



## Queer Anti-Capitalism: What's Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation?

ALAN SEARS

*ABSTRACT:* Lesbians and gays are on the verge of winning full citizenship in Canada and a number of Western European countries. This represents a remarkable change in the 35 years since the contemporary lesbian and gay liberation movement was launched out of the Stonewall riots. These gains are the product of a social movement with a strong history of militant mobilization. At the same time, the process of capitalist restructuring has opened some of the space for lesbian and gay existence. The penetration of the market deeper into everyday life has created spaces for commodified forms of lesbian and gay existence, oriented around bars, restaurants, commercial publications, fashions and hairstyles. Capitalism has accommodated elements of lesbian and gay existence in the face of ongoing mobilizations, opening certain spaces for lesbian and gay life while at the same time shutting down others. The era of lesbian/gay citizenship and commodification opens new possibilities for anti-capitalist queer marxist-feminist politics.

**T**HE THIRTY YEARS SINCE THE DEVELOPMENT of the contemporary lesbian and gay movement have seen very significant gains. In many of the most developed capitalist countries, lesbians and gays are heading towards winning full civil rights, including anti-discrimination legislation, the recognition of same-sex relationships, legal marriage and an unprecedented cultural visibility. The United States is a partial exception to this trend, lagging behind Canada and much of Europe in the recognition of lesbian and gay rights.

These moves in the direction of full citizenship for lesbians and gays change the terrain of sexual politics in important ways. The experience of coming to terms with one's own lesbian or gay sexual-

ity has been politicizing for many people over much of the period since the 1960s, as an ascending movement confronted deeply entrenched patterns of political, legal, religious and cultural oppression. This is now changing, as the emerging framework of civil rights meets the political goals of many lesbians and gay men.

We are seeing a significant depoliticization of the lesbian and gay milieu; yet we have fallen rather short of the ambitious goals of all-round sexual emancipation set out by the radical movement for lesbian and gay liberation that emerged after the Stonewall riot of 1969. This demobilization is particularly important in the light of an emerging anti-capitalist movement for global justice and against poverty over the last few years that seems to be opening a new space for the politics of radical social transformation. It is important to consider the kinds of sexual liberation politics appropriate to this emerging political movement.

This demobilization leaves many queers out in the cold. The consolidation of lesbian and gay civil rights has tended to benefit some more than others. Those who have gained the most are people living in committed couple relationships with good incomes and jobs, most often white and especially men. At the same time, queer people of color, street youth, people with limited incomes, women, people living with disabilities and transgendered people have gained less or in some cases even lost ground. For example, the legal recognition of same sex relationships means that recipients of social assistance now find their eligibility for benefits contingent on their partner's income. Street youth are now hustled out of queer areas by cops acting on behalf of gay or lesbian residents intent on creating comfortable middle-class neighborhoods. People with money (more often men than women) have privileged access to the commercialized spaces and consumer lifestyles that define visible queer "communities." Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people of color often face a double invisibility, effaced by the racism within queer communities and marginalized by the stigmatization of same-sex identities and practices within their cultural communities.<sup>1</sup>

My project here is to contribute to the development of a queer marxist feminism that offers important tools for the remobilization of sexual liberation politics. This is a challenge to the queer theory perspectives, influenced by post-structuralism and the works of Michel

1 See Crichlow, 2001, for an important discussion of this double invisibility.

Foucault, which tend to dominate contemporary analyses of lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual politics. These queer theory analyses have illuminated the contradictory ways that lesbian and gay politics have been caught up within the dominant relations, showing how gains in cultural visibility or civil rights can situate queers more deeply inside systems of power.<sup>2</sup> It is not my project to engage in a detailed critique of queer theories here, as I can draw on the important contributions of Floyd (1998), Hennessey (2000) and McNally (2000). Rather, my focus is to contribute to the development of a queer marxist feminism that turns our attention to many dimensions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered existence that have been neglected in queer theory accounts, including class relations and divisions of labor, the dynamics of state regulation, the specific impact of capitalist restructuring and the cultural logic of processes of commodification.

I refer specifically to a queer marxist feminism to argue that marxist feminism as it has emerged since the 1960s is a necessary but not sufficient tool for the analysis of contemporary lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered politics. The distinguishing feature of marxist-feminist theories is the insistence that the dynamics of class, gender, race and sexuality are internally related yet not reducible to one another.<sup>3</sup> The historical materialist analysis of capitalist reproduction must examine the ways that the different dimensions of structured inequality are present in each other (see Bannerji, 1995). An adequate understanding of class formation must therefore be based on a rich analysis of the ways class relations are gendered, racialized and sexualized, just as an examination of sexualities must attend to the ways that sexual and intimate relations are classed, gendered and racialized.

Marxist feminism thus rejects both dual (or multi) systems theories that see class, gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality as separate spheres that intersect, on the one hand; and the reductionist marxism that seeks to capture all of social reality through the single lens of class exploitation as examined in the works of classical marxism, on the other.<sup>4</sup> Marxist feminism expanded the parameters of marxist

2 See, for example, Diana Fuss (1991), who plays with ideas of inside and outside in the cultural construction of heterosexualities and homosexualities. She reflects on the way being "out" as a lesbian or gay person means being "in" — being visible, no longer an outcast.

