

HOMOSEXUALITY

and Identity Politics

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The modern movement aiming at the decriminalisation of homosexuality began in the early 1950s. It was initiated by the Moral Welfare Council of the Church of England. Anglican leaders had become worried about the criminalisation of prominent figures, including Major Michael Pitt-Rivers, Lord Montague of Beaulieu, and Peter Wildeblood, the diplomatic correspondent of the *Daily Mail*. These three individuals were arrested and prosecuted for 'gross indecency' with men in 1954. The Church felt that, apart from being homosexual, these chaps were reliable and respectable members of society. Consequently, they sought to separate the sin of homosexuality from the criminal law. After all, infidelity in marriage is a sin, but it is never prosecuted.

The churchmen's efforts were rewarded with the establishment of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution in Great Britain under the chairmanship of Sir John Wolfenden. Although the Committee was charged with investigating the law with relation to prostitution its focus upon 'soliciting for immoral purposes' and 'gross indecency' between males was ground breaking.

The atmosphere of paranoia and secrecy surrounding the subject of male homosexuality at the time presented the Committee with real difficulty in getting male 'queers' ('queers' had a grimly pejorative meaning at the time) to come forward to give evidence. Eventually, they succeeded in getting three

men to cooperate, Peter Wildeblood, Carl Winter, and Michael Pitt-Rivers. Wildeblood gave evidence in his own name, but Winter was known as “Mr White”, and Pitt-Rivers as “the Doctor”. Aliases were thought to be both necessary and appropriate.

Secrecy and paranoia during the fifties and sixties were brilliantly captured by the movie *Victim* released in 1961. In the film Dirk Bogarde plays a professional man being blackmailed for his homosexuality. The world the movie portrays is darkly sinister and entirely accurate.

When I was a lad in the late fifties, a teenager, 13 or 14, I was a communist of the Stalinist sort. I was hotly aware of fancying boys sexually, but because I was a communist, I could not be queer, because it was evident to me that communists could not be homosexual. (Incidentally, Stalin’s dictatorship criminalised homosexuality across the Soviet Union in 1934 and instigated nationwide police repression.) Our responsibilities were very clear. Every Young Communist League membership card at the time carried the following instruction from the author of *How the Steel was Tempered*, Nikolai Ostrovsky:

Our dearest possession is life. It is given only once, and it must not be lived feeling tortured by regrets for wasted years or to know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that when dying you have a right to say: all my life, all my strength was given to the finest cause in the world – the fight for the liberation of mankind.

This for fourteen-and-fifteen-year-olds! The personality was thoroughly engaged.

My identity remained frankly Stalinist until it strayed for a time towards Maoism, and by 1967 settled upon Trotskyism in the form of the International Socialists, forerunner of the Socialist Workers Party.



In the midst of an emotional and psychological crisis during late 1970 and early 1971 I finally realised that I could no longer escape from the fact that I was queer – in fact I wrote this down so it would face me from the page.

After leaving the home of my wife and child I put up in the spare room of a friend and made arrangements to see a psychiatrist. However, in the intervening time I went to the Kill the Bill demonstration in February 1971 in London. This was a demo against the Industrial Relations Act being promoted by the government. At this demonstration I witnessed the extraordinary scene of the Gay Liberation contingent being barracked by trade unionists and other socialists chanting “E Eye Addie O, Teddy is a Queer!” This was a reference to Ted Heath the unmarried Tory prime minister. The GLF lads did not back down; slapped up to the eyeballs, carrying purple placards emblazoned with the slogan in silver spray, “Poof Goes the Bill”. They were also distributing two leaflets, one listing the trade unions they were members of and the other one, an attack on psychiatry.

I was far too alarmed by the dozen or so gay men on this GLF contingent to approach them, but I

got hold of their leaflet on psychiatry and took it back home with me. It was a treasured scrap of paper; it was the first time I had seen anything that said it was alright to be queer. I cancelled my arrangement to see a psychiatrist and quickly discovered that a number of other men I knew in the Socialist Society at Lancaster University were unbeknown to each other, also homosexual. Within weeks we had all come out, realising that we had to positively associate ourselves with – *queers* – people who at the time were lower than prostitutes and thieves.

My identity immediately became *queer* and more positively, gay. This was because the Gay Liberation Front had broken free from the idea that all we could do was lobby behind the scenes. We had to proclaim our new identity in order to fight in public for our right to be openly homosexual. The tradition of quiet lobbying was well established. Starting in 1958 the Albany Trust of the great and the good amongst the liberal intelligentsia led the way. They were followed by the Homosexual Law Reform Society, and in 1963, most significantly, the North Western Homosexual Law Reform Society – this lobbying organisation was most significant because it was the first such group to be led by gay men.

The efforts of the Wofenden Committee and the other lobbyists paid off ten years after the publication of the Committee's recommendations with the passage of the Sexual Offences Act, 1967. This Act legalised sexual relations between two men, over 21, in private. Interestingly, Wildeblood, Pitt-Rivers, and Lord Montague, whose prosecution had set the Anglican ball rolling in 1954, would still have been found guilty and imprisoned under the provisions of the 1967 Act. As would Oscar Wilde and a whole raft of victims. This so-called “decriminalisation” legalised what nobody was ever caught for.

