

Anarchism, Sexual Liberation and Bisexuality

Peter Principle

1995

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Quote...

“...the future is one of polarisation, a humane acceptance of the bisexual nature of people, against a zealous structure, both repressive and domineering, which involves the concept of distinct differences in gender which are always in opposition.”

“Capitalism seems to need this fierce and limited gender stereotyping. So long as capitalism is in control we are stuck with it, unless the feminist and gay liberation movements can change these caricatures of sexual identity. But as crises in the world’s ecology and population loom, capitalism must change within the next fifty years or wither away.”

“As capitalism also creates and maintains a homophobic society, and as societies in crisis deepen homophobia, there is little hope that that too will wither away in the next few decades. In fact, I see it getting worse.”

This is not a book review

In the Autumn of 1995 there was much discussion of and praise for a “radical new approach” to the question of lesbian and gay rights by the liberal press. Unfortunately, “the most important work ever about homosexuality” was not Colin Spencer’s “Homosexuality: A History”, from the conclusion of which the opening quote is taken, but Andrew Sullivan’s “Virtually Normal”, extracts from which were published in the Guardian.

I don’t fall for the George Woodcock/Freedom Press portrayal of anarchism as simply a more consistent version of liberalism. Liberalism is an individualistic creed based on a hierarchy of “enlightenment” – the liberals’ freedom is based on their class privileges, which are “deserved” because of their supposedly superior education and enlightenment, as opposed to the “ignorant” masses whose freedom would result in the tyranny of ignorance, brutality and bad taste.

Ultimately, as the actions of some republican authorities at the outbreak of civil war in Spain in 1936 – denying the workers arms to fight fascism in the face of otherwise certain defeat – illustrates, they are more scared of a social revolution which would destroy their class privileges than they are of fascist ignorance and brutality.

Liberal “freedom” has been exposed by history as a conceit – the mortal enemy of anarchism, which is based on the true freedom of abolition of all hierarchy and privilege, our liberation from the shackles of ignorance and brutality imposed by

our “enlightened” rulers. Anarchism is based on federalism rather than individualism, and is about organising a society in which the individual is free to be truly human. Oppression is about denying the humanity of people in varying ways, chiefly through class, but also through race, gender and sexuality, and the imposition of disability.

A movement which seeks real freedom must address and overcome all of these, but all too often anarchists adopt liberal or other ready-made positions without much thought; or apply crude theory to differing oppressions without being informed by the experience of those oppressed in particular ways. To give an example of what I mean, classical anarchism should not be seen as sufficient in itself for addressing the oppression of women, but it should be informed by feminist insights rather than adopting a favoured brand of radical feminism as a quick fix without real thought.

A stick to beat “militant gays”

I read the Independent because I like my liberals openly right wing, so I can see where they’re coming from. I’m disturbed by the almost universal loyalty to the Guardian among anarchists and the left – know your enemies before they jail you. So, I got it rammed down my throat that “militant gays” would be better off lobbying politely for the right to marry (doubtless with “male” and “female” roles within the marriage, as every straight moron knows we have), and to patriotically serve our countries like “normal people”, than “outing” the closet cases who are among our most vicious oppressors. .

Wasn’t it nice of these enlightened people to give us the benefit of their opinions, and to tell us what we have to (not) do to win their approval? Their new found (and short-lived) interest in gay rights had little to do with acceptance of our common humanity, and everything to do with a self-appointed gay voice who shares their class and cultural assumptions.

Andrew Sullivan is the editor of the New Republic, an ex-Kennedy-liberal-turned-Republican magazine, in the United States, and is clearly more at home with fellow Republicans, including the homophobes, than he is with any kind of politicised lesbian and gay consciousness. As a white, middle class male Sullivan enjoys all the privileges afforded someone in his position.

Of course, “normal” is not simply all three of these, but also heterosexual. Sullivan is gay, so he’s not what “society” defines as normal, but his argument is that this part of the definition of normality, with access to full citizenship rights, is based on mistaken premises. He is “virtually normal”, and his book is dedicated to demolishing the arguments of those of his peers who wish to discriminate against

him on the grounds of his sexuality, and to deny him the unqualified bourgeois respectability he craves.