3 This is my way of expressing the idea of a "unitary theory," as in Vogel, 1983.

4 This brief discussion draws on my reading of the somewhat divergent contributions to marxist feminist theories made by: Himani Bannerji (1995), Stephanie Coontz (1988) and Lise Vogel (1983).

analysis by seriously rethinking in the light of the challenge of an emerging social movement (in this case, “second-wave” feminism).<sup>5</sup> Marxist feminists neither rejected the key premises of marxism nor argued that all important questions had already been answered in the received versions of so-called “classical” marxism.

Perhaps the greatest single contribution of marxist-feminist theory has been the development of a rich conception of social reproduction that ties together paid and unpaid labor, state and civil society, home and workplace in a single process defined by fundamental relations of inequality (class, gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality) (see Ferguson, 1999). This totalistic analysis of social reproduction is a crucial tool for the development of an emancipatory sexual politics, helping us to understand the ways that regimes of sexual regulation mobilize or suppress forms of sexuality at particular historical moments in the context of changing relations of production and reproduction.

A queer marxist feminism builds on this conception of social reproduction by relating it to the “indigenous” politics of sexual emancipation developed in the lesbian and gay liberation movement. I believe a queer marxist feminism can contribute to a revival of some of the most emancipatory aspects of lesbian and gay liberation by explaining how the limits and contradictions in the gains we have made since 1969 are tied to the specific dynamics of racialized, gendered and sexualized capitalist reproduction. This is not a departure from marxist feminism, but an expansion of it in light of the politics of queer liberation.

In the first section of this article I briefly map the politics that emerged out of the lesbian and gay liberation movement. I believe that a critical encounter with these “indigenous” politics is a crucial feature of a queer marxist-feminist analysis. In the second section, I work towards the development of a queer marxist-feminist analysis that sheds light on the current moment in sexual politics. It is my contention that this kind of analysis provides insight into aspects of queer existence that are not examined in the postmodern queer theories or liberal accounts that tend to dominate theoretical work in this area.

I should signal from the outset that this paper is partial, focusing specifically on the condition of lesbians and gay men in the most developed capitalist countries. It does not examine the diverse struggles

5 This process is described autobiographically and historically in the introduction to Vogel, 1995.

around sexual politics, homosexual practices and/or sexual identities that have developed in the Third World or the former Soviet bloc.<sup>6</sup>

*The Politics of Lesbian and Gay Liberation*

The lesbian and gay liberation movement developed an ambitious project of sexual emancipation. A queer marxist-feminist analysis of sexual liberation needs to reclaim aspects of this project. The gay liberation movement emerged in the wake of a riot in response to a routine police raid at the Stonewall Inn bar in New York City in 1969. This movement born out of a riot marked a sharp departure from previous forms of homosexual organizing. The post-Stonewall gay liberation movement emphasized visibility (centering around the importance of coming out), militancy (mobilizing to confront power) and an end to sexual regulation and the monopoly of the compulsory family system (through which the state assumes a monopoly on defining acceptable relationships). In contrast, the more moderate reform-oriented movements, both before Stonewall and since, have emphasized respectability, entrance into the established institutions of power and assimilation into an expanded conception of the family (see Sears, 2000, 23).

The early post-Stonewall gay liberation movement developed an intensely eroticized bawdy politics. The gay libertarian sexual politics that emerged represented a kind of sexual utopianism, which cast the erotic as a realm of liberation.<sup>7</sup> These politics were utopian in that they located the spaces of sexual practice as sites of freedom in which the oppressive relations of the everyday, and particularly daytime, world were overcome.<sup>8</sup> The gay liberation movement combined demands for the right to privacy, getting the state out of our bedrooms and our sexual lives, with the right to bring sex out from behind closed doors into spaces defined as public and therefore asexual. Bawdy politics, in short, sought to bring sexuality itself out of the closet.

These bawdy politics were, in a broad sense, revolutionary (see Teal, 1995, 156). Gay liberation emerged in the context of a 1960s

6 Peter Drucker (2000) offers a powerful global perspective that challenges the narrowness of much of the analysis of lesbian/gay existence.

7 See John Rechy's novels (*e.g.*, Rechy, 1975) for a vision of this sexual utopianism, exploring the pleasure and danger of a sexual underground. I was first exposed to these politics through the *Body Politic* newspaper. See Jackson and Persky, 1982, for a collection of articles from *Body Politic*.

8 This idea of night and daytime cultures draws on Bryan Palmer, 2000.

and 1970s New Left that generally rejected change through established institutions. The sexual utopianism of the gay liberation movement located the sexual as a crucial moment in the transformation of society, both providing a prefigurative vision of a better world and a realm of struggle against coercion. Gay liberation politics often insisted, at least in some rudimentary way, that sexual freedom required a broader social transformation to eliminate the gender system and other forms of inequality (Seidman, 1993, 113–16).

These bawdy politics were crucial to movement activism against sexual policing, such as the mobilization that brought thousands into the streets of Toronto following mass arrests in a police raid on gay bathhouses in 1981. Bawdy politics also provided a crucial political grounding for AIDS activism, insisting on sexual freedom as the precondition for safety in the face of homophobic anti-sex policing measures pursued by the state and the health establishment. AIDS activists informed by gay liberation focused on developing safer sexual practices by increasing sexual agency through greater access to information and resources, while the state sought to decrease sexual agency by enforcing external and coercive regulations.

