



Which Way Forward for Sexual Liberation?

Gary Mucciaroni, Sherry Wolf, Kenyon Farrow, and Greg Gabrellas

*On November 8, 2010, Platypus hosted a forum entitled “Which Way Forward for Sexual Liberation?” moderated by Jeremy Cohan at New York University. The panel consisted of Gary Mucciaroni, professor of political science at Temple University; Sherry Wolf, author of *Sexuality and Socialism* and organizer for the International Socialist Organization; Kenyon Farrow, executive director of *Queers for Economic Justice* and author of the forthcoming *Stand Up: The Politics of Racial Uplift*; and Greg Gabrellas of Platypus. What follows is an edited transcript of the event. Full audio is available online at <<http://www.archive.org/details/WhichWayForwardForSexualLiberationARoundtableHostedByPlatypusNyu>>.*

Opening Remarks

Gary Mucciaroni: One of the questions for this discussion has an interesting hook: “Why do we have Gay Pride Day instead of Sexual Freedom Struggle Day?” First, I think gays and lesbians have linked their cause to other non-gay groups also seeking sexual liberation. The gay liberation phase of the movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s drew inspiration from the sexual revolution that was going on at the time, and lesbians played an important role in the women’s movement, which was in part devoted to emancipating women sexually.

However, it is true that we have a gay rights movement, but not a broader sexual emancipation movement. Why? Gays and lesbians obviously have a community and a shared set of experiences, which includes being targeted by discriminatory laws, so they naturally see themselves as having more in common with each other than with other people, most of whom are seen as part of a heterosexual majority that has oppressed them for centuries. As for people who are not gay or queer, I think they tend not to reach out to gays and lesbians to form a broader movement because they don’t have a sexual identity, as such. If they do have grievances in the area of sexual emancipation, they tend to deal with them outside of politics, because sex is private, for the most part. You can be subversive sexually without being political.

It should also be said that gay rights are not just about sex and overcoming a denial of sexual freedom. The Right has always sought to portray gays and lesbians not only as sexual deviants, but also as exclusively sexual beings. A straight person who does not follow sexual mores might be labeled a pervert, but you don’t have categories like “homosexual” that reduce their humanity solely to their sexual preferences. To view the LGBT movement as fighting only for sexual freedom is superficial and potentially plays into the hand of the Right.

This gets at the internal politics of the Left. People often say the Left ought to stand for

universal values, and identity politics are exclusionary. But promoting the interest of identity groups is not necessarily at odds with universal values. The LGBT rights movement has fought for equality and freedom. What could be more universal than those values? There is also the concern that identity politics displace class struggle. I don't think we should promote identity politics at the expense of class concerns, but the two aren't mutually exclusive. You can do both at the same time.

In most countries, the Left has tended to be more supportive of gay and lesbian rights and sexual liberation than other parties. Nevertheless, I don't think we should exaggerate the importance of the Left. There are other reasons why gay rights have advanced faster in some places than in others. The first factor is religion. In Canada, Northern Europe, and in Europe generally, religion is not as strong politically or socially. The courts in these countries, and particularly in Canada, have also been more assertive than courts in the U.S., where Republicans have dominated the federal bench. In other countries, LGBT movements have gained more traction because they have benefited from simpler human rights policies, whereas in the U.S. the LGBT movement has had to contend with a complicated civil rights jurisprudence in which racial and gender groups who had supposedly "immutable" characteristics were given legal preference. It has been difficult for gays and lesbians to fit in to this legal framework, which is one legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.

I sympathize with the criticism that same-sex marriage is a narrow focus. Organizations that want to go beyond marriage propose reducing the importance of marriage as a civil status and striving for a more inclusive notion of the family, rather than making marriage the primary qualification for rights and benefits. Other kinds of families, such as adult children taking care of parents, single parents, and so on, deserve social recognition and support. Of course, this raises the question of whether we want a completely unrestricted definition of family when there are arguably ethical reasons for deciding that some forms of family might be inherently unjust—polygamy, for instance. Nonetheless, I mostly agree with the "beyond marriage" arguments, although I don't know how politically realistic it is to mobilize all these other family groupings. These do not constitute identity groups, generally, while gays and lesbians obviously do. There is a permanence to sexual orientation that does not exist in other kinds of relationships. Adults take care of their parents for a phase of their lives, for example, but do not remain in that role. Gay marriage could be one step on the road to a more inclusive family policy, and I think that's what we should see it as—an incremental step. At the same time, I don't think it is sensible to wait until a radical, comprehensive change in family policy comes about.

