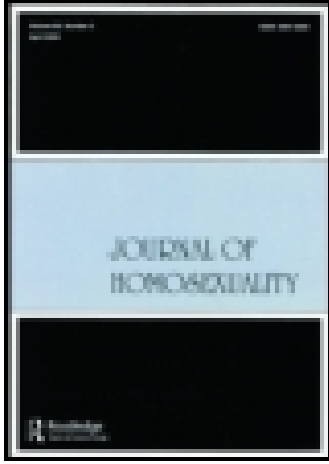


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Homosexuality and the American Left:

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Homosexuality and the American Left: The Impact of Stonewall

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SUMMARY. Following the Stonewall Riots in New York City in June 1969, the left had to reassess negative appraisals of homosexuality that prevailed among virtually all leftist currents. Pressure for change came from within and from without. By the mid-1970s, three approaches had emerged: (1) radical support for sexual liberation and acceptance of same-sex love as being on a par with heterosexuality; (2) liberal support for the civil rights of homosexuals but without challenging heterosupremacy; and (3) continued adherence to the (Stalinist) view that homosexuality is a form of “bourgeois decadence” alien to the working class. This essay assesses the ways in which the left adapted to the new challenges that confronted it, with particular focus on attitudes toward the nature of homosexuality and its relation to the broader goals of the left.

The June 1969 Stonewall Riots at a gay bar in New York City’s Greenwich Village caught most of the left unprepared. Sex-negative baggage inherited from Stalinism and bourgeois psychology would have to be scuttled before the left could relate to the new move-

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ment-let alone have any influence on its course. From Stalinism came quasi-religious incantations labeling homosexuality a “product of bourgeois decadence,” the “fascist perversion,” something destined to “wither away,” along with the state, under socialism. Homosexuals were too narcissistic and unstable to make “good revolutionaries.” From bourgeois (neo-Freudian) psychology came the classification of homosexuality as a mental illness. Same-sexers were considered “security risks” and barred from both government employment and membership in most leftist groups.

The rebirth of a militant women’s movement in the late sixties prompted a reassessment of sexual roles and of homosexuality. Women’s reaffirmation of their sexuality proved contagious and—together with the civil-rights struggle, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the hippie counterculture-inspired the gay rebels of the Stonewall generation. The women’s and gay movements were movements of youth. Consequently, they spread quickly on the campuses. It was there that left-wing groups—“new” as well as “old”—first encountered challenges to the male chauvinist and heterosexist thinking that prevailed in their ranks. These external challenges, together with those by growing numbers of uncloseted homosexual leftists, discredited heterosupremacy. Prevailing positions became anachronistic and untenable.

What follows is a summary of this process as manifested in a variety of U.S. groups, with particular attention to those that formed part of the “old left”—especially Trotskyism, since it is there that the most extensive efforts to confront hetero dogma took place.

REACTION IN THE “VANGUARD”

The sex-negative, family-oriented outlook of Stalinism in the 1930s came to infect virtually every left-wing current: Stalinist, Trotskyist, Maoist, social democratic, even anarchist. By the 1960s, past support by leftists for homosexual rights—even a rationalistic or scientific understanding of sexual behavior—had vanished from collective memory.

“I am suspicious of those who always stare only at the question of sex the way an Indian holy man stares at his navel,” Lenin told Clara Zetkin.¹ Taking its cues from Lenin, the left tended to trivial-

ize personal questions and problems of daily life. Instead, it sought to concentrate on gaining support among the organized working class (seen as uniformly heterosexual) in hopes of eventually making a revolution—a sexually dysfunctional but “normal” worker would make a better revolutionary than one who led a deviant sex life.

Questions of sexuality and sexual oppression under capitalism were relegated to the far-off future of socialist utopia—the leftist equivalent of the Christian paradise derided by the Wobblies as “pie in the sky by and by when you die.” Fighting against sexual oppression in the here and now was disparaged as petty-bourgeois self-indulgence, a diversion from more urgent goals, such as overthrowing capitalism. For the left, the personal was not political; communist society would not have room for same-sex love.²

Stalinism brought the annihilation of tens of thousands of revolutionaries, including the entire Bolshevik leadership, as well as the triumph of bourgeois family values, the outlawing of abortion, and repression of homosexuality. At the same time, Nazism destroyed the growing homosexual movement in Germany. Two decades later, in the United States, the McCarthyite witch-hunt made both communists and homosexuals into pariahs; support for homosexual rights receded even farther from the left’s agenda. Change came only when homosexuals themselves rocked the boat.

Stonewall helped homosexuals to rediscover their history. They found that in the late nineteenth century their movement had met with tolerance, even support, in some (not all) German Social Democratic quarters—in particular with such leading figures as Ferdinand Lassalle, Eduard Bernstein, and August Bebel—as well as from the American anarchist Emma Goldman. Prior to Stonewall, historical awareness of the opinions of leftist thinkers on homosexuality was limited to the condemnation of pederasty by the socialist/anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Friedrich Engels’s absurd belief that the ancient Greeks had fallen into “the abominable practice of sodomy and degraded alike their gods and themselves with the myth of Ganymede,” and that the Germanic peoples had acquired a taste for “gross, unnatural vices” from their encounters with nomads around the Black Sea.³

The new ferment around sex provoked unprecedented discus-

sions on the left. In some cases, these were more extensive than any that have occurred to date inside ruling-class organizations (except, possibly, Christian churches). The turbulent interfacing between gay liberation and the left that took place after Stonewall merits attention despite—perhaps also because of—the waning of interest in revolutionary ideologies in the wake of the collapse of Stalinism, not to mention the eclipse of a radical vision by bland assimilationism in the gay movement.

Stonewall fostered optimism, discovery of self, disdain for received prejudice, and solidarity between oppressed peoples, social underdogs, sexual outcasts. The streets were the preferred arena of struggle. Happiness lay in confronting conformity and in discovering sexual variety: “Love is a many-gendered thing,” gay banners proclaimed. Faith in assimilation and career advancement—through electoral politics or appointment to lower levels of government bureaucracy—were faint glimmers on the horizon. The medicalization of homosexuality that had occurred in the late nineteenth century became a target, in particular the sickness theories of the neo-Freudians. Could anyone have imagined that within a few years not only would psychiatrists be advertising in gay magazines, but AIDS would have contributed to a remedicalization of homosexuality?

Following Stonewall, radical homosexuals saw themselves on a path leading toward a world free of exploitation and racial and sexual oppression. They were determined to secure for homosexuality its rightful place in the socialist society of the future. After years of struggling for other people’s causes, their time had come: “No revolution without us!”

The Gay Liberation Front (GLF), the first group to emerge from Stonewall, was a radical countercultural collection. A number of explicitly left-wing gay groups also sprouted over the next few years, among them the Red Butterfly, a group of revolutionary socialists inside the GLF; Gay Revolution and Gay Flames; the Gay Left in England; the Lavender & Red Union in Los Angeles; a group of radicals inside New York’s Gay Academic Union, which gave rise to the Committee of Lesbian and Gay Male Socialists; the Lavender Left. Such groups influenced the debates within the left, but will be dealt with only tangentially in this essay.

Before examining some of the positions that evolved out of this

ferment, it should be noted that on the whole the left *reacted* to these historic events rather than actively influencing them. Self-described “vanguards” scurried to catch up and adjust decades-old positions.