There is much to celebrate in these gay libertarian bawdy politics and there are aspects to recuperate. At the same time, these politics had a dreadful problem that led them into a complete impasse. Gay libertarian politics were so enthusiastic about erotic liberation that they tended to ignore the relations of power within sexuality and gender. In the first place, this meant that these bawdy politics largely excluded women, who knew from their own experiences and from the emerging politics of “second-wave” feminism that the practice of sexuality was saturated with power relations. These bawdy politics were also blind to the power relations among men, rooted in broader social relations of class, race and ethnicity, gender-normativity, desirability and age.

Lesbian feminism developed as the general political point of reference among radicalizing lesbians, rather than gay libertarianism. Lesbian feminism was highly attuned to the ways that patriarchal power and other forms of inequality shaped the realm of sexuality. Adrienne Rich’s account of the relations of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) is perhaps the most significant single statement of lesbian feminist politics. Rich argued (647) that feminist theory needed to be grounded in the understanding of “the enforcement

of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economic and emotional access.”

Thus the practice of intimacy between women had “political content” as it was based on the refusal of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980, 659). Lesbian feminism had its own utopianism, based on the practice of freedom in spaces reserved for women. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, womyn’s dances and similar events created spaces where women could invent new forms of expression outside of the reach of male dominance and compulsory heterosexuality.

In contrast to the “anything goes” sexual politics of gay libertarianism, lesbian feminism was highly sensitized to the connection between sexual practices and social inequality. Even between women, sexual practices such as sadomasochism, rooted in dominance and subordination, were seen as a continuation of patriarchal relations. Sally Roesch Wagner (1982, 37) wrote: “But having learned sexual attitudes and behavior from patriarchal ideology, groups of homosexuals and lesbians who practice sadomasochism are now modeling their sexual expression on this patriarchal heterosexual power imbalance.” Indeed, lesbian feminists focused so heavily on the relations of power within sexuality, and tended to understand them in such a reductionist way (ignoring, for example, the complex role of play and fantasy in sexual pleasures), that they often downplayed the politics of pleasure within their own theory and practice.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, lesbian feminism drew on an important current of emancipatory body politics that emerged particularly out of the women’s health movement (exemplified in the book *Our Bodies Our Selves*).<sup>10</sup>

The scene was thus set for some fairly bitter confrontations between gay libertarian and lesbian feminist politics, traced for example in Ross (1993). These were clearly very different views of liberation, each anchored in its own conceptions of sex and intimacy, its own utopian spaces and its own reductionism. While gay libertarians tended to reduce sexuality to freedom, lesbian feminists tended to reduce it to power.

The first generation liberationist politics that emerged after Stonewall were limited in their ability to overcome the impasse be-

9 I am drawing here on critiques of lesbian and radical feminist sexual politics in Segal, 1994; Valverde, 1985; and Wilson, 1993b.

10 It was Charlene Senn who reminded me of this dimension of lesbian/radical feminist body politics, challenging me on my own reductionism.

tween a libertarian sexual politics primarily associated with gay men and a lesbian feminist politics. During the 1980s, a current of socialist feminist analysis strongly influenced by the experiences of lesbian and gay liberation began to develop its own approach to sexual politics. This sexual politics found expression in *Rites* magazine and a variety of important books and articles at the time (including Burstyn, 1985; Kinsman, 1987; Valverde, 1985; and Vance, 1984). This lesbian- and gay-influenced current of socialist feminism worked to reconcile a sexual liberationist approach to the state and sexual regulation with a sensitive understanding of the ways sexual practices were imbedded in relations of power and inequality. Unfortunately, the emergence of this sexual politics coincided with a dramatic marginalization of marxist thinking and socialist organizing. While some important work continues to be done within this tradition, the socialist current within queer organizing has tended to be small over the last 15 years.

The marginalization of marxist thinking and socialist organizing during the 1980s meant that the re-emergence of a more militant queer movement in the late 1980s was understood largely in terms of postmodern queer theories. The later 1970s and early 1980s saw a shift toward a more moderate reform-oriented politics in the lesbian and gay movement. This more moderate politics was challenged in the late 1980s, when a radical minority of AIDS activists formed militant organizations such as ACT UP (originally in New York and then in other cities) and AIDS Action Now! (in Toronto). The radical queer movement emerged out of militant AIDS activism, with the formation of (unaffiliated) Queer Nation organizations and similar movements in many places.

The late 1980s and early 1990s thus mark an important turning point in the politics of the lesbian/gay and queer movements. Post-modern queer theory claims to be the unique theoretical expression of the re-emerging radical politics since that time. The emergence of a new queer politics in the early 1990s had three distinct dimensions, in many ways interconnected yet not reducible to one another: queer movements, queer identities and queer theory.

The development of Queer Nation and similar organizations in the early 1990s marked a sharp departure from the moderate reformist strategies that had come to dominate lesbian and gay politics through the 1980s. This radical departure was often expressed in

terms of an anti-assimilationist perspective, rejecting the idea of a moderate civil rights struggle demanding our “rightful” place in an otherwise unchanged straight world (Kinsman, 1996, 299–300). The Queer Nation slogan of “bash back,” for example, called for a militant self-active response to anti-queer violence rather than pleading with the police or counting on the established authorities to keep us safe (Berlant and Freeman, 1993, 206–7). In many ways the new queer movements marked a revival of militant gay liberationism centering on militancy, visibility and abolition of the compulsory family system. These movements tended to have a fairly short organizational life, but none the less left an important legacy.

