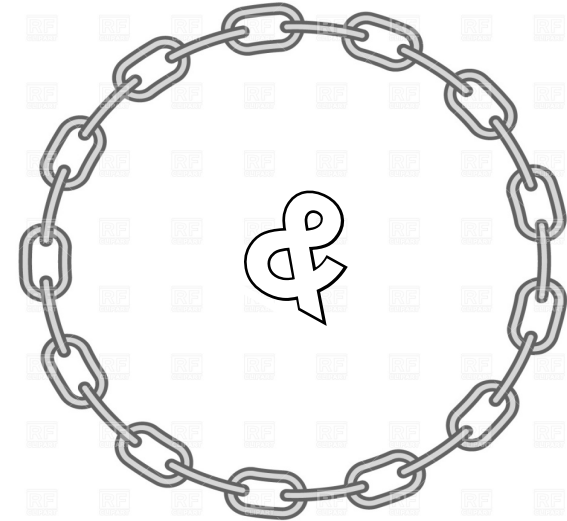


# CAPITALISM



# GAY IDENTITY

## The Birth and Short Lived Life of Gay Marxism: Capitalism And Gay Identity in Context\*

by Rossemarry Henesy

The Stonewall uprising in New York City in June 1969 was the most immediate catalyst for the formation of the gay liberation movement. Before the end of the summer of 1969, the Gay Liberation Front had formed in the United States, and within the following year gay liberation groups sprang into existence across the country (D'Emilio 1983, 232–33). Gay liberation was itself an outcome of the adjustments of late capitalism that spawned the general international insurgency circa 1968. Most immediately, it was inspired by the black power movement and the rise of feminism — both of which included fractions that aimed to articulate the historical relationship between culture and class, local and global forces. As in much of the New Left, there was general agreement within gay liberation thinking that capitalism was oppressive. Many gay liberation manifestos at least rhetorically drew connections between capitalism and repressive sexuality, racism and imperialism. But the gay liberation movement was by no means thoroughly influenced by marxism or a united socialist front, and its internal debates sorted out in what seem in hindsight to be predictable ways. There were those who, despite references to capitalism, basically focused on and advocated for cultural change, and there were those more avowedly marxist groups that stressed that political and cultural concerns needed to be linked to more global economic structures in some way.<sup>1</sup>

One set of texts that succinctly demonstrates these different leanings is Carl Whitman's "Gay Manifesto" and the reply to it written by the gay socialist group Red Butterfly (Blasius and Phelan 380–90). Although Red Butterfly supports Whitman for generally linking the individual effects of gay oppression to "the social and economic facts which are at once the cause and effects of this situation," they note the tension in his manifesto between personal freedom and the need for collective action, and they critique Whitman's promotion of "coming out" as an inadequate strategy for social change in itself because it can so easily separate personal liberation from changing the social conditions that foster gay oppression. Comprised of a loose network of collectives, journals, newsletters, study groups, conferences, and actions whose most intensive activity lasted only until the mid-seventies, the Gay Left represented a short-lived but vital willingness to make use of marxism

as a critical framework to link sexual oppression to global capitalism. In fact, however, there were more gestures in this direction than there were developed theoretical explanations from which to forge a fundamentally anticapitalist activist politics. Nonetheless, the fact that a broad sector of the discourse of gay liberation was at least in spirit directed toward connecting sexual oppression to the history of capitalism made this one of the most exciting flash points in the historical development of a critical and materialist understanding of sexuality.

Among the collectives that very pointedly did set out to develop a marxist or socialist analysis of sexuality as a basis for action were the Los Angeles Research Group, the Lavender and Red Union (Los Angeles), Red Butterfly (New York), the Gay Left Collective (UK), and the Gay Socialist Action Project (New York City). As the Collective Statement for the British socialist journal *Gay Left* announced in 1975, the aims of the Gay Left were to "contribute towards a marxist analysis of homosexual oppression . . . and encourage in the gay movement an understanding of the links between the struggle against sexual oppression and the struggle for socialism." Like many socialist gay organizations forming at the time, the British Gay Left Collective brought together men who benefited from and were involved in the gay liberation movement's dramatic interruption of the negative value attached to homosexuality. They strove to expand gay culture and community but also sought another basis for social organizing than personal change. Marxism offered a politics, a theory, and a practice that moved away from the spontaneity and localized countercultural emphasis that prevailed in gay liberation. But acceptance of a marxist stand-point did not preclude critique. They acknowledged that "there has not . . . been a properly marxist understanding of sexual oppression," an understanding that, they suggested, would lie "in grasping the relationship between the economy, ideology, and culture and the insights supplied by recent developments in the study of sexuality" (*Gay Left Collective* 9). They rejected a marxism that stressed the economic system as the motor of change or saw social struggle solely in economic terms. Instead they contended that economic relations are mediated through complex ideological and political forms (10). In arguing that the workers' struggle is not just about better wages and working conditions but also over social relations inculcated in the family and reinforced through bourgeois ideology, they hoped to expand the discussion of sexuality that occurred in the pre-1914 work of Engels and Kollontai (9). They aligned with the efforts of British marxists to address the role of ideology in social reproduction. But in contending that it is at the

\* The introduction is an excerpt taken from Rosemary Hennessy's book *Profit and Pleasure*.

