



GAY

OPPRESSION

A
RADICAL
ANALYSIS

I. THE REALITY OF GAY OPPRESSION

The Gay Liberation movement has forced many people into new thinking about homosexuality. It has shown this uptight straight society that there are a lot of gay people around, that we are articulate, that we can organize and become a potentially important force for social change. Much of Gay Lib's impact has been on heterosexuals. Certainly media coverage has focused attention on how the straight world is reacting to the new gay militancy. But the most significant effects of the movement have been felt at home: in the awakening of millions of gay women and men to the possibility of a better life - and a realization of how put-down we are. For us, as for any group which is the victim of discrimination, the first step toward changing the situation is to become fully aware of what our actual situation is. To make life bearable, many gay people have filtered out awareness of their actual social position. The promise of Gay Liberation is the creation of a new, free way of life in which we will not have to retreat psychologically and socially to survive.

Self-understanding is the beginning of genuine liberation. Several facts are basic for grasping the reality of our oppression as homosexuals. First, who we are. According to the famous Kinsey studies of sexual behavior in America, homosexual behavior is very common among both women and men in our society - more common among males than among females. Following are some of the Kinsey findings:

- 50% of American males have been conscious of specifically erotic responses to other males.

- 37% have had at least one homosexual experience leading to orgasm.

- 18% have had at least as much homosexual as heterosexual experience for at least a three year period between the ages of 18 and 65.

- 28% of American females have been conscious of specifically erotic responses to another female.

- 13% have reached orgasm from at least one homosexual experience.

(Kinsey repeatedly points out that because of the savagely repressive attitudes towards homosexuality, the actual incidence will always be far higher than the collected data indicate.)

Also interesting is Kinsey's finding that most of the males who engage in homosexual behavior also take part in heterosexual activity. In other words, homosexuals are a large part of the population, a large portion of whom are otherwise "normal" heterosexuals.

It is important to note that this high incidence of homosexual behavior occurs in a society which is extremely hostile and repressive to all forms of homoerotic activity. This alone negates the myth that homosexuality is a rare "disease" confined to a few contaminated areas. Homoerotic drives are powerful forces throughout our society in spite of heavy repression.

How is such widespread incidence possible? The established church of the psychological world, the National Institute of Mental Health, and other professional circles often have difficulty in accounting for the near-universality of the "illness". A simpler explanation, which carries more evidential weight, is that homosexuality is a natural and common activity found among nearly all higher mammals. Sexual response among humans is learned activity. It is not innate. There is simply no one natural sexual response for humans. Heterosexuality is not inherited. Cultural conditioning is the main determinant of the kinds of sexual response an individual will choose. The "problem" of homosexuality is that straight society hates and fears it (yet unwittingly inclines large numbers of its own members to respond homoerotically). The point is that homosexuality is not sick. It is as valid a mode of human sexual response as heterosexuality. What is pathological is this society's inability to give a positive place to homosexuality, thereby excluding and squandering great amounts of human energy and potential. Homosexuality is a positive personal and social force. It is the capacity to love fully members of one's own sex. It is the natural complement and equal of heterosexuality.

In short, there are tens of millions of us throughout all parts of the American population. We suffer from an oppression based upon irrational concepts, and are subject to the crudest prejudice and bigotry. Yet, great numbers of gay people appear to the rest of the society to lead perfectly normal lives.

What does it mean, then, to claim that we are oppressed as homosexuals? Oppression is a slippery term, but it can be given a reasonably concrete meaning. By oppression we mean a situation in which the growth and development of a group or an individual is systematically frustrated because of the social position of the oppressed and/or the structure of the social situation in which they live. We maintain that all gay people in America are systematically frustrated in various ways because of their sexual orientation. This oppression is both psychological and social, and affects all of us to varying degrees, regardless of the heterosexual component of our lives. Gay oppression is real, socially as well as psychologically - it affects us outwardly as well as inside. Gay oppression is harmful: it inhibits our lives, causing us to be less than we could be. Gay oppression is a social problem. It is a systematic process which derives from the narrow roles of our sex-negative society and culture.