At the same time, the early 1990s saw the supersession of older lesbian and gay identities by new queer ones among certain layers of the population. Watney (1993, 123) cast this in explicitly generational terms: “Certainly there is already abundant evidence that the models of lesbians and gay identities established in the early 1970s are proving inadequate to increasing numbers of people who, as it were, inherited them in the 1990s. . . .” Some younger activists saw these older identities as confining straightjackets that inserted some queers as the tolerated “others” within the existing social relations of gender and sexuality and marginalized others, including bisexuals and transgendered people (Gamson, 1996, 401–406). Queer identity challenges some of the constraints of “lesbian” and “gay,” though at the same time it sacrifices specificity and risks reproducing gay and particularly lesbian invisibility (see Grosz, 1995, 249, n. 1).

Queer theory emerged at roughly the same time as the queer movements and identities discussed above. Perhaps the central premise of this theory is expressed by Sedgwick (1990, 1):

An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged to the degree it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition.

Queer theory, then, is not a sexual politics, but an account of contemporary culture that begins with sexuality. Queer theory, like marxism or feminism, is not a single body of theory but a variety of contested positions drawing on strands of Foucaultian, post-structuralist and postmodern theorizing. These strands tend to share roots in an account of new social movements that explicitly rejects marxism (Seidman,

1993, 108). Stein and Plummer (1996, 132–33) challenged the idea that queer theory emerged directly as the theoretical expression of the new queer movement:

Queer theory, an academic movement — indeed an elite academic movement centered at least initially in the most prestigious U. S. institutions — is indirectly related to the emergence of an increasingly visible queer politics, a confrontational form of grassroots activism embodied in ACT UP, Queer Nation and other direct-action groups during the last decade.

### *Towards a Queer Marxist Feminism*

Above, I traced out the historical relationship between the mobilization of the lesbian/gay liberation movement and the development of particular theoretical approaches to sexual politics. At the end of that story, we are left with postmodern queer theory and various liberal approaches as the dominant tools for the analysis of these struggles. Yet these approaches cannot account for the phenomenon that lesbians and gays have made important gains over the past 20 years, during a period in which the center of political gravity shifted substantially to the right. As Elizabeth Wilson (1993a, 115) notes, the queer movement “has managed to advance when all around were in retreat.” In what follows I argue that a queer marxist feminism helps us understand how the gains made by queers result from both successful mobilization and capitalist restructuring.

*Mobilization.* Militant and defiant mobilization has been a repeated feature of queer politics since the contemporary movement was born out of the Stonewall riot. This pattern of militancy is rooted in four factors. First, a militant, activist response to AIDS was fuelled by the death and suffering in our communities and the unhelpful to obstructionist official responses. The movement calculus was clear: silence = death, action = life. Second, the exclusion of lesbians and gays from full citizenship fueled a mistrust of official institutions, particularly the police, who could not effectively claim neutrality when they were clearly the front line agents of coercive sexual regulation.

Third, the influence of lesbian feminism and gay liberation politics meant that many of us came out into a politicized identity that was grounded in an activist community that included publications, spaces and informal personal networks. For a sizeable portion of the

community, becoming a lesbian or gay man was not simply a personal lifestyle choice but also a political commitment. It is arguable that as we approach full citizenship our queer identities are no longer necessarily politicizing. Finally, queer movements have been fueled by a joyful transgressive energy that has sustained activists in specific ways (see Wilson, 1993a, 115–116).

Mobilization was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the gains queers have made. Others have mobilized in this period, with less success. Anti-racist movements have fought hard, for example, and yet despite their important successes in opening up certain spaces, the overall trend in this period of a shift to the right has been towards a racialized clampdown on people of color. Some of the difference lies, I believe, in the character of the spaces that have opened up and shut down through the process of capitalist restructuring under way since the mid-1970s. A queer marxist-feminist account of this process of restructuring offers specific insights into the current moment in sexual politics.

*New Spaces and Capitalist Restructuring.* The last 30 years have seen huge changes in social policy in the most developed capitalist states. The social programs of the broad welfare state have been cut back at the same time as coercive policing activities have increased. The broad welfare state was a particular mode of moral regulation that sought to shape the reproduction of the population through benefits and programs that provided some sense of security and belonging to sections of the working class. Corrigan and Sayer (1985, 3) argue that states “define, in great detail, acceptable forms and images for social activity and individual and collective identity.” The broad welfare state aimed to reproduce a heterosexual family form that was based on a particular gendered and racialized division of labor (Wilson, 1977; Ursel, 1989).

The shift from the broad welfare state to new forms of social policy has produced a limited moral deregulation. The state has given up a few of the tools it used to attempt to shape the morality of the population. Social policy through much of the 20th century sought to inculcate values of temperance and prudence among working-class people. Yet these values can be an impediment to working-class consumerism and market-oriented hedonism. The shift towards the market has seen various forms of deregulation, ranging from the legalization of gambling to reductions in censorship. Neary and Tay-

lor (1998) argue that the legalization of gambling fits with the formation of a new kind of citizenship oriented to risk-taking rather than social insurance-based security. The recognition of certain lesbian and gay rights in this situation of moral deregulation is thus rather parallel to the legalization of gambling through casinos and lotteries or the deregulation of trucking. The state has withdrawn from certain areas of regulatory control and turned them over to the amoral market.