1. See Toby Marotta, quoted in Blasius and Phelan 377. It is also worth noting here that the group that sparked the homophile movement in the United States was the Mattachine Society, whose founder, Henry Hay, was a member of the Communist Party and devoted his energies to the party from 1933 through 1948. However, marxist analysis had little place in the society. The Mattachine Society did not set out to treat sexual oppression as a feature of the history of capitalism. Their aim was simply to address the situation of homosexuals as an oppressed cultural minority.

ideological level that most of our oppression as gays is expressed (10), they ran the danger of separating ideology from capitalism's base and opening the door to an exclusive focus on ideological and political practices that would ultimately dominate the New Left.

The New York City-based Gay Socialist Action Project (which included among its members Jonathan Katz and John D'Emilio) formed on September 14, 1975, as a gay men's marxist study group whose one continuing activity was regular weekly readings and discussions. After beginning with the work of Marx —(including six months devoted to reading volume 1 of Capital)— they went on to read Eli Zaretsky's *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life*, Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women," Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, and the writings of Trotsky, Lenin, and Mao. The group also called gay socialist caucuses and delivered talks at the Gay Academic Union Conference (1976), issued a newsletter, and worked on various political actions. Like the Gay Left Collective in the UK, they linked gay oppression under capitalism to the role of the family and the subjection of women in the capitalist system of production. Both of these groups understood that sexuality is inextricably linked to gender and that gender ideology ultimately serves to reproduce the sexual division of labor. They argued that because it is bound up with the gendered division of labor, sexual oppression probably wouldn't be eliminated under capitalism; consequently, it is essential for gay people to relate their oppression to the wider system of exploitation and oppression that capitalism operates (Gay Left Collective 2). The organizing efforts of the Gay Left pressured socialist organizations to address questions of sexuality and sexual identity, and some of them—like the Spartacist League— did, although they did not all develop or even promote the systematic analyses of sexuality of the sort called for by the Gay Left.<sup>2</sup> The American Workers Party, for example, supported "equal rights for gays" but stressed that democratic rights would not completely improve the lives of many working-class gays. Their publications and pamphlets emphasized that state-sanctioned gay oppression affected the quality of life for many gay people and limited their access to basic human resources.<sup>3</sup>

While I am stressing the value of analysis that would inquire into the ways the local histories of sexuality were shaped by the changing relations of production in global capitalism, I also do not want to minimize the accomplishments of the gay liberation movement. In very brave and bold terms they demanded changes in civil society that would end discrimination against anyone who was named, or known, or claimed an identity as "homosexual." It is important to remember that even in the mid-1970s homosexuality was illegal

2. Others (among them the Communist Party USA, the Revolutionary Union, and the Socialist Workers Party) dug in their heels and clung to the official anti-homosexual Communist Party line.

3. For an anti-marxist account of some of the homophobic practices of marxist and Communist Party groups, among them the Socialist Workers Party, see Edge.

in over half of the fifty United States, and in states where it was legal there were no provisions for gay families; next-of-kin privileges were refused homosexuals in hospitals; custody and adoption rights were routinely withheld from gay parents; gay men and lesbians were denied employment in federal government jobs; there were no laws to make discrimination in nongovernment jobs illegal; and landlords could also legally discriminate against gay people. In light of these oppressive conditions, the reforms achieved by the gay liberation movement permanently altered the quality of life for lesbians and gay men in the United States. By the end of the seventies the American Psychiatric Association had removed homosexuality from its list of disorders; about half of the states had removed their sodomy laws; the Civil Service Commission eliminated its ban on employment of lesbians and gay men; and dozens of municipalities had passed antidiscrimination statutes. Lesbians and gay men were more of a public presence in academia, in the media, and in churches, and a gay subculture was growing (D'Emilio 1983, 239).

One of the glaring problems from the outset both in gay liberation and within the gay marxist left was the inability to develop a politics and theories that adequately addressed the particularity of lesbian oppression and the political contributions of women to the movement. By the mid-seventies in the United States, autonomous lesbian-feminist collectives were forming, as many women who had been involved in gay liberation circles became disaffected by the sexism of gay men. While there were numerous socialist feminist groups and collectives in the United States, Britain, France, and Germany, few lesbian feminist organizations turned to marxism to develop a materialist explanation of sexuality. Most lesbian collectives and groups tended to be radical feminist in their thinking; that is, they identified patriarchal structures as the primary cause of women's oppression. The Furies, based in Washington, D.C., are an interesting example of the overlaps and substantive differences between the two standpoints. The topics covered in articles appearing in their newspaper of the same name are indicative of the collective's concerns. They read Engels, focused attention on class privilege within the movement, confronted corporate capitalism, and called for a level of analysis that would surpass most of the current discussion of lesbianism as a personal, cultural, or civil rights issue. But the analysis they produced did not finally offer the more systemic explanations they called for.

