

IS THE PERSONAL STILL POLITICAL? SEXUALITY AND SOCIALIST CHANGE

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The insight that "the personal is political" was at the core of the resurgence of feminism and the lesbian and gay liberation movements in the late Sixties and early Seventies. In response to orthodox political thought, including its leftist variants, that defined issues of gender, intimate relationships and sexuality as simply "private" or "personal" as a way of marginalizing us and keeping us in line, we affirmed the heretical position that these aspects of our lives were intensely political - that they were organized by broader social forces including state laws and policies.

In connection these "personal" questions to broader social and political issues we opened up new visions and agendas for personal and social transformation. Starting from our experiences in our everyday lives we began to make a new theory and politics, exploring how our lives were socially organized and constrained. In these early euphoric days everything seemed possible as we believed that the personal and political assertion of our new identities - our coming out as lesbians and gays, and telling our parents, our friends and the world could itself cause the wall of homophobia and heterosexism to come tumbling down. Close to twenty years later, although we have made impressive gains and have changed

the fabric of our lives and relationships dramatically, heterosexism is still very much with us.

The message that the "personal is political" fueled our early utopianism about the possibilities for immediate and total change in the world. Along with campaigns for our rights, and solidarity with other oppressed groups, many of us embarked on exciting and dynamic changes in our lives and relationships ranging from coming out itself, to experiments in living in communal relationships and households, to non-monogamy and exploring the delight and pleasures of sexual relationships with large numbers of people.

## EARLY EXPLORATIONS

These explorations in the '70s led to the development of new ways of being together, new forms of social and political solidarity and community. Many of these experiments collapsed, others survived. Many of our lives would never be the same again. Somewhere along the line the ties between many of these efforts and our movements for social change tended to get broken and our islands of "liberation" became isolated from broader developments. Some of us longed for the securities of a mythical past that never really existed as against the uncertainties and turmoil we were going through. Others, after the first tastes of a new life, longed passionately for a future of sexual and social pleasures. There were unfor-

tunately no blueprints for our journeys in trying to build new ways of relating, loving and living. Often it seemed like we were destined to reinvent the wheel over and over again. We learned as we groped along.

Through these changes gay men confronted new questions: how to live together with other men in supportive relationships? Who would do the dishes, the laundry, cleaning the toilet? This forced many of us to confront the social institution of masculinity which defined certain types of work and nurturing as "feminine". With great difficulty, much struggling, stumbling and pain much was learned about nurturing other men. Very different conclusions were drawn from these experiences. Some opted for monogamous relationships (often with other sex play on the side) while others rejected monogamy and relationships more generally for the joys of many different partners.

## KEEPING THE EROTIC SPARK ALIVE

Those who opted for monogamous relationships of one sort or another struggled with how to keep the erotic spark alive in sex with lovers after doing it for the 1,000th time. And what about sexual "incompatibility"? Some decided to give up on sex with their lovers entirely, while continuing to live with them and only had sex with others. Some of us placed a taboo on sex with friends ("Oh, I wouldn't want to destroy our

friendship with sex"). Others had a number of fuck-buddy friends. We began to explore and live the ambiguities and contradictions of men loving men in a capitalist/patriarchal/racist society which continued to define us as abnormal, sick and criminal.

We felt ourselves straining against seemingly immovable and insurmountable forces. We had banged right into the barriers of personal changes in a society which had not fundamentally changed. We experienced jealousy, possessiveness, dependency, insecurity, anger and fear which we had thought that we could somehow just wish or will away. We sometimes blamed ourselves for "failing", for not being able to live up to certain socially or politically correct standards.

We remained products of the society we grew up in, many of whose values we had internalized as well as the very real constraints of heterosexual society. To paraphrase Marx, we were beginning to make our own histories but not in circumstances determined by us. We ran right up against the wall of a capitalist, heterosexist and racist society that permeated even our most intimate of relationships - of pressures to be a "proper" man, of having to pay the rent on time, of having to work for money to survive and often at jobs we didn't like, of standards of respectability we had little control over.

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As we huffed and puffed and strained to transform ourselves we began to realize the limitations of purely personal change isolated from other social changes. Some of us retreated under these pressures away from our early radical hopes and dreams to discover various routes to



accommodation with the existing order. Our "personal" lives were once again separated from broader social and economic relations.