STALINISM

Some saw no reason to change. This was true of groups generally described as “Stalinist”-Communist parties and most Maoist groups, which banned homosexuals from membership. Typical was the position adopted in 1973 by the Maoist Revolutionary Union (RU):

1. Homosexuality in the USA today is an individual response to the intensification of the contradictions brought about by decaying imperialism; in particular it is a response to the contradiction between men and women which is rooted in male supremacist institutions and male chauvinist ideology. Because homosexuality is rooted in individualism it is a feature of petty bourgeois ideology which puts forth the idea that there are individual solutions to social problems.
2. Because homosexuality is based on petty bourgeois ideology and deals with the contradiction between men and women by turning its back to it (at least in intimate personal relationships), homosexuals cannot be Communists, that is, belong to communist organizations where people are committed to struggle against *all* forms of individualism, in *all* aspects of their lives.
3. Gay Liberation in its putting forth of gayness as a strategy for revolution in this country is a reactionary ideology and can lead us only down the road of demoralization and defeat.⁴

This position was striking in its abstractness, its lack of subtlety, its *ex cathedra* tone. In addition to demonstrating remarkable ignorance of sexuality-including cross-cultural varieties and ambiguous possibilities that run the gamut between exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality-it confused coming out and gay pride with a “strategy for revolution” and suggested that gay liberation

was in competition with the revolutionary left. For the RU (as for the ruling class), penis-in-vagina sex represented the apex of human evolution. It saw sexuality in terms of social “contradictions” and dismissed petty-bourgeois individualism, yet its own position reflected a personalistic view of sexuality. Even if homosexuality in the United States could—however unimaginatively—be described as a product of the “decay” of imperialism (an assertion too absurd to refute), the RU offered no theory as to the origin of homosexuality either in the past or in other contemporary cultures (China, Siwa Oasis, tribal African societies, New Guinea, the Zapotecs of Mexico, to name a few). It felt no need for rationalism or evidence to back up its argument. As a basis for a gay-left exchange, this method was a dead end.

Maoist positions on same-sex behavior were rigid and simplistic—simpleminded even. In June 1972, not long after the People’s Republic of China was admitted to the United Nations, its Mission to the UN was contacted to inquire about attitudes toward homosexuality in China. “There is no such thing in China,” a spokesman responded. When he was told that homosexuality had figured prominently in Chinese history, and that some of China’s greatest emperors were homosexual, he persisted: “No, that does not exist in China. In my opinion, it is a completely abnormal and unnatural thing. Oh, perhaps it existed before the Liberation. But after the Liberation our youth acquired a healthy outlook, and they carry out this healthy outlook both in their study and in their work.” He expressed surprise upon hearing that the Bolsheviks had decriminalized sex between males and added: “In twenty years of the revolution I have never heard of this kind of curious thing.”⁵

Similar to the Maoist position was that of the Communist Party USA. Barely a year after Stonewall, Jarvis Tyner, national chairman of the party’s youth group, the Young Workers Liberation League (YWLL), presented a report to its Central Committee in which he reiterated the usual negative views of homosexuality and described gay liberation as a diversion from the “centrality of the struggle for Black Liberation.” Women’s liberation and gay liberation, he argued, did not belong on the same level as black liberation—but women’s liberation was a struggle worth supporting as long as it

was approached with “class understanding.” An incoherent excursus on gay liberation followed:

But Gay Liberation is essentially a diversion. And the bourgeoisie picks up on these things and goes to town. The N.Y. Times was talking about “gay ghettos.” Talking about the “gay way of life” and all that. And we really have to examine this, you know. And I don’t really understand it fully myself, I have to admit. But I think “sexism” is a misnomer in the first place, as it’s projected to parallel racism. There is male chauvinism [*sic*]. There’s no question about that, but I don’t think “sexism” describes the thing, the phenomenon. We are opposed to the repression of homosexuals on the basis of their being homosexuals. We are opposed to them being treated as criminal problems. But it *is* a psychological problem. It’s based on the bourgeois concept of manhood. It’s based on all kinds of pressures in the crisis and oppression and exploitation in society with people distorted and so on. But you really can’t answer the Gay Liberation movement at this stage by walking up to them and saying “You’re sick.” They’re not ready to accept this. And in every coalition, Gay Liberation has been brought in. Incidentally, the basic line of Gay Liberation is basically a petty-bourgeois line. They’ve played that role in every single coalition. They were the ones who shouted Nina Simone off the stand at Bryant Park here in N.Y. Gay Liberation was right in the forefront. Shouted her right off the stand. Took over the platform. Then they had this united front with some sections of the Trotskyites and other trends.⁶

The Communist Party lumped homosexuality together with drug addiction and other social problems. In 1972, Roque Ristorucci, chairman of the New York YWLL, “linked the promotion of drugs, including marijuana, with the promotion of prostitution, homosexuality and pornography and pointed to the similarity with Germany during the rise of Nazism,” according to a report in the party’s daily.⁷

Despite regarding homosexuality as unsavory, and gay liberation as a diversion from more important matters, Tyner omitted the usual “fascist perversion” slander and even voiced opposition to the

oppression of homosexuals. This suggested the inroads that gay liberation, barely a year after Stonewall, had made into the youth and antiwar movements. As Tyner noted, heterosexuals could no longer get away with dismissing homosexuals as “sick”: “They’re not ready [!] to accept this.”

Still, the CP was not about to fundamentally reassess its position or embrace gay liberation. In the more than two decades since Tyner’s report, the CP has neither been involved in gay liberation nor adopted a more refined position on homosexuality. It never criticized the Soviet Union for its law penalizing male homosexuality, adopted in 1934, nor did it develop a program for sexual liberation. Although individual members expressed support for gay rights (Angela Davis being the most prominent), the party itself remained aloof. Following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the party went into crisis.⁸

THE PANTHERS

As early as 1970, during the heyday of New York’s Gay Liberation Front, Huey P. Newton, Supreme Commander of the Black Panther Party, issued a “Letter From Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements” in which he rejected the Stalinist-Maoist viewpoint and urged black revolutionaries to “form a working coalition with the gay liberation and women’s liberation groups” and “unite with them in a revolutionary fashion.” “The terms ‘faggot’ and ‘punk’ should be deleted from our vocabulary,” he advised. While admitting that he did not entirely understand why some people are homosexual, he added:

Some people say that it’s the decadence of capitalism. I don’t know whether this is the case; I rather doubt it. But whatever the case is, we know that homosexuality is a fact that exists, and we must understand it in its purest form: That is, a person should have freedom to use his body in whatever way he wants to. That’s not endorsing things in homosexuality that we wouldn’t view as revolutionary. But there’s nothing to say that a homosexual cannot also be a revolutionary. And maybe I’m

now injecting some of my prejudice by saying that “even a homosexual can be a revolutionary.” Quite on the contrary, maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary.⁹

At a time when the Panthers were still a force in progressive politics, before their leaders had been murdered by the FBI or hounded out of political life, Huey’s statement made a strong impression—and not only on gay activists, who welcomed it as a sign of support.¹⁰

On Labor Day weekend, 1970, many gay activists joined more than ten thousand people attending the Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, sponsored by the Panthers. Discussions were held between gay activists and Panther leaders, and lists of demands were drawn up by gay male and lesbian workshops—only the gay male statement was formally presented. Among other things, the statement recognized the Black Panther Party as “the vanguard of the people’s revolution in Amerikkka.”¹¹

TROTSKYISM

Left-wing attempts to relate to gay liberation made the greatest headway among Trotskyist groups. Their discussions went farther than they did among most leftist groups and, in a few cases, produced analyses that went beyond mere liberal support for gay rights. The discussions inside the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) were the most extensive and the best documented. They did not produce a position as radical as that of some other groups, but they addressed the main issues that have defined the debates between radicals and liberals.