One of the significant features of the writings that came out of the Furies collective, and an aspect of their thinking that distinguished it from much of the discourse of gay liberation, was their attention to heterosexuality as an institution. This was a substantially different focus from feminist politics that promoted women's liberation, lesbian feminist concerns with

women-identified culture, or gay liberation's promotion of homosexual rights. Unfortunately, though, their work did not go on to develop how this institution is connected to capitalism. At times it even seemed that heterosexuality itself was the problem. Moreover, although they linked sexuality to class, they did not understand class as social relations of labor but rather as "classism." Classism stresses the cultural expression of class hierarchies — in income, consumer choices, and lifestyle — and understands class differences in terms of status. As a result, it redirects the focus of class analysis from exploitation to cultural oppression.

In this way, the Furies were finally quite different from marxist and socialist feminists. While the group was short-lived, the radical feminist notion of intersecting oppressions they developed continues to define women's studies in the United States. By the early 1980s the founding principles of the gay marxist left, always a small fraction of the gay liberation movement, had been dismantled or abandoned even by its chief promoters. Much of the reason for its demise lies in the intractable refusal of many of the existing socialist groups to meaningfully address sexuality, and homosexuality in particular. Many gay socialists finally found themselves exhausted and alienated from long and fruitless struggles in party organizations; some redirected their energies to work with autonomous gay groups and focused their scholarship on a cultural rather than historical materialism (Weeks 1979, 235). The legacy of this retreat from class analysis for sexual politics is evident in the understandings of culture and materialism that have shaped queer theory. While the rise of the right in the eighties was a time of crisis for marxism and of political fragmentation on the left, it was also the decade when cultural studies began to flourish in the academy. By decade's end, cultural studies was becoming an established academic entity whose retreat from marxism and alternative rush to Foucauldian materialism virtually dominated the analysis of sexuality.

## Capitalism and Gay Identity

by John D'Emilio

For gay men and lesbians, the 1970s were years of significant achievement. Gay liberation and women's liberation changed the sexual landscape of the nation. Hundreds of thousands of gay women and men came out and openly affirmed same-sex eroticism. We won repeal of sodomy laws in half the states, a partial lifting of the exclusion of lesbians and gay men from federal employment, civil rights protection in a few dozen cities, the inclusion of gay rights in the platform of the Democratic Party, and the elimination of homosexuality from the psychiatric profession's list of mental illnesses. The gay male subculture expanded and became increasingly visible in large cities, and lesbian feminists pioneered in building alternative institutions and alternative culture that attempted to embody a liberatory vision of the future.

In the 1980s, however, with the resurgence of an active right wing gay men and lesbians face the future warily. Our victories appear tenuous and fragile; the relative freedom of the past few years seems too recent to be permanent. In some parts of the lesbian and gay male community, a feeling of doom is growing: analogies with McCarthy's America, when "sexual perverts" were a special target of the Right, and with Nazi Germany, where gays were shipped to concentration camps, surface with increasing frequency. Everywhere there is the sense that new strategies are in order if we want to preserve our gains and move ahead.

I believe that a new, more accurate theory of gay history must be part of this political enterprise. When the gay liberation movement began at the end of the 1960s, gay men and lesbians had no history we could use to fashion our goals and strategy. In the ensuing years, in building a movement without a knowledge of our history, we instead invented a mythology. This mythical history drew on personal experience, which we read backward in time. For instance, most lesbians and gays in the 1960s first discovered their homosexual desires in isolation, unaware of others, and without resources for naming and understanding what they felt. From this experience, we constructed a myth of silence, invisibility, and isolation as the essential characteristics of gay

life in the past as well as the present. Moreover, because we faced so many oppressive laws, public policies, and cultural beliefs, we projected this into an image of the abysmal past: until gay liberation, lesbians and gay men were always the victims of systematic, undifferentiated, terrible oppression.

These myths have limited our political perspective. They have contributed, for instance, to an overreliance on a strategy of coming out- if every gay man and lesbian in America came out, gay oppression would end – and have allowed us to ignore the institutionalized ways in which homophobia and heterosexism are reproduced. They have encouraged, at times, an incapacitating despair, especially at moments like the present: How can we unravel a gay oppression so pervasive and unchanging?

There is another historical myth that enjoys nearly universal acceptance in the gay movement, the myth of the "eternal homosexual." The argument runs something like this: gay men and lesbians always were and always will be. We are everywhere; not just now, but throughout history, in all societies and all periods. This myth served a positive political function in the first years of gay liberation. In the early 1970s, when we battled an ideology that either denied our existence or defined us as psychopathic individuals or freaks of nature, it was empowering to assert that "we are everywhere." But in recent years it has confined us as surely as the most homophobic medical theories, and locked our movement in place.