Anyone growing up gay in America learns to develop a mildly schizophrenic personality style. Gay persons experience a split between what he or she feels toward members of the same sex and what is socially acceptable. A gay person soon learns to become an expert at self-censorship, at inhibiting feelings and responses to avoid being "read" as gay. Under strong pressures at home, in school, with peers to "go straight", a gay person has difficulty experiencing sexuality as a positive force. Sex becomes split off from productive and active parts of life, draining off energy in repression, and leaving a sense of being not quite together. Every gay person in America leads two lives. Within the personality there is a felt opposition between feeling and socially-approved activity. This kind of self-division is usually termed alienation. The anti-gay pressures of American society and culture force upon homosexuals peculiar forms of personal and social alienation.

Alienation In Personal Life

The deepest problem faced by gay people in their personal lives is that of positive self-image. American society exerts strong pressures through most of its institutions to enforce the view that homosexuality is a negative characteristic. Heterosexuality as an exclusive way of life is exalted as the only legitimate form of sexual expression. At the same time, homosexuality is put down in books, films, "queer" jokes, etc. The first film in America to deal with gay experience, "The Boys In The Band", focused upon a group of male, middle class New Yorkers - the typical stereotype of "the homosexual". The film showed gay men with personal problems such as guilt, self-hatred and failure, all somehow connected with their homosexuality. Yet, there was no mention of the kind of social repression which surrounds every gay person, women as well as men, in our society. This is putting homosexuality down. There are strong influences, including organized religion and established psychology, which pressure gay people to view themselves as inferior and sick. This is borne out by the number of homosexuals of both sexes who seek psychiatric help to be "cured" of their homosexuality. It is hardly surprising that this kind of negative propaganda barrage should leave many of us with feelings of inferiority and self-hatred.

This lack of self-esteem has had effects on personal relations. Gay people often have difficulty establishing lasting relationships, especially with other homosexuals. This reinforces the pattern of self-hatred and can cause feelings of anxiety and insecurity. All this affects the way gay people experience their sexuality itself. The cultural censure of homosexuality usually leads gay people to suffer from some kind of guilt or anxiety in connection with their sexual activity. Some seek "cures", some depersonalize sex as much as possible and others avoid sex altogether. Because of strong social pressure, homosexuals are forced to censure their sexual feelings much of the time. This makes it very hard to integrate sexuality into the total personality. For every gay person in America, sex is a major personal problem in at least some period of his or her life.

Alienation In Social Life

The problems gay people experience in their personal lives largely derive from the conflict between their erotic needs and the dominant role structure of society. American families condition many of their children to respond homosexually as well as heterosexually. As mentioned above, this is natural and in itself a good thing. The problem arises because the society not only does not provide positive roles for gay sex, but attempts to enforce heterosexual supremacy to the point of suppressing all aspects of homoerotic behavior. American society denies homosexuals equal status alongside exclusive heterosexuals - the cultural ideal. Homosexuals are considered somehow less than fully human. Great effort is expended to keep homosexuals from participating in important social roles. Gays are officially barred from influence on the young in education, from all areas of government employment, and from positions throughout industry and business. Homosexuals are consciously pushed out of social functions for which they qualify in all ways but sexual orientation. "Known homosexuals" are a marginal group in America. Even though most gays carefully conceal their identity, there is always the threat of exposure and the possibility of being forced into the marginal category.

To make clear the impact of falling into the marginal group, it is useful to recall what open or known homosexuals are subject to in America. First, physical attack. It is no secret that "queers" are favorite victims for beatings, muggings and killings by various segments of the population, including police.

Second, legal punishment - in some states life imprisonment - for consenting homosexual acts. Gay sex in any form is outlawed in every state but Illinois, where severe repression takes place nevertheless. Third, occupational exclusion. Very few jobs anywhere are open to known homosexuals. This is the biggest club used against us. Fourth, psychological oppression in the form of harassment, abuse, slander and ridicule. Fifth, blackmail. Sixth, housing discrimination.

Because of this kind of pressure, most gay people are forced to conceal and restrict their often vital personal needs in order to survive. This reinforces the self-censure and the split between sexuality and other kinds of productive activity. This results in masquerading - either playing straight or exaggerating one's sexual style in camp.