As for whether the struggle has progressed or not, I think that depends on how you look at it. Forty states have banned gay marriage, so by that reckoning it seems to be a failure. On the other hand, five states recognize gay marriage, five states have civil unions, and two states recognize out-of-state gay marriage. Ten countries around the world recognize same-sex marriage, and about eight have civil unions. No one would have expected this 30 years ago. The main limit in the U.S. is the religious Right and fundamentalism. Capitalism does play an important role, because U.S. capitalism creates such a mobile society that there is concern

about social disintegration, and gay rights come to be seen as a threat to social integration. But the religious Right is the real culprit.

On the whole, the courts have played a constructive role in getting the issue on the agenda and forcing action. Some say we shouldn't have gone through the courts, as this created a horrible backlash. This may be true, but if the courts had stayed on the sidelines, I'm convinced that little or nothing would have been accomplished. Others argue that courts don't work because they tend to be conservative and wait for public opinion to catch up, but this is not always the case. The majority of the states that repealed sodomy laws did so through the courts, for instance, even as public opinion remained divided. Besides, public support for same-sex marriage today is getting quite large, especially for people under 50. It is not that big of a leap for the courts to declare same-sex marriage constitutional.

Sherry Wolf: With respect to reformist demands, such as same-sex marriage and no discrimination against gays in the military, radicals need to distinguish between reformism and the fight for reforms. The fight for reforms is something revolutionaries and radicals have always engaged in. Otherwise, we leave it to the liberals, who drive the struggle into the ground. It doesn't make sense, as movements erupt, to abandon the field of battle to the people with the lowest-grade politics who aim only for the immediate demand.

I have not heard serious leftists today debate about whether we ought to involve ourselves in building unions or fight for decent labor contracts, even though we all understand that the point of unions is to renegotiate the terms of our exploitation. However, reforms like equality in the family or workplace are often held to a different standard. But it is completely consistent to think the Federal government should not discriminate in the military, the nation's largest workforce, while at the same time thinking that nobody should serve in this miserable institution that spreads war, misery, and empire. One can hold these positions at the same time.

We need to engage with others as they move Left. We are in a moment when this movement is on the ebb, and you see the rise of conservative "Gay, Inc." sorts, who were utterly uncritical of the military funding bill which passed with the repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell." It is unacceptable among people who aim to build the broadest level of solidarity among people—whether gay, bisexual, transgender, and of whatever nationality—to say that we are willing to gain rights behind the backs of our Iraqi and Afghan brothers and sisters.

The dominant forces unnecessarily narrow the question of sexual liberation to those issues—"Don't ask, don't tell" and DOMA [Defense of Marriage Act]. Nevertheless, for the first time large contingents of LGBT folks have been participating in mass demonstrations on May Day following the National Equality March. You also have the sit-in and factory occupation at the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago. This largely black and Latino workforce solidarized with the LGBT movement. This past June, LGBT contingents were protesting apartheid Israel's actions following the flotilla massacre in Gaza. These are concrete examples of how you can develop solidarity on the ground.

If the Left does not get involved in these struggles, we abandon the field of battle to people with politics that are far to the right. If anybody had asked, "What are the fights you want to

have out there, in terms of LGBT rights?” I never would have said, “Oh, please, can it be military and marriage?” But we on the Left are not accustomed to the luxury of picking our battles. They hit us—you either involve yourself or you don’t.

Over the last 30 years, academic theory has decided the working class no longer exists. It ignores Marx’s understanding that nurses, teachers, service and office workers, and baristas are rendered workers by their relation to production. But the power of workers identified in the *Communist Manifesto* remains. By deleting the working class, these theorists rule out class solidarity along with the possibility of ending oppression. Identitarian politics came to replace the working class, leading to an individualistic framework that accommodates the system and sees transformation in individual life choices. Pat Califia put it brilliantly: “We can’t fuck our way to freedom.”¹ I support people doing whatever they choose, but I do not think that is liberation. There are real material constraints on our lives.

