

COMMENTARY

Sexuality and Subcultures in the Wake of Welfare Capitalism

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When the British Parliament eventually debated the Gulf War – journalists had earnestly demanded this, pretending to believe that it might somehow make a difference; when we finally got this debate, just two new ideas were produced. One, from an Ulster Unionist, was that we should have a day of prayer and repentance. I admit, I hadn't thought of that. The other, from an old leftist, was that we wouldn't have this trouble if we still had the good old Cold War.

Well, the Cold War perhaps did restrain US militarism, but it is over and the collapse of the Russian empire proves, we hear, that socialism is not the way forward. This begs a fascinating question: who, on the European Left in recent times, has believed that a centralised, command economy and a Soviet-style political system are the way to socialism? *Virtually no one*. What we have called '1968' amounted, as much as anything else, to the decisive arrival of a generation of leftists who did not feel obliged even to consider the proposition that the Soviet Union was a model for socialism. So why is it said that we are so taken aback by the collapse of the Russian empire?

Closet Keynesians

There have been two broad approaches on the Western European Left in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of us have looked for radical new possibilities. These were envisaged, most often, as a kind of immediate local autonomy; we might think of this as the spirit of Greenham Common. Others of us, the larger part, stayed with the mode that had prevailed since 1945: attempting to develop the progressive potential of the mixed economy as it emerged from the post-war settlement. Let's locate that, briskly. In the 1930s, there had seemed to be three kinds of future: fascism, communism and a rejigging of capitalism to make it fairer – welfare-capitalism. These three fought it out between 1939 and 1945. Welfare-capitalism won in Western Europe; on the Right as well as the Left, it was agreed that there should be no return to pre-war conditions. Now all the people were to have a stake in society, an adequate share of its resources as of right – a job, a pension or social security, a roof over

your head, health care, education. These promises were to be sustained by government management of the economy in the manner proposed by Keynes (not by Soviet-style bureaucracy). That is the consensus which broke down conclusively in the late 1970s, allowing Thatcherism to confront it and to take us back, in theory and in effect, to the 1930s.

It is my contention that, whatever we were saying on the Left, we hadn't really worked out a system that might supersede welfare-capitalism. This is because, actually, we envisaged it continuing, though with vastly more of its promises realised. To be sure, we often used a revolutionary rhetoric – and with justification, when we protested about nuclear weaponry, racism, unemployment and poverty, the Vietnam War; any number of imperial wars. But what did we really *mean* – when we cried 'America Out', for instance? We pushed and shoved at the line of police, in Grosvenor Square in 1968 and thereabouts, with the evident goal of breaking through and reaching the US Embassy. But what were we going to do when we got there? Scratch at the walls with our fingernails, perhaps. Most of us hadn't thought about it. I know this is not true of everyone; I mean to be provocative. But for the most part, through diverse, more and less promising modes – trades unions, the Labour Party, the courts, the left-liberal press, canvassing, lobbying, demonstrating, infiltrating – we were looking for a delivery, within welfare-capitalism, on the promises of 1945.

Consider three significant movements. The Greater London Council when Ken Livingstone was its leader aspired to combine the two main kinds of leftism that I have identified – an immediate, local autonomy and a more humane welfare-capitalism: the idea was to redistribute wealth and power through relatively democratic municipal structures. But how was this to be sustained, in the medium term, within the capitalist world order? If socialism in one country was tricky, how could there be socialism in one city? Perhaps it would be the lever for a greater change, but how would that develop? I don't think we thought very hard about it. Of course, the capitalist world order asserted itself: the GLC was abolished.

Remember Bennis. Joint planning of the economy was the initial idea – the government and the multinationals were to get together, to make planning agreements. And there was to be an extension of nationalisation – to perhaps twenty-five manufacturing companies. The ambition was to shift the culture of business towards industrial democracy, and that perhaps might have been achieved: here too, there was an idea of local autonomy within a more benign state. But the project was simultaneously too weak and too strong: too weak to challenge the framework of capital, too strong to have been tolerated by international corporations.

Even the great industrial disputes... The mode is epitomised by my own union, the Association of University Teachers. At one moment – one of many moments – our pay had fallen out of line with that of others with whom we thought it strategic to compare ourselves. The slogan we produced, with all the intellectual resources at our command, was: 'Rectify our anomaly'. A potent challenge to capital, if there ever was one. But that has been the general project in trades unionism: putting things into better proportion within capitalism.