During the sixties, the SWP banned known homosexuals from membership on the ground that they were a “security risk”—an argument adopted from McCarthyism. But the policy had an internal contradiction: by compelling homosexual members to treat their sexuality as a secret not to be told, it not only relegated them to inferior status but also made them more vulnerable to blackmail. The policy did not prevent homosexuals from joining; it just kept them in the closet. The SWP seems to have been the only Trotskyist

group in the world to ban homosexuals from membership. This policy was never officially adopted, but it was applied in some party branches in the late sixties. Other branches ignored the ban.¹²

The SWP National Committee first discussed the exclusion of homosexuals from membership at its plenum of February 27-March 1, 1970. No one challenged the argument that it was a security measure intended to protect the party from victimization by the state, or that it was comparable to the ban on use of illegal drugs by party members. Curiously, in August 1970—at precisely the moment when the exclusionary policy was becoming untenable—the party leadership had the National Committee of its youth group formally adopt it for the first time. Ironically, it was a homosexual (and former lover of mine) who was selected to present the report urging adoption of the ban. The policy elicited such ridicule and opposition from youth that it became an obstacle to recruiting on the campuses. Barely three months later, on November 13, the party's Political Committee decided to abolish it. It did so, however, without explaining the policy's origins or admitting that the policy had been discriminatory and wrong. Rather, it rejected it on purely pragmatic grounds, saying that it "is really not viable in that it creates more real problems for the party than it solves." Once it was safe, gay members began to come out.

Over the next six months, the party began to involve itself in the gay movement: it joined gay demonstrations, organized gay participation in antiwar demonstrations, held public forums on gay liberation, and published news and analytical articles in its weekly, *The Militant*. This involvement had barely begun when the brakes were applied. Instead of maintaining its involvement, the party turned inward and held a closed, internal "literary discussion" on gay liberation that resulted in withdrawal from gay liberation until 1977, when Anita Bryant's antigay crusade and the massive gay mobilizations it provoked made abstention impossible; the SWP again joined gay coalitions in a few cities. Then, after two years of sporadic participation, in 1979 the party definitively pulled out of the gay movement.

The SWP's official position on gay liberation was adopted by a party convention in August 1973, following nearly three years of heated internal debate. The party has never publicly released the

document, entitled “Memorandum on the Gay Liberation Movement.” The Memorandum expressed support for struggles by homosexuals “for full democratic rights, including full civil and human rights, and against all the forms of discrimination and oppression they suffer under capitalism.” This represented an advance over the days when gays were banned from membership, but did little more than give the party something to say that would look good in election propaganda. It described gay liberation as relating to a “relatively narrow sector of the population,” as lacking the “potential mass” and “social weight” of movements for women’s and black liberation, and as being “much more peripheral to the central issues of the class struggle” than those movements. It held that members should not generally be assigned to be involved in gay liberation. It refused to “take a stand on the nature or value of homosexuality,” thereby suspending judgment on whether same-sex behavior is an inherent capacity of the human animal or a bizarre deviation from “normal” heterosexuality. To do so, it argued, would alienate it from workers—a reformulation of the idea that “workers hate queers.” It justified this stance by claiming that, as a political organization, it could not “take a stand” on “scientific” questions—although it had no trouble doing so when this involved women (for example, its rejection of the notion that “biology is women’s destiny”).

The SWP was torn by internal debates on homosexuality throughout the seventies, but its position did not change. Altogether, the party held a half dozen such debates, producing scores of documents circulated only to party members.¹³ Many gay SWPers opposed the party’s position, not only because it meant abstention from the gay movement (gay members were not allowed to attend meetings of gay groups), but because it was considered a liberal approach that reduced gay liberation to a movement for equal rights by a fixed social minority (“gay people”) rather than a struggle for sexual liberation—a topic addressed later in this essay. Other Trotskyist groups took positions that were more radical, as well as more consistent with a Marxist analysis: in the United States, both the Spartacist League (SL) and the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL); in Mexico, the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT); in France, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR). In

general, these groups went beyond mere support for equal rights and attempted to develop an analysis that would integrate gay liberation and the struggle for socialism. They also tended to hold a more pro-sexual outlook on such issues as prostitution, pornography, and pederasty.¹⁴

OTHER GROUPS

Among other groups with positions favorable to gay liberation, the most ubiquitous has been the Workers World Party (WWP). Since the early seventies, it has participated in gay demonstrations and coalitions. Its gay members had a high profile as a caucus of its youth group, Youth Against War & Fascism (YAWF), and later as part of its front group, the People's Assembly. The WWP's newspaper, *Workers World*, regularly features articles on the gay movement, including issues of gay and transgender rights. It has published two pamphlets on gay liberation: *The Gay Question: A Marxist Appraisal* (1976) and *In the Spirit of Stonewall* (1979), a compilation of articles from its newspaper.

The WWP's support for gay liberation has been enthusiastic, but it has a tendency to see the world in Manichean terms: good, oppressed groups and socialist or Third World countries versus bad oppressors and imperialism—a worldview that led it to endorse both the crackdown in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 and the botched coup in the Soviet Union in August 1991. It brushed off gay criticism of repression in such countries as Cuba and the Soviet Union:

There is no country in the world today that has an adequate position with regard to ending the oppression of homosexually inclined people. But to single out any of the socialist countries for special attack, as some leaders of the gay movement in the U.S. have done, is to cover over this important fact and, in addition, it lets the U.S. imperialists, the ones who have a real stake in the maintenance of racism, sexism, and anti-homosexual attitudes, off the hook.¹⁵

Like most groups, the WWP focused on a struggle of “gay people” (or “homosexually inclined people”) as a social minority.

Its views on sex in a socialist future do not sound much different from those of other groups, including the SWP:

Marxism is a potent tool in the struggle for a better world but it is not a crystal ball. Yet Marxists *are* concerned with the questions of love and sexuality. We are confident that with the end of exploitation and oppression will come the possibility of much fuller, richer, and more profound human relationships.¹⁶

Among the most compelling attempts to develop a Marxist analysis of homosexual oppression and “to encourage in the gay movement an understanding of the links between the struggle against sexual oppression and the struggle for socialism”—as it stated its aims—was that of the Gay Left Collective in England in the mid-seventies. The collective’s article “Why Marxism?” is the best in an uneven anthology—published by the New American Movement (NAM), a social-democratic group—that addresses some challenges the left faces in relating to gay liberation.¹⁷

By the end of the 1970s, most left groups supported the idea that homosexuals (“gay people,” “lesbians and gay men”) deserved equal rights, whether in capitalist or socialist society. This was also becoming the position of the Democratic Party and several Christian churches. As long as gay equal rights remained abstract and did not cost the state anything, they could be supported. Such a position dovetailed with that of an increasingly assimilationist gay movement: the farther removed from Stonewall, the more its social agenda focused on symbolic issues (gay civil-rights legislation and film portrayals of homosexuality, for example) rather than on sexual freedom, repeal of sodomy and age-of-consent laws, or the release of persons imprisoned for consensual—yet illegal—sexual activity.

It was the issue of consensual sex, or man/boy love, that demonstrated the limitations of the pro-gay positions taken by most left-wing groups.

THE MAN/BOY LOVE ISSUE

Most left-wing groups have had trouble dealing with the taboo against intergenerational love, although a few have taken a libertari-

an stand on the issue. Some, fearing that any restrictions on free speech could jeopardize their own, have expressed support for the civil liberties of pederasts and their right to organize. When the FBI targeted the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) in December 1982, several left papers (the *Guardian*, *Workers Vanguard*, *Workers World*, *Torch*) defended the group's rights.¹⁸ On more substantive issues of man/boy sexuality, positions varied.