Historical materialism holds its currency to this day: It is our social being that determines our consciousness, not our ideas that shape the world. We get up early, prepare lunch or get the kids off to school, go out to work—or to find work, more likely—then, after a long commute, we spend the next eight or ten hours doing soul-sucking labor, and we still have to worry about affording health care, child care, anything. These are not ingredients for sexually liberatory experiences in day-to-day life, they are ingredients for exhaustion.

Restructuring our individual lives does not challenge the status quo. Nor does the attempt to instill another sexual hierarchy mirroring bourgeois morality—“They say the missionary position is best, we say fist-fucking.” We have to go back to Wilhelm Reich and Alexandra Kollontai, who in the early 20th century insisted on the interconnection between the transformation of the material conditions of our lives and liberating our sexuality. It is not just LGBT people who are oppressed, or repressed, in society today, where the average length of sex is six minutes. We all have a fight for sexual liberation on our hands, which will not be won without the transformation of the conditions we work and live under. It’s impossible to extricate the struggle for sexual liberation from the larger material struggles against austerity measures, racism, Islamophobia, and all the noxious crap specific to the ruling class’s attempt to have its way.

Our fights and our demands for immediate rights—including leisure time to explore ourselves and our bodies, and to raise questions in a forum like this—cannot be disconnected. The current moment, though often described simply as a rightward shift in the U.S., is actually a politically volatile moment. We are witnessing a political polarization. Their side, obviously, is mobilizing its base. Our side is not as well organized. We have quite a bit of work to do. The 29 million people who voted for Obama in the last election and sat it out at the midterms are disgusted and disaffected. Many are absolutely terrified, and some of them are organizable. That’s the job of the Left: to give people direction, hope, and organization.

Kenyon Farrow: I don’t want to debate the utility of marriage itself. However, the use of same-sex marriage as a central issue in the LGBT movement, along with “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” is not a natural occurrence. Why this issue? Why now? Why is funding going into this issue and

not others? In 2008, the 40th anniversary of Stonewall, marriage was widely proclaimed to be the next step for gay rights in a natural progression of politics, but this is ridiculous.

Sex and sexuality is seen as a private issue, but it is not. I don't think the state or the community has the right to determine the sexual expression or identity of consenting adults. But the state and, sometimes, institutions like families and communities, try to control different kinds of sexuality or different racial or sexual groups. I have even found that, though it ranges from progressive to radical, the Left can be just as sexually conservative as the right, in terms of policing certain kinds of sexual expression. Either way, when a group's sexuality is brought into question, it is public.

For example, the phrase "baby momma," which targets single black and Latino poor mothers as "welfare queen" did in the 1980s, allows the state to demonize low-income women in order to remove welfare benefits from those women. Even saying "baby momma" brings a certain image to mind. The state operationalizes itself to target and control the sexual and reproductive rights of poor women, mostly black and brown. They are maligned in the press on the basis of their sexuality, how many kids they have, whether they know who the fathers are, and so on.

Another category today is the "sex offender," or the "sexual predator." Those legal definitions are not just about people who have committed acts of rape, child sexual abuse, or incest. It is being expanded to other criminal offenses involving sexuality. In Louisiana, women convicted of prostitution are now targeted with a 200-year-old "crime against nature" law. Though it was put on the books to target queers, this law is now being applied to prostitution charges, so that prostitutes can be designated as sex offenders by the state. This goes on their record, jeopardizing their access to jobs and to welfare for at least ten years. So, I challenge the idea that sex is private. For many communities, sexuality is policed and made very public.

If we are talking about the LGBT movement, which grew out of a sexual liberationist politics, the question for me is, Why hasn't that movement made overtures to these communities? Certainly, in the black community, marriage has never solved the socioeconomic problems that the LGBT movement claims marriage will solve. For a lot of people, the narrative is that LGBT is white. One really has to think about what gay marriage would mean for black queer folks, particularly in low-income communities. Considering how race corresponds to access to material resources, it is unclear how same-sex marriage could work for black LGBT people. Given the widespread lack of health insurance among black people, or the fact that health insurance isn't even an option for those trapped in low-wage jobs, getting married to a partner—same-sex or otherwise—does not ensure access to health care.

People argue that they've seen black, Latino, and poor people at protests. That may be true, but as executive director of an organization that does not do marriage work, I often hear LGBT funders question the validity of the work we do with the black community. Meanwhile we are in a national crisis of queer youth homelessness, yet no funding is rolling in to secure access to housing. Clearly, some communities do not have access to discussions about the privacy of their bodies and sexuality, or about their reproductive rights and health. The fact

that the movement is arguing that same-sex marriage will somehow address these issues across the board reflects a shallow understanding of the problem.

