

## Capitalism, High Camp . . . . . . and the straightening out of homosexuals

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There is a striking correlation between advanced or wealthy capitalist countries and the capacity of homosexuals to live free of state repression and legal sanctions. There continues to be an uneven situation across the US, but in most states of the Union the trend is towards equality and the abolition of laws framed for the punishment of same-sexuality. Throughout the world, where the rule of law and bourgeois democracy prevails, lesbians and gay men find themselves benefitting from legal changes and from a fairly rapid cultural drift towards acceptance. Of course, this is not universal, the situation in Poznan or Scunthorpe is radically different from that in downtown Manchester or Seattle, but by and large there is a strong correlation between acceptance of homosexuality and modern capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere, brutal prejudice and state-sanctioned violence is widespread but not global. In China, for example, homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997 and removed from the official schedule of mental disorders in 2001. Recently, attempts to straighten out gay men with electric shock therapy in Chongqing have been declared illegal by a court in Beijing. Similar changes have taken place in Russia, but Putin's regime continues to support repression and refuses to countenance the legal protection of homosexuals – there are no gay rights in Moscow, or in Shanghai for that matter. In Havana homosexuals continue to strive against prejudice, but as Cuba moves towards opening itself up to capitalist development the Castro dictatorship has gradually abandoned its policy of repression; corralling homosexuals

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<sup>1</sup> Inescapably most references in this article are to male homosexuality because camp sensibility is largely, though not exclusively, expressed by gay men. Regarding the law, lesbianism is not proscribed or even mentioned in most polities. However, the fact remains that lesbians have usually suffered discrimination and oppression regardless of whether or not they are the subject of statute laws. See for example Louis Crompton, 'The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791' in *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 6, Fall/Winter, 1980/81.

in revolutionary prison camps is now only an awful memory.<sup>2</sup> The situation is improving in Hanoi too, but things are considerably worse in Cairo, Abuja, and Kampala, where imprisonment, beatings, vigilante killings and officially approved ostracism are the order of the day.

There appears to be a scale in which the more developed and wealthier a capitalist state - the more consistent and well found it's legal system is – the freer life will be for lesbians and gay men.

However *correlation* does not amount to a *cause*, which in this case remains opaque. Why is it that some capitalist states begin to free homosexuals from legal restrictions and cultural impediments, while others insist upon a policy of denial or even implement active repression?

Perhaps the answer lies simply in the deepening of democracy? Perhaps, but I think that this merely begs the question. Alternatively, some people attribute these developments to the audacious action of gay liberationists in the lesbian and gay movement that arose after New York's Stonewall riot in 1969, others might take it back to the patient work of the Moral Welfare Council of the Church of England in the fifties, or to the quiet lobbying of the Homosexual Law Reform Society and the Campaign for Homosexual Equality.<sup>3</sup>

There can be no doubt, of course, that these efforts in Britain and North America opened up the discussion and helped to dissolve taboos – they certainly contributed noisily

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<sup>2</sup> These were the Military Units to Aid Production in which more than thirty thousand Cubans – gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses and other suspicious elements were imprisoned by the regime during the 1960s. Homosexuality was decriminalized by the dictatorship in 1979 and there has been an improvement in the situation, albeit a glacially slow one.

<sup>3</sup> In 1953 the Church of England Moral Welfare Council called on the Government to set up an inquiry into homosexuality – the Wolfenden Committee (Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution) was set up in 1954 and in 1957 recommended decriminalization for homosexual acts between consenting adults. The Homosexual Law Reform Society was founded in 1958 to lobby for the implementation of the Wolfenden recommendations. This was finally achieved nine years later in 1967. The Committee for Homosexual Equality was founded by a group of homosexuals in 1964 and was renamed the 'Campaign' for Homosexual Equality in 1968.

by giving voice to ‘the love that dare not speak its name’.<sup>4</sup> But, none of these tiny groups could have brought about such momentous changes in public attitudes and legal arrangements unaided. We need to ask what was it that made it possible for them to have such an extraordinary impact . . . we probably need to look at the question with a longer lens.