The WWP, for example, supports age-of-consent laws. "Age of consent laws were a progressive victory that stopped some of the most blatant exploitation of children, such as the selling of young girls into marriage," it asserted, apparently unaware that such laws were instituted to control youth sexuality and in no way protect children from abuse.¹⁹ The WWP sidestepped the fact that the age of consent varies greatly (from twelve to twenty-one, depending on the country or state) and did not say which one it supports. Historically, the age had nothing to do with "protection"—least of all of boys—but rather represented the age at which a young girl was legally marriageable. It would be stretching it, to say the least, to describe the age of consent in, say, Elizabethan England (where it was set at ten) as a "progressive victory." On the age of consent, many leftists defer to prevailing ruling-class or feminist prejudices.

In 1982, the staff of the *Guardian*, an independent weekly, held an internal discussion on the question and, in deference to feminists, adopted the position that man/boy love equals child abuse. Only one staffer—a gay man who came out as a pederast after leaving the staff—opposed the position. The staff rejected his proposal that it meet with radical boy-lovers before deciding on a position.²⁰ The *Guardian* never reported on this internal discussion. Instead, the editor chose to announce the paper's position in the letters column—without mentioning the internal debate that had produced it:

We strongly support laws protecting children against sexual abuse by adults and reject any suggestion that this position is "puritanical." We would, of course, oppose the use of such laws as a pretext for sweeping attacks on the rights of gays and lesbians, but we don't share the view of some in the gay/lesbian community that the issue of pederasty is mainly one of the civil liberties for the adult involved.²¹

Subsequently, in an article defending NAMBLA against state harassment, the *Guardian* expanded on its position but did not acknowledge the right of a young person to choose sex with an older person. It made no distinction between a small child and an adolescent youth, nor between a young girl and a teenage boy (even though the consent issues involved in sex between a sixteen-year-old gay-identified boy and his twenty-one-year-old gay lover are very different from those, say, between a six-year-old girl and her father):

The issue of sexual relations between adults and young people is a controversial one within the lesbian and gay communities. Most left groups, including the *Guardian*, do not condone sexual relations between adults and children, arguing that truly consensual relationships are not possible given the disparity in power, experience, and physical and emotional development. The rights of children, they stress, must be paramount and protected.²²

This surrender to bourgeois morality and antisex feminists avoided obvious questions: What is a “child”? If a state defines a “child” as someone under the age of eighteen, yet sets an age of sexual consent at sixteen, should the age of consent be raised to coincide with the higher age? Since it is legal for a sixteen-year-old to consent to sex in New Jersey but illegal across the Hudson River in New York, should New York sixteen-year-olds wait until they are seventeen? Do gay youths have a right to sex with older gays if they choose (many feel safer with gay men than with other teens)? If laws against same-sex activity between adults—long supported by the left—are now wrong, why are laws setting widely disparate ages of consent more reasonable? Do children have a right to sexual pleasure? If a teenage girl should have the right to an abortion without her parents’ consent (a position endorsed by most leftist groups and by NAMBLA), why should a teenage boy not have the right to enjoy his body with an older man (or woman)?

The most vociferous hostility on the left to man/boy love came from the U.S. Socialist Workers Party. In 1979, the SWP abruptly withdrew from activity in the gay movement and reallocated its cadre jobs in industry. Its involvement in gay liberation had been

sporadic in most places (New York being something of an exception). But after two years of involvement during a time of mass mobilization in the gay community, it had recruited no new members from it and was facing yet another internal debate on gay liberation. Its leaders played up the man/boy issue to help justify their decision to “turn to labor” and withdraw from the gay movement.

In 1979, the gay movement went through a wrenching controversy over the age-of-consent issue, especially in New York and New Jersey, where, as a result of lobbying by feminists, the state legislature had adopted a measure that lowered the age of consent from sixteen to thirteen, as well as abolishing the sodomy statute. In the ensuing controversy, the feminists acquiesced in the state’s decision to push the age of consent back up to sixteen. This is the context in which the SWP announced its opposition to man/boy love, which coincided with its withdrawal from the gay movement:

The age-of-consent issue has recently been foisted on gay rights organizations by a small group called the North American Man/Boy Love Association. A central leader of this group is David Thorstad, who . . . argues that supporters of gay rights must take up the fight against all age-of-consent laws. . . .

The repeal of age-of-consent laws is a reactionary demand, even though its supporters try to pass themselves off as defenders of adolescents against legal victimization.

The campaign around this demand has nothing to do with the totally progressive stance of defending the right of teenagers not to be penalized for their sexual activity. On the contrary, the advocates of repealing age-of-consent laws are primarily adult men who believe they should be unrestricted in having sex with children.

Saying that children have the “right” to “consent” to sex with adults is exactly like saying children should be able to “consent” to work in a garment factory twelve hours a day. Don’t some children “consent” to being used in brutal pornographic films? Don’t child prostitutes “consent” to their miserable and terrifying existence? . . .

Laws designed to protect children from sexual and econom-

ic exploitation by adults are historic acquisitions of the working class and should be enforced. An anti-working-class, anti-child, campaign against the age-of-consent laws has nothing to do with gay rights or human rights of any kind. It has no place in the struggle to end discrimination against lesbians and gay people.²³

The most libertarian views on man/boy love came from two small groups, the Trotskyist Spartacist League and the Revolutionary Socialist League. The Spartacists ridiculed the SWP's position:

Revolutionaries, unlike the social-democratic SWP, oppose any and all legal restrictions by the capitalist state on effectively consensual sexual activity. Get the cops out of the bedrooms! We know that such measures are not designed to protect children but to enforce the sexual morality of the nuclear family which is at the root of the oppression of women, youth and homosexuals. The case of Roman Polanski, the Polish-born director, dragged through the courts, sent to jail and forced into exile for his liaison with a precocious Hollywood 13-year-old, was only a highly publicized example of the reactionary purpose of age-of-consent laws.²⁴

Several years later, the Spartacist League defended NAMBLA against FBI harassment:

Perversion, it has been noted, seems to be not what you like, but what other people do. As we wrote five years ago during the persecution of Polish film director Roman Polanski, who was witchhunted for having an affair with a 13-year-old girl: "As communists we oppose attempts to fit human sexuality into legislated or decreed 'norms.' The guiding principle for sexual relations should be that of effective consent—that is, nothing more than mutual agreement and understanding as opposed to coercion . . . the state has no business interfering." This ought to be the guiding principle not just for Marxists but for any democrat on such social questions. Determining what is effective consent is always tricky, and particularly with youth there is a grey area. But such a judgment must be case

by case, not categorical as it is with the reactionary age-of-consent laws. The act of sex in itself is not *prima facie* evidence of abuse or coercion. And the NAMBLA activists are being witchhunted for things nowhere close to where their real interests and activities lie.²⁵

The Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), which was active in the gay movement until it disbanded in 1989, went farther than other U.S. groups in integrating sexual liberation into its program. Age-of-consent laws, it said, are “one of the primary ways in which a repressive sexual ‘morality’ is imposed on young people.” Their result “is to take away from a young person any power to give consent, or in fact to play any role whatsoever in making decisions about his or her sexuality at an important age of development. Instead, this power is placed in the hands of the state or, in some cases, the state in conjunction with the parents.”²⁶ The RSL summarized its views in a June 1980 leaflet:

We believe that all consensual sex is the business only of those involved. The state has no business regulating in any way expressions of sexuality between consenting persons of any number, sex, or age. The state’s attempt to regulate youth sexuality in particular is rooted in young people’s position as property of their parents and/or wards of the state. Young people are jailed in schools, economically exploited, and denied the most basic political rights. Society maintains this oppression by imposing the idea that young people are not capable of determining their own wants and needs, in particular their sexual needs and desires. We oppose age of consent laws. These laws deny the ability of young people to determine their own sexual needs and desires. They maintain the status of youth as property, and reinforce the closet for gay youth.²⁷

The SL and RSL positions hold several elements in common with the views of radical boy-lovers: a pro-sexual outlook; a recognition that young people are sexual and have a right to choose their partners; support for individual rights; a recognition that every case is different and should be treated on its own merits; opposition to

age-of-consent laws and other laws that discriminate against young people; a rejection of any role for the state in restricting consensual activity.