At the center of many gay people's lives is the painful choice between personal fulfillment and socially-sanctioned achievement. A gay person often has to choose between a job or career in which sex has to be denied, and an open sex life in a gay ghetto with little chance for a decent job or fulfilling career. Such a choice enforces a split personality no matter which option is taken. Either choice alienates the human capacities for enjoyment from those of creative production. A chief form of our oppression is this barren choice of alternatives: love or work, but not both.

The oppression of homosexuality in America is a result of the anti-gay bias running through the institutions and culture of this society. The stifling of growth and potential affects all gay people (as well as all heterosexuals), leaving few aspects of our lives untouched. The oppression is intolerable because it is unjustified and irrational. The continuing oppression of homosexuals is both humanly degrading and socially wasteful.

Homosexuality is as "natural" as heterosexuality, because of the great flexibility of human sexual response. Homosexuality harms no one and is a valuable form of relationship. American society's condemnation of homosexuality has no basis in science or nature. It is prejudice, like racism. Human health and creativity require integration of the needs for enjoyment and intimacy with productive activity. Repression of homosexuality restricts individuals and society as a whole from developing this kind of healthy integration, causing gay sexuality to be separated from social life with the consequences noted above. Since the proper development of sexuality is vital for human growth, the continuing repression of gay people, especially in adolescence, inflicts needless suffering on millions of people. As long as anti-gay oppression is permitted, considerable human resources are being squandered and all our lives are impoverished and distorted.

II. THE INSTITUTIONS OF REPRESSION

The dominant culture in our society is anti-gay as a whole. Repression of gay sexuality is enforced through the interlocking life patterns or institutions which make up this society. These institutions are man-made and changeable. They interlock, but not perfectly. Each one represses homosexuality in its peculiar fashion. But the result of all this is so consistent that it is accurate to speak of them all as sources of gay oppression.

1. The family. In American society the nuclear family, composed of father, mother and children, is the first institution most people encounter, and it has the greatest effect in forming personalities. The family is where sexual response is learned, by a process still little understood. The American family is also the starting point for anti-gay attitudes. Unfortunately it is also the institution which conditions other repressive attitudes, i.e. attitudes which tend to stifle and cripple people's abilities to develop. The normal family usually fosters male supremacy, enforces the inferior, dependent status of women, and confining sex-typing of personality traits, according to which males should be aggressive and females passive, etc. Sexism, discrimination against persons because of sex or sexual activity, begins here.

2. The educational system. Schools and related youth-oriented programs in America reinforce the anti-gay attitudes learned in the family. This is done by enforcing distinctions between "masculine" and "feminine" roles and activities, by exalting stereotypes of male and female behavior, etc. Homosexuality receives heavy negative sanctions both directly and by treating it in negative and lurid ways. Since the educational institutions affect development from childhood through adolescence, their impact is considerable.

3. Organized religion. American churches and synagogues reinforce the same configuration of values developed by the family: sexism, male supremacy, anti-homosexuality. Further, religious sanctions are used to infuse attitudes toward homoeroticism with a heavy sense of guilt. Because of their powerful influence over the lives of many people in this society, religious institutions are major agents of enforcing the oppression of homosexuals.

4. Government. Federal, state and municipal governments exert strong anti-gay pressures. Anti-gay laws, police harassment, persecution within the military, and nearly universal job discrimination all act to oppress the lives of gay people in very concrete and often painful ways.

5. Business. Gay people suffer from both discrimination and exploitation at the hands of large and small business alike. American business enforces conformism and anti-gay prejudices in hiring practices, in unequal opportunities for gays within factories, offices, etc. Gays, when "discovered", are often fired or never promoted. Open homosexuals frequently have difficulty finding adequate housing. In gay ghetto areas housing is available, but usually over-priced and of poor quality. And homosexuals are exploited through over-priced bars, films, magazines, clothes, etc.

6. The Mass Media. The media extol and reinforce cultural norms, projecting a negative image of homosexuality. The film & TV industries in particular emphasize identification with prevailing stereotypes, male chauvinism, and the negative aspects of homosexuality.