He also has a less convincing swipe at gay liberation. He has no real idea of the radical politics of sexuality and gender which he dismisses, and his ignorance was highlighted in the more critical quarters of the gay press. For Sullivan and his privileged peers society works, they are “normal”, or virtually so, and therefore radical ideas such as subverting the oppressive structures of gender which are woven into the very fabric of society have no appeal to them.

Those of us who are not “normal” — black gay men, lesbians and openly bisexual people, and above all anyone working class — don’t have access to privileges, to be free we need social change. While reform, particularly the removal of all officially-sanctioned discrimination, would be welcome because without basic rights more radical agendas are unrealistic, it is not an end in itself. It is, however, what the liberals would want us to settle for, and not challenge the society which delivers their privileges.

Lavender marriage

Anarchists are against both marriage and the military, of course, so straight ones will see both Sullivan’s arguments and the high-profile “Military Four” campaign as irrelevant. These are both political, however, and the issues involved are important to anyone who is not exclusively heterosexual. At the heart of this is the apparatus by which lesbians, gay men and bisexual people are dehumanised by society.

A reformist approach to partnership rights would be to grant them for all unions, based on universally-recognised criteria, not giving married couples privileged access to pension, immigration and communal property rights. One of the most devastating ways lack of social recognition of gay relationships can hit home is when one partner dies and their “kin” take over funeral arrangements, exclude the surviving partner, and turn a coffin into a closet.

Some reform of the privileged status of marriage is on the political agenda from the point of view of heterosexual couples, so campaigners prepared to tackle bigotry (by raising specific issues, not simply pretending we’re the same as “normal people”) have potential allies, and can take the battle for visibility and human rights out of the ghetto and into the real world. This stands to become the next big thing, I think anarchists should have something to say about the issues.

Marriage by its nature gives privileged status to monogamous heterosexuality, and as an ideal serves to police sexual behaviour, foster guilt among the overwhelming majority who either fail or don’t conform, and generally turn out profit

fodder for the capitalists. It is also at the heart of the gender system, being the union of one man and one woman, two complementary halves to make one human pair. The idea of “opposite” sexes which need to pair off in order to balance each other’s “innate” characteristics out is as basic to dehumanising and enslaving people as the creation of gods.

Any same-sex union would tend to subvert this, as would “bisexual” unions, regardless of the sex combination, where gender is incidental as opposed to basic. Gay marriage would destroy the institution of marriage as it exists today, it is (unconsciously) a transitional demand – limited but impossible in this society. There is a need for a more radical and honest approach.

Informed by such ideas the old anarchist concept of the free union (the original, real “free love”) can gain a new life and radicalism it has lost with the prevalence of “living together” in western societies. There is more to be gained in embracing free unions than the symbolic refusal to recognise the church and the state. Within a reform campaign it could also become a viable option free from second class legal status, which is a real issue, rather than just a life-style accessory for revolutionaries.

Kiss me goodnight, Sergeant Major

The gay issue of the moment is the “right” to serve in the military. Many working class lesbians and gay men get “economically drafted” into the military in “peacetime”, and conscripted in wartime, anyway. Choosing the military is somewhat academic, and harassment is merely part of the macho brutalising process. However, the “bad for morale” argument (no better explanation for this than that it upsets bigots has been advanced) helps to institutionalise an irrational fear of lesbians and gay men among straights.

It is still possible for straight men who murder men they claim made sexual advances towards them (however tentative – there are rarely witnesses) to get lighter sentences or manslaughter convictions. The thought of being desired by another man is apparently so disturbing as to justify, or mitigate, murder. The military ban is one of the most basic ways in which the state sanctions such attitudes and behaviour. It also declares to all that lesbians, gay men and bisexual people are second class citizens, and not to be afforded human rights.

Soldiering, like marriage, is a dehumanising concept. The armed forces take men and women, and destroy or circumscribe their capacity for independent thought by standardising haircuts, clothes, behaviour and modes of speech. By these means they are subordinated to the authority of the state, which they will unquestioningly serve, killing because they are told to, not fighting for themselves. The degree

of dehumanisation necessary means that gender roles are more exaggerated than civilian society needs, as the need for a non-human identity is stronger.