THE "GAY PEOPLE" CONCEPT

Over the past century and a half, the gay movement has sought to answer the question: What is the nature of homosexuality? Is it an inherent capacity of the human animal, or a quirk of nature affecting only a minority of humans? Is there such a thing as "gay people," or is everyone potentially gay (therefore also potentially straight)? How one responds to such questions not only colors scientific judgments but determines political strategies—whether one sees solutions to sexual oppression and discrimination in terms of radical change or piecemeal adjustment of social structures and attitudes; of combating heterosupremacy and liberating repressed homoerotic potential, or merely increasing spheres of tolerance.

The view that gays constitute a more or less fixed social minority ("gay people") prevails today—in the ruling class, among gay and lesbian activists, among feminists, in the psychiatric, legal, and religious professions, on the left. The concept imposes rigid polarities on an ambiguous reality, forcing a square peg into a round hole while claiming a perfect fit.

Gay leaders purport to represent a group defined as "gay." This constituency must be perceived as large enough to warrant attention by the presumed heterosexual majority, yet at the same time as unthreatening. Gay leaders claim to speak for the minority of people who have come out and identify as gay. Rarely do they address the far larger group of people who have not yet come out, or who are still struggling with their homosexuality; fearful of being seen as proselytizers for homosexuality, they relegate the suppressed homoerotic potential of the presumed heterosexual majority—especially of youth, and even of teenage gay bashers—to off-the-record social chitchat. Pederasts, who take the risk of responding to the sexual needs of youth, are considered anathema by many gay and lesbian leaders.²⁸

The concept that homosexuals are a social minority implies that they are a special kind of human being, different from heterosexu-

als—a contemporary version of the nineteenth-century view that they were a “third sex.” Homosexuals are defined as people who love the same sex, and heterosexuals as people who love the opposite sex—two different kinds of people, depending on whom they go to bed with. But this is a political fiction—sexual identity and sexual practice do not necessarily overlap—designed to give definition to yet another liberal pressure group. It is a useful fiction insofar as it allows the gay movement to exploit cracks in the political system, but simplistic in its reduction of the ambiguities of sexuality to bipolar categories of hetero and homo. It has less to do with sexual liberation than with readjusting the status quo; in exchange for minor perks, gay and lesbian leaders keep the flock corralled.

Few have addressed these issues more creatively than Mario Mieli, who has critiqued both gay assimilationism and left-wing heterosupremacy. Speaking of gay liberation goals, he wrote:

We homosexuals must liberate ourselves from the feeling of guilt (and this is one of our immediate goals), so that homoeroticism spreads and “catches on.” We have to make the water gush from the rock, to induce “absolute” heterosexuals to grasp their own homosexuality, and to contribute, through the dialectical confrontation and clash between the minority and majority sexual tendencies, to the attainment of the transsexuality which the underlying polysexual “nature” of desire points towards. If the prevailing form of monosexuality is heterosexuality, then a liberation of homoeroticism, this Cinderella of desire, forms an indispensable staging-post on the road to the liberation of Eros. The objective, once again, is not to obtain a greater acceptance of homoeroticism by the hetero-capitalist status quo, but rather to transform monosexuality into an Eros that is genuinely polymorphous and multiple; to translate into deed and into enjoyment that trans-sexual polymorphism which exists in each one of us in a potential but as yet repressed form.²⁹

The argument that homosexuals are a social minority goes back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Until then, the notion of “the homosexual” did not exist. Other terms were used: “sodomite” (any male who engaged in anal intercourse, with man or

woman), “pederast,” “Sapphist.” The terms referred to specific acts (or sins), not to a state of being. The nineteenth century saw the birth of a new movement on behalf of “third sexes” (people thought to be born half-man, half-woman). Since then, the concept of homosexuals as a distinct social minority has remained a common feature of gay propaganda. It achieved preeminence with the evolution of the gay movement toward liberal assimilationism since the mid-1970s.

The forerunner of the Mattachine Society, the International Fraternal Orders for Peace and Social Dignity (sometimes referred to as Bachelors Anonymous), described itself in 1950 as “a service and welfare organization devoted to the protection and improvement of Society’s Androgynous Minority.” Mattachine continued this approach, which had the virtue of defining the unmentionable in terms of civil rights, thereby making it accessible—in theory, at least—to the American melting pot. In the early 1950s, it was radicals who advocated the minority-group concept, and conservatives who opposed it. During the McCarthy witch-hunt, in 1953, one Mattachine member argued during a debate: “Never in our existence as individuals or as a group should we admit to being a minority. For to admit being a minority we request of other human beings that we so desire to be persecuted.”³⁰

Minority-group partisans today argue that homosexuals are just like everybody else, except for what they do in bed. The argument seems surprising, because in reality homosexuality and heterosexuality do not differ appreciably with regard to either mechanics or emotion. In the sex act, difference in partner gender seems inconsequential; imagination plays the larger role. True, some gay men have pushed the erotic capacities of body orifices to the limit (fist-fucking, for example). Although to some their practices may appear far-out, surely they are harmless compared, say, to heterosexually inspired infibulation and female circumcision in some African cultures.

Same-sex and other-sex behavior are both universal aspects of human experience. If sexual pleasure is its own reward, and not merely a trick of nature to get the species to reproduce, then the aim of sexual emancipation would seem to be to free people’s capacity to love persons of the same as well as the opposite sex. If the

primary purpose of sex is pleasure, not reproduction, then same-sex play cannot be viewed as a practice peculiar to a minority of people defined as “gay,” but rather as part of the potential experience of everyone.

Cross-cultural studies confirm what common sense knows: the impulse toward same-sex love lies within the human animal. Its expression is culturally determined, but its biological basis is suggested by the fact that it has evolved as part of the mammalian heritage and becomes more common the higher up the phylogenetic scale one goes. This is not to say that homosexuality (or heterosexuality) is inborn, or that it is a function of the size of one’s hypothalamus—but rather that creativity and imagination acquire greater value in more highly evolved species. The idea that homosexuality is a minority phenomenon is culture-bound. Clellan S. Ford and Frank A. Beach demonstrated more than forty years ago what anyone who travels widely, especially in non-Western societies, can easily confirm: same-sex activity is, to a greater or lesser extent, accepted behavior in the majority of societies studied.³¹

The idea that “gay people” are a social minority reassures the heterosexual dictatorship that homosexuality represents no threat. It focuses on gay rights (liberal, symbolic measures that usually add no burden to city and state budgets), not on sex-law reform (which strikes at the heart of the Judeo-Christian, heterosupremacist underpinnings of Western capitalism). It oversimplifies the complexities of human sexuality. It leaves largely intact the tools of state and church control.

