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LGBT

LGBT liberation: Build a broad movement

John D'Emilio interviewed by Sherry Wolf

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JOHN D'EMILIO is a professor of history and of gender and women's studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago and is author of many works including *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy and Civil Rights*; *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*; *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*; and *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. The ISR's SHERRY WOLF, author of *Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics, and Theory of LGBT Liberation* (Haymarket Books, 2009), interviewed him.

YOUR GROUNDBREAKING essay, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," published in 1983, uses the Marxist method to root the emergence of a distinctive gay and lesbian identity in capitalism. You argue, "Capitalism has created the material conditions for homosexual desire to express itself as a central component of some individuals' lives…" What, if anything, would you add to this analysis regarding the growing emergence in recent years of those who identify as transgender?

THE THRUST of the argument in "Capitalism and Gay Identity" was that the shift from kinship forms of production to individual wage labor opened a social and economic space that allowed individuals to live, to survive, outside a reproductive household. Same-sex desire could congeal into a personal identity and a way of life. The opportunity for that to happen was distributed differently depending on one's relation to capitalist modes of production. In the U.S., that meant men more than women, whites more than Blacks, the native-born more than immigrants, and the middle class more than the working class. But the heart of it is individuals able to make a living rather than livelihoods being dependent on family groupings.

It seems to me that the emergence in the last half century or so of transgender as an identity articulated by a social group depends on something different. It's more closely connected to the increasingly porous boundaries that have come to characterize gender roles in post-industrial capitalist societies. In the West, one can find individual transpeople in the past who "passed" successfully. But as long as gender roles were highly polarized and sharply differentiated, as they have been until the last generation or so, openly declaring oneself as a gender crosser brought great trouble and

persecution. As the distance between male and female has narrowed, it has become easier for individuals to make those crossings. I say “easier” in the sense of relative to past generations, because it would be hard to claim that being trans is easy.

WHAT DO you attribute to the rising chorus—both inside and outside contemporary LGBT circles—that insists sexuality is not fluid, but fixed if not at birth, then at an early age?

THE IDEA that people are born gay—or lesbian or bisexual—is appealing for lots of reasons. Many of us experience the direction of our sexual desires as something that we have no control over. We just are that way, it seems, so therefore we must be born gay. The people who are most overt in their hatred of queer folks, the religious conservatives, insist that being gay is something we choose, and we know we can’t agree with them. Hence, again, born gay. Liberal heterosexual allies love the idea. If gays are born that way, then of course they shouldn’t be punished for it. “Born gay” is also a relief to any of us who have some doubts about our sexuality or who feel ourselves sinking under the weight of the oppression. If we’re born gay, then it’s not our fault, and we’re certainly not choosing to be oppressed: we just can’t help it, so leave us alone. It also answers those who worry about the effect of too many out-of-the-closet gay men and lesbians: if people are born this way, then young people won’t be influenced by us.

I hope you see where I’m going with this: “born gay” is an idea with a large constituency, LGBT and otherwise. It’s an idea designed to allay the ingrained fears of a homophobic society and the internalized fears of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. What’s most amazing to me about the “born gay” phenomenon is that the scientific evidence for it is thin as a reed, yet it doesn’t matter. It’s an idea with such social utility that one doesn’t need much evidence in order to make it attractive and credible.

ON THE one hand, there is growing social acceptance of LGBT people and pop culture reflects that on TV and movies; on the other, social and legal repression persist—including alarming rates of violence against those who are or appear to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. How do you explain this apparent schizophrenia in modern U.S. society regarding LGBT people?

I DON’T find it surprising at all. I think you could notice contradictory patterns for almost any identity-based movement of the last fifty years. We could talk about racism and sexism, for instance, and make analogous comments: on the one hand, formal legal rights have expanded dramatically for people of color and for women since the 1960s. Large numbers of women and people of color have experienced expanded educational opportunities, more economic opportunities, and more freedom of movement. And, at the same time, structural racial and gender inequality is still alive and well, and for those who are most in the line of racist and sexist fire, the price is very high. In other words, identity-based movements have brought great gains, but the benefits don’t get distributed equally.

For gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (I’m deliberately excluding transgender people here, because I don’t think there’s been nearly as much beneficial change for gender-crossing, there’s been an expansion of legal protections against discrimination, the solidification of gay-identified urban neighborhoods, much more cultural visibility, the elimination of criminal penalties for private consensual sexual behavior among adults, and the end of science and medicine classifying us as ill. This is all wonderful. But, depending on where one grows up, on one’s access to economic and educational privileges, on one’s religious upbringing, and especially on the degree of one’s overt gender nonconformity, one has either more or less access to these favorable changes.

