Sexuality and History: Humanism, Freedom and Commitment

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Abstract: the socialist tradition has not generally proved sympathetic to the message of the lesbian and gay movement, or to sexual liberation more generally. The result has been an impoverishment of its vision through an intractable attachment to the family. A productive engagement with sexual liberation movements, and even queer theory, might facilitate a necessary return to social utopianism.

I want to make some comments about the relationship between capitalism and the family as these have a bearing on our understanding of queer sexuality—and especially gay experience—and modernity. I shall focus on the Marxist tradition, though not exclusively. I want to indicate the extent to which our sense of the human is bound up with humanist ideals, including those that are important to the Marxist tradition. This relationship has been responsible for the demonization of queers, and especially gay men.

Bourgeois society was progressive for Marx, not in the sense that it represented a gradual improvement on feudal or neo-feudal orders, but that it revolutionized them. Similarly, though communism would be made possible by the advances in productivity generated by technological developments under capitalism, it would be discontinuous with capitalism, qualitatively quite different in its collectivism (the German word "Aufhebung" signals this dual quality of preserving and overturning). For Marx, then, progress was not strictly speaking a linear process or an intensification of existing trends. The result was a tendency in his writing to neglect further consideration of the
possibilities for progress within capitalism as well as to take for granted the improvements that communism would bring. Hence, a key problem with Marxist theory: the tendency to disavow "utopian" speculation and rather to assume that the specific advances of bourgeois society—not only the expansion of the productive forces, but the freedoms it had produced through greater autonomy—would be preserved and extended in a post-capitalist future, at the same time as they would be reconciled with collectivism.

The tendency for Marx and Engels to see progress to socialism in terms of both continuity with and revolutionary discontinuity from the bourgeois epoch is evident in their various comments on the family, which they see it as both anticipating "higher" forms of intimate relations in post-revolutionary circumstances and destined for destruction by the revolution. In the case of the working class, they argued, familial breakdown had already occurred as one consequence of poverty and capitalist industry's reorganization of work. In the case of the bourgeoisie, for whom marriage had by contrast been consolidated, the end of the family would result from revolution and the abolition of private property. Both emphases are to be found in Engels' influential *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). Engels claimed that the monogamy and seclusion demanded of women in bourgeois marriage was necessary to ensure that the husband's biological children would inherit his wealth. Hence, bourgeois marriage fostered the double standard, licencing the male resort to prostitution necessitated by supposed male sex needs. Engels believed the eradication of prostitution would be a desirable consequence of socialist transformation, and even though he assumed that marriage as an institution would be a casualty of that revolution, he also suggested that the transformation of social conditions would result in a higher form of freely chosen heterosexual monogamy. This would have been prefigured by bourgeois love, but would be unconstrained by the continuing tendency of it to be directed towards members of the same class.

This evolutionary emphasis in Engels' account of the development of the family is

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one that also suggests that the enslavement of women by ancient Athenian men "was avenged on the men and degraded them also till they fell into the abominable practice of sodomy and degraded their gods and themselves with the myth of Ganymede." Sodomy here appears as the historical complement to the slavery of women determined by the imbalance in a supposedly natural order of things that that slavery entailed. Engels' deployment of Judeo-Christian terminology and morality to judge the Greeks' own mythological justifications for sex between men is indicative of the extent to which he ultimately remained trapped within the (tacitly) religious logic of the time, facilitating his conviction in socialism as fulfilment of the progressive potential of capitalism. Indeed, his idealization of cross-sex relations functions allegorically to mark the resolution of the dialectic of history in much the same way as marriage had traditionally symbolized the reconciliation of social problems in the kind of plot that dominated the Victorian novel: history would have a happy ending, and heterosexual sacramentalism symbolized for Engels the more general social reconciliation of freedom with mutuality that the revolution would bring. Hence, Engels' critique represented an evasion of one of the key practical and theoretical challenges for Marxist and socialist thought—namely, how socialism might reconcile autonomy with collectivism.