Gay men continued to be routinely arrested for soliciting – in order to commit the offence of Gross

Indecency – the age of consent was 21 instead of 16 (the heterosexual age of consent), and “in private” did not extend even to hotel rooms. So, the traditional haunts, public toilets, parks, private parties, and bars, continued to be the places where gay men sought the company of others. All of which were illegal under the reformed law of the late sixties.

Despite this, however, the sixty-seven-law reform had one positive effect: it legalised ‘gross indecency’ between two adult men in private and yet retained laws making it illegal for such men to do anything at all to find themselves in a private place with a lover, including prohibiting *licentious dancing*, and much else. This absurd contradiction did not stop extensive police repression and prosecutions for many years, but it did open up the law to *de facto* challenges.

From 1970-71 gay liberation groups in London and around the country started to hold and advertise gay discos and dances. Gay picnics and other gatherings were brazenly held in defiance of the law and, announced the necessity of ‘coming out’ with our gay identity. This tactic was noticed by the gay scene of private clubs and discrete pubs; commercial interests were not slow to pick up that the days of gay haunts being necessarily ‘undercover’ or ‘under the carpet’ were numbered; the world of gay bars, clubs, and saunas began to quietly expand in London, Manchester, and other big cities.

We are all foisted by the persistence of our identity. This is because although it persists it never remains the same as we constantly *overhear ourselves* our identity morphs over and over as we go along. Harold Bloom describes our predicament thus:

We are lived by drives we cannot command, and
we are read by works we cannot resist.

In the radical gay movement of the seventies we, perhaps inevitably, did a certain violence to Bloom's conception of identity. Because our gay identity was enthusiastically constructed – it was chosen, it was artificial, it was a weapon in the struggle for homosexuals to achieve their place in society alongside everyone else. And, the legal emancipation of homosexuals could not have been achieved without this identity, without the brazen announcement of our homosexuality. Our identity extended way out beyond traditional camp expressions, to an articulate public challenge to the law and time-honoured heterosexual assumptions.

In this sense our gay identity was quite different from modern forms of identity politics because it was forged specifically as a weapon in the struggle with the state and wider heterosexual assumptions in society. The left, traditionally committed to unity in the class struggle, was resolutely opposed to the sectional demands of women, black people, and male homosexuals. Most of the left dragged their feet on gay liberation until 1979-80 when the efforts of gay trade unionists and gay members of the Labour Party gradually began win some support in the labour movement.

Women were present from day one of GLF. Although the legal prohibition of homosexuality never applied to lesbians, early campaigners understood that the legal emancipation of gay men might create improved social circumstances for gay women. Yet there were many difficulties as it as it became apparent that the situation of lesbians could not be adequately embraced within the struggles being waged by gay men. Consequently, the unity of the early days rapidly broke up as lesbians realised that they had to pursue their own path.

There was also confusion amongst gay men, of course, because some of us explicitly demanded

equality, while others made elaborate revolutionary demands regarding family life, marriage, and much else. Despite this, equality was coming down on us like a ton of bricks whether we wanted it or not:

1994: Age of consent lowered from 21 to 18
2000: Age of consent equalised at 16
2004: Civil partnerships ratified
2014: Same-sex marriage legalised

Despite delays in Scotland and Northern Ireland homosexuals in Britain achieved legal equality. After sixty years of lobbying, including forty-four years of public campaigning, legal emancipation was achieved first in England and Wales. By 2014 we'd won! This has dismayed a number of older gay men who miss the edginess of our *queer* past and are appalled by the vacuousness of the modern usage of "queer and queerness". Of course, many of us did not actually get what we'd fought for, people rarely do, but we did get the removal of all laws and restrictions relating to our sexual relations. Access to insurance, pensions, and joint tenancies – the right to be recognised as 'next of kin – were all victories along the way. Our gay identity had finally worked its magic.

This startling transformation of our law and culture could not have been achieved without vast changes in the nature of society or the efforts of musicians and other artists in destroying the post-imperial stuffiness and hesitations of 'Swinging Britain'. Gay liberation could not have been achieved without the process of deindustrialisation – the destruction of the world in which *difference* was routinely regarded by employers and trade unions alike as dysfunctional. As older industries, technologies, and ways of working were swept away the value to the 'bottom line' of different experiences and perceptions of life in a team or a workforce began gradually to be recognised. All kinds of difference could be profitably embraced – and

it turned out that homosexuality was one such difference. Neither could gay liberation be achieved without Mick Jagger's movie *Performance*, or the lightening flash across David Bowie's face, or the movies, *Boys in the Band* (1970) and *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971).

Yet, we should never forget the necessary and unavoidable contribution made by five or six hundred gay liberation activists who by insisting upon their 'gay identity' brought the state and society to the point of surrender.