In the 1970s it became apparent that welfare-capitalism cannot pay its way. First, as Beveridge said at the start, it must depend on popular commitment. Unless people really believe that the system can produce social justice and fair shares for all, the removal of the traditional threat of poverty licenses wage inflation. This may have been the crucial failure: the system didn't change sufficiently to engage most of us to the point where we were prepared to sacrifice sectional interests. Everyone had to grab for themselves, because you couldn't rely on the system. Whether it could have been otherwise is a question. Perhaps the framing ethos of competitive capitalism made fair shares impossible; perhaps the Attlee administration lost its opportunity when it went into Korea, and after 1951 the Tories shrivelled the scope of aspiration to keeping up with the Joneses. Now the Labour Party has lost the nerve to campaign on the idea of fairness, and we may never know whether it could have worked.

Second, while the post-war/Vietnam War boom continued, and while the oil-rich territories could be dominated, there was usually more money to push round the system, so that diverse interests could be bought off, piecemeal. But the boom ended, and suddenly the Keynesian mechanisms for holding the economy steady were revealed as emperor's new clothes. A moment of truth was when Denis Healey was forced to capitulate to the International Monetary Fund in 1976 (the Labour administrations were packed with moments of truth). This is the flaw: welfare-capitalism raises expectations, with a view to maintaining popular enthusiasm; but only for a while can the system produce enough wealth to keep pace with those expectations. In Sweden and New Zealand, even, they have found this. Welfare-capitalism, to legitimate itself, arouses aspirations, but cannot produce the wealth to meet them.

Leftist attempts to work within welfare-capitalism have not been in bad faith. We did believe, very many of us, that 1945 was a breakthrough, that we were pursuing important

campaigns, that there was potential for a slow and uneven, but steady movement towards equality and social justice. And it hasn't been all bad – especially if you overlook the fact that our relative wealth is premised on the poverty of most of the world. But, overall, it is dawning upon us now that welfare-capitalism is not going to deliver. That is the failure that has distressed us, not the failure of Soviet-style centralised direction. Short of the barely-imaginable revolution, things are not going to get much better. And this is so stunning that we cannot afford to recognise it. We prefer to allow the notion that it is Eastern Europe that has blown us off course; otherwise we will have to acknowledge the real poverty of our theories.

Homosexuality and the problematic of the problem

Commentators have often observed that during the twentieth century homosexuality came to be considered less an evil or a sin, and more a medical or psychological condition. That is true; but it came to be regarded also, increasingly, as a social problem. A Church of England pamphlet, published in 1954, was called *The Problem of Homosexuality*. The Wolfenden Committee on homosexual offences (and prostitution) was set up in 1954 after a minister for home affairs declared: 'Quite clearly, this is a problem which calls for very careful consideration on the part of those responsible for the welfare of the nation.' In 1952 writer Gordon Westwood conceived an objective: to bring 'the problem of homosexuality ... out into the open where it can be discussed and reconsidered'. By the end of the decade he felt this had been achieved.

The social problem is a welfare-capitalist formation. It goes back, of course, to Chadwick, Rowntree, the Webbs, but it is central to the post-war settlement – accompanying the rise of sociology as a discipline and social work as a profession. Juvenile delinquency, unmarried mothers, the colour bar, the housing shortage, latch-key children ... there was suddenly a swathe of them. The social problem has a standard aetiology. The state encourages discussion by the press, the public and the wise and the good, and then passes laws to improve matters. It is the social equivalent of the mixed economy: the state intervenes to smooth over injustices and secure steady general progress. We can see the extent to which this formation has organised our thinking, to which we have lived inside it, now that it has been repudiated under Thatcher and Reagan; they declare that there are no social problems, only personal and family difficulties.

As with socialism, we have used a revolutionary rhetoric to talk about homosexuality. Especially in the immediate enthusiasm of Stonewall, in the spirit of 1968, it was asserted that gay liberation constitutes a broad and deep challenge to patriarchal society – for instance, by Guy Hocquenhem and Mario Mieli, but many of us have said it. And it is not a manifestly foolish idea if you consider, on the one hand, the actual wide occurrence of same-sex practices, and, on the other, the virulence of the hostility towards them. There are people out there who will kill because the

state tells them to, or for love, or for money; but among those who will kill out of hatred, there are few targets so favoured as homosexuals. Something so disturbing might really threaten the prevailing power arrangements. Parents disown their children for it. Look how irrational the laws are, how bizarrely they are drafted. Lesbians and gay men don't hurt anyone, don't cost anything; we are consumers, Christians, royalists, conservatives, employers, trades unionists; we love our mothers – sometimes even our fathers. There must be something deeply upsetting about us.