Here I wish to challenge this myth. I want to argue that gay men and lesbians have not always existed. Instead, they are a product of history, and have come into existence in a specific historical era. Their emergence is associated with the relations of capitalism – more specifically, its free labor system – that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I want to suggest some political lessons we can draw from this view of history. What then are the relationships between the free labor system of capitalism and homosexuality? First, let me review some features of capitalism. Under capitalism, workers are "free" laborers in two ways.

We have the freedom to look for a job. We own our ability to work and have the freedom to sell our labor power for wages to anyone willing to buy it. We are also freed from the ownership of anything except our labor power. Most of us do not own the land or the tools that produce what we need, but rather have to work for a living in order to survive. So, if we are free to sell our labor power in the positive sense, we are also freed, in the negative sense, from any other alternative. This dialectic- the constant interplay between exploitation and some measure of autonomy- informs all of the history of those who have lived under capitalism.

As capital-money used to make more money-expands, so does this system of free labor. Capital expands in several ways. Usually it expands in the same place, transforming small firms into larger ones, but it also expands by taking over new areas of production: the weaving of cloth, for instance, or the baking of bread. Finally, capital expands geographically. In the United States, capitalism initially took root in the Northeast, at a time when slavery was the dominant system in the South and when noncapitalist Native American societies occupied the western half of the continent. During the nineteenth century, capital spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and in the twentieth, U.S. capital has penetrated almost every part of the world.

The expansion of capital and the spread of wage labor have effected a profound transformation in the structure and function of the nuclear family, the ideology of family life, and the meaning of heterosexual relations. It is these changes in the family that are most directly linked to the appearance of a collective gay life.

The white colonists in the seventeenth-century New England established villages structured around a household economy, composed of family units that were basically self-sufficient, independent, and patriarchal. Men, women, and children farmed land owned by the male head of household. Although there was a division of labor between men and women, the family was truly an interdependent unit of production: the survival of each member depended on the cooperation of all. The home was a workplace where women processed raw farm products into food for daily consumption, where they made clothing, soap, and candles, and where husbands, wives, and children worked

together to produce the goods they consumed.

By the nineteenth century, this system of household production was in decline. In the Northeast, as merchant capitalists invested the money accumulated through trade in the production of goods, wage labor became more common. Men and women were drawn out of the largely self-sufficient household economy of the colonial era into a capitalist system of free labor. For women in the nineteenth century, working for wages rarely lasted beyond marriage; for men, it became a permanent condition.

The family was thus no longer an independent unit of production. But although no longer independent, the family was still interdependent. Because capitalism had not expanded very far, because it had yet taken over – or socialized – the production of consumer goods, women still performed necessary productive labor in the home. Many families no longer produced grain, but wives still baked into bread the flour they bought with their husbands' wages; or, when they purchased yarn or cloth, they still made clothing for their families. By the mid-1800s, capitalism had destroyed the economic self-sufficiency of many families, but not the mutual dependence of the members.

This transition away from the household family-based economy to a fully developed capitalist free labor economy occurred very slowly, over almost two centuries. As late as 1920, 50 percent of the U.S. population lived in communities of fewer than 2,500 people. The vast majority of blacks in the early twentieth century lived outside the free labor economy, in a system of sharecropping and tenancy that rested on the family. Not only did independent farming as a way of life still exist for million of Americans, but even in towns and small cities women continued to grow and process food, make clothing, and engage in other kinds of domestic production.

But for those people who felt the brunt of these changes, the family took on new significance as an affective unit, an institution that produced not goods but emotional satisfaction and happiness. By the 1920s among the white middle class, the ideology surrounding the family described it as the means through which men and women formed satisfying, mutually enhancing relationships and created an environment that nurtured children. The family became the setting for a

“personal life,” sharply distinguished and disconnected from the public world of work and production.

The meaning of heterosexual relations also changed. In colonial New England, the birthrate averaged over seven children per woman of childbearing age. Men and women needed the labor of children. Producing offspring was as necessary for survival as producing grain. Sex was harnessed to procreation. The Puritans did not celebrate heterosexuality but rather marriage; they condemned all sexual expression outside the marriage bond and did not differentiate sharply between sodomy and heterosexual fornication.

By the 1970s, however, the birthrate had dropped to under two. With the exception of the post-World War II baby boom, the decline has been continuous for two centuries, paralleling the spread of capitalist relations of production. It occurred even when access to contraceptive devices and abortion was systematically curtailed. The decline has included every segment of the population – urban and rural families, blacks and whites, ethnics and WASPS, the middle class and the working class.

As wage labor spread and production became socialized, then, it became possible to release sexuality from the “imperative” to procreate. Ideologically, heterosexual expression came to be a means of establishing intimacy, promoting happiness, and experiencing pleasure. In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on a sexual identity.