Most left-wing groups—and an increasing array of capitalist institutions and corporations—now endorse equal rights for “gay people” and oppose some forms of discrimination. In this, the outlooks of gay leaders, the ruling class, and most left-wing groups largely coincide. Yet more than two decades after Stonewall—especially with the arrival of AIDS—sexual freedom seems as remote as ever. Gay leaders focus on gay rights rather than sex-law reform. They play down issues of sexual freedom and try to sanitize their constituency by cutting loose embarrassing elements. They sometimes claim that sexual orientation is determined by age six, yet they refuse to call for lowering or abolishing the age of consent; they try to distance themselves from pederasty—despite the fact that

pederasty is the main form that homoeroticism has taken throughout most of Western (and not only Western) culture. In their rush toward respectability, they are promoting coupledness as a gay ideal. Gay marriage and receiving spousal benefits seem more important to them than repealing Judeo-Christian sodomy laws, which remain on the books in nearly half the states. They have lost sight of the central goal of gay liberation: the right of human beings to love someone of the same sex.

Is sexual freedom a realistic goal? The answer lies outside the parameters of this essay. But even if it is unrealistic, even if a society in which sexual freedom prevailed might not resemble the egalitarian nirvana associated with the dream,³² the strategies that result from such a perspective—libertarian, antiauthoritarian, multicultural, tolerant—seem preferable to the accommodationist compromising inherent in the gay minority dogma.

AUTHOR NOTE

David Thorstad is a former president of New York's Gay Activists Alliance and a founding member of the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) and New York's Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights (CLGR). From 1967 to 1973 he was a member of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). He is coauthor, with John Lauritsen, of *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)* (New York: Times Change, 1974).

NOTES

1. Cited in Clara Zetkin, *Erinnerungen an Lenin* (Berlin/GDR: Dietz, 1975), p. 67; translated by the author.

2. An exception to this is the utopian socialist Charles Fourier (1772-1837), a precursor of the hippie counterculture of the 1960s who placed love at the center of his vision of a future society, which he dubbed Harmony. His utopia provided not only for homosexuality (he called it "unisexual" or "same-sex" love), including lesbianism, but also boy-love. For Fourier, sexual variety was built into nature; varieties of sexual behavior were to be welcomed, not feared or combated. He considered laws against sexuality to be "spider webs that stop only the small gnats and let the big ones through." His views on sex were written around 1817 to 1819 in *Le Nouveau Monde amoureux*, but they were suppressed by his epigones

and not published until 1967, a century and a half later. They are presented in more accessible form in the anthology of his ideas on sexuality, *Vers la liberté en amour*, ed. Daniel Guérin (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), as well as in Guérin's *Essai sur la révolution sexuelle après Reich et Kinsey* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1969). For a useful discussion, see the contribution by Saskia Poldervaart to this volume.

3. For a discussion of attitudes toward homosexuality among the Bolsheviks, Stalinists, and the German Social Democracy, see John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)* (New York: Times Change, 1974). On the German Social Democracy, see also James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (New York: Arno, 1975), and Wilfried U. Eissler, *Arbeiterparteien und Homosexuellenfrage: Zur Sexualpolitik von SPD und KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (West Berlin: Rosa Winkel, 1980). Proudhon's views on sexuality are elaborated in *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*, vol. 4 (Paris: Rivière, 1858), and are summarized in Daniel Guérin's *Essai sur la révolution sexuelle*. Engels's comments are in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). For a discussion of Engels's and Karl Marx's rather silly exchanges on the subject of homosexuality, see Hubert Kennedy's contribution to this volume. Lenin's opinions about sex can be found in Clara Zetkin's *Erinnerungen an Lenin* (Recollections of Lenin), written in 1925 and published in Russian in 1926 and in German in 1929, as well as in A. Kollontai's *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971). Aleksandra Kollontai, best known for her writings on women's emancipation and sexuality, was the foremost Bolshevik advocate of "free love." She is believed to have been the first to raise with Lenin what came to be known as the "glass of water" theory, which held that satisfying the sex drive was as simple, and morally neutral, as drinking a glass of water to quench one's thirst. Lenin's sharply critical views on the theory exist in several versions, including in Zetkin. Here is the version from Fannina W. Halle's *Women in Soviet Russia*, trans. Margaret M. Green (New York: Viking, 1933), pp. 112-14:

Naturally the changed attitude of the young people to sexual questions is "fundamental" and appeals to a theory. Some call their attitude "communist" and "revolutionary." They honestly believe that it is so. I at my age am not impressed. Although I am far from being a somber ascetic, the so-called "new sexual life" of the young people—and sometimes of the old—seems to me to be often enough wholly bourgeois, an extension of the good bourgeois brothel. All that has nothing to do with free love as we communists understand it. You are doubtless acquainted with the capital theory that in communist society the satisfaction of the instincts, of the craving for love, is as simple and unimportant as "the drinking of a glass of water." This "glass of water theory" has driven some of our young people crazy, quite crazy. It has been the destruction of many young men and women. Its supporters declare that it is Marxist. I have no use for such Marxism, which deduces all the phenomena and transformations in the

intellectual superstructure straight from its economic basis. Things are not quite so simple. . . .

I consider the famous “glass of water theory” to be utterly un-Marxian, and, moreover, un-social. . . . Of course thirst cries out to be quenched. But will a normal person under normal conditions lie down in the dirt in the road and drink from a puddle? Or even from a glass with a rim greasy from many lips? But most important of all is the social aspect. Drinking water really is an individual concern. Love involves two, and a third, a new life, may come into being. That implies an interest on the part of society, a duty to the community.

As a communist I have not the slightest sympathy with “the glass of water theory,” even when it is beautifully labeled “love made free.”

One can disagree with Lenin’s comments on free love, but they at least show an intellectual respect for his interlocutor and a tone that would vanish from debate on the Communist left. Left-wing positions on man/boy love, from the utopian socialists to the present, are discussed in David Thorstad, “Man/Boy Love and Sexual Freedom: A Radical Perspective,” in *Varieties of Man/Boy Love: Modern Western Contexts* (= *NAMBLA Journal*, no. 8 [1992]), ed. Mark Pascal (New York: Wallace Hamilton, 1992), pp. 85-103.

4. Revolutionary Union, “On Homosexuality and Gay Liberation” (leaflet in author’s files). The RU’s complete statement is presented (with slight variations and with commentary and illustrations from a radical gay perspective) in the pamphlet *On Homosexuality: A Stalino-Leninist Guide to Love and Sex* (Ann Arbor: by the authors, 1975), which also contains an “Appendix on Cuba,” consisting of documents detailing the antigay position of the Cuban regime. The RU’s statement is also published (without changes in the original text) in a pamphlet by the Los Angeles Research Group (a Maoist group of “ten communists who are gay women”), *Toward a Scientific Analysis of the Gay Question* (Cudahy, CA: Los Angeles Research Group, n.d.), which presents a critique of the RU and the other main Maoist group of the day, the October League. For a more recent statement of the Stalinist-Maoist viewpoint, see *On the Question of Homosexuality: Reply to the Body Politic Collective*, published by the Canadian Bolshevik Union (Montreal: Lines of Demarcation, 1981).

5. I conducted the conversation in French; translation by the author. The complete exchange appears in David Thorstad, “Antigay Laws in the United States and Some Other Countries,” *SWP Discussion Bulletin* 30.3 (July 1972): 8-9.