Greg Gabrellas: Two opposed, and seemingly irreconcilable, stances claim the mantle of a radical position on gay politics. Although occasionally dressed up in the language of class struggle, socialist parties of all stripes remain practically indistinguishable from mainstream liberal advocacy: support of same-sex marriage, the extension of hate crime legislation, equal pay, and civil rights. Against this allegedly assimilationist orientation, self-described queers demand more radical and expansive politics. Instead of lobbying for equality, queer politics aims to fight against “heteronormativity,” “white privilege,” and “the marriage-industrial complex” by dropping banners from megachurches and vandalizing the Human Rights Campaign. To the socialist Left, such activism appears counter-productive. To the queer activist, the demand only for equality amounts to accommodation and domestication.

Despite apparent differences, both the socialist and the queer stances share unquestioned assumptions about sexuality and how it matters to the Left. For both, sexuality defines us as a minority dominated by a straight majority. The state, culture, and even language itself contribute to our shared experience of shame and otherness. Although socialists and queers disagree about what defense entails, they agree that it is the Left’s role to defend sexual minorities and their sexuality. Many see the defense of rights as fundamental, but even if not—“We’re here, we’re queer, so get used to it.” Give us tolerance, accept us for who we are, or at least leave us be. These are common slogans licensed by common-sense assumptions. But they are wrong, and, worse than wrong, they obscure the problem of sexual freedom and naturalize the incapacity of the Left to address its implications.

Sex is old, but sexuality is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Sexuality as a sphere of life distinct from all others only begins with the great revolutions wrought by capitalism. The accumulation of capital tore apart traditional ties, breaking the bond between peasants and their land, brutally forcing people into the labor market. Denied common land, peasants fled to cities seeking jobs. But with this change and attendant violence came the possibility of fashioning a sexual life free from the traditional community and its rigid customs. Terrified at the force and the freedom made possible by capitalist modernity, many sought order and restraint, hoping to control the sexual disorder proliferating around them. This was no conspiracy against the masses. As the development of capitalism wore on in the 19th century, with cyclic economic collapse following ever more destructive wars, many workers were confused and disoriented. Lashing out against the alleged destroyers of the family seemed a reasonable means to restore a better, if mythical, order of society. This was not simply a bad judgment, or a case of bad attitudes. Rather, it must be understood as a misrecognized attempt to master capitalism through social control.

The relationship between capital and sexuality goes deeper. Class rule before capitalism was a straightforward, brutal affair. But under capitalism, the abstract form of work itself constitutes domination. Wage laborers produce the very thing that dominates them. Thus, the form of the work is alienated—it is not our own. In way of response, we carve out wholly

subjective space: sexuality, personal life, and marriage. It is not simply that our workaday selves are unhappy, or that some of us dislike our jobs. What matters is whether we make ourselves, and the conditions in which we live, or whether they are made for us. Capitalism is unique in that, while the combined powers of humanity make and remake the social world with ever increasing frequency, as capital continues its process of ongoing creative destruction, we make ourselves and our world only behind our own backs. Our sexuality is a way of trying to organize this confusion, to bring reason and dignity into human affairs. It doesn't matter if this means faithful monogamy with vanilla missionary-style sex once a month, or wild orgies at the local bathhouse. What matters is its meaning: that it is ours—our pleasure, our pain, our selves.

Sexuality is a form that freedom takes under capitalism, but like all forms of freedom under capitalism, it remains incomplete. Early bourgeois philosophers like Hegel embraced sexuality in their own way. They recognized that modern marriage, as a union of free individuals, was in tension with the blind play of interests in civil society—a haven in a heartless world. Such a perspective on the emancipatory kernel of modern marriage was shared by those who advocated free love, an ideology that sought the reform of marriage by making divorce legal and abolishing the coverture laws that subsumed the rights of women under those of men. How could marriage represent a free union of individuals if one partner had the civil status of a slave? Not surprisingly, advocates of women's rights were also largely advocates of civil rights for freedmen and opponents of child slavery. Both exponents of free love and politicians of free labor, before and after the American Civil War and Reconstruction, drew from a common stock of bourgeois political theory. Many, like Frederick Douglass, Victoria Woodhull, Wendell Phillips and Sojourner Truth, made common cause in their long, reformist careers.