If people need to fight for something other than the interests the state upholds, they can do it as people, and therefore as themselves, not as cogs in the killing machine. To some extent this has to happen in modern wars where conscription is employed, and propaganda is used to mobilise and motivate people.

We would argue that the only wars worth fighting are for social revolution, and that they can only be fought by the people — armed, mobilised and deployed through revolutionary organisations. For such organisations to work realising people's humanity is crucial, without restrictions on emotional and sexual expression, and without gender roles.

Visible and divisible?

In February's *Gay Times*, Simon Edge argues that, far from being the creation of gay businessmen, the ghetto is the product and symbol of the gains made by (affluent, white) gay men (and not so much by lesbians) in the quarter century of the post-Stonewall era. Edge sees this, rather than political activism, as being a means of attracting people out of the closet. In noting its intolerance of diversity, however, he fails to draw the obvious conclusion that this in itself leaves the most vulnerable, invisible people who are attracted to their own sex with nothing positive to leave the closet for.

My idea of one circle of hell is a disco full of clones. Lesbians and gay men, let alone bisexual people, are not ethereal creatures existing in a separate world. To quote an old slogan used against the single-issue activism of the Gay Activists' Alliance which succeeded the Gay Liberation Front in the USA in the '70's, "our lives are not divisible". We do have children, our past (and present, and in some cases future) involvements with people of the other sex are not always mistakes or "phases". We are women and working class and black too, sometimes all of these. We are not going to hang these up at the door of the club, any more than we are going to stop being gay when we leave.

Yeah, conventional political protest is of limited usefulness, but so is the ghetto. Try asking the Jews of Europe how well visibility and a vibrant culture and social prominence served them in the '40's. The key area is to be out, proud and ourselves at work, play and in political involvement — which should be an appropriate aspect of everything we do, not just a life-style accessory. Being "normal", or "queer", misses the point. To combat homophobia we have to be real, to combat heterosexism we have to subvert its institutions.

To see a specific form of oppression — based on gender, race, or sexuality — as a single issue is the prerogative of those for whom capitalist society delivers, but who feel unjustly excluded from their full range of privileges or from a fulfilling social life. The left-wing “intelligentsia”, minority nationalists, “ladies who lunch”, the race relations industry, gay businessmen, et al, sell single-issue politics to working people for whom gender, race, sexuality, etc. is an aspect of their oppression. “We are your friends — support us instead of the Establishment/ British/ male/ white/ straight world which oppresses you”.

For working people specific forms of oppression do not exist in isolation, however, and can never be a single issue. Sexuality is inextricably linked to race, class and gender oppression (or privilege). Equality with your peers is only useful if you are otherwise “normal”, ie privileged. Gay liberation has always been about the links between different aspects of oppression and the totality of the lives of lesbians, gay men and bisexual people. Liberation means changing the society which needs your oppression to maintain itself — I am working class and bisexual, and I want to be free, therefore I am an anarchist.

...Unquote

By contrast with Sullivan, Colin Spencer, who shares his viewpoint that same-sex affections and behaviour are unremarkable, takes the premise that it is not these that need to be explained — they just exist, and have always done — but societies’ attitudes towards them.

So, his very personal perspective takes the form of an anglo-centric history of imposed sexual moralities clashing with human sexual behaviour. He does attempt to link the rise of capitalism with the rise of the modern homophobic society we live in (although he does not treat capitalism as the start of history as a marxist might; he starts with pre-history, and prehuman times!), but his analysis of the developing ideology of British capitalism and its need for a homophobic component is not particularly sharp.

And there’s the rub, at 400 pages of text the book is neither an exhaustive history (it is anglo-centric, but draws on other societies as they affect English culture in this respect), nor a disciplined analysis. Very readable, and with a remarkable sweep to it, it is an enjoyable book, but not a satisfying one. It also scores points for honesty in acknowledging that the history of Homosexuality (ie same-sex love) is largely the history of Bisexuality. I’d recommend it to anyone who is interested in people as they really are, but someone needs to write a proper theoretical analysis of the relationship between heterosexism, gender and oppression in capitalist society. Any takers?

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Retrieved on December 24, 2009 from libcom.org
This article comes from Black Flag #207, which came out in 1995.

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