6. Jarvis Tyner, *Build the Youth Front!* (New York: Young Workers Liberation League, n.d.), a speech to the Central Committee of the YWLL meeting October 17-18, 1970. Tyner’s comments about the *New York Times* referring to a “gay way of life” must be inaccurate because it was not until June 1987 that the *Times* began to use the word “gay” in such contexts. The *Times*’s 1979 *Manual of Style and Usage* instructed reporters and editors: “Do not use [gay] as a synonym for

homosexual unless it appears in the formal capitalized name of an organization.” In an apparent slip, the November 16, 1980, issue of the newspaper nevertheless printed the headline, “Army Allows Clearances to Gays”—although the *Times* had first used the word “gay” for homosexual in a book review in 1963; see Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 15. It is not clear who Tyner was referring to in his assertion that gay groups made a “united front with some sections of the Trotskyites”; the main Trotskyist group at the time, the Socialist Workers Party, banned homosexuals from membership until the end of 1970, and no other Trotskyist groups were involved in the gay movement at this point. Perhaps Tyner was referring to individual gay activists, but his report reflected the usual Stalinist ploy of tarring opponents as “Trotskyites.”

7. Donna Ristorucci, “Drugs Called by YWLL a Ruling Class Weapon,” *Daily World* 5.104 (December 9, 1972): 4. Similar warnings were voiced a month later by the chairman of the party’s International Affairs Commission, who wrote: “In our present-day society, we have a magnitude of ills—reflecting and resulting from the deterioration of the system in which we live. There is the drug scene with its resultant criminal activities; there is over-drinking and alcoholism, there is sexual promiscuity, there is homosexual behavior. There is white chauvinism, male supremacy, bourgeois nationalism and feminism—and much more. There is over-concern for one’s own comforts.” This appeared in a section entitled “Social Ills Must Not Seep Into Our Party,” in Helen Winter, “Standards for Party Members and Leadership,” *Party Affairs* 7.1 (January 1973). In the same issue of the internal party publication, party leader James E. Jackson stated: “It is necessary to remind ourselves that there are those whom we do not recruit.” He listed five groups: dope addicts, drug users; alcoholics; racists, white supremacists, national fanatics; common criminals, thieves, hustlers; and “homosexuals, perverts.” See “For Safeguards Against the Party’s Enemies,” from a report to the Central Committee meeting, September 8-9, 1972, on Problems of Security and the Struggle for Higher Standards (*ibid.*, p. 51).

8. On May 27, 1993, Russia (the largest of the republics of the former Soviet Union) repealed its law against homosexual acts (*New York Times*, May 29, 1993, p. 3).

9. Newton’s letter was published in *The Black Panther* 5.8 (August 21, 1970): 5, and is reprinted in Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), pp. 170-71.

10. Assimilationist homosexuals did not welcome Newton’s statement. A leading gay journal editorialized: “So Huey Newton wants to be friends. Sorry, Huey, but somehow this fails to elate us. . . . We see some virtue in evolution. We think it is possible to change the ‘system’—to make it what it is supposed to be. In fact, we see much more hope this way than in violence and destruction. Sorry, Huey.” See Dick Michaels, *The Advocate* 4.17 (October 14-27, 1970): 5; quoted in Teal, p. 172. Huey’s statement argued that black militants, regardless of their sexual orientation, should support gay liberation, but made no reference to “violence and destruction.”

11. "Statement of the Male Homosexual Workshop," quoted in Teal, p. 174. Teal's account of the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention (pp. 169-78) includes a report by Steve Kuromiya of the Philadelphia Gay Liberation Front (originally published as "Gay People Help Plan New World," *Gay Flames*, no. 2), as well as the "Statement of the Gay Male Homosexual Workshop," including its list of eighteen demands, and the "Demands of the Lesbian Workshop." Martin Duberman provides a brief account of the convention in *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993), pp. 259-60, and also discusses reactions to the Panthers among gay and lesbian activists.

12. The Minneapolis-St. Paul branch of the SWP, for example, had three organizers in a row (including myself) who were gay-all closeted; all three came out once the policy was eliminated in 1970. One was widely assumed at the time to be gay and had friends who clearly were—one of whom was a party member. In the mid-sixties, a friend of mine who was a University of Minnesota student continued to hustle while a member of the party's youth group, the Young Socialist Alliance. Despite his turbulent personal life, he was offered a job on the party's newspaper in New York. (The offer was arranged by Vincent Raymond Dunne, a former member of the IWW, founding member of the CPUSA, and longtime SWP leader famous in Minnesota for his role in the Teamster strikes of the 1930s that made Minneapolis into a union town.)

13. The debates on gay liberation inside the SWP during the 1970s are documented in *Gay Liberation and Socialism: Documents from the Discussions on Gay Liberation inside the Socialist Workers Party (1970-1973)*, ed. David Thorstad, 2nd ed. (New York: by the author, 1981), and *No Apologies: The Unauthorized Publication of Internal Discussion Documents of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) concerning Lesbian/Gay Male Liberation (Part 2: 1975-79)*, ed. Steve Forgione and Kurt Hill (New York: by the authors, [1981]). The former contains nearly 40 of the 104 documents published during preconvention discussions in 1971 and 1973, and the "literary discussion" of 1972, as well as an epilogue of articles pertaining to the SWP's opposition to man/boy love, which it used to justify its withdrawal from the gay movement in 1979. The latter contains documents from three subsequent discussions—in 1975, 1977, and 1979. During a period of renewed activity in the gay movement in 1977, the SWP published a pamphlet on current movement issues, *Gay Liberation Today: An Exchange of Views* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977). After 1979, no self-respecting homosexuals remained inside the SWP. In 1982, the SWP ceased to consider itself Trotskyist. It has since evolved into a sect on the fringe of a shrinking left. Similar debates took place in the SWP's sister group in Canada, the League for Socialist Action/Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière, which published its own pamphlet of selected documents, *Gay Liberation in Canada: A Socialist Perspective* (Toronto: Vanguard, 1977). Unlike the SWP, the LSA/LSO never banned homosexuals from membership—nor did it expel members for smoking marijuana. It did, however, follow the SWP's line on homosexuality.

14. Most of these groups published leaflets or pamphlets on gay liberation. These include Paul Carson, *Socialism and the Fight for Lesbian and Gay Libera-*

tion (New York: Revolutionary Socialist League, 1982); *Luttes homosexuelles: Quelles perspectives?* (Paris: Commission nationale homosexuelle, Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, 1981) and *Le Droit d'être homosexuel/lesbienne* (Paris: Commission nationale homosexuelle, Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, 1981); Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores, *Liberación homosexual: un análisis marxista* (Mexico City: Folletos Bandera Socialista, 1983). Spartacist League positions can be found in many issues of its magazines, *Women and Revolution* and *Spartacist*, and in its newspaper, *Workers Vanguard*. The SL was not directly involved in the gay movement (it opposed "sectoralism"), whereas the RSL was an active presence in gay groups in several cities. When the California gay group Red Flag Union (formerly called the Lavender & Red Union), having evolved from Maoism toward Trotskyism, dissolved in 1977, one faction joined the SL, the other the RSL. The RSL, which combined elements of Trotskyism and anarchism, disbanded in 1989. The Freedom Socialist Party, a "Trotskyist-Feminist" group, has also maintained a pro-gay stance and involvement in the gay movement in some areas, although it has refused to take a stand on the issue of man/boy love. Other groups resulting from SWP expulsions during the 1970s (Socialist Action, Fourth Internationalist Tendency, Solidarity) did not evolve positions on gay liberation sufficiently different from those of the SWP to warrant attention here. (The Fourth Internationalist Tendency dissolved into Solidarity in September 1992.)