As far as anyone knows there have always been same-sex relationships, sometimes incorporated in dominant cultural practices, sometimes denied and hidden. Certainly in circumstances outside of ordinary family life homosexuality appears to have always been present in royal courts, amongst aristocracies, and other privileged elites, in monastic institutions, in armies, navies, and the merchant marine. However, for as long as material production was inextricably tied to the small holding, to the craft workshop or forge, to the domestic sphere, and the family remained at the centre of more or less all agricultural and artisanal activity, the opportunity for sexual relationships beyond what we would now recognize as heterosexual arrangements were extraordinarily limited.

It was not until the emergence of commercial society in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century that we can detect the appearance in London and other big places of a common life in which commodity production began to move beyond the confines of the family. It is there that we can see the first signs of what we now call homosexuality . . . forms of relationships in which ordinary people who habitually engage in same-sexuality from across all classes and professions begin to create their own secret institutions, surreptitious networks, modes of speech and ways of being.

The authorities in England, informed by venerable religious prejudices resorted to imprisonment, transportation, and the gallows, but seemingly nothing could suppress the emergence of molly houses and other places of illicit resort,<sup>5</sup> which arose specifically to serve those who

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<sup>4</sup> This is a line from the poem *Two Loves* published in 1894 by Alfred Lord Douglas, Oscar Wilde’s lover. Wilde was asked by the prosecution to explain its meaning during the trial Regina v Wilde in 1895.

<sup>5</sup> See Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap’s molly house: the gay subculture in*

enjoyed same-sexuality. It appears that beyond the confines of the family and the village sex would, as it always had, take off in all directions. Now, as commercial society gradually began to organize commodity production in larger and larger workshops, in larger towns and cities, a life beyond the nexus of hearth, home, and kinship, became more widely available – such a life was no longer restricted to courtly elites, to soldiers or seafarers.

This was a lengthy social development during the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century in which relations between relatively independent young men and women earning wages in burgeoning ports and manufacturing towns, and subsequently in industrial cities, outgrew parish boundaries, and popular life slipped the leash held by churchmen and local landowners. The emergence of same-sexuality was an integral part of this process and was eventually given its name, *Homosexualität*, by Károly Mária Kertbeny.<sup>6</sup>

In England in 1861 the Offences Against the Person Act abolished the death penalty for sodomy, which had in any event become a dead letter since the execution of James Pratt and John Smith at London's Newgate in 1835.<sup>7</sup> It would seem that by the middle of the nineteenth century juries were reluctant to convict for buggery if those found guilty might be hanged.

For the authorities, male homosexuality remained a problem of order, one akin to the regulation of prostitution.<sup>8</sup> The extension of the bourgeois family<sup>9</sup> to

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*England, 1700-1830*, London: Gay Men's Press, 1992

<sup>6</sup> Károly Mária Kertbeny was a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire who is also known as Karl-Maria Benkert. He first used the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality in his pamphlet of 1869 which opposed the Prussian buggery statutes: *143 des Preussischen Strafgesetzbuchs und seine Aufrechterhaltung als 152 des Entwurfs eines Strafgesetzbuchs für den Norddeutschen Bund* ("Paragraph 143 of the Prussian Penal Code and Its Maintenance as Paragraph 152 of the Draft of a Penal Code for the North German Confederation").

<sup>7</sup> See 'The Trial of James Pratt and John Smith', 1835, *Homosexuality in Nineteenth Century England* a source book compiled by Rictor Norton at <http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/1835prat.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 known as the Labouchere Amendment created the portmanteau crimes of "gross indecency" and "soliciting for an

the working class became the order of the day from the 1850s or thereabouts, and enormous social energy was expended in attempting to train young workers in the virtues of house and home. No longer the centre of material production the family became a refuge from the world, and the principal site of moral education and sexual discipline. Health, 'legitimate' births, and good order required men to be able to earn the 'family wage', and sexuality to be regulated and confined as far as possible within marriage.

Lying well outside straight marriage and expressed much more easily within the relative anonymity of large towns and cities homosexuality became a phenomenon that needed to be controlled by police activity and prisons, and in the fullness of time, analyzed and treated by medical and psychiatric science.