At the same time, new forms of coercive policing have emerged, including: harsher immigration controls, employee drug tests, “targeted” policing in urban centers, and the regulatory abuse of people on social assistance. Parenti (1999) evocatively describes this as “lock-down America.” The ideological association of markets with freedom and choice is based on forgetting the historical and contemporary suppression of alternatives that is required to make people sellers of their labor-power (capacity to work) and buyers of goods and services (see McNally, 1993; Thompson, 1993). The intensified market orientation associated with contemporary capitalist restructuring and the development of the neoliberal state requires new coercive mechanisms to suppress alternatives and to establish norms for market selves.

Queers are caught up in many aspects of the sharp coercive turn. New forms of sexual policing have developed as part of the intensified surveillance of “public” space, including actions against sex in parks, washrooms and bar “back rooms” (see Kinsman, 1996, 361). Street youth, who include disproportionate numbers of queer youth, face new kinds of harassment, as do sex trade workers. There has been increased police harassment of sex-oriented “back room” spaces in Toronto men’s bars and lesbian bath nights have been raided. At the same time, the shift towards explicitly pro-marriage social assistance policies penalizes same-sex partnerships as well as parents (primarily mothers) who are single.

In short, changes in state policies have created certain openings for queer civil rights, yet at the same time queers have been caught up in new forms of coercive policing. The net result has been an intensification of existing polarizations within queer communities. Gay and lesbian rights make a difference, particularly for those who are in recognized couple relationships, who have secure jobs and incomes, who live “out” gay lives, who can afford the “lifestyle” and who choose it or are not excluded from it. People who are not “out” due

to fear, other life commitments or roots in cultural communities where the open gay life is not an option, still tend to live their sexual lives in fear. Indeed, people in these situations are quite likely to be more vulnerable due to the increased coercive activities of the state and the overall erosion of social programs.

This limited moral deregulation is but one dimension of a broader process of intensified commodification associated with contemporary restructuring.<sup>11</sup> The expansion of market relations is another. Market relations have penetrated much deeper into our daily lives and alternatives to the market (such as social programs) have been eroded or eliminated. Open lesbian and gay life has thrived primarily in commodified forms: bars, restaurants, stores, coffee shops, commercial publications, certain styles of dress and personal grooming, commercialized Pride Day celebrations with corporate sponsorship. The early period of the post-Stonewall movement saw a variety of non-commercial spaces opened up, such as community centers, non-profit publications (*e.g.*, *Body Politics* and *Gay Community News*), community dances or movement gatherings; but these have tended to wither with the development of a gay and lesbian commercial sector.<sup>12</sup>

Intensified commodification, then, has contributed to the development of the spaces of open lesbian and gay existence. The theoretical investigation of commodification processes is therefore an important contribution to the understanding of lesbian and gay life as it has developed as an alternative life style under capitalism. This process has been explored in important pioneering works by John D'Emilio (1992 [1983]) and the more recent work of Danae Clark (1991), Kevin Floyd (1998) and Rosemary Hennessey (2000).

Michael Warner (1993, xxxi, n. 28) argued that the commodification of queer life poses a problem for marxist theorizing, as it suggests that the sites of openly lesbian and gay life are specifically products of highly developed capitalism: "Gay culture in this most visible mode is anything but external to advanced capitalism and to precisely those features of advanced capitalism that many on the left

11 A commodity is a thing or service produced for sale on the market. Commodification is the process through which things or services become market goods.

12 These non-commercial spaces were to some extent an alternative to the straight-owned bars that tended, as much of the rest of grey market capitalism (such as drugs and gambling), to have a reputation for being mob-run. For example, a "homophile youth movement" leaflet produced just after Stonewall demanded: "Get the mafia and the cops out of gay bars" (Teal, 1995, 8-9).

are most eager to disavow.” It is indeed challenging for marxist approaches to make sense of the contradiction that capitalist restructuring has opened up certain spaces for lesbian and gay cultures.

Yet the fact that advanced capitalism has opened up certain spaces for open lesbian and gay existence should not mute our anti-capitalism. Indeed, queer marxist feminism provides tools for understanding the ways that the commodification of public lesbian and gay life has distorted our communities. The nature of market relations is that access to goods or services is based not on need or desire, but on the ability to pay. A community structured around commodified public spaces is economically exclusive. Not everyone has the money, or the class-based taste,<sup>13</sup> to outfit themselves with the right clothes, haircuts and accessories or to pay the price of socializing at the “in” places. Women are less likely to have access to a public commercial lesbian scene as a result of the dominant gendered division of labor that tends to offer women lower economic standing and a greater likelihood of having “private” domestic responsibilities. Men with limited incomes are not likely to find their way in.