Be this as it may, if we have believed that homosexuality has a revolutionary potential, we have also, overwhelmingly, proceeded as if we expect the social-problem approach to work. The language of sexual revolution, like that of political and economic revolution, has accompanied actual welfare-capitalist assumptions. The pink economy, indeed, is a micro-version of the mixed economy. Commercial organisation is taken for granted, but to ameliorate its drawbacks we have worked for publicly funded interventions – gay centres, theatre companies, courses in education, campaigns about safer sex. We demand that the state protect us, even though it is the state that has been victimising us. We know, surely enough, that the problem of homosexuality is not lesbians and gay men but homophobia, just as the problem of race is not immigrants but racism. But



this doesn't overthrow the social-problem problematic. It still allows the assumption that there will be room for us if we get the analysis right, organise, push hard enough, and catch the right moment – just as pensions for the elderly will, in welfare-capitalist ideology, be made adequate as soon as the economy settles into growth. Of course, that moment doesn't come. What we get instead is cuts in social security, the tabloid press and Section 28. We campaign against it all. Rectify our anomaly.

The contribution of gay men to quality culture may stand as a test case for the welfare-capitalist proposition that everyone will eventually be accommodated within a cleaned-up version of capitalism. The Section 28 legislation, making it illegal for local authorities to 'promote homosexuality' was, for me, another moment of truth. Just when postmodernists were claiming that cultural hierarchies have collapsed, so that we can move in an effortless bricolage among diverse cultures, Parliament legislated to control the dissemination of my subculture; not because it involves the infringement of any law, but simply because they don't like

us. Section 28 was provoked by gay artistic and other municipal ventures: we expected these as our share of public resources and public legitimation – as promised in 1945, however belated. The campaign against Section 28 made much of the contributions, through the ages, of gay men to the arts. It was a good campaign, and well-enough reported. But the votes in the Lords and the Commons at the end – and this was as important for me as the collapse of the Russian empire – were the same as at the beginning. Nothing changed. We said: Look, we have made all this art for you. They replied: Yes, we know, that's what poofsters are supposed to do, but don't think it means you can flaunt yourselves.

Precisely because artistic culture is associated with queers, it is relatively easy, when push comes to shove, to set aside its pretensions. Mainstream achievement does not make us respected and liked; it feeds into the pattern through which we may be despised. Gay men have been accepted as purveyors of posh culture only on condition that we be discreet, thereby acknowledging our own unspeakableness. The centre takes what it wants, and under pressure will abuse and abandon the subcultures it has plundered. Blacks, it seems to me, have reason to know this. Decoding the work of closeted homosexual artists discovers not a ground for congratulation, but a record of oppression and humiliation. What we celebrated in the Section 28 campaign was not our culture, but our contribution to their culture.

Subcultural production

OK, so Soviet-style communism didn't work very well; now let's see the evidence that capitalism works. Welfare-capitalism was a response to the 1930s. When it led to the IMF and the winter of discontent, Thatcher tried a return to unfettered capitalism. That has now led to where it led in the 1930s: to a slump and a growth in fascism. It isn't even the fault of the poor, said John Major – a yes-person promoted beyond his capacities if ever there was one. The fact is, the system doesn't work whatever they do. The 1930s weren't that special: there was an even bigger slump in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Capitalism produces booms and slumps, just as it produces extremes of wealth and poverty. It is not a matter, as the press and the Labour leadership seem to imagine, of discovering a 'new policy'. All the policies have been tried. The system is inherently cruel and inefficient. And socialists, whatever our confusions through the decades, are people who know this.

Looked at squarely, three quarters of the world has been in continuous distress since 1945. A sleight of hand leads people to believe that being fully committed to the world capitalist order produces a 'successful' economy, such as that attributed until recently to West Germany. But what about, say, Zaire? That has been in the capitalist orbit throughout (for a brief moment there was a socialist leader, Patrice Lumumba, but he was assassinated by Western interests). We are invited to ascribe 'unsuccessful' economies to particular circumstances, or to an uninspected

'third-world'-ness. But countries like Zaire are, in fact, more capitalist than the UK – because the IMF won't allow them even to attempt welfare programmes. They are in poverty because that is what happens to most people in capitalism, as it always did. Even the East European states were not insulated from the world system. It is usually alleged that they collapsed out of internal weakness, but they too took loans from Western banks on the promise of world economic growth, and then hit a world slump. It will be interesting to see for how long it can be maintained that instability in Eastern Europe derives from the former system, rather than from market economies. If you like socialism so much, they used to say, why don't you go to Russia? Now we may turn it round: if you want to experience the dominance of market forces, go to Russia and see how you like that.