Evidence from colonial New England court records and church sermons indicates that male and female homosexual behavior existed in the seventeenth century. Homosexual behavior, however, is different from homosexual identity. There was quite simply, no “social space” in the colonial system of production that allowed men and women to be gay. Survival was structured around participation in a nuclear family. There were certain homosexual acts – sodomy among men, “lewdness” among women – in which individuals engaged, but

family was so pervasive that colonial society lacked even the category of homosexual or lesbian to describe a person. It is quite possible that some men and women experienced a stronger attraction to their own sex than to the opposite sex - in fact, some colonial court cases refer to men who persisted in their “unnatural” attraction – but one could not fashion out of that preference a way of life. Colonial Massachusetts even had laws prohibiting unmarried adults from living outside family units.<sup>3</sup>

By the second half of the nineteenth century, this situation was noticeably changing as the capitalist system of free labor took hold. Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity – an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex. By the end of the century, a class of men and women existed who recognized their erotic interest in their own sex, saw it as a trait that set them apart from the majority, and sought others like themselves. These early gay lives came from a wide social spectrum: civil servants and business executives, department store clerks and college professors, factory operatives, ministers, lawyers, cooks, domestics, hoboes, and the idle rich: men and women, black and white, immigrant and native born.

In this period, gay men and lesbians began to invent ways of meeting each other and sustaining a group life. Already, in the early twentieth century, large cities contained male homosexual bars. Gay men staked out cruising areas, such as Riverside Drive in New York City and Lafayette Park in Washington. In St. Louis and the nation’s capital, annual drag balls brought together large numbers of black gay men. Public bathhouses and YMCAs became gathering spots for male homosexuals. Lesbians formed literary societies and private social clubs. Some working-class women “passed” as men to obtain better paying jobs and lived with other women – lesbian couples who appeared to the world as husband and wife. Among the faculties of women’s colleges in the settlement houses, and in the professional associations and clubs that women formed one could find lifelong intimate relationships supported by a web of lesbian friends. By the 1920s and

1930s, large cities such as New York and Chicago contained lesbian bars. These patterns of living could evolve because capitalism allowed individuals to survive beyond the confines of the family.<sup>4</sup>

Simultaneously, ideological definitions of homosexual behavior changed. Doctors developed theories about homosexuality, describing it as a condition, something that was inherent in a person, a part of his or her “nature.” These theories did not represent scientific breakthroughs, elucidations of previously undiscovered areas of knowledge; rather, they were an ideological response to a new way of organizing one’s personal life. The popularization of the medical model, in turn, affected the consciousness of the women and men who experienced homosexual desire, so that they came to define themselves through their erotic life.<sup>5</sup>

These new forms of gay identity and patterns of group life also reflected the differentiation of people according to gender, race, and class that is so pervasive in capitalist societies. Among whites, for instance, gay men have traditionally been more visible than lesbians. This partly stems from the division between the public male sphere and the private female sphere. Streets, parks, and bars, especially at night, were “male space.” Yet the greater visibility of white gay men also reflected their larger numbers. The Kinsey studies of the 1940s and 1950s found significantly more men than women with predominantly homosexual histories, a situation caused, I would argue, by the fact that capitalism had drawn far more men than women into the labor force, and at higher wages. Men could more easily construct a personal life independent of attachment to the opposite sex, whereas women were more likely to remain economically dependent on men. Kinsey also found a strong positive correlation between years of schooling and lesbian activity. College-educated white women, far more able than their working-class sisters to support themselves, could survive more easily without intimate relationships with men.<sup>6</sup>

Among working-class immigrants in the early twentieth century closely knit kin networks and an ethic of family solidarity placed constraints on individual autonomy that made gayness a difficult option to pursue. In contrast, for reasons not altogether clear, urban black communities appeared relatively tolerant of homosexuality. The

popularity in the 1920s and 1930s of songs with lesbian and gay male themes – “B. D. Woman,” “Prove It on Me,” “Sissy man,” “fairy Blues” – suggests an openness about homosexual expression at odds with the mores of whites. Among men in the rural West in the 1940s, Kinsey found extensive incidence of homosexual behavior, but, in contrast with the men in large cities, little consciousness of gay identity. Thus even as capitalism exerted a homogenizing influence by gradually transforming more individuals into wage laborers and separating them from traditional communities, different groups of people were also affected in different ways.<sup>7</sup>

The decisions of particular men and women to act on their erotic/emotional preference for the same sex, along with new consciousness that this preference made them different, led to the formation of an urban subculture of gay men and lesbians. Yet at least through the 1930s this subculture remained rudimentary, unstable, and difficult to find. How, then, did the complex, well-developed gay community emerge that existed by the time the gay liberation movement, exploded? The answer is to be found during World War II, a time when the cumulative changes of several decades coalesced into a qualitatively new shape.