Engels' argument on the family has been treated as authoritative within much of the Marxist tradition, though the sacramentalism defended by him has tended to underwrite support for, rather than opposition to, the family unit. Certainly, the repressively puritanical attitudes and policies towards non-familial sexuality in the so-called "socialist states" have ultimately served to reinforce perceptions of capitalism's capacity to underwrite personal freedoms. Michele Barrett and Mary MacIntosh


helpfully summarize why it is that the family has functioned as an important symbol of a post-capitalist future; "Marx's 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' is an ideal to which the nearest approximation we can imagine is a caring family where the contribution of each is not subjected to exact calculation."® As this implies, to continue to privilege the family as the site of such non-instrumentalized bonds marks an obvious failure on the part of socialist thought to imagine how general relations in a non-capitalist future might be transformed, not to mention the continuing idealization of an institution associated by many, especially women, with confinement, misery and abuse.

If the symbolic significance of the family for both left and right has been determined by the qualitatively distinctive nature of the relations it ideally manifests, the suspicion directed at sexual relations between members of the same sex has not only been determined by the religious and moralistic discourses invoked by Engels, but also by their apparently malign negation of the these same qualitative traits, as determined by their outlaw status and spatial exteriority to the home. Given the gendered nature of the public/private division for much of our history, I here focus for the most part on relations between men.

If the nineteenth century witnessed the sanctification of marital relations, it would nonetheless be true to say that capitalism in its larger determinations of social change exerted pressure on the family's integrity. This is the emphasis of John d’Emilio in his remarkable, and still persuasive, essay, "Capitalism and Gay Identity" (1983). D’Emilio argues that the system of family-based production that was characteristic of New England villages from the seventeenth century was gradually broken up during the nineteenth century by the emergence of urban capitalist production and the development of "free labour." This generated greater autonomy for workers—including autonomy from familial structures and relations—even while it exposed them to new forms of exploitation. Over time, this facilitated not merely same-sex contacts, but self-conscious, mostly urban communities based on same-sex desire from the late nineteenth century on. Nonetheless, the family served functionally to reproduce the workforce, and subjectively as the affective centre of existence for most people, ideally

® Barrett and MacIntosh, Anti-Social Family, p. 40.
providing a form of stability and emotional reciprocity denied them elsewhere.⁰

Miranda Joseph has reservations about this narrative, suggesting it evinces a tendency to link homosexuality with the exchange value that both superseded historically and, in the present, continues to mask the use value thereby associated with the traditional, pre-capitalist family. The result is that “Gays […] become the scapegoats in a romantic or populist anticapitalism where only the abstractness of money and the impersonal corporation are seen as evil.”ⁱ She points out problems with this opposition: that the family contributes to the order of exchange value through the reproduction of variable capital (the workforce); that it consumes goods; and that many businesses are still family run. However, it is important to point out that d’Emilio does not argue that same-sex desire was determined by capitalism’s breakup of traditional family production, but rather that certain kinds of communities and identities were enabled by it. Joseph does not demonstrate that d’Emilio’s argument in this respect is wrong, merely that aspects of it potentially fuel romantic forms of anticapitalism. But d’Emilio is aware of this danger and critiques such forms of thought in very much the same terms as Joseph; his conclusion is that lesbians and gay men have become scapegoats as a result of the destabilization of the family that is one consequence of capitalist development, even as capitalism relies on, and thereby determines powerful emotional investments in, the family. As part of the project of legitimating sexual autonomy, he argues, socialists must demand “structures and programs that will help to dissolve the boundaries that isolate the family, particularly those that privatize childrearing.”⁵ D’Emilio writes within a tradition of lesbian and gay liberation that saw the effectiveness of such a struggle as dependent on more general social transformation and enhanced freedoms.

The focus in his essay is on the growth of communities. However, such communal

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ⁱ Miranda Joseph, Against the Romance of Community (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 105, 165. Zaretzky, who is supposedly the source d’Emilio’s romantic anti-capitalism in Capitalism, is also explicitly critical of romanticism.

life was facilitated by a prior autonomy that has been negatively associated with the atomization and anonymity of modernity, according to which, Raymond Williams suggests, city dwellers were said to exhibit “an absence of common feeling, an excess of subjectivity.”