If sexuality emerged as a symptom of capitalism, then the revolutionary Left sought to push the symptom to its highest consciousness, seeking to expose through class struggle the contours of an otherwise opaque reality, along with its possibilities for transformation. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels sought to examine how sexual relations were transformed under capitalism while also sustained in their most oppressive forms, and how they might be superseded by a change in the mode of production. August Bebel, the cofounder and longtime chairman of the German Social Democratic Party, authored a landmark monograph on the close relationship between socialism and the struggle for gender rights.² He was also the first parliamentarian in history to champion the decriminalization of homosexuality. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 decriminalized divorce, homosexuality, and abortion. Sexuality was not just one plank on the program, an issue dealt with by a multi-issue party. Rather, sexuality and its emancipation were understood to be intrinsic to the process of revolution itself. The Left exposed the bourgeois ideologists, the holdovers from free love, *not* for "privileging gender" over something called class. Instead, they criticized bourgeois spokespeople for being bourgeois—for evading the tasks of freedom by prescribing more abortions for the poor, rather than the abolition of the system that made them poor.

The Left's critique was not moralistic, but historical. Over time, the politics of free love had

turned into its opposite. From a critique of the present order, looking toward a transformation of sexual relations, it became a defense of the ways sexuality remained unfree in the new order. This desire to cling to the past and avoid facing an uncertain future, this fear of freedom, has characterized both reform and revolution in the 20th century.

Today there is no Left in a position to make revolution, nor even to realize comprehensive social reforms. Although the contradictions of capitalism remain, they are now invisible, and seem unsolvable. Politics, once the vehicle to achieve self-knowledge, now just confirms us in what we already know. Sexual politics becomes a way of tolerating each other; radical activists create “safe spaces” and teach each other to be more “sex positive.” Sexual politics is a kind of compromise formation, formed by the recognition of the necessity for change when fundamental change is blocked. Hence its antinomical character: bourgeois rights versus radical queer freedom, same-sex marriage versus anti-marriage.

Radical queer activism seeks legitimization in the history of the 1960s, when revolution appeared to be in the air. But no revolution materialized, and proponents of liberation unreflectively drove their politics to their logical end point in accommodation and liquidation. The consternation about the mainstreaming of the LGBT liberation movement is beside the point. The liberationists of that movement did not supersede, but fell back upon old leftist formulations derived from Third World anti-colonial struggles, and demanded the abolition of the family as the simple and straightforward negation of the right-wing socialist, and later Stalinist, emphasis on preserving the integrity of the proletarian family.

But such activism does not, and cannot, overcome the situation that generates our need for family life in the first place—a situation that propels the contemporary movement for same-sex marriage. It is not the responsibility of the Left to be for or against same-sex marriage. The question of sexual freedom is not reducible to civil rights. The future of sexual liberation lies in the recovery of a Marxian approach to history: to understand ourselves and the history of the Left as an ongoing, unfinished attempt to change ourselves in the struggle for freedom, rather than simply the struggle to free what is already there. If we turn to history it must not be in an effort to find a usable past, ready-made, but in order to critique the impasse of the present.

The Left is handicapped by its history in ways that elude its grasp. The death of the Left in 1960s militancy was a peculiar phenomenon, and gay liberation must be understood within this context. As an entire movement self-destructs, no intellectual or political actor can escape the clutch of regression. Political discourse coarsens and petrifies, as analysis hardens into a set line. The gay liberation movement recognized this problem in its own way by attempting to elaborate a historically novel theory of liberation that would help alleviate the moralistic death grip of Cold War liberalism. But gay liberation as a political movement failed to raise historical consciousness—the contradiction of freedom and domination under capitalism—to the level of practical knowledge. To raise historical consciousness would have required the advance of an international socialist movement poised to make the revolutionary transformations necessary to achieve sexual freedom.