Amber Hollibaugh (2001) wrote about the importance of challenging the belief that “queerness can’t be poor.” “The myth of our wealth goes deep, so deep that even other gay people seem to believe it.” One major source for the myth of queer wealth is the exclusionary character of lesbian and gay spaces. Queers with limited incomes are invisible because they cannot enter the commodified realm of lesbian/gay visibility. Indeed, Hollibaugh argues that queers are often particularly vulnerable to poverty:

Poverty and outright destitution can happen to anyone — and the queerer you are, the fewer safety nets exist to hold you up or bounce you back from the abyss. Queerness intensifies poverty and compounds the difficulty of dealing with the social service system.

An investigation of the impact of market relations on the character of lesbian and gay communities goes beyond the question of access to the character of the businesses that organize queer space. These businesses (bars, cafes, shops, restaurants, fashion and beauty industries) are themselves class-organized workplaces. There is a need for more research on the specific social relations of the queer service

<sup>13</sup> I am drawing here on Bourdieu’s argument that the cultivation of specific tastes is a crucial mark of class in capitalist societies (Bourdieu, 1984).

economy. It matters that these spaces are sustained by the labor of relatively low-wage service workers who may (though further investigation is required) be willing to accept a lower wage than they would be paid elsewhere in exchange for the relative comfort of working in a queer environment. It would also be important to hear more from these workers about the particular rewards and punishments involved in working in what are often (certainly in gay male settings) aestheticized and sexualized work places.<sup>14</sup>

An understanding of class in queer communities must, of course, extend beyond those specific spaces. The working-class majority of the queer population has very little presence as such. Increasingly, it is the queer professional, entrepreneurial and managerial classes who act as the spokespeople for our “communities” (see Kinsman, 1996, 300). This might be changing a little. Over the past few years, queer organizing within the union movement has begun to provide a voice for lesbian and gay activists within unions and working-class voice within our communities. This matters, in part because the labor movement has often been a crucial ally in lesbian and gay struggles.<sup>15</sup> I would argue that one of the important reasons that Canadian queers have won more civil rights than Americans is because of the more militant state of the labor movement in Canada.<sup>16</sup> Many of the crucial gains for lesbian and gay civil rights (non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, full benefits for same-sex domestic partners) were established in collective agreements before they were generalized through provincial or federal legislation.<sup>17</sup> Further, the contract protection we have won through unions had provided a crucial foundation of security that has allowed lesbian and gay existence to break into the everyday world (in which waged and domestic labor are central) out of its confinement to the night.

14 I am drawing here on ideas emerging from Hennessey, 2000, 211–12, and Hochschild, 1983, about the particular role of management of emotions in service work.

15 See the collections edited by Hunt (1999) and Krupat and McCreery (2001) for a detailed analysis of lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual organizing within unions and the development of labor–gay alliances.

16 There are other factors as well. For an interesting examination of these issues see Adam, 1999.

17 CUPW, the postal workers union, won the first contract language protecting against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in 1981, at a time when only Quebec had included such protection in the human rights code (see Jackson and Persky, 1982). CUPE library workers were pioneers in winning same-sex partnership benefits, beginning in the mid-1980s (see Kinsman, 1996, 312). Same-sex domestic partnerships were only recognized in legislation in the later 1990s, by which point they were widespread in collective agreements, particularly in the public sector.

Of course, to do justice to the issues of queers and class we should also push further in directions I cannot explore here. It would be useful to examine the relationship between the rise of gender-normativity in the post-Stonewall lesbian and gay movements and the gendered division of labor within capitalism.<sup>18</sup> This is particularly important as the marginal status of transgendered people within contemporary lesbian and gay communities mirrors their position in a labor market that is highly gendered and gender-normative (see Hirschman, 2000). It is possible that our more secure place in the gender-organized workplaces has been won at the cost of isolating transgendered people and other gender insurgents who cannot or will not conform to gender norms.

A theoretical analysis of the commodification of lesbian and gay spaces, then, must pay attention to the ways that class relations shape and are shaped by queer existence. Commodification also has a huge impact on the way desire is lived in contemporary capitalist society. Our whole experience of our bodies, eroticism and intimacy is framed by the deeper penetration of market relations into every corner of social life.

Marx argued in his analysis of commodity fetishism that products take on apparently magical properties in the market because their origins in active human labor are obscured. Capitalist social relations mean that workers' accomplishments are separated from them and seem to become the property of their products. This is a process of abstraction, where the concrete labors of workers' own living bodies are turned into quantities of value congealed in commodities. This process of abstraction has a profound impact on the way we live in our own bodies. David McNally (2001, 224) wrote that in capitalist production, "commodities are detached from their origin in the concrete labor of human individuals. And this becomes the model for all the forms of abstraction that characterize bourgeois thought and culture: all along the line the body is forgotten."

This process of forgetting the body is crucial to our understanding of contemporary sexualities. Desire is displaced from our bodies onto commodities that seem to contain all the best of humanity. The advertising industry seeks to mobilize this displacement, reminding us

18 Donna Cartwright (2000) provides an important analysis of the increasing gender normativity of the lesbian and gay movement since Stonewall.

of the essential sexiness of every product (cars, underwear, beer, pop, etc.) except condoms, which are marketed in terms of cold, rational safety. Bodies become sexy only insofar as they can take on the allure of commodities, through fashion (clothes, haircuts, piercings, tattoos), through photography and filming (so that images of bodies are hotter than the real thing), or through the fitness industry by which we seek to remodel our bodies along the lines of these images.