The war severely disrupted traditional patterns of gender relations and sexuality, and temporally created a new erotic situation conducive to homosexual expression. It plucked millions of young men and women, whose sexual identities were just forming, out of their homes, out of towns and small cities, out of the heterosexual environment of the family, and dropped them into sex-segregated situations – as GIs, as WACS and WAVEs, in same-sex rooming houses for women workers who relocated to seek employment. The war freed millions of men and women from the settings where heterosexuality was normally imposed. For men and women already gay, it provided an opportunity to meet people like themselves. Others could become gay because of the temporary freedom to explore sexuality that the war provided.<sup>8</sup>

Lisa Ben, for instance, came out during the war. She left the small California town where she was raised, came to Los Angeles to find work, and lived in a women’s boarding house. There she met for the first time lesbians who took her to gay bars and introduced her to



other gay women. Donald Vining was a young man with lots of homosexual desire and few gay experiences. He moved to New York City during the war and worked at a large YMCA. His diary reveals numerous erotic adventures with soldiers, sailors, marines, and civilians at the Y where he worked, as well as at the men's residence club where he lived, and in parks, bars, and movie theaters. Many GIs stayed in port cities like New York, at YMCAs like the one where Vining worked. In his oral histories of gay men in San Francisco focusing on the 1940s, Allan Bérubé has found that war years were critical in the formation of a gay male community in the city. Places as different as San Jose, Denver, and Kansas City had their first gay bars in the 1940s. Even severe repression could have positive side effects. Pat Bond, a lesbian from Davenport, Iowa, joined the WACs during the 1940s. Caught in a purge of hundreds of lesbians from the WACs in the pacific, she did not return to Iowa. She stayed in San Francisco and became part of a community of lesbians. How many other men had comparable experiences? How many other cities saw a rapid growth of lesbian and gay male communities?

The gay men and women of the 1940s were pioneers. Their decisions to act on their desires formed the underpinnings of an urban subculture of gay men and lesbians. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the gay subculture grew and stabilized so that people coming out then could more easily find other gay women and men than in the past. Newspapers and magazines published articles describing gay male life. Literally hundreds of novels with lesbian themes were published.<sup>10</sup> Psychoanalysts complained about the new ease with which their gay male patients found sexual partners. And the gay subculture was not just to be found in the largest cities. Lesbian and gay male bars existed in places like Worcester, Massachusetts, and Buffalo, New York, in Columbia, South Carolina, and Des Moines, Iowa. Gay life in the 1950s and 1960s became a nationwide phenomenon. By the time of the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969- the event that ignited the gay liberation movement- our situation was hardly one of silence, invisibility, and isolation. A massive, grass-roots liberation movement could form almost overnight precisely because communities of lesbians and gay men existed.

Although gay community was a precondition for a mass movement, the oppression of lesbians and gay men was the force that propelled the movement into existence. As the subculture expanded and grew more visible in the post-World War II era, oppression by the state intensified, becoming more systematic and inclusive. The Right scapegoated "sexual perverts" during the McCarthy era. Eisenhower imposed a total ban on the employment of gay women and men by the federal government and government contractors. Purges of lesbians and homosexuals from the military rose sharply. The FBI instituted widespread surveillance of gay meeting places and of lesbian and gay organizations, such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. The post Office placed tracers on the correspondence of gay men and passed evidence of homosexual activity on to employers. Urban vice squads invaded private homes, made sweeps of lesbian and gay male bars, entrapped gay men in public places, and fomented local witch hunts. The danger involved in being gay rose even as the possibilities of being gay were enhanced. Gay liberation was a response to this contradiction.

Although lesbians and gay men won significant victories in the 1970s and opened up some safe social space in which to exist, we can hardly claim to have dealt a fatal blow to heterosexism and homophobia. One could even argue that the enforcement of gay oppression has merely changed locales, shifting somewhat from the state to the arena of extralegal violence in the form of increasingly open physical attacks on lesbians and gay men. And, as our movements have grown, they have generated a backlash that threatens to wipe out our gains. Significantly, this New Right opposition has taken shape as a "pro-family" movement. How is it that capitalism, whose structure made possible the emergence of a gay identity and the creation of urban gay communities, appears unable to accept gay men and lesbians in its midst? Why do heterosexism and homophobia appear so resistant to assault?

The answers, I think, can be found in the contradictory relationship of capitalism to the family. On the one hand, as I argued earlier, capitalism has gradually undermined the material basis of the nuclear family by taking away the economic functions that cemented

the ties between family members. As more adults have been drawn into the free labor system, and as capital has expanded its spheres until it produces as commodities most goods and services we need for our survival, the forces that propelled men and women into families and kept them there have weakened. On the other hand, the ideology of capitalist society has enshrined the family as the source of love, affection, and emotional security, the place where our need for stable, intimate human relationships is satisfied.