These were measures congruent with the need to patrol and integrate the proletariat into the capitalist mode of life in Britain during the last third of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth. Respectability - church attendance, trade unionism, social, educational and sporting clubs, marriage, and the franchise – all helped to stabilize class relations within vast industrial centres.<sup>10</sup>

These arrangements stood the capitalist class in good stead until the early 1950s when changes in technology and the organization of the labour process began gradually to break up the old homogeneities which had held the lower middle class, and the great mass of the working class together for the previous eight or nine decades. As industrial and commercial organization was transformed and service activities of

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immoral purpose", terms much vaguer than the old buggery statutes and consequently much more effective at securing convictions.

<sup>9</sup> See Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780*, Oakland CA: University of California Press, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> See George Eliot's novel *Felix Holt the Radical* (1866) for a revealing insight into the meliorism with which the more liberal sections of the bourgeoisie confronted their fear of the industrial proletariat.

all kinds began to occupy a dominant place within the economy, the old opposition to social differentiation amongst working class and lower middle class people began to break down. The premium upon the common experiences of a common life and common sharing began to lose its value and its appeal. The field of individual choices and individual aspirations, not simply in the sphere of consumption, but in the manner in which one chose to live, came to the fore.

This gradual process of individuation coincided with deindustrialization and the advent within the older capitalist economies of a labour process typically dominated by relatively small units of production, regardless of the size of the enterprise, in which workers were required to embrace fully the objectives of the management – to develop a more articulate engagement with the nature of the job in hand and the interests of their employers. Skilled in general (rather than in detail) these workers have over the last forty years come to represent the mass of the working class in the West. Control is exercised within small teams in which acceptance of difference, rather than the homogeneity of yesteryear, is prized by both workers and employers alike.

It is in this social landscape that the old model of controlling homosexuality by arrest, by public humiliation in the press, and by imprisonment, broke down. Starting during the early fifties, it slowly dawned upon the authorities that homosexuality presented no threat at all to good order within working class communities. Subsequently, it became clear that the acceptance of difference and the capacity of diverse kinds of people to get along with each other is a positive boon to the process of capital accumulation. Whereas in the past difference within the working class was understood to be disruptive and dysfunctional, it is now grasped by all and sundry, that it is a positive virtue in which different experiences, talents and capacities can be mobilized to the best effect.

Consequently, we're all expected to get along with each other regardless of our race, our creed, our range of physical and mental abilities, our gender, or our sexual orientation.

All this was recently brought into sharp relief by traditionalist opposition to gay marriage. Apart from the usual Biblical objections, the opponents of allowing homosexuals to tie the conjugal knot could only come up with the argument that allowing gay marriage would somehow cheapen or degrade heterosexual unions. The bizarre logic of this passed most people by, and the legalization of same-sex marriage went through on the nod.

The reason for this was that straight marriage has over the last fifty or sixty years been stripped down to its bare essentials. It is now an entirely voluntary union between two individuals who decide to register their love and commitment to each other in a partnership, which is dissolvable at will by either party. In this sense marriage is not seen as having any singular or critical role in community or familial cohesion. It has been denuded of most of its past associations. No longer a union between two families – marriage is principally a matter of importance to the individuals concerned who typically seek no permission or blessing from their respective parents – although everybody is happier if the 'in-laws' can get along, and help defray the cost of the wedding and honeymoon.

In this sense, straight marriage has been made entirely consonant with homosexual marriage – a public commitment entered into by two individuals to look after each other through thick and thin regardless of the misfortunes which life throws at them. The permission of religious authorities, parents or other relatives is neither sought nor required. The rearing and care of children takes place outside wedlock, often in single parent households, or within marriages, regardless of the gender of parents or guardians, and is

not infrequently shared *between* different married couples whether gay or straight.

We have arrived at a ‘new normal’ in which it is now possible to accommodate homosexuals without difficulty. In a sense the straight world has become gay. Or, looked at in another way, the difference between straight and gay realities is gradually being eroded by the manner in which all normal relationships emanate from two individuals’ desire for love and pleasure, and from the love of pleasure.

Homosexuality, which has no biological promise or potential to fulfill, fits perfectly into this ‘new normal’. Indeed, in the past the principal objection to same-sexuality was that it could produce no children and was therefore purposeless, barren, and unnatural. Now, in the context of widely available and effective contraception in which straight couples exercise control over their fertility it can be seen that opposite-sexuality for pleasure without the potential or ‘risk’ of pregnancy runs parallel to gay realities.