15. Bob McCubbin, *The Gay Question: A Marxist Appraisal* (New York: World View, 1976), p. 62.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81. The WWP originated in a 1956 split from the SWP because it supported the Soviet crushing of the workers' uprising in Hungary, which the Trotskyists opposed. It sees a "global class war" between capitalism and socialism—which can lead to incantatory clichés such as this (now quite dated) one: "For the capitalist class, each passing day deepens the dread and gloom as their system grows weaker and weaker and the socialist countries grow stronger and stronger. For revolutionaries, the future is bright" (p. 81).

17. New American Movement, *Working Papers on Gay/Lesbian Liberation and Socialism* (Chicago: NAM, 1979). The Gay Left Collective article, reprinted from *Gay Left* (Winter 1977), is included because it "recognizes the importance of connecting the personal and the political, and Gramsci's posthumous contribution to our current discussion in NAM" (p. 7).

18. This series of events is recounted in *A Witchhunt Foiled: The FBI vs. NAMBLA* (New York: NAMBLA, 1985), available for \$6.95, postpaid, from NAMBLA, P.O. Box 174, Midtown Station, New York, NY 10018. For an analysis of the relationship between man/boy love and the left, see David Thorstad, "Man/Boy Love and Sexual Freedom: A Radical Perspective" (see note 3), which is based on a talk before the New York Marxist School sponsored by the Committee of Lesbian and Gay Male Socialists on January 6, 1983. In addition to discussing the American left, the article analyzes the position of the French Trotskyist group, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire. The positions of foreign groups on man/boy love and homosexuality lie outside the scope of this article. In

her book *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), Camille Paglia says this about state harassment of pederasts: “These days, especially in America, boy-love is not only scandalous and criminal but somehow in bad taste. On the evening news, one sees handcuffed teachers, priests, or Boy Scout leaders hustled into police vans. Therapists call them maladjusted, emotionally immature. But beauty has its own laws, inconsistent with Christian morality. As a woman, I feel free to protest that men today are pilloried for something that was rational and honorable in Greece at the height of civilization” (p. 116). For an overview of the relationship between pederasty and gay liberation, see David Thorstad, “Man/Boy Love and the American Gay Movement,” in *Male Intergenerational Intimacy: Historical, Socio-Psychological, and Legal Perspectives*, ed. Theo Sandfort, Edward Brongersma, and Alex van Naerssen (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 1991), (simultaneously published as *Journal of Homosexuality* 20.1-2) pp. 251-74.

19. Preston Wood, “Frameups Spark Anti-Gay Media Campaign,” *Workers World* 24.52 (December 24, 1982): 11. Curiously, the practice of selling girls into marriage—and even of female infanticide—is not uncommon even today in China, despite Mao’s “Cultural Revolution,” which the WWP welcomed.

20. Private communication to the author. In subsequent public statements of its position, the *Guardian* avoided the explicit and crude equation of pederasty with “child abuse,” preferring more roundabout formulations. This equation was feminist-inspired; in October 1980, the National Organization for Women (NOW) had adopted a resolution—submitted by its Lesbian Rights Committee—condemning pederasty, pornography, sadomasochism, and public sex. The *Guardian* staff accepted feminist arguments unquestioningly while sweeping aside those of radical pederasts. The *Guardian* folded in 1992.

21. *Guardian* 34.34 (May 26, 1982): 22. In a letter to the editor (*Guardian* 34.42 [July 21, 1982]: 18), I explained that pederasts did not regard the issue as “mainly one of the civil liberties for the adult” but as a “fundamental question of the civil and human rights of the young person”:

We radical homosexuals are fed up with leftist groups reasserting their heterosexism. Do you take your cues from the New Right, the FBI, the Moral Majority, and the Pope? Your attack on man/boy love was not merely puritanical, it was reactionary. . . . In general, man/boy relations are far less exploitative than heterosexual relationships.

22. John Trinkl, “Cops and Media Target ‘Man-Boy Love’ Group,” *Guardian* 35.13 (January 5, 1983): 7. Several months later, the *Guardian* published a discussion piece by Steve Ault, “Man/Boy Love Can Be Defended, But So Can Some Limits,” *Guardian* 35.36 (June 8, 1983): 23. However, it did not publish any of the letters it received as part of the “discussion.” By the late 1970s, the *Guardian* carried regular news stories on gay rights as well as discussion articles; see, for example, David Thorstad, “Linking the Left and Gay Movements,” *Guardian* 31.41 (July 18, 1979): 17.

23. Rich Finkel and Mathilde Zimmermann, "The Class-Struggle Road to Winning Gay Rights," *The Militant* 43.14 (April 13, 1979): 24-25. This statement rivaled the rhetoric of the right wing. Most odd was its comparison of man/boy sex to twelve hours of work in a garment factory—the authors seemed unfamiliar with either man/boy sex or factory work. For an answer to the Finkel/Zimmermann article, see David Thorstad, "The Socialist Workers Party vs. Gay Liberation (or the Cuckoo Builds a Strange Nest)," in *Gay Activist* 8.3 (June-July 1979): 12-16, and in *Gay Insurgent*, no. 7 (Spring 1981): 17-23. Both are reprinted in Thorstad, *Gay Liberation and Socialism* (see note 13), as is David Thorstad, "A Statement to the Gay Liberation Movement on the Issue of Man/Boy Love," *Gay Community News* 6.23 (January 6, 1977): 5, which Finkel and Zimmermann denounce.

24. "SWP: From 'Gay is Good' to 'Save Our Children,'" *Young Spartacus*, no. 74 (Summer 1979): 5.

25. "Defend NAMBLA!" *Workers Vanguard*, no. 321 (January 14, 1983): 14. Nine years later, during another media frenzy that attempted to get NAMBLA thrown out of the Potrero Hill public library in San Francisco, where it had been meeting for two years, the Spartacist League published an article under the same title defending the group; see "Defend NAMBLA!" *Workers Vanguard*, no. 544 (February 7, 1992): 2. During this struggle, NAMBLA was also actively supported by another small leftist group, the Revolutionary Workers League. The RWL participated in NAMBLA's 1991 Membership Conference in San Francisco, the first non-boy-love group to do so.

26. Ian Daniels, "NAMBLA, Age of Consent, and Human Sexuality," *Torch* 10.1 (January 15-February 14, 1983): 5.

27. Revolutionary Socialist League, "Lesbian and Gay Liberation Through Socialist Revolution," June 1980. Copy in author's files.

28. In the years following Stonewall, the gay movement seemed more willing to acknowledge the ambiguities of sexuality. Nowadays, image matters more, so gay leaders seek to rein in "politically incorrect" tendencies. For example, gay youth at the June 30, 1985, New York City Gay Pride March were quickly shushed up by an adult mentor when they broke into a chant of "2, 4, 6, 8—How do you know your wife is straight? 3, 5, 7, 9—Hey, lady, your husband's mine!"

29. Mario Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Gay Men's Press, 1980), pp. 120-21.

30. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 79n. D'Emilio discusses the Mattachine's debates over the gay minority concept on pages 79-81.

31. See Clellan S. Ford and Frank A. Beach, *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), who report that the majority of societies studied approved some form of homosexuality: "In 49 (64 percent) of the 76 societies other than our own for which information is available, homosexual activities of

one sort or another are considered normal and socially acceptable for certain members of the community” (p. 130).

32. This is the view of Camille Paglia, for instance, who argues that “whenever sexual freedom is sought or achieved, sadomasochism will not be far behind”; see *Sexual Personae*, p. 3. C. A. Tripp describes as standard violent sexual encounters in several societies that are nonrestrictive in permitting sexual liaisons; see Tripp, *The Homosexual Matrix* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), p. 40.