This elevation of the nuclear family to preeminence in the sphere of personal life is not accidental. Every society needs structures for reproduction and childrearing, but the possibilities are not limited to the nuclear family. Yet the privatized family fits well with capitalist relations of production. Capitalism has socialized production while maintaining that the products of socialized labor belong to the owners of private property. In many ways, childrearing has also been progressively socialized over the last two centuries, with schools, the media, peer groups, and employers taking over functions that once belonged to parents. Nevertheless, capitalist society maintains that reproduction and childrearing are private tasks, that children “belong” to parents, who exercise the rights of ownership. Ideologically, capitalism drives people into heterosexual families; each generation comes of age having internalized a heterosexist model of intimacy and personal relationships. Materially, capitalism weakens the bonds that once kept families together so that their members experience a growing instability in the place they have come to expect happiness and emotional security. Thus, while capitalism has knocked the material foundation away from family life, lesbians, and gay men, and heterosexual feminists have become the scapegoats for the social instability of the system.

*This analysis, if persuasive, has implications for us today. It can affect our perception of our identity, our formulation of political goals, and our decisions about strategy.*

I have argued that lesbian and gay identity and communities are historically created, the result of a process of capitalist development that has spanned many generations. A corollary of this argument is that we are

not a fixed social minority composed for all time of a certain percentage of the population. There are more of us than one hundred years ago, more of us than forty years ago. And there may very well be more gay men and lesbians in the future. Claims made by gays and nongays that sexual orientation is fixed at an early age, that large numbers of visible gay men and lesbians in society, the media, and the schools will have no influence on the sexual identities of the young, are wrong. Capitalism has created the material conditions for homosexual desire to express itself as a central component of some individuals lives; now, our political movements are changing consciousness, creating the ideological conditions that make it easier for people to make that choice.

To be sure, this argument confirms the worst fears and most rabid rhetoric of our political opponents. But our response must be to challenge the underlying belief that homosexual relations are bad, a poor second choice. We must not slip into the opportunistic defense that society need not worry about tolerating us, since only homosexuals become homosexuals. At best, a minority group analysis and a civil rights strategy pertain to those of us who already are gay. It leaves today's youth – tomorrow's lesbians and gay men – to internalize heterosexist models that it can take a lifetime to expunge.

I have also argued that capitalism has led to the separation of sexuality from procreation. Human sexual desire need no longer be harnessed to reproductive imperatives, to procreation; its expression has increasingly entered the realm of choice. Lesbians and homosexuals most clearly embody the potential of this split, since our gay relationships stand entirely outside a procreative framework. The acceptance of our erotic choices ultimately depends on the degree to which society is willing to affirm sexual expression as a form of play, positive and life-enhancing. Our movement may have begun as the struggle of a “minority,” but what we should now be trying to “liberate” is an aspect of the personal lives of all people- sexual expression.”

Finally, I have suggested that the relationship between capitalism and the family is fundamentally contradictory. On the one hand, capitalism continually weakens the material foundation of family life, making it possible for individuals to live outside the family, and for a lesbian and gay male identity to develop. On the other, it needs to push

men and women into families, at least long enough to reproduce the next generation of workers. The elevation of the family to ideological preeminence guarantees that capitalist society will reproduce not just children, but heterosexism and homophobia. In the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem.<sup>12</sup>

*How do we avoid remaining the scapegoats, the political victims of the social instability that capitalism generates? How can we take this contradictory relationship and use it to move toward liberation?*

Gay men and lesbians exist on social terrain beyond the boundaries of the heterosexual nuclear family. Our communities have formed in that social space. Our survival and liberation depend on our ability to defend and expand that terrain, not just for ourselves but for everyone. That means, in part, support for issues that broaden the opportunities for living outside traditional heterosexual family units: issues like the availability of abortion and the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, affirmative action for people of color and for women, publicly funded daycare and other essential social services, decent welfare payments, full employment, the rights of young people – in other words, programs and issues that provide a material basis for personal autonomy.

The rights of young people are especially critical. The acceptance of children as dependents, as belonging to parents, is so deeply ingrained that we can scarcely imagine what it would mean to treat them as autonomous human beings, particularly in the realm of sexual expression and choice. Yet until that happens, gay liberation will remain out of our reach.

But personal autonomy is only half the story. The instability of families and the sense of impermanence and insecurity that people are now experiencing in their personal relationships are real social problems that need to be addressed. We need political solutions for these difficulties of personal life. These solutions should not come in the form of a radical version of the pro-family position, of some left-wing proposals to strengthen the family. Socialists do not generally respond to the exploitation and economic inequality of industrial capitalism

by calling for a return to the family farm and handicraft production. We recognize that the vastly increased productivity that capitalism has made possible by socializing production is one of its progressive features. Similarly, we should not be trying to turn back the clock to some mythic age of the happy family.

We do need, however, structures and programs that will help to dissolve the boundaries that isolate the family, particularly those that privatize childrearing. We need community- or worker-controlled daycare, housing where privacy and community coexist, neighborhood institutions- from medical clinics to performance centers – that enlarge the social unit where each of us has a secure place. As we create structures beyond the nuclear family that provide a sense of belonging, the family will wane in significance. Less and less will it seem to make or break our emotional security.