Commodified queer space appears, in part, as a set of market niches, in which people live their sexuality through the purchase of specific goods and services. These niche markets operate largely in specific spaces where styles are given particular meanings (see Mort, 1996, 175–182). It is much less common to find such market niches oriented toward lesbians than gay men. Danae Clark (1991, 182) argues that lesbians have not really been targeted as a consumer group as they tend to be neither economically powerful nor identifiable as such. Yet even without such a spatially identified niche market, new forms of lesbian style have developed in the 1990s, often understood in counter-position to the lesbian-feminist hostility to commodified style that preceded it (see Clark, 1991, 184–85).

In this context of commodification, a person becomes visible as “queer” only through the deployment of particular market goods and services. Others are invisible, either because they are literally left outside the door (for example, because they cannot afford the cover charge) or because they cannot look “gay” or “lesbian” if they are old, fat, skinny, transgendered, racialized, stigmatized as disabled or ill, or obviously poor. These people become visible only as the object of some fetishized exoticism. Rosemary Hennessey (2000, 112) wrote: “The increasing circulation of gay and lesbian images in consumer culture has the effect of consolidating an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences.”

*Conclusion: Queer Anti-Capitalism?*

The past few years have seen the emergence of movements for global justice and against poverty that at their most radical have taken on an anti-capitalist character. It is an important time to consider whether there is a possibility for an open queer presence in these movements. Clearly, the commodified queer existence is very much captured inside capitalist social relations. Thus, our communities exist largely in the form of exclusionary market spaces; our real diversity is

obscured by the dominance of homogenous images; our politics are largely confined to claiming our place in existing social relations either through reform (“get me to the church on time!”) or transgression detached from transformation (“we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!”); and our sexuality is visible (though only in very specific forms) while our real sexual practices are effaced. It might be tempting, under these circumstances, to conclude that an explicitly queer anti-capitalism is not in the cards.

A queer marxist-feminist perspective provides us with ways of envisioning a queer anti-capitalism. Many people who engage in same-sex sexual practices have won neither full citizenship nor a place within the currently existing queer public spaces. The brutalizing experiences of many queer youth (or youth perceived as queer) in high schools is an important reminder of how far we have to go to achieve full human rights (see Frank, 1994; Smith, 1998). A new queer radical agenda will have to be built around the needs, desires and organizing capacities of the young, the poor, people of color, women, transgendered people, working-class people, people living with AIDS and/or disabilities, the elderly and those who cannot or will not come out. One of the important organizing bases for this agenda will be the emerging movement of queer trade unionists, though (like the unions themselves) it will need to go much farther to organize the unorganized (people in non-union workplaces, contingent workers, people who are not employed) and the excluded (on the basis of nationality, racialization, disability or gender).

A queer anti-capitalism takes us back to the best of the liberationist politics that emerged after Stonewall: the militancy, the breadth of vision and the transformative commitments. An engaged queer marxist feminism provides valuable tools for negotiating the complex issues that led to the impasse of gay libertarianism and lesbian feminism, specifically through grounding the analysis of sexuality in a rich understanding of processes of social reproduction. It is possible to combine a joyous struggle for sexual freedom with a serious and nuanced examination of the power relations that shape our experiences of gender and sexuality.

*Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
University of Windsor  
Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4  
Canada  
asears@uwindsor.ca*

## REFERENCES

- Adam, Barry D. 1999. "Moral Regulation in the Disintegrating Canadian State." Pp. 12–29 in *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, ed. Barry D. Adam, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Andre Krouwel. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press.
- Bannerji, Himani. 1995. *Thinking Through: Essays on Feminism, Marxism and Anti-Racism*. Toronto, Canada: Women's Press.
- Barber, John. 2001. "Gay Index Good Sign of City's Potential." *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), August 8, A14.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Elizabeth Freeman. 1993. "Queer Nationality." Pp. 198–229 in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. M. Warner. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Burstyn, Varda. 1985. *Women against Censorship*. Vancouver, BC, Canada: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Cartwright, Donna. 2000. "Transgender Activism after Falls City." *Against the Current*, XV:5, 24–28.
- Clark, Danae. 1991. "Commodity Lesbianism." *Camera Obscura*, Nos. 25–26, 181–201.
- Coontz, Stephanie. 1988. *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600–1900*. London: Verso.
- Corrigan, Philip, and Derek Sayer. 1985. *The Great Arch*. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
- Crichlow, Wesley. 2001. "Buller Men and Batty Bwoys: Hidden Men in Toronto and Halifax Black Communities." Pp. 69–85 in *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context*, ed. Terry Goldie. Vancouver, BC, Canada: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- D'Emilio, John. 1992. "Capitalism and Gay Identity." Pp. 3–16 in *Making Trouble*, ed. John D'Emilio. London/New York: Routledge.
- Drucker, Peter. 2000. "Introduction: Mapping Sexualities." Pp. 9–42 in *Different Rainbows*, ed. Peter Drucker. London: Gay Men's Press.
- Ferguson, Sue. 1999. "Building on the Strengths of the Socialist Feminist Tradition." *New Politics*, VII:2, 89–100.
- Floyd, Kevin. 1998. "Making History: Marxism, Queer Theory and Contradiction in the Future of American Studies." *Cultural Critique*, 40, 167–202.
- Frank, Blye. 1994. "Queer Selves, Queer in Schools: Young Men and Sexualities." Pp. 44–59 in *Sex in Schools: Canadian Education and Sexual Regulation*, ed. Susan Prentice. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Our Schools/Our Selves Foundation.
- Fuss, Diane. 1991. "Inside/Out." Pp. 1–10 in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. New York: Routledge.
- Gamson, Joshua. 1996. "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma." Pp. 395–420 in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. S. Seidman. Cambridge, England: Blackwell.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1995. *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. New York/London: Routledge.