What appears as lack of community for some, though, may be experienced as the freedom to seek out company on something other than a highly circumscribed communal basis. This has been of especial importance to those whose desires are more or less illicit; their experience is in every sense the inverse of urban anomie. Mark Turner suggests that “modernity opened up a space, both real and conceptual, for the cruiser to inhabit,” and compares him or her to the Baudelairean and Benjaminian flaneur; in urban conditions, sex became an abstract possibility latent within the flux of everyday life. Speaking of twentieth century contexts specifically, Henning Bech stresses the objective and subjective determinants of a distinctive experience when he writes of the stimulus of the city—“that altogether special blend of closeness and distance, crowd and flickering, surface and gaze, freedom and danger”—combined with the homosexual’s sense that “sexuality is his innermost nucleus.”

Bech, moreover, considers the qualitative nature of the kinds of contacts sought in such ways precisely in terms of their inversion of the value normatively placed on “relationships”—the euphemism is instructive—as the antidote to the impersonality of modernity:

[…] they are not long-term, not binding, not personal—and that is not good. They are alienated, not authentic; there is no giving of self, only enactment of a role and maintenance of distance; they are reified; the other person is treated as a thing to be used and disposed of, and only appearance counts in selling and buying; they are instrumentalized; it is a matter of merely pursuing purely selfish interests and making the other person into a means for them, instead of both persons becoming a common end for each other; they are fetishized; only the surface of the other person, or only a

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part of him, is given attention and worshipped—that whole vocabulary of invectives and distancing phrases, formulated by the last couple of centuries’ theoreticians and poets as fascinated and frightened witness to the development of the capitalist market, the state bureaucracies and the modern city. In short; these meetings are purely and simply the negation of what they should be; there is, so to speak, nothing left.

Yet obviously something does go on; and something, at that, which cannot be reduced to the mere trading of commodities.Ô

Bech evinces a relish for and defiant insistence on the alienated, reified, instrumentalized, and fetishized quality of such meetings that suggests their eroticism is significantly determined by others’ negative valuations of those qualities; it is in the breaking of taboos that they acquire their thrill, the particular quality of freedom that makes them viscerally appealing. It is also significant that he insists on the masculine nature of such desires,Ô and the stress here is precisely on an independence, or reserve, that is maintained despite physical intimacy. Even so, Bech ultimately feels the need to challenge the adequacy of normative judgements by asserting a redemptive “something” about these contacts. More than the “nothing” of their material and objectifying forms, there is that paradoxically intangible, yet human, substance to them after all; needs of some sort are being expressed and satisfied.

The point I am trying to establish here, of course, has to do with the qualitative contrast such contacts form with the values of partnership, family and home that, in their idealization, are represented as places of satisfaction, stability and repose, and all the more human for that. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, for instance, highlight how important the separation between home and work was for the middle class in industrial Britain, and describe the specific cultivation of a feminine “homeliness” through the construction and furnishing of the middle class household.Ô The contrast highlights spatio-temporal dynamics, both material and ideological, and the ways in

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Ô Bech, When Men Meet, p. 112.
Ô He claims, for instance, that “An analysis of male homosexuality that doesn’t acknowledge the difference of masculinity is indeed—homophobic” (Ibid., p. 71). This runs the risk of reifying masculinity as a property of specific bodies.
which they have determined same-sex desires and the experience of them, as well as their representation. In the transition from country to city, and then again, in the distinction between private and public, same-sex desire inhabits—if that is the right word—the latter. It is exiled from home, rest, and a wholeness lost subjectively and/or historically, but which might be restored or won again; for Engels, through communism. It is dynamic and circulatory, restless and abstract, and for all of these reasons imbued with a specific intensity. We may no longer live in cities in which the suburban has quite the connotations it once had, but the sense of home as a retreat and place of reparation, especially in its privileged associations with relationships (however diversified), remains important nonetheless.

These dynamics help to explain why it is that the socialist tradition has not generally proved sympathetic to the message of the lesbian and gay movement, or to sexual liberation more generally. The result, however, has been an impoverishment of its vision through an intractable attachment to the family onto which it has projected what narrow hopes for utopia it has been capable of sustaining. A productive engagement with sexual liberation movements, and even queer theory, might facilitate a necessary return to social utopianism.

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性倾向与历史：人道主义、自由与义务

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【内容摘要】社会主义传统仍未支持男女同性恋运动或性自由，其结果是通过缠结复杂的附着于家庭而导致其学说的贫困枯燥。富有成效地讨论性解放运动和同性恋理论，可能为回归于社会乌托邦思想的必要提供便利。

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