In this respect gay men and lesbians are well situated to play a special role. Already excluded from families as most of us are, we have had to create, for our survival, networks of support that do not depend on the bonds of blood or the license of the state, but that are freely chosen and nurtured. The building of an “affectional community” must be as much a part of our political movement as are campaigns for civil rights. In this way we may prefigure the shape of personal relationships in a society grounded in equality and justice rather than exploitation and oppression, a society where autonomy and security do not preclude each other but coexist.

## Notes

This essay is a revised version of a lecture given before several audiences in 1979 and 1980. I am grateful to the following groups for giving me a forum in which to talk and get feedback: the Baltimore Gay Alliance, the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, the organizers of Gay Awareness Week 1980 at San Jose State University and the University of California at Irvine, and the coordinators of the Student Affairs Lectures at the University of California at Irvine. Lisa Duggan, Estelle Freedman, Jonathan Katz, Carole Vance, Paula Webster, Bert Hansen, and the editors of this volume provided criticisms of an earlier draft. I especially want to thank Allan Berube and Jonathan Katz for generously sharing with me their own research, and Amber Hollibaugh for many exciting hours of nonstop conversation about Marxism and sexuality.

## Endnotes

1. I do not mean to suggest that no one has ever proposed that gay identity is a product of historical change. See, for instance, Mary McIntosh, "The Homosexual Role," *Social Problems* 16 (1968): 182-92; Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain* (New York: Quartet Books, 1977). It is also implied in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: An Introduction, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978). However, this does represent a minority viewpoint and the works cited above have not specified how it is that capitalism as a system of production has allowed for the emergence of a gay male and lesbian identity. As an example of the "eternal homosexual" thesis, see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), where "gay people" remains an unchanging social category through fifteen centuries of Mediterranean and Western European history.
2. See Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); and Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
3. Robert F. Oaks, "Things Fearful to Name": Sodomy and Buggery in Seventeenth Century New England, *Journal of Social History* 12 (1978): 268-81; J. R. Roberts, "The case of Sarah Norman and Mary Hammond," *Sinister Wisdom* 24 (1960): 57-62; and Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History* (New York: Crowell, 1976), pp. 16-24, 568-71.
4. For the period from 1870 to 1940 see the documents in Katz, *Gay American History*, and idem, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* (New York: Crowell, 1983). Other sources include Allan Bérubé, "Lesbians and Gay Men in America," unpublished paper, 1979; Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, "Lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s: A New Found Study," *Signs* 2 (Summer 1977): 895-904.
5. On the medical model see Weeks, *Coming Out*, pp. 23-32. The impact of the medical model on the consciousness of men and women can be seen in Louis Hyde, ed., *Rat and the Devil: The Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1978), p.47, and in the story of Lucille Hart in Katz, *Gay American History*, pp. 258-79. Radclyffe Hall's classic novel about lesbianism, *The Well of Loneliness*, published in 1928, was perhaps one of the most important vehicles of the popularization of the medical model.
6. See Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953).
7. On black music, see "AC/DC Blues: Gay Jazz Reissues," Stash Records, ST-106 (1977) and Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974); on the persistence of kin networks in white ethnic communities see Judith Smith, *Our Own Kind: Family and Community Networks in Providence*, in *A Heritage of her own*, ed. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 393-411; on differences between rural and urban male homoeroticism see Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, pp. 455-57, 630-31.

8. The argument and the information in this and the following paragraphs come from my book *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). I have also developed it with reference to San Francisco in "Gay Politics; Gay Community: San Francisco's Experience," *Socialist Review* 55 (January-February 1981): 77-104.
9. Donald Vining, *A Gay Diary, 1933-1946* (New York: Pepys Press, 1979); "Pat Bond," in Nancy Adair and Casey Adair, *Word is Out* (New York: New Glide Publications, 1978), pp. 55-65; and Allan Bérubé, "Marching to a Different Drummer: 'Coming Out During World War II,'" a slide/talk presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, December 1981, Los Angeles. A shorter version of Bérubé's presentation can be found in *The Advocate*, October 15, 1981, pp. 20-24.
10. On Lesbian novels see *The Ladder*, March 1958, p. 18; February 1960, pp. 14-15; April 1961, pp. 12-14; February 1962 pp. 6-11; January 1963, pp. 6-13; February 1964, pp. 12-19; February 1965, pp. 19-23; March 1966, pp. 22-26; and April 1967, pp. 8-13. *The Ladder* was the magazine published by the Daughters of Bilitis.
11. This especially needs to be emphasized today. The 1980 annual conference of the National Organization for Women, for instance, passed a lesbian rights resolution that defined the issue as one of "discrimination based on affectional/sexual preference/orientation," and explicitly disassociated the issue from other questions of sexuality such as pornography, sadomasochism, public sex, and pederasty.
12. I do not mean to suggest that homophobia is "caused" by capitalism, or is to be found only in capitalist societies. Severe sanction against homoeroticism can be found in European feudal society and in contemporary socialist countries. But my focus in this essay has been the emergence of a gay identity under capitalism, and the mechanisms specific to capitalism that made this possible and that reproduce homophobia as well.