It was precisely this task that liberationist rhetoric evaded under its cloak of “group

consciousness” and “group power.” It is precisely the task of any future Left to take up the call for sexual freedom, not as an identity politics, but as an emancipatory politics seeking to fulfill the highest promises of modern capitalist society and establish the material grounds for happiness. Far from prescribing the future, the Left must push on the limits of possibility under capitalism, without once reneging our responsibility to establish the necessity of political revolution. Engels had the right idea in his description of people in a free society: “Once such people appear,” he wrote, “they will not care a rap about what we today think they should do. They will establish their own practice and their own public opinion, conformable therewith, on the practice of each individual—and that’s the end of it.”³ It is up to the Left to abolish punitive morality and establish the grounds for human sexuality to flourish. To the proponents of both queer theory and gay domesticity, the Left must respond as Trotsky wrote of the Fourth International, against Stalinist counterrevolution in his day: The task is to sweep away “the quacks, charlatans, and unsolicited teachers of morals. In a society based upon exploitation, the highest moral is that of the social revolution.”⁴

Q & A

It’s hard not to think of the Civil Rights Movement when talking about gay rights. Even though poverty and segregation rates are as bad as they were in the 1960s, that was a period of radicalization. These struggles did not lead to international socialism, but clearly they were steps toward equality. Just because a given demand isn’t going to solve all the problems that motivate us, I don’t think we can be dismissive of those fights.

GG: I certainly would not dismiss those movements, especially the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power. Those movements went somewhere—namely, they helped pave the way to where we are in the present. Black Power was largely victorious as an ideology for thinking about race and community politics. As Sherry pointed out in her remarks, the Left largely acquiesced to conservative politicians who established policies punitive towards poor and working-class people in the name of “racial empowerment.”

The pressing question is this: What should define the Left’s basic orientation toward the world? For many decades, the Left’s answer has been to participate in social movements as they are, in hopes of using them as vehicles to build consciousness and lead the movement to something else. Socialist organizations have been attempting this strategy for decades. Why hasn’t it worked yet? I’m definitely sympathetic towards the possibility of a reinvigorated workers movement and socialist politics, but the Left has ceded so much ground that today it is incapable of formulating its basic orientation towards problems like sexuality.

SW: The role of people who aim to change the world, and not just think about radical ideas, is to engage with real forces and struggles. We can’t get around the human material that capitalism has bequeathed to us. We can’t wait around for a more race-, class-, sex-conscious

mass population to come about in order to move forward.

Two hundred folks in Boston, largely black and brown, who were initially fighting evictions largely out of their own self-interest, built a fertile movement that in some cases reversed the tide of foreclosures and evictions. Leftists in Chicago used that as a model and won a moratorium on evictions. Is it big enough? No. But this is where we are. Our job as radicals is to be involved in concrete struggles. I chafe at people who say, "I put the best four years of my education toward revolution and it hasn't panned out." We are looking at global forces and a Left that was obliterated in this country. A reborn Left will need us to get involved, sometimes in very partial reforms, in order to have an impact on them.

GM: I agree with what Sherry is saying about how we have to engage people on the basis of how they live their daily lives, in what may appear at first to be mundane struggles. That's what people relate to, rather than doctrines and theories.

KF: I don't distinguish organizing work from my work with shelters. I don't feel like I have to divert from my politics. Otherwise it is patronizing; I would rather be blunt and say, "I'm not going to do that because it violates my politics." You want to be involved where people are in their work and struggles, but at some point you have to make political choices. Projects of the mainstream LGBT community, like marriage, came from something. They're not as spontaneous as they're painted. There was funding and strategy that set these things up in a particular way.

There is a lot research around relationship configuration and HIV risk. I've heard the argument that what the U.S. needs is same-sex marriage, as this will go some way to decreasing HIV risk among gay men. I think, "Tell that to the married woman in South Africa." You have to question those kinds of politics creeping their way into supposedly objective research. I say, "Let's talk about *you*, rather than my community that you feel is problematic."

One part of my political approach is to engage critical thinking about popular culture on my blog. I focus on the stuff people are actually being informed by, to raise questions about sex in a way that is not being dealt with by dead white man theory.

How do you see the last 20 years? In terms of sexual issues as well as general inequality, do you see it as offering progress or as a period of defeat or stasis?

SW: I've been an organized socialist since I was 18, and I have never seen a larger audience for left-wing politics and theory than in the last year. The number of people who are finding Marxists.org and reading things is great. It is a welcome development because superficially reading news items and taking action has shown itself to be insufficient. This generation is facing a lifetime of couch surfing and debt. This is not a game. The early lifestyle politics typical of the social justice movement 15 years ago are falling by the wayside and class politics are now back on the agenda.

