily in the present form.

We are holding a Gay Socialist Conference later this year, as is advertised elsewhere in this issue, and there we hope to be able to give some idea of what we are doing. Any comments and feedback would be most welcome.

June 1980

Keith Birch, Derek Cohen, Emmanuel Cooper,
Philip Derbyshire, Simon Watney, Jeffrey Weeks,
Tom Woodhouse, Nigel Young.

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Note to our Readers in N. America

If your local bookshop does not stock *Gay Left*, the collective would be grateful if you contacted our distributors Carrier Pigeon, 75 Kneeland Street Room 309, Boston, Mass., 02111 to take a firm order.

Back issues are also available from Carrier Pigeon.

Contents

Democracy, Socialism & Sexual Politics	2
Workplace politics: Gay politics	5
Socialism, Feminism and Socialist Feminism.	8
Geoff Brighton: Anatomy of a Campaign	12
'Gay Life'	15
Gay Liberation in Central America	19
Dykes in the Granite City	21
Groping in the Dark	24
Against Public Morals	26
The Hunt, Hunter and Hunted	27
35 into the 80's	30
Eros Denied (or the revolution betrayed)	31
Facing the Crisis	34
Acting It Out	38
Making It Gay	40
Who Is Eddie Linden?	42
Caged In	43
Letters	44
Heavy	46
CHE	47

THE COLLECTIVE

This issue was put together by Keith Birch, Derek Cohen, Emmanuel Cooper, Philip Derbyshire, Simon Watney, Jeffrey Weeks, Tom Woodhouse, Nigel Young.

GAY LEFT 38 CHALCOT ROAD LONDON NW1

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What's Left

New Attacks on Gay Rights in Greece

In December 1979 the Greek police seized the gay magazine 'AMPHI' because of a poem and drawing concerning the oppression of gays. The prosecutor has sent the case to court and the trial will be held on 14th July 1980. AKOE, the Gay Liberation movement of Greece, is asking the international support and solidarity. The film 'Nighthawks' has also been prohibited from being shown in Greece. It is described as "a propaganda piece for the spread of homosexuality."

AKOE, c/o AMPHI, 6a Zaloggou St, Athens 142.

Gay Youth Movement

A number of gay teenage groups from England, Scotland and Ireland, have formed themselves into an organisation called Gym (Gay Youth Movement). A provisional booking has been made for 26th and 27th July 1980 at a hall (including accommodation) in Central Birmingham, for a conference on the organisation of Gym. It will be open to any person under the age of 25. Any participant is invited to set up a stall or workshop to air their views. Anyone who wants further information can write to the London Gay Teenage Group, c/o Gary Barker, 6/9 Manor Gardens, Holloway Road, LONDON N7.

Men Living Together

A group of three men are interested in living in a communal, primarily male household, somewhere in the country. Anyone who would like to join them or would like to know more details of their ideas and how they see it should write to Will Iles, Moor Farm, Stainbeck Lane, Leeds 7.