

Where's the Revolution?

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Because I came out in the context of black liberation, women's liberation and--most significantly--the newly emerging black feminist movement that I was helping to build, I worked from the assumption that all of the "isms" were connected. It was simply not possible for any oppressed people, including lesbians and gay men, to achieve freedom under this system. Police dogs, cattle prods, fire hoses, poverty, urban insurrections, the Vietnam War, the assassinations, Kent State, unchecked violence against women, the self-immolation of the closet and the emotional and often physical violence experienced by those of us who dared leave it made the contradictions crystal clear. Nobody sane would want any part of the established order. It was the system--white supremacist, misogynistic, capitalist and homophobic--that had made our lives so hard to begin with. We wanted something entirely new. Our movement was called lesbian and gay liberation, and more than a few of us, especially women and people of color, were working for a revolution.

Revolution seems Like a largely irrelevant concept to the gay movement of the nineties. The liberation politics of the earlier era, which relied upon radical grass-roots strategies to eradicate oppression, have been largely replaced by an assimilationist "civil rights" agenda. The most visible elements of the movement have put their faith almost exclusively in electoral and legislative initiatives, bolstered by mainstream media coverage, to alleviate discrimination. When the word "radical" is used at all, it means confrontational, "in your face" tactics, not strategic organizing aimed at the roots of oppression.

Unlike the early lesbian and gay movement, which had both ideological and practical links to the left, black activism and feminism, today's "queer" politicians seem to operate in a historical and ideological vacuum. "Queer" activists focus on "queer" issues, and racism, sexual oppression and economic exploitation do not qualify, despite the fact that the majority of "queers" are people of color, female or working class. When other oppressions or movements are cited, it's to build a parallel case for the validity of lesbian and gay rights or to expedite alliances with mainstream political organizations. Building unified, ongoing coalitions that challenge the system and ultimately prepare a way for revolutionary change simply isn't what "queer" activists have in mind.

When lesbians and gay men of color urge the gay leadership to make connections between heterosexism and issues like police brutality, racial violence, homelessness, reproductive freedom and violence against women and children, the standard dismissive response is, "Those are not our issues." At a time when the gay movement is under unprecedented public scrutiny, lesbians and gay men of color and others committed to antiracist organizing are asking: Does the gay and lesbian movement want to create a just society for everyone? Or does it only want to eradicate the last little glitch that makes life difficult for privileged (white male) queers?

Since that time I've heard very little public criticism of the narrowness of lesbian and gay nationalism. No one would guess from recent stories about wealthy and "powerful" white lesbians on TV and in slick magazines that women earn 69 cents on the dollar compared with men and that black women earn even less. These examples are directly connected to assumptions about race and class privilege. In fact, it's gay white men's racial, gender and class privileges, as well as the vast numbers of them who identify with the system rather than distrust it, that have made the politics of the current gay movement so different from those of other identity-based movements for social and political change. In the seventies, progressive movements--especially feminism--positively influenced and inspired lesbians' and gays' visions of struggle. Since the eighties, as AIDS has helped to raise consciousness about gay issues in some quarters of the establishment, and as some battles against homophobia have been won, the movement has positioned itself more and more within the mainstream political arena. Clinton's courting of the gay vote (at the same time as he did everything possible to distance himself from the African-American community) has also been a crucial factor in convincing the national gay and lesbian leadership that a place at the ruling class's table is just what they've been waiting for. Of course, the people left out of this new gay political equation of mainstream acceptance, power and wealth are lesbians and gay men of color.

Our outsider status in the new queer movement is made even more untenable because supposedly progressive heterosexuals of all races do so little to support lesbian and gay freedom. Although homophobia may be mentioned when heterosexual leftists make lists of oppressions, they do virtually no risk-taking work to connect with our movement or to challenge attacks against lesbians and gays who live in their midst. Many straight activists whose politics are otherwise righteous simply refuse to acknowledge how dangerous heterosexism is, and that they have any responsibility to end it. Lesbians and gays working in straight political contexts are often expected to remain closeted so as not to diminish their own "credibility" or that of their groups. With so many heterosexuals studiously avoiding opportunities to become enlightened about lesbian and gay culture and struggle, it's not surprising that nearly twenty-five years after Stonewall so few heterosexuals get it. Given how well organized the Christian right is, and that one of its favorite tactics is pitting various oppressed groups against one another, it is past time for straight and gay activists to link issues and work together with respect.

If the gay movement ultimately wants to make a real difference, as opposed to settling for handouts, it must consider creating a multi-issue revolutionary agenda. This is not about political correctness, it's about winning. As black lesbian poet and warrior Audre Lorde insisted, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Gay rights are not enough for me, and I doubt that they're enough for most of us. Frankly, I want the same thing now that I did thirty years ago when I joined the civil rights movement and twenty years ago when I joined the women's movement, came out and felt more alive than I ever dreamed possible: freedom.