

# 1969

I write this in the month when we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, which saw several nights of violent resistance to police brutality against LGBT people in New York City in June 1969. The riots, spearheaded by some of the most marginalized queer communities, in particular trans\* people, are commonly viewed as marking the emergence of a new era of gay liberation in the United States, when coming out and defying heteronormative conventions brought sexual dissidents out of the shadows.<sup>1</sup> The year 1969 witnessed the birth of the Gay Liberation Front, and the following decade would see the elimination of anti-sodomy laws in numerous States, as well as a dramatic positive shift in medical discourses around sexuality. The years immediately following 1969 also constituted a critical turning point for the relationship between the US left, including Marxist organizations, and sexuality, as virtually all socialist groups shed or modified their longstanding antipathy to sexual dissidence and openly debated the place of sexual minorities in wider struggles for social change. Placed in the context of a modern gay rights movement forged in the late 1940s and 1950s in part by men active in the Communist Party, it seems appropriate to use the year 1969 as a way of exploring what a discussion of both Marxism and LGBT rights in tandem can teach us about the history of social movements of the era, as well as ways in which Marxism as a tool of historical analysis can play a critical role in understanding the distinctive trajectory of sexual politics in the United States since the rights revolutions.

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<sup>1</sup> See Martin Duberman, *Stonewall: The Definitive Story of the LGBTQ Rights Uprising that Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2019).

My discussion falls, therefore, into two parts. The first explores the evolving relationship between Marxist organizations and LGBT issues after the emergence of gay liberation in 1969. Some of these groups, such as the Freedom Socialist Party, committed to socialist feminism and closely connected to women's liberation, the Workers World Party, the Spartacist League, and the Revolutionary Socialist League, actively embraced sexual dissidence as a core plank of their revolutionary praxis. The early gay liberation period also saw the formation of a specifically queer Marxist organization, the Lavender and Red Union, calling itself "a group of dyke and faggot communists" and adopting the slogan "Gay Liberation is Impossible without Socialist Revolution – Socialist Revolution is Impossible without Gay Liberation."<sup>2</sup> Other groups, notably the Socialist Workers Party and its youth wing, the Young Socialist Alliance, retained a more ambivalent and conflicted relationship with sexual politics, but ended their policy of automatic expulsion of gay members in November 1970, a direct result of the pressure brought to bear by the liberationist forces of the late 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Some notable figures in the early Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance, such as John Lauritsen, David Thorstad, and John O'Brien, had cut their political teeth in the YSA and SWP. While membership in radical Marxist organizations was never especially large, and queer membership even less significant, their importance to our understanding of LGBT history cannot be doubted. It is no accident that two important LGBTQ community archives, the Stonewall Library in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and the Sexual Minorities Archive in Holyoke, Massachusetts, both contain significant holdings related to

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<sup>2</sup> Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 71. Hobson charts the development of a number of Marxist queer groups in California in the early 1970s, including the Revolutionary Gay Men's Union in the Bay Area. See Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Phelps, 'The Closet in the Party: The Young Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Workers Party, and Homosexuality, 1962-1970,' *Labor*, (2013), 10:4, 11-38.

communist activism from the 1970s and 80s: the Socialist Newspapers Collection at Stonewall, and the personal archive and library of trans\* activist and prominent member of the Workers World Party, Leslie Feinberg, at SMA. The passionate commitment of the WWP to sexual liberation and LGBTQ rights has meant that the party's newspaper, *Workers World*, gave much more extensive and engaged coverage to LGBTQ politics and activism than many other news outlets; its coverage of the HIV/AIDS crisis during the 1980s was impressive, and its finding a home at Stonewall has enhanced our ability to excavate our queer past.

The second part of my discussion relates to the parameters of my own current research, which examines the relationship between the US health and welfare systems and LGBT rights since the 1960s. It became clear to me during the course of working on this project that the capitalist structure of health care provision in the United States, in which health is a consumer commodity rather than a public right, has imbued LGBT rights politics with a particular form of class stratification and has yoked questions of individual rights to notions of personal responsibility. "Coming out" in the context of gay liberation in the years after 1969 represented not simply an individual affirmation of sexual identity, but was also a demand to access social and health services, without which sexual revolution would remain incomplete. Understanding sexual minority politics in a US context therefore demands an understanding of class and economic forces that draw on Marxist historical analysis. We might call my part of this round table *How I learned to stop worrying and love Marxism*.<sup>4</sup>

Marxism and gay liberation became uneasy but important bedfellows in the late 1940s, when CPUSA member Harry Hay formed Bachelors for Wallace during Henry

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<sup>4</sup> With apologies to the late Stanley Kubrick.