I can’t begin to pretend that I can identify what the deeper structural changes are that would be necessary to eliminate homophobia. But I suspect it involves the de-institutionalization of heterosexual marriage as a source of legal and economic privileges. That’s different from saying we should campaign nonstop for same-sex marriage. What I mean is that marriage shouldn’t get you easier access to health insurance or retirement benefits or tax breaks, or any other kind of special deal. Instead, if we value a broad spectrum of household arrangements, we will be making it harder for heterosexual privilege to reproduce itself. The other side of heterosexual privilege, of course, is homophobia and queer oppression.

YOU HAVE been quite critical of identity politics, arguing that “movements based on identity probably act as a barrier to solving class-based injustices because they place a premium on group loyalty across class lines.”

Since then, queer theory has arisen in academic circles to challenge identity politics. How do you explain queer theory and do you believe it can advance the struggle for LGBT liberation?

I'M REALLY not the right person to be speaking about queer theory. It seems to me that at its best, queer theory is a perspective that asks us to question normalcy, to be skeptical of seeing both gender and sexuality as fixed categories. Who can argue with that? And, again, at its best, this can be an angle of vision on society that allows us to critique, to rebel against, to organize against, normative systems that oppress people who refuse to follow the rules of gender and sexuality. That's invigorating. I'm not sure I know how that might lead to collective mobilization as opposed to the individual's assertion of a right to be who and how we want to be.

YOU WERE a student at Columbia University in 1969 when the Stonewall Riots took place in New York City. What impact did it have on you as a young gay man? And what do you believe are the most important lessons of that upheaval?

IF I were to use my own personal story to get at the meaning of Stonewall, I'd have to say Stonewall wasn't of much significance. That's a pretty heretical statement to make, so let me try to explain.

I was an undergraduate at Columbia when Stonewall occurred. I knew where it was, had even been there once or maybe twice. Christopher Street in 1969 was the main cruising strip in Greenwich Village. Over the three or so previous years, I had pretty much come to terms with being gay. I didn't have a political consciousness of it, but I'd broken with my Catholic upbringing, and decided that this was me, I wasn't going to fight it, and I could lead an ethical and meaningful life while being gay. I'd come out to a set of friends, so I had something of a support network, and I had a boyfriend—actually, "lover" was the word we used then.

I read about Stonewall a couple of months after it happened in an old issue of the Village Voice that I'd come upon. I remember thinking "wow, this is pretty cool." But the reason I thought it was cool was because I was an antiwar activist, and had come to see demonstrations and protest and rebellion as what was necessary to change the world. So, the idea that these queens, which is how I think the article described them, were battling New York's tactical police force — well, I could relate to that. I'd had the experience of running through the streets of midtown Manhattan in protest against the war, as police on horses came chasing after us. I'd marched in DC, I'd picketed the homes of draft board members, I'd rallied in front of the United Nations, and all that.

I guess what I'm saying is that Stonewall's meaning came as much from the times as from the event. It was "cool" to me when I read about it, because I was living in a time and place where protests and progressive movements were a vital part of everyday life. Without that bigger context of progressive mobilization, Stonewall would have been just an event. And I think the lesson is that, short of catastrophic situations like the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, gay mobilizations—or LGBT mobilizations—are not going to get very far by themselves. They need the deeper and bigger context. So, if you care about gay liberation in the biggest sense, build a broad movement for social and economic justice!

THE MOVEMENTS that emerged after Stonewall raised ideas about Gay Power and gay liberation, yet those notions receded in decades since. How would you define LGBT liberation today and what, if anything, do you believe can be done in the here and now to attain it?

ONE OF the interesting things to me about the course of the gay and lesbian, and now LGBT movement, is that the periods when radical activism has dominated the movement have been relatively few and short-lived. There was the historical moment of the founding of the Mattachine Society in 1950–51, when this new notion of homosexuals as a minority achieved organizational expression through the work and leadership of gay men who were in the Communist Party or who were fellow travelers. Then there was the post-Stonewall moment when gay liberation and radical lesbian feminism exploded into the world and, through the insistence on coming out, helped create a whole new gay and lesbian world. Two decades later, the assertive activism of ACT UP pushed queers into the heart of both American political debate and popular culture. All three were of great consequence. They each embodied a radical visionary analysis with tactics that were militant for their times.

But, none of them lasted long. What they had in common were two things. They emerged because of a larger context of change: the upheavals in sexual mores provoked by World War Two and the Kinsey studies; the mass movements and widespread challenges to authority that we associate with the sixties; and the AIDS cataclysm. In other words, they couldn't be wished or planned into existence. But, when circumstances changed, when something destabilized the normal routines of life and politics, queer radicalism of one sort or another got its opportunity.

I think we're in a period—provoked by the new opportunities of the Obama presidency—when some small and not so small changes will occur that will move things farther along in the direction of formal equality. What might happen that would propel a larger, more progressive wave of activism into existence? Boy, do I wish I had an answer to that question!

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