GM: I think there has been a lot of progress in the last 20 to 40 years in terms of sexual politics, but much less so in the area of material, class struggle. I'm glad to hear that things might be improving, but I grew up in a time when unions were much stronger than they are today. Sexual politics have gotten a lot more progressive—just look at the sexual revolution and the changes in family law over the last 30 years. But on the economic side, the inequality keeps getting worse. The efforts of the Left to organize can't keep up with that. If this latest catastrophe in capitalism that began with the 2008 crash doesn't reconstitute the Left, I don't know what could.

GG: When we talk of the past 20 years, I think that certainly no substantive gains by the Left have been achieved, but something of great importance has been lost: its basic orientation towards freedom. The failure to take stock of a very long period of degeneration on the Left is indicated by the gay liberationist writings themselves, much of which was Third Worldist and infected by Stalinist, conservative ideologies throughout the 1960s–1980s. That this goes unrecognized as a history of self-defeat bespeaks a failure to take ownership of history as something the Left has been active in making. As Adolph Reed, Jr. once wrote, "the opposition must investigate its own complicity."⁵ That's something the Left has failed to do. If we are going to change the circumstances in which politics operate, we have to begin by investigating how we ourselves have been complicit in maintaining those circumstances, in the past and present.

The problem with the Left in the 1960s and 1970s was not the tepidity of demands, but the legacy of McCarthyism. There weren't a lot of radicals around to help get these movements off the ground, because the Left had been largely wiped out. Today, I have conversations with people who don't support marriage equality struggles and I tell them how radicalized the movements are. They say, "Fine, but that's not how I want to spend my time." It seems like an impasse. Are we trying to convince people to do things they don't want to do? How do we work together to ensure that we do not separate movements?

SW: There's certainly no dearth of things that need to be fought for. I have zero interest in pounding away at someone who says, "Sorry, it's just not my issue." Whether you want to throw yourself into it to a certain degree is another question. People gravitate towards the kinds of activism that makes sense to them. The massacre of the flotilla brought together people who never imagined themselves getting involved in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement in Israel. It's great. Arabs and Jews have been building this movement. People who were only involved in that have now encountered activists with broader politics on the Left. Muslim activists are side-by-side with LGBT activists outside of Fox News. When has that happened? Never! That's a step forward.

There is racism and Islamophobia among the LGBT movement, as there is homophobia among the religious. Politics bridges these divides. That's why I think teach-ins and educationals, in a moment like this, are as important as mobilizing people on the streets.

KF: Well, I'm never going to a same-sex marriage march. I don't want to cross that political line. But there is the issue of lopsided funding, which I've brought up before. I can't get the same kind of funding that others do. Organizations that provide funding say, "Nobody cares about people on welfare," but they are funding marriage. There are many communities not being engaged. They may not have exposure to political theory, but I think they are interested politically. I prefer thinking about those folks. The gay marriage people find a black minister to talk on camera about support for same-sex marriage. Half the black community doesn't go to church. Nobody at all is talking to the people that have a stake in sexual liberation because of the way they are targeted by the state. That is the crux of the issue.

GG: I think this is a conflation of roles. In the contemporary imagination, an activist is someone with a dosage of political education who goes out and talks with people about issues. They try to connect struggle A with struggle B. But I don't see, for example, what queer activists have to gain in terms of advancing a project of social freedom by supporting a strategy of sanction. I don't see what the Palestinian people have to gain by the queer activists' uncritical support of strategies and political forces that are right-wing. This idea of the activist is misleading. The point of the Left, at least as Marx saw it, was not simply to "be the movement," but to provide a ruthless criticism seeking to clarify the most radical potential of the movement.

It's simply untrue to say that there were hardly any radicals, revolutionaries, or Marxists in the 1970s. There were tons of Marxist-Leninist cadres of all types. When they weren't trying to organize, they were having debates about whether or not Mao was dead. You can't let these radicals off the hook. Their political approaches were wrong or misguided in a number of ways. The roots of those problems stretch back in history and involve a lack of social imagination, or at least a lack of clarity. We need to recover that imagination. Regarding sexuality, the Left's imagination of freedom has been reduced to merely breaking taboos about having sex and saying dirty words in public.