Wallace's popular front run for President in 1948, followed shortly thereafter by the formation of the Mattachine Foundation. The Foundation's 1950 manifesto described it as "a service and welfare organization" opposed to "encroaching American Fascism," its rhetoric very much in tune with communist and popular front political nostrums. The document urged members, who remained anonymous and part of a secretive network of Mattachine cells on the CPUSA model, to "work collectively on the side of peace...for the full-class citizenship participation of Minorities everywhere, including ourselves."<sup>5</sup> Hay recalled that "I thought of the Freemason movement and the type of Communist underground organization that had existed in the 1930s, which I had known and been a part of....The whole organizational setup was based on what I had learned from the old left".<sup>6</sup> Several other founders of Mattachine were also communists, and though they left the party as a result of their association with homophile activism, the popular front heritage of gay rights activism at mid-century was never fully disavowed. The hysteria of the McCarthyite witch hunts of the early 1950s encouraged the rapid shift of Mattachine away from its early collectivist roots, but the fact that sexual dissidence encompassed both enforced marginality and collective identity within society rendered it a potentially attractive cause for later socialist organizing.

Of course, some LGBT people simply happened to be communists, and were committed to broader social transformations the dramatic decade of the Sixties seemed to herald. They had to contend, however, with a legacy of Stalinism deeply hostile to sexual liberation and deeply rooted in the international communist movement. The Venceremos

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<sup>5</sup> Mattachine Preliminary Concepts, 7 July 1950, quoted in Jonathan Katz interview with Harry Hay, 31 March 1974, in Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), 409.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 411.

Brigades to Castro's Cuba barred the participation of gay people, in thrall to the brutal homophobia and machismo of Castro's regime.<sup>7</sup> Maoism also dismissed sexual dissidence as a bourgeois affectation with no place in class struggle. Marxists of all sectarian bents struggled to reconcile class consciousness and solidarity with individual desires for sexual freedoms, a tension made only more acute by the radical demands of gay liberationists for the overturning of heteronormative societal structures that loomed as large over international socialism as any other political worldview.

Yet liberationist struggles of the 1960s around gender and sexuality, symbolised by the dramatic events of the summer of 1969, had significant impact on the ideological direction of Marxist organizations. The Revolutionary Socialist League, founded in 1972 as a response to the enormous social reverberations of the previous few years, argued that a "free society cannot exist unless everyone is free; for us, therefore, socialism can mean nothing less than the systematic attempt on the part of the toiling majority of society to eliminate everything that fetters people under capitalism: hunger and poverty; national, racial, and sexual oppression; wars and fascism; and the general dog-eat-dog struggle to survive."<sup>8</sup> RSL member Paul Carson produced a booklet entitled *Socialism and the Fight for Lesbian and Gay Liberation*, in which he portrayed the heterosexual nuclear family as a product of capitalism, and saw lesbian and gay liberation as undermining "the sexual repression that is built into capitalism and that flows from the idea that people exist for the purpose of accumulating capital."<sup>9</sup> The Spartacist League, which absorbed the overtly queer Lavender and Red Union in 1977, explicitly tied sexual liberation to the overthrow of

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<sup>7</sup> Ian Lekus, 'Queer Harvests: Homosexuality, the US New Left, and the Venceremos Brigades to Cuba,' *Radical History Review*, 2004 (89), 57-91; Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> "Socialism and the Fight for Lesbian and Gay Liberation," *Torch*, June 15-July 14 1982, Socialist Newspapers Collection, Stonewall Library, Fort Lauderdale, Torch 1982 file.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

capitalism and a politics of class war: “only socialist revolution can lay the basis for finally uprooting sick prejudices against ‘sexual deviance,’ through providing social alternatives to the stifling monogamous family, the main social institution oppressing women, children, and homosexuals. Our aim is not a sectoralist ‘gay movement’ but a revolutionary party based on the working class to lead the struggles of all the oppressed – and in which the best fighters from all sectors of the oppressed will be, not narrow representatives of ‘their people,’ but communist revolutionaries.”<sup>10</sup>

That this forceful commitment to sexual liberation as but a strand of a wider commitment to the overthrow of the existing order appeared in an article in the Spartacist League newspaper attacking fellow Trotskyists the Socialist Workers Party should surprise no one even vaguely familiar with sectarianism on the left. The pages of rival Trotskyist party newspapers were full of angry denunciations of rivals for ideological waywardness or some other transgression. The Freedom Socialist Party newspaper in 1977 ran a headline “Lavender and Red Union Dumps Gay Liberation,” arguing that the latter’s merger with the SL (a gay liberationist minority “Revolutionary Faction” fled to the Revolutionary Socialist League) tied it to a group “whose arrogant sexism is exceeded only by its holier-than-thou sectarianism.” The irony seemed to be lost on the article’s author, as he excoriated the SL and Red Flag Union (as the LRU had now become) for apparently placing “gay liberation at the bottom layer of their rigidly structured hierarchy of social issues, such as class, race, sex, and sexuality.”<sup>11</sup> The dramatic implosion of the former LRU in 1977 over the priority assigned to gay liberation within Trotskyism demonstrated the ongoing difficulty Marxists

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<sup>10</sup> “Gays and the SWP,” *Women and Revolution*, Spring 1982, Socialist Newspapers Collection.