7. Organized Crime. In the cities the gay ghetto area is a favorite place for exploitation by criminal syndicates. The oppressed situation of gay people and our lack of social support or power make us easy victims of exploitation in syndicate-owned bars, baths and restaurants. The syndicates exploit our needs for a relatively safe place to meet and socialize with other gay people. This kind of exploitation does not exclude threats, and the reality, of assaults and murder.

III. THE STRUGGLE TOWARD LIBERATION

As our analysis indicates, to be gay in America is to be forced to live under grinding psychological and social pressure. It means having to frustrate one's own desires and conceal the gay aspects of one's identity, or face strong economic, social and legal sanctions. Freedom means to be and feel "together", to experience sexuality as a positive force, to see ourselves as equals with straights and able to control our own destinies.

Our liberation means the positive inclusion of homosexuality within a healthy society, the integration of sexuality on the part of all people within a productive and developing life. Our liberation is a personal and social process of change. Our goal cannot be tolerance from straight society as presently constituted. Because of the roles and patterns of this society we could at best be tolerated as inferiors and "terminal cases" of an affliction. Existing American institutions cannot assimilate homosexuality in a positive way. Liberation will require a resistance to the kind of negative channelling this society imposes on us and finally a radical overhaul of the institutions which oppress us - including the removal and replacement of institutions where necessary.

Our alienation as gays is in this way like that of Women as a whole, of Blacks and other Third World peoples. The social arrangements of this society as it stands are simply incapable of meeting our or their needs regardless of the good will if any, of those controlling the institutions. To break our chains and become free we are going to have to work for fundamental changes in the institutions which oppress us, such as the existing family system with its web of supports: male chauvinism, sex typing of personality traits and arbitrary labels such as "gay" and "straight". But to change any one basic institution will require changes in related ones. Change in family patterns would mean changes in education, in the economy, in laws, etc. This will mean coming up against vested interests, those who gain at the expense of our oppression. It will mean a struggle to free ourselves.

To be free to live human lives we as gay people have to alter the whole interlocking group of institutions which affect our lives. This is the sense in which Gay Liberation is necessarily a radical movement. Our project must be to gain power to make changes in this society which have to be made if we are to live healthy, free and productive lives.

Concretely, this will require two things. One, getting ourselves and our movement together. For this we need a realistic set of social and political goals to fit our needs. Two, a readiness to form alliances with other groups struggling for change. We cannot remake American society by ourselves. We surely cannot ask those who are comfortable with the present order, i.e. our oppressors, to change it for us. But together with others, we may be able to create a free life for all of us.

The Red Butterfly maintains that the American economic and political system, based on the capitalists' pursuit of profit, cannot incorporate our demands and satisfy our needs for full social participation any more than it can meet the demands of Black Americans. Capitalism does ... not operate directly to serve human needs, but to increase profits. As recent experience indicates (e.g. Ralph Nader), the great corporations pursue this policy as well as small businesses. To achieve full participation in social life and access to the economic necessities for the good life, we need to take control of the economy out of the hands of the profit-seekers and substitute rational planning and control of economic life by all the people. Furthermore we need guaranteed protection for the economic, social and political rights of all minorities, including homosexuals. Together with public and cooperative ownership of social wealth, this is democratic socialism.

We hold that only such an economic and social democracy, in which people have genuine control over the institutions which affect their lives, can provide conditions in which we can work out a free society, in which gay people can live full and creative lives and in which "gay" and "straight" can be buried along with other labels of division and oppression.

Other Pamphlets:

Gay Liberation

by The Red Butterfly

A Gay Manifesto

by Carl Wittman
with Red Butterfly discussion

Pamphlets are 25¢ including postage.

The Red Butterfly is an association of gay men and women who as revolutionary socialists see their liberation linked to the class struggle.

Additional copies of this pamphlet are available. We are engaged in study and writing projects to develop a comprehensive radical analysis of Gay Liberation. On-going projects include critiques of religion, the family, and Women's Liberation. For additional materials, or a speaker for your group or school, write us.

The Red Butterfly
Box 3445
Grand Central Station
New York, N.Y. 10017