The old accusation that homosexuality is unnatural is, of course, entirely correct in the sense that it has no biological function and is engaged in for entirely synthetic, ‘manmade’, or human purposes. It is artificial. This is surely why the love of artifice has long been associated with homosexuals. Indeed, who would “gild refined gold . . . paint the lily” or “throw a perfume on the violet”?

The answer to Lord Salisbury’s question in Shakespeare’s play is: We would!<sup>11</sup>

From Dolly Parton to the lights in children’s shoes, from purple hair and green carnations, to computer games, the magnificent Shard,<sup>12</sup> and the absurd

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<sup>11</sup> Spoken by Lord Salisbury in Act IV, Scene II of *The Life and Death of King John* by William Shakespeare, written some time between 1587 and 1598.

<sup>12</sup> The Shard, the 87-storey glass tower at 32 London Bridge Street, London SE1, opened in 2013.



Gherkin,<sup>13</sup> to the landing of Philae on Comet 67P, we all rejoice in artifice and the celebration of the human capacity to improve upon nature by finding evermore extraordinary ways to realize our human purposes and our desires.

The camp sensibility, that characterizes much of modern capitalism, is urban, even it's engagement with the 'natural world' is highly mediated through urbanity and the technologies essential to life in cities. It is a sensibility which dissolves the boundaries between the serious and the frivolous so that frivolity can, like One Direction or David Beckham, be taken extremely seriously, while the spectacle of Islamist terror assumes the status of ludicrous grotesqueries, the absurd posturing of Islamic State fighters making their murders and massacres, idiotic, beyond caricature.

In her 1964 'Notes On "Camp"' Susan Sontag wrote that while "not all homosexuals have Camp taste" they "by and large, constitute the vanguard – and the most articulate audience – of Camp [. . .] Homosexuals have pinned [the hope of] their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, [and] sponsors playfulness."<sup>14</sup> While these observations were sound fifty years ago, they are now somewhat outmoded. This is because what Sontag attempted grasp as an ineffable sensibility sponsored largely by homosexuals, has now not merely "hardened into an idea",<sup>15</sup> it is an idea embraced by the straight majority, camp has become a mainstay of mainstream bourgeois culture.

It is pointless for the homosexual radicals of the seventies or eighties to bemoan the loss of the edginess of the lesbian and gay 'community' when the truth is that we've been swallowed whole – straight society has

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<sup>13</sup> 30 St Mary Axe, the 41-storey office building in the City of London known popularly as the Gherkin.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, notes 51 & 52, in 'Notes on "Camp"', , 1964, available at <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>

<sup>15</sup> Susan Sontag, Preamble to "Notes on "Camp"".

caught up with us – taken us to its bosom – and finally absorbed us into its ‘new normal’. What was once the creation of an outcaste demimonde, a life in the margins, has moved centre stage because it expresses a sensibility that most authentically captures the times through which we are living.

“Being-as-Playing-a-Role”,<sup>16</sup> applies as much to our own trips to Ikea as it does to seeing ourselves drinking coffee or eating pizzas in franchise restaurants and coffee shops. Like Chicago gangsters who famously modeled their speech and gestures on the movie representations of themselves, we inescapably conduct ourselves like the actors in advertisements for the clothes we’re wearing and the bars we’re patronizing.

Of course there are counter narratives beloved of those who believe in ‘appropriate technology’ and insist upon the ‘limits of growth’, but these dismal spirits are merely recuperated by being awarded parts within the camp parade of roles and ‘lifestyles’ and ways of being appropriated by modern capitalism – the love of artifice, innovation, improvement, and growth. Indeed it is plain to see that the only viable solutions to our ecological problems lie in mobilizing all our ingenuity, our technologies, and our love of artifice, to overcome the degradation of the environment.

I have no idea of whether capitalism is ‘late’, on the rocks, or simply going through a particularly rough patch, but I do know that if socialists are to pose any effective alternative to a system in which billions fall under the wheels of the juggernaut it will not be by rejecting innovation and artifice, but on the contrary, it will be by finding a way of building upon the degree to which capitalism has emancipated humanity from raw unvarnished nature, in order to emancipate us all from the private ownership of capital and the profit motive.

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Sontag, note 10, in ‘Notes on “Camp”’.