SW: I think people living in this country, an empire financing the wholesale destruction of the Palestinian people, actually do have a stake in solidarizing with Palestinians and activists fighting against apartheid Israel. I am interested in winning over LGBT activists and people in the same way the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa in the 1980s radicalized a whole generation of people like me.

How should the Left respond to an issue like homophobia in Third World Countries?

KF: I don't know about the Left broadly, but I have struggled to determine ways to support work happening in the Caribbean and Africa, for instance. I have heard from people in those regions that foreign solidarity people get the attention and funding, while the people with fewer resources and less access to media are ignored. Outside organizations get the glory, especially when those organizations are white-elite identified NGOs. Even though they are

trying to help, they fuel those states' claims that gayness is white. It can actually further homophobia. So I build relationships with organizations that reach out to me, and I try to figure out what kind of support I can offer from the outside. I figure out how to move resources or get press for them outside the country.

SW: I agree with Kenyon. That dynamic of NGO-ization plays into the hand of elites in Uganda, who say that homosexuality is a white, imperial abomination being imposed on Africa. The role we play here is to stop collusion of our own government in these things, while the role of the Republicans and the right wing in this country is to be the architects of this noxious legislation in other countries.

GG: I disagree. Right-wing ideologies aren't simply exported from the United States. Reaction to capitalism is global. We can't let the right wing in other countries off the hook simply because they receive funding from religious or fundamentalist organizations, or because they have been propped up by the U.S. government.

The Left over the past half-century has been hobbled by nationalism, even when dealing with issues of equality here in the U.S. I think the gay rights movement is profoundly implicated in this narrow focus. But the hardcore, sectarian Left has also undermined itself through an inverted nationalism, which assumes that everyone else's nationalism is progressive and good, as long as it's opposed to American nationalism. There are homophobic discourses and politics the world over. If our only way of trying to counter this is by supporting struggles operating in conditions that are extremely regressive politically, in which free speech and basic civil liberties like freedom of expression are suppressed, then the Left will not actually be able to deal with a problem like homophobia in Third World countries.

To me, the only way to even begin to address this problem is from the perspective of international socialism. If that perspective seems hopelessly utopian, then we still need to think about what would it actually take to realize worldwide the minimal reforms that gay activists take for granted. It would take a lot more than the strategies that have been pursued by gay and queer radical organizations.

KF: You should not assume that de-racialized international solidarity, of the kind you have just described, Greg, is neutral. You can't assume that, just because you have a particular political orientation, your strategy is what people need. There is homophobia that exists in a range of places around the world. People are working under conditions formed by massive amounts of racism and imperialism from political, missionary, and NGO organizations. For an outside organization to say, "This is our political bent, buy it or kick rocks," is completely ridiculous.

Why is the Left so silent on supporting global transformations, while conservatives are willing to rush to Uganda, for instance, to maintain order?

SW: The American Left is tiny and multifaceted. Opposition to various ongoing wars is one

focus of the Left. But we're talking about such small numbers that what the Left has to do in this country, right now, is grow. Unless we have a critical mass, we cannot have a decisive impact internationally.

GG: The problem cannot be reduced to the question of the Left becoming big enough. At different points in time, the Left has been large enough. Its small size and marginal status are neither accidental nor incidental. The question is: What has brought us to where we are today, and what has been the role of the Left in that history? From the 1960s through to the present, the Left has supported cause after cause that ultimately leads to its own liquidation. It throws support to various right-wing nationalist regimes. It runs completely counter to the interests of sexual freedom, or any kind of freedom, for that matter. What is needed is a thorough reconsideration of this history and, with it, reconsideration of what the Left is. Until then, the way forward for the Left remains unclear, as does the reason for people to commit to being leftists in the first place. | **P**

Transcribed by Brian Worley

-
1. Patrick Califia, *Macho Sluts: Erotic Fiction* (Boston: Alyson Books, 1988), 15.
 2. See August Bebel, *Woman Under Socialism* (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2009). Originally published in 1879, sometimes translated as *Woman and Socialism*. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bebel/1879/woman-socialism/index.htm>.
 3. Friedrich Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, reprinted in Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978), 751. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm>.
 4. Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (Atlanta: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 107. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text2.htm>.
 5. Adolph Reed, Jr., "Black Particularity Reconsidered," *Telos* 39 (Spring 1979): 71–93. Available online at <http://libcom.org/library/black-particularity-reconsidered-adolph-l-reed-jr>.