- Hennessy, Rosemary. 2000. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Hirschman, Jo. 2000. "Organizing Against Capitalism and State Violence in San Francisco." Paper at Rethinking Marxism Conference, Amherst, Massachusetts.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Hollibaugh, Amber. 2001. "They Are Everywhere. But We Refuse to See Them. Queers Without Money." *Village Voice*, June 20–26.
- Hunt, Gerald, ed. 1999. *Laboring for Rights: Unions and Sexual Diversity Across Nations*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press.
- Jackson, Ed, and Stan Persky. 1982. *Flaunting It!: A Decade of Gay Journalism from the Body Politic*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Pink Triangle Press.
- Kinsman, Gary. 1987. *The Regulation of Desire*. Montreal, Quebec, Canada: Black Rose.
- . 1996. *The Regulation of Desire*. Revised Edition. Montreal, Quebec, Canada: Black Rose.
- Kinsman, Gary, and Patrizia Gentile. 1998. *"In the Interests of the State": The Anti-Gay, Anti-Lesbian National Security Campaign in Canada*. Sudbury, Ontario, Canada: Laurentian University Press.
- Krupat, Kitty, and Patrick McCreery, eds. 2001. *Out at Work: Building a Gay-Labor Alliance*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- McNally, David. 1993. *Against the Market*. London: Verso.
- . 2000. *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Liberation*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Mort, Frank. 1996. *Cultures of Consumption*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Neary, Mike, and Graham Taylor. 1998. "From the Law of Insurance to the Law of Lottery: An Exploration of the Changing Composition of the British State." *Capital and Class*, 65, 55–72.
- Palmer, Bryan. 2000. *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the History of Transgression*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Parenti, Christian. 1999. *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*. London/New York: Verso.
- Rechy, John. 1975. *City of Night*. New York: Anchor.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1980. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs*, 5:4, 631–660.
- Ross, Becky. 1993. "Like Apples and Oranges: Lesbian Feminist Responses to the Politics of the Body Politic." *Fuse* (May–June), 19–28.
- Rutherford, Jonathan. 1997. *Forever England: Reflections on Masculinity and Empire*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Sears, Alan. 1999. "The 'Lean' State and Capitalist Restructuring: Towards a Theoretical Account." *Studies in Political Economy*, 59, 91–114.
- . 2000. "Queer in a Lean World." *Against the Current*, XV:5, 21–24.
- Sedgwick, Eve Koslowsky. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Segal, Lynne. 1994. *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Seidman, Steven. 1993. "Identity and Politics in 'Postmodern' Gay Culture: Some

- Historical and Conceptual Notes." Pp. 105–142 in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. M. Warner. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Smith, George. 1998. "The Ideology of 'Fag': Barriers to Education for Gay Students." *Sociological Quarterly*, 39:2, 309–335.
- Stein, Arlene, and Ken Plummer. 1996. "'I Can't Even Think Straight': 'Queer' Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology." Pp. 129–144 in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. S. Seidman. Cambridge, England: Blackwell.
- Teal, Don. 1995. *The Gay Militants: How Gay Liberation Began in America, 1969–1971*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Thompson, E. P. 1993. "The Moral Economy of the Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." Pp. 185–258 in *Customs in Common*, ed. E. P. Thompson. New York: New Press.
- Tucker, Scott. 1997. *The Queer Question*. Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press.
- Ursel, Jane. 1992. *Private Lives, Public Policy: 1000 Years of State Intervention in the Family*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Women's Press.
- Valverde, Mariana. 1985. *Sex, Power and Pleasure*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Women's Press.
- Vance, Carole S., ed. 1984. "Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality." *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. London: Pandora.
- Vogel, Lise. 1995. "Introduction." Pp. 1–19 in *Woman Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism*, ed. L. Vogel. New York: Routledge.
- . 1983. *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory*. London: Pluto.
- Wagner, Sally Roesch. 1982. "Porn and the Sexual Revolution: The Backlash of Sado-Masochism." Pp. 32–55 in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, ed. R. E. Linden, D. R. Pagano, D. E. H. Russell and S. L. Star. East Palo Alto, California: Frog in the Well.
- Warner, Michael. 1993. "Introduction." Pp. vii–xxi in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. M. Warner. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Watney, Simon. 1993. "Emergent Sexual Identities and HIV/AIDS." Pp. 13–29 in *AIDS: Facing the Second Decade*, ed. P. Aggleton, P. Davies and G. Hart. London: Falmer Press.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. 1977. *Women and the Welfare State*. London: Tavistock.
- . 1993a. "Is Transgression Transgressive?" Pp. 107–117 in *Activating Theory*, ed. J. Bristow and A. R. Wilson. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- . 1993b. "Feminist Fundamentalism." Pp. 15–28 in *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, ed. Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Copyright of Science & Society is the property of Guilford Publications Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.