"Personal is political" began to shift in its meaning as it began to become a social and political weapon within our communities and movements in the '70s and '80s. From a critique of the dominant society it became a critique of the various ways of life (or "lifestyles") of various individuals and groups within our communities. Various elites defined what "proper" gay or lesbian lifestyles were as the number of gay-owned businesses, establishments and organizations grew. Some tried to establish "lesbian" or "gay" as simply a new ethnic identity. Those of us who didn't really fit in were labelled "not really gay". As somehow deviant or, once again, weird. Drag queens and transvestites became outcasts as the new "macho" took over (men could now be masculine and gay) and some politically-correct lesbian feminists looked down on butch/femme lesbian relationships. Some groups tried to achieve acceptance for us in this heterosexist society by promoting our "respectability" asserting that we were "just the same as straights accept for what we did in bed." Those of us who were not, or had no pretensions to such respectability (whose respectability, one might ask) were once again shunted aside.

**POLITICALLY CORRECT SEX IN THE '80S**

In the early and mid-'80s sex wars within and between the feminist gay and lesbian movements over porn/censorship, S/M, inter-generational sex and other issues, the personal is political has been redefined and reduced to politically-correct

sex. Various hierarchies of political correctness have been constructed. For some exponents (particularly some antiporn feminists), monogamous "equal" sex is on the top, while porn, S/M etc. are on the bottom. For some "sex-radicals" the polarities are reversed with S/M, "kinky", "promiscuous" sex, and porn on the top representing "sexual liberation" with monogamous, "vanilla" sex on the bottom. Both hierarchies describe a vanguardist politically-correct sexuality which is then prescribed to everyone else as the royal road to liberation.

**SEXUAL DIVERSITY**

This polarization not only froze explorations of the diversity of our sexual pleasures, it also acted to deny the many differences within our communities - the different choices people have made about their lives and relationships, differences of class and race, the various identities we have made for ourselves and the different forms of oppression we face.

This use of the "personal is political" transformed it into a dogmatic tool of debate, subverting its potential to explore the various connections between our personal everyday worlds and the social relations we inhabit and help to make.

Some 'respectable', moderate gays along with straight liberals, state agencies and much of the mass media have attempted to use the AIDS crisis as a new way to construct hierarchies of "proper" gay sexuality and relationships." It is asserted that respectable monogamous relationships are also the only "healthy" kind and that is those "other" sex-crazed, "promiscuous", bath-going gay men who are the problem. This denies that the HIV virus (which plays a crucial

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role in the development of AIDS) is *not* transmitted through having many sexual partners (ie. you can jerk-off with as many men as you wish without fear of AIDS transmission) but only through specific sexual activities (especially unprotected anal and vaginal intercourse).

At the same time the AIDS crisis has forced many of us to remake our sexualities and relationships as we have learned more about safe sex, sexual responsibility, and health and has helped many of us to rediscover and build new supportive relationships in our communities.

## YES, THE POLITICAL IS STILL PERSONAL

Is the personal still political in the late 80s then? I would answer a definite YES! But we also have to redefine and resituate what we mean by the "personal is political", so that is no longer a prescriptive basis for establishing "politically correct" behaviour, but becomes instead a tool for exploring the diverse dimensions of our experiences and relationships, allowing us to understand how they are socially organized and therefore how they can be changed. When we collectively discuss the social constraints on our lives, we will no longer feel as much individual guilt about the difficulties of such change. We will be able to locate common problems in our relationships seeing that there is no instant magical and individual solution to them. We can also begin to provide support for each other in changing our lives and

can also begin to collectively organize to change social relations and state policies so that we can gain more control over our lives.

In this process the dialectic between personal and broader political changes will become clearer changing our personal lives and society at the same time. This will open up more space for us to define our lives and relationships, and will require a transitional politics able to connect the sexual pleasures, desires and relationships we enjoy and love in the present with the transformations in pleasure, desire and relationships that will take place in the making of a

providing a supportive space in which to critically discuss, explore and celebrate our different consensual sexualities. This would allow us to explore what love, consent, equality and pleasure mean in our lives. This would in turn provide valuable resources for wider forms of socialist feminist change.

Rather than retreating into "personal" world separated from the broader social and political world which organize our everyday lives it is time to breathe new life vision into the "personal is political" combining our hopes and dreams for personal changes with the transformation of



new erotically-charged socialist society." This transitional perspective would have to encompass a recognition of the validity of the diversity of our different sexualities recognizing that there is no single "correct" or "real" lesbian or gay sexuality, while at the same time

society. This would combine our early utopianism of changing the world (and wanting everything now) with a more realistic and grounded social and political perspective of personal and social transformation.

## DESPERATELY SEEKING SOCIALIST SEX!

Canadian Dimension is looking for writers on the topic of socialist sexuality. How does socialism relate to the theory and mechanics of sexuality? How would sexuality and relationships be different in a socialist society? If you have the answers, please send detailed outline of your article to Canadian Dimension office 801-44 Princess St., Winnipeg MB, R3B 1K2.