<sup>11</sup> “Lavender and Red Union Dumps Gay Liberation,” *Freedom Socialist*, Summer 1977, 7.

had integrating sexual freedom into a wider politics of class struggle.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that gay liberation was by the 1970s an important point of debate and ideological ferment on the communist left demonstrates the pivotal importance of the spirit of 1969 in reshaping radical leftist discourse and action.

Just as significant to our understanding of the relationship between gay liberation and Marxism is the fact that the multiple movements for sexual freedoms after 1969 depended to a large degree on the provision of health and social services for queer communities. My research into the public policy dimension of the rights revolutions demonstrates clearly the close relationship between access to money and LGBT identity. Having to pay for health services in the United States did not simply reveal the class dimension to LGBT rights, but it also placed the transactional element of capitalist exchange at the heart of the development of LGBT identity. For example, trans\* people found their self-definition influenced by the need to access the private insurance marketplace. Since most private insurance refused to pay for sex reassignment when explicitly named as such, trans\* patients were forced to redefine themselves as medically diseased in order to secure payment for surgery or treatment: “Best results have been obtained when the condition (transsexualism) is presented as ‘a neuroendocrinological or psychohormonal disorder,’ absolutely requiring and responsive to surgical and hormonal treatment.” This helpful advice, included in a brochure produced by transgender advocacy group the Erikson Educational Foundation, went on, “health insurance policies state that the holder is covered only for ‘necessary treatment of an injury or disease process.’ In such a case, the physician

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<sup>12</sup> For an admittedly partisan account of the breakup of the Lavender and Red Union, see Introduction to *Documents of Struggle: Gay Liberation through Socialist Revolution (The Fight for Gay Liberation in the Red Flag Union)*, Lavender and Red Union file, in LGBT Groups Ephemera Collection, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco.

should represent transsexualism as ‘a distinct, medically definable disease entity, for which treatment is required.’ In every instance, it is advisable for you and your physician to examine carefully the wording of your policy, for indications as to how he should frame his diagnosis.”<sup>13</sup> For transgender people, seeking medical attention represented a coming out process framed by stigmatization and economic marginalization, demonstrating the value of Marxism as a tool of historical analysis when analysing the dynamics of sexual liberation.

Many LGBTQ service providers in the 1970s internalized the capitalist health system’s association of payment for services with full social citizenship, stressing their commitment to notions of personal responsibility as they took pains to distance themselves from any association with a welfare state. A memo to staff at a gay therapy service in Boston in 1979 urged them to be less lenient on clients missing payments for services. The “lack of responsibility around money here is shared by each and every one of us. Historically, this agency has always had the attitude of ‘oh, the poor client...’ which feeds right into the client’s own ‘oh, poor me’ attitude and their lack of feeling responsible, low self-image, lack of respect for you as a therapist, etc.” The memo’s author mirrored dominant narratives about the pernicious effects of welfare dependency on the mental wellbeing of claimants, going so far as to argue that, if the clinic could sort out its financial relationship with clients out, “you will hopefully begin to understand the importance of money in the therapeutic relationship.”<sup>14</sup> Mental well-being, in this reading, went hand in hand with financial independence and self-reliance, however fanciful such ideas were when applied to all sexual minorities regardless of social status. Professional gatekeepers of queer

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<sup>13</sup> EEF booklet “Guidelines for transsexuals,” July 1974, Kessler Records, transsexualism folder.

<sup>14</sup> Don Farwell to staff, Homophile Community Health Service, 6 September 1979, John C Graves Papers, Northeastern University Special Collections, Boston, Box 1, folder 61.



community services mimicked dominant neoliberal thinkers and politicians, as they developed a class consciousness which linked full citizenship to capitalism and joined together their economic status with their sexual identity.<sup>15</sup>

For me, then, thinking about 1969 as a point of departure in the history of Marxism in a US context directs us towards the rapidly growing importance of gay liberation in American Marxist thought and praxis in the following two decades. But it has also encouraged me to think about the value of class analysis and Marxist critiques of capitalism as tools in understanding LGBT politics after 1969, a time when private health care was showing its inability to respond to the demands of new social movements and when the ramshackle public welfare system was coming under sustained attack, both ideologically and from funding cuts. The concern of Marxist groups in the seventies with intersections between class struggle and identity politics was therefore validated in LGBTQ politics, although capitalism's neoliberal reconfiguration would frustrate the hoped-for liberation.

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<sup>15</sup> Melinda Cooper, *Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2017), chapter 5.