But if capitalism is cruel, it is also victorious – and there should be nothing intrinsically surprising about that. The attraction of welfare-capitalism was that we might humanise the system without having to go to the improbable length of overthrowing it. But, for very many people, welfare-capitalism is not going to become adequate. The UK state retirement pension stands at 15 per cent of average earnings; that is intolerable. But bringing it merely up to 30 per cent would put about 15 pence on income tax. That is not going to happen, and nor are innumerable other urgent reforms, and we all know it.

Since I am arguing that the failure of welfare-capitalism is a disaster that we can hardly bear, collectively, to contemplate, I will hardly be expected to come up with a comprehensive new answer. Until someone does, I think lesbian and gay activists, including intellectuals, have a special responsibility to our immediate constituencies. The danger, always, is that those who lose out are persuaded to blame themselves – for instance, for unemployment. For gays, self-oppression has been a great difficulty. As a salaried bourgeois intellectual, I am well defended against tabloid newspapers. I shudder to contemplate how other men and women cope with exposure to a sustained hate campaign, directed not just at our ideas, or actions even, but at our very selfhood. 'If he were a dog he'd have been put down five years ago' – thus the *Daily Sport* on Freddie Mercury. It should be astonishing that any public organ could write like that about someone the day after he died; never mind the rest of us – what about his family and friends? But no one is surprised. Or the *Daily Star* on prominent people who support AIDS causes: 'It seems to me Princess Diana's morbid fascination with AIDS has hung a Royal Warrant over the disease and endorsed it as an acceptable and fashionable way of dying.'

I want a resuscitation of a broad and substantial socialist project; in fact, I think young people will reinvent it in a while, since it is still the most plausible alternative. But, at the moment, millions of lesbians and gay men outside the privileged enclaves are in a lot of trouble – subject to daily insult, deprivation of civil rights, and the threat and actuality of violence. Until the next revolutionary conjuncture, we have to prioritise self-defence.

That may be done, partly at least, through subcultural consolidation. We have to work to develop the self-understandings of lesbians and gay men, on our terms. Instead of offering our efforts and talents to a disdainful mainstream, we should commit ourselves to lesbian and gay writing, histories, art, institutions, political and cultural commentary. One proposal in my book *Faultlines* (1992) is that the Althusserian conception of interpellation may be applied to subcultures (thus correcting the leaning towards totalisation in Althusser's formulation). The dominant ideology tends to constitute subjectivities that will find 'natural' its view of the world; this happens in subcultures also – but in ways that may validate partly dissident subjectivities. The project, therefore, is to reinforce subcultural identities. 'In acquiring one's conception of the world one belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting,' Gramsci declared. It is through such subcultural sharing that we may learn to inhabit plausible dissident subjectivities. By establishing sufficiently vigorous and comprehensive lesbian and gay milieux – attitudes, texts, institutions – we can counteract the tabloids, and begin to produce the conditions for a pride so substantial that it will last all year round.

I've presented my case in a determined way; in conclusion, I anticipate two questions. All right, we should exploit welfare-capitalist arguments and opportunities where we can, and that may produce some results. For some subordinated groups – women with children, for instance – it is hard to see how any significant alleviation of the situation can be achieved without public resources. Nevertheless, we can't allow ourselves to rely on them. While AIDS was thought to affect only gay men, governments did almost nothing about it; but for gay subculture, thousands more would be dying now. A second question: we should, to be sure, work with other subordinated groups, seeking coalitions of interest. It is not a matter of separatism; rather, it is because separatism is impossible – because gayness is so inextricably involved with heterosexuality – that subcultural priority needs asserting. Also, we have important work to do among ourselves before we can expect other groups to take us very seriously. We have a fearful legacy of self-oppression, deriving from decades of victimisation and passing; it produces misogyny, class deference, racism, ageism. Only by dealing with those issues within our communities will we develop the potential for a lesbian and gay left – one with the capacity to combine with other groups.

As I have said, subcultural consolidation is not an answer to the global topics I have raised. It is a defensive strategy for a distinctively beleaguered group in bad times; others will say how far they recognise its relevance to them. It may sound like a single-issue politics. Perhaps it is; I would like to hear of a better way for the groups that the centre, quite systematically, positions as its others. I ask only that those who think they have it engage, seriously, with my contentions that revolutionary rhetoric is unrealistic and welfare-capitalism is not going to deliver, for their failures render otiose many of our traditional